

Struggling with God

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[0 : 00] We often see this in movies where the story's hero has to overcome his or her nemesis in order to fulfill their destiny.

So I'm sure you've already got movies in your mind, but let me give you a few examples. So Harry Potter, in order to save the wizarding world, has to confront you-know-who, or he who must not be named.

Or Luke Skywalker, in Star Wars, has to confront Darth Vader or the Emperor to bring balance back to the Force. Even the Karate Kid, which some of you are probably too young to remember, so let me put up a picture of the movie.

He has to face up to his bullies, the ones who actually made him learn karate in the first place, one by one, in order to ultimately win the competition. And so maybe you've had a nemesis in your life as well, someone you've tried hard to avoid, but you know you need to confront before you can move on or move forward in life.

Perhaps it's your one-time best friend, your BFF, is that what they call it, whom you've fallen out with, and yet you keep running into him or her, even though you're trying hard not to.

[1 : 23] Or maybe it's your nasty ex-boss that you still keep doing work for, even though you've asked for transfers to get away from him. Maybe it's not even a person as such, but a fear, like you really want to be a doctor, but you fear the sight of blood.

Or there's this one exam you have to pass to graduate, and it's now your third attempt at it. Well, tonight we return to Jacob and Genesis after being away for a month.

And remember, the last time we were here, Jacob has just had a major victory. With God's help, he's seen the back of Uncle Laban. But now as he continues to the Promised Land, he faces yet another nemesis in the person of Esau.

And unlike Laban, whom Jacob actually trusted, but then got taken advantage of, Esau is actually an enemy of Jacob's own making. For he had stolen his brother's birthright, and he had schemed to take away his blessing from dad.

Now realize, though, that Jacob didn't need to confront Esau. Not physically, anyway. So if you look at the map on the screen, which is a picture of Israel, you'll see that Edom is pretty small.

[2 : 44] Sorry about that. But it's Edom or Seir, which is where Esau is, is right down in the south. Whereas the Promised Land is actually to the west of that line of rivers in the middle.

Gilead, that piece of land just above those red dots, is where Jacob and Laban had just been when they had faced off against each other.

Nevertheless, in verse 3, if you look there, Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother in the land of Seir, right down the south, to the country of Edom. Jacob didn't need to confront Esau, but he knew that unless he faced Esau, he would never have peace back in the land.

He would always be looking over his shoulder and worrying for his family's safety, worrying that Esau might come and get him. And the message that Jacob brings to Esau is actually a conciliatory one.

The aim of his messengers is to actually make peace with Esau. So, verse 4, he says, Jacob here shows subservience to Esau, even though, if you recall the prophecy, it was that the elder Esau was going to serve the younger Jacob.

[4 : 15] Now, I want to make two points about this episode, which you've got on your outlines. First is the fact that Jacob, that as Jacob prepares to face Esau, he has the assurance of God's presence and God's promise.

God's presence in verse 1 is in the form of angels who meet him as he departs from Laban. And that's why he calls the place Mahanaim, which means two camps.

One camp is God's angels, the other is his own. Now, 20 years ago, Jacob had also met angels at Bethel as he left the Promised Land.

At that time, he saw them ascending and descending, if you remember, the letter of heaven. And so now, in what is a mirror event, angels meet him again as he returns to the Promised Land.

And this was a comfort for Jacob, for a camp indicates actually an army of angels, enough to guard him and his family as he faces Esau.

[5 : 22] Further, Jacob also has the comfort of God's promises. And we can tell that based on his prayer in verse 12, because there he quotes God's promises back to God, which actually, if you're learning how to pray, is a good way to pray, to quote God's promises or word back to him in prayer.

Now, when we read this prayer, we see how Jacob not only takes to heart the promises that God has given to him directly, but actually also the ones that were passed down to him by his father Isaac and Abraham.

Thus, he prays, God is the God of his father Abraham and the God of his father Isaac. And Jacob remembers what the Lord has promised him. Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper.

This was the actual promise that started the return journey for Jacob in the first place, where he left Laban to come back to the land. And in humility, he remembers God's kindness to him, verse 10.

I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become toucans. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me and also the mothers with their children.

[6 : 42] But you have said, I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted. Now, what prompts this prayer in the first place?

