

Wrestling with God

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[0 : 00] Well, kids say all sorts of phrases, so take a look at this video to hear some of them. Mommy, that's mommy.

Music. I want it, I want it. Mommy, I want it. Mommy, I want it. What do you say? Me. Why are you so upset?

I want to do chores. You want to do what? Chores. You want to do chores? Chores. Okay, let's go find you some chores to do. What do you want? You can make your bed. Or not.

That's why you're ruining me. This or that, this or that, this or that. That's why you're ruining my Christmas. I'm not ruining your Christmas.

It's not even Christmas yet. Touché. Well, the phrase that stands out for me with one of my girls when she was about that age, it was not I want it or touché or I want to do chores, although I'd be quite happy with that one.

[1 : 14] It was by myself. Every time she wanted to do something, every time we tried to help, it was by myself. Even at one point when she was wanting to cut her own sandwich with a very sharp knife, it was by myself as I was trying to wrestle the knife without getting cut from her hand.

She found it very hard to acknowledge her weakness and rely on others for help. Of course, she's no different to many adults today. Rather than admit our weakness and rely on others for help, we keep trying to bottle it up and rely on our own strength or wit, or in Jacob's case, his skillful deception.

But today we'll see him finally admit his unworthiness and his weakness and rely on God's grace to save him.

And as we do see that, we'll see a fundamental lesson about how we become God's people and also how we can face our fears with confidence as God's people.

But first, let me remind you very briefly of the story so far. Jacob fled his brother, whom he deceived for a birthright, and his father, whom he deceived for the blessing.

[2 : 34] He stole both things through deception. Esau wanted to kill him as a result, you might remember. And so Jacob has fled north to Haran. So on the next slide on the map, you might remember this.

He was started off down in Beersheba, right down the bottom. And he had a vision with God at Bethel, who God promised to be with him and keep him. And then he's ended up right at the top at Haran.

And he spent now, at this point in the story, 20 years. And it seems that through those 20 years, God has been wrestling with Jacob, using Jacob's hardship to humble him.

And it started to work. Because when Jacob first went up to Haran, God provided all this stuff for him. And he mentioned God, nuns.

No thanks, no acknowledgement. But now he started to acknowledge God. Because at the end of 20 years, remember last week, Laban went out to chase him and to harm him.

[3 : 38] But God protected him. So on the next slide, we heard from chapter 31. I have the power to harm you, says Laban. But God appeared to him in a dream and said, don't you dare.

And notice how Jacob responds towards the end of the chapter. He now acknowledges God. He says, if the God of my father had not been with me, you would surely have sent me away empty-handed.

You see, he's now starting to acknowledge God. And God has made Jacob promises. He's used Jacob's hardship from Laban, who's cheated him and changed his wages and so on.

And he's kept his promise to Jacob. And he's done all those things so that Jacob might not live by myself, but by God's grace, depending on God for help.

And now, this is really important because now he's returning home. God told him to turn back and go home. And waiting for him is a big, hairy problem.

[4 : 48] His name's Esau, remember? And so what will Jacob do? Well, here we see the old Jacob, but we also begin to see a new Jacob.

So at point one, verse one of chapter 32, let's have a look at the background to our interesting reading. Verse one, Jacob also went on his way after he left Laban.

And sometime later, it seems, the angels of God met him. When Jacob saw them, he said, this is the camp of God. And so he named that place Mahanaim.

Here Jacob sees some angels. The word angel means messenger. And the message seems to be the same one as before. God is with you. Because alongside Jacob's camp is the camp of God, God's camp.

And so that's why he names the place Mahanaim, which your footnote says means two camps, one for Jacob, one from God. God is right next to him, with him. And so with that encouragement, Jacob then sends his own messages, messengers in verse three.

[5 : 54] Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. He instructed them, this is what you're to say to my lord Esau. Your servant, Jacob says, I've been staying with Laban and have remained there until now.

I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, male and female servants. Now I am sending this message to my lord that I may find favour in your eyes.

It's interesting that this is the first time that Jacob ever calls Esau my lord. Previously, he wasn't very nice to his brother. And it's the first time he calls himself Esau's servant.

In fact, this language will keep popping up. It seems like there's some new humility on the horizon. Well, the messenger returns in verse six and said, we went to your brother Esau and now he's coming to meet you.

Oh, good. Oh, but with 400 men with him. It's not quite the answer Jacob was looking for. And so how does he respond? Well, over the page in verse seven, in great fear and distress, Jacob divided the people who were with him into two, literally it is camps, as your footnote says, and the flocks and herds and camels as well.

[7 : 09] He thought if Esau comes and attacks one camp, the camp that is left may escape. Now on the surface, this seems like a pretty good strategy. One of the guys in my Bible study group said it's good risk management.

But given God's promise to be with him and the recent reminder with the angels, it's actually more like classic old Jacob, isn't it? You know, relying on his wit and schemes, dividing his camps in two. But the very fact that he does that seems to have prompted his original two camp meeting, you know, Mahanaim, where God was with him. Because now the new Jacob really emerges.

Verse nine. Then Jacob prayed, Oh God, my father Abraham, God, my father Isaac, Lord, you who said to me, go back to your country and your relatives and I will make you prosper.

I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed the Jordan, but now I have become at two camps.

[8 : 19] 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 and their children. 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 we might think that Jacob is reminding God of his promises here to try and twist God's arm, you know, manipulate him. But verse 10 would speak against that.

Because in verse 10, for the first time ever, he calls himself unworthy. And for the first time ever, he calls himself God's servant.

And in fact, for the first time ever, he actually prayed to God. All the other times in the Jacob story so far is God praying or talking to him. This time he takes the initiative to pray to God.

And this prayer's significance is highlighted by the fact that it's the longest single prayer in the book of Genesis. This is a new Jacob. Jacob who admits his weakness in terms of his unworthiness and asks God for his help to be saved.

[9 : 33] And it's not a bad model of prayer too, is it? I think I may have shown you this prayer from the kids before on the next slide. It says, Dear God, thank you for the baby brother, but what I pray for is a puppy, Joyce.

We can pray for anything that concerns us, says the Bible, even a puppy. But Jacob's prayer here is a good model for us in two ways. First, it shows us how to pray with humility.

And then second, it shows us what to pray according to God's promises in his word. And so it's good and right to pray that God would forgive us because he promises that.

It's good and right to pray that God would provide for us what we need, not what we want, what