Well, it was actually the word that the messengers returned with. So, let's back up again. I've jumped forward. Let's back up to verse 6. Now, without any further context, this sounds really ominous, doesn't it?

It sounds like a confrontation is on the cards. Esau and 400 men. And no wonder then Jacob sort of goes into a panic.

He may have the assurance of God's presence and promise, but now his response is actually driven by fear, as we read in verse 7. He says, in great fear, or it says, in great fear and distress, Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and the herds and the camels as well.

He thought, if Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape. And if you look at the footnotes, I think it should be here. Maybe not. Maybe it's just online.

[7 : 57] The word two groups actually means two camps. It's ironically the same name that was given to the place he was in, except now the place name points to his fear rather than to God's assuring presence.

He may have prayed for God to save him, but Jacob wasn't going to take any chances. Rather, he sends ahead multiple greeting parties, each with gifts of herds, hoping to pacify Esau.

And as we read in verse 14, these gifts are actually quite sizable. So 200 female goats and 20 male goats. The only reason why you have male goats is they keep the female breeding.

That's why you only need 20, not 200. And it's the same with the ewes and the rams. Then there were 30 camels with their young. And these, as I've said in previous times, camels were the equivalent of land rovers in those days, right?

Really great vehicles. And then cows and bulls and donkeys. So lots and lots of gifts that were going ahead. And what Jacob hoped was that, verse 20, he says, By doing this, I will pacify him with these gifts I'm sending on ahead.

[9 : 11] Later, when I see him, perhaps he will receive me. And we might be tempted to criticize Jacob for his lack of faith. But I think this is sort of really entirely expected behavior, isn't it?

When you're desperate and in great distress, this is sort of what you do anything, wouldn't you? Just to make sure you're safe. It's rather like people that are facing life-ending illnesses, being willing to spend their entire fortune or wealth on a cure, even when sometimes the drugs or the treatment is purely experimental.

Well, the Bible keeps us in suspense as to what happens with this. So we wouldn't be looking at that this week, but next week. So if you want to know the answer, you can read ahead or come back next week and we'll deal with it.

But in the meantime, night falls and Jacob is left now to face a very different challenge altogether. Now, we didn't get a chance to read this earlier.

We're at point two now of the sermon outline. So let me read that now. Look with me at verse 22 and I'll read it to the end of the chapter. So page 34, verse 22.

[10:22] That night, Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his 11 sons, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions.

So Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. And when the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as it wrestled with the man.

Then the man said, Let me go, for it is daybreak. But Jacob replied, I will not let you go unless you bless me. The man asked him, What is your name?

Jacob, he answered. Then the man said, Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.

Jacob said, Please tell me your name. But he replied, Why do you ask my name? Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, It is because I saw God's face, God's face to face, and yet my life was spared.

[11:29] The sun rose above him, and as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. Therefore, to this day, the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon.

Well, again, I want to make two more points about this story, and again, and your outlines under point two. First, we see how God, through this mysterious man, actually accommodates his power to Jacob.

Now, was this man God in human form, or was he simply God's angel? We can't tell exactly. Yet we can see him limiting his power to match exactly Jacob's strength.

It sort of reminds me of when, as kids, we would have an uncle. He would hold out his arm, or hold us at arm's length. I don't know when the uncles have done that before.

And then invite us to, you know, try and punch him. But of course, with our tiny arms, you know, we would just go, and we would just be punching at it, wouldn't we?

[12:36] No matter how hard we try. It's the same thing, I think, with Jacob. This man of God could have easily just crushed Jacob, like, you know, if we had an ant between our fingers.

And yet, this was a wrestle of attrition. It lasted until daybreak, where neither party seems to win.

And yet, on the other hand, even though Jacob knew that he had no chance of winning, I don't know about you, but this is probably six, seven hours of wrestling.

I can't even do it for five minutes. Jacob doesn't give up either, does he? And I think that's what verse 25 means. Not that the man is unable to overcome Jacob physically, but rather that he was unable to force Jacob into a surrender.

He could not overcome his willpower, as it were. And it's sort of really a metaphor, I think, of how God chooses to actually deal with us. God never overrides the human will, does he, to achieve his purposes because it's the dignity that he affords to all of us as human beings.

Instead, what the man does is he maims Jacob by touching him on the hip. He wrenches his hip from the socket, which sounds very painful.

[13:56] But again, instead of letting go, Jacob, instead of admitting defeat, Jacob continues to cling on. He refuses to let the man go until he's blessed.

Perhaps he's put up so much of a struggle that he wants to get something from it, especially as he, I think, must sense right now that this man is of God. And so, like every human, I think, who finds himself in the presence of God, he desperately wanted a blessing.

Perhaps this might even be the answer to his prayer in verse 10, the blessing that he needs to save him from Esau. But in another twist, Jacob doesn't get his blessing at once.

Instead, the man asked Jacob his name. And again, I don't think it's because he didn't already know who he was dealing with, but rather, I think so that Jacob can admit who he was.

A deceiver. That's what his name means. But in reply, this is what Jacob hears next. He hears, you are no longer a deceiver, but a struggler.

[15:10] Verse 28. Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome. Now again, this is quite a cryptic sentence, isn't it?

It's not clear that this is even a positive thing. And yet, I think it acknowledges that henceforth, Jacob is no longer looked upon by God as a deceiver, but someone who is defined by his valiant struggles in life.

to the point of overcoming. But this night's events also tell us that Jacob didn't overcome by overpowering God, but by clinging on to him.

By clinging on and refusing to let go until he was blessed. Well, just to finish the story, Jacob asked the man for his name in turn, perhaps just to confirm that this is really God.

But again, that never comes, probably because there wasn't any need. We've just been told that Jacob struggled with God. Instead, the man does finally bless him and then he departs.

[16:24] And Jacob realizes that he has indeed come face to face with God because he calls the place Peniel, meaning face of God. God's death. It may only have been the sight of God in the dark of night, almost pitch black, but encounter God he did.

And not only did he not die, he was blessed. We often presume, don't we, that if we ever came face to face with God, that actually he would bless us.

We not only desire it, but somehow we expect it as well, don't we? That's why it's such a surprise, don't you think, that whenever things go wrong, we're sort of so surprised that it's happened to us. How could it be that things go wrong with us? We don't deserve this. No, we deserve to be blessed. But Jacob realized one important thing that night and it was that he actually didn't deserve to be in God's presence.

But amazingly, because of God's grace, not only did he make it out alive, he was blessed as well. Even when he had been striving with God all night, refusing to submit to him, and yet, God blessed him in the end.

[17:40] But it was a costly blessing, isn't it? Because as the sun rose, verse 31, and he passed by Peniel, or literally he passed by the face of God, Jacob does so with a limp.

And all this just before he's about to face Esau. if he had been planning to escape swiftly, if attacked, this limp has now put pay to it, hasn't it?

God would really need to come and save him if he was going to get away alive. Now, as we finish this story, I guess the question that comes to my mind is, why has God chosen to meet Jacob at this very point in his journey?

And why maim him just as he's about to meet his brother? Well, the way I see it is this. If facing Esau is the culmination of Jacob's struggles, then what his encounter with God at this time shows us is the true nature of Jacob's struggles.

In other words, Jacob has not only been struggling with humans, but actually he's been struggling with God himself. This encounter is like a parable of his life that sheds light on the true realities that has been going on.

[19:05] All his struggles with Esau, then Laban, and then Esau again, at the end of the day, the one that Jacob was really contending with was God himself.

Now, if you've been following the series so far, then you realize that God's sovereignty has been a constant theme in our series. Again and again, we see God's controlling hand guiding all of Jacob's affairs, even in the midst of human sin and struggles.

Now, God himself is not responsible for sin, but nothing happens outside his will or purpose. If you remember a month or so ago back, I talked about that big tube which is our lives within which all of our human decisions and choices are like balls bouncing off each other, even against the wall.

But this tube is, as it were, God's will that's guiding everything to God's intended destination. And so, here, while Jacob may be struggling with men and he feels like Laban and Esau and all these other things are obstructing his path, robbing him of his blessing, ultimately, it's actually God who stands over it all and is hamming Jacob in.

Not because God wants to impede Jacob's progress, but rather so as to guide Jacob to his intended purpose and ultimately to bless him.

[20:34] these so-called obstacles in Jacob's lives were actually necessary, not maybe in a physical or material sense, but necessary in a spiritual sense for Jacob for the sake of his relationship with God.

Without them, God would not have been able to achieve his purpose for Jacob. Jacob may be thinking that God has protected and blessed him despite his troubles, but in reality, these troubles were there so that Jacob could really know the truth of God's blessings.

That God's blessings come to him not in his striving to get over these obstacles, but as he clings to God in weakness. Friends, I wonder whether Jacob's life reminds you of your own.

We often think, don't we, that there are people or circumstances that are holding us back, people blocking our path to success, spoiling our dreams. You know, if only my parents would stop meddling in my life, if only my wife or husband was more understanding, if only I did not have this sickness that keeps slowing me down.

But if we believe that God is truly sovereign, and I do, that nothing is outside his control, then ultimately God is the first cause of all that's going on in our lives, isn't it?

[22 : 06] And while he's never the source of sin or evil, these things are only in our lives because God has ordained them. And so our gripe is never ultimately with these obstacles.

But if we have a problem with them, we're actually saying we have a problem with God, who put them there in the first place. God would ordain bad stuff, as it were, bad stuff in inverted corners, in my life.

But that's the truth, and we can respond in one of two ways. We can either respond like Jacob at the start of the night, wrestling against God and unwilling to accept his will, or we can be like Jacob at daybreak, maimed and weakened, and realizing that God is God and his ways are beyond ours, and then simply clinging on to him for blessing.

The Apostle Paul shared a similar experience in our second reading tonight, 2 Corinthians chapter 12. Like Jacob, he too had a vision of heaven, surpassingly great revelations is how he puts it, and yet to stop him from being proud, he was given a thorn in the flesh.

We don't know what the specifics of that is, but three times Paul asked for its removal. He really wanted the thorn out of his flesh, and yet, which I've got a verse on the slide, God's reply to him in verse 9 was this, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

[23 : 46] Paul had to accept this maiming in his life, and even to boast and delight in it, because he came to see that God's power is made perfect through human weakness, that ultimately this was the way to true blessing.

And this is something especially true for us, and I say this particularly for those who actually desire to serve God. I know many of you here do that. You'd love nothing more than to be able to serve God, and it would be your greatest joy and blessing.

And yet often, we're prone to confuse God's will with our own. We want to serve God, but our way, not His. And then we wonder why God's not blessing our ministry, why there are so many obstacles in our way.

And the reason is because we're often striving with God, wanting to do God's will in our own power, rather than having His power work through our weakness. God's love.

Which is why I want to end today by drawing our attention to yet one more person, that of Jesus Christ Himself. Because Jacob's life, I think, also reminds us of him, not in similarity, but in contrast.

[24 : 59] You see, there was yet another momentous night in history, but this time we find Jesus at the Garden of Gethsemane. He too was hours away from facing his nemesis, the cross.

And he was in such distress that Luke would describe his sweat as like blood, drops of blood, falling to the ground. And yet, Jesus' constant prayer throughout the night was, not my will, but yours, Father, be done.

Jesus' prayer was that His will be fully aligned in total submission to His Father. And what was the outcome of this? Well, what we witnessed on the cross, God's wonderful power made absolutely perfect in utter human weakness.

And Jesus' death unleashed God's power of salvation for all humanity at the very moment when He hung on the cross in weakness.

And friends, thanks to Jesus, we now can face God like Jacob, not only being spared, but blessed as well. That would have been impossible without Jesus.

[26 : 17] Because in our human pride and sin, all we want to do is defy and be defiant to God, refusing to submit to His will. That's how we all are by nature, like Jacob, striving with God to live life our own way, even at the same time wanting Him to bless us.

But it's only as we shield ourselves behind Jesus, the only human who all His life, in every way, submitted His will to the Father, that we too can find blessing in God's presence.

And so friends, if there's any of you who have not done that tonight, submitted yourself to God's will, given your life to Jesus, then that's the first thing that you need to do, submit to God by submitting

to His Son.

But then, when we've done that, we also need to continue as we've started, continue in that submission, living like Christ did, seeking God's will humbly, so that we can align ours with His will. That means seizing in our striving against God, and resting in our weakness, delighting in it even, boasting in it, and then clinging ever more so to Jesus, His Son.

[27 : 33] And through that, allowing God to bless us, to have His power work through us in our weakness. Well, we're going to close by singing a song, This Life I Live, which I think is a perfect prayer to sum up what we've read tonight.

So please rise as we sing This Life I Live. that's so good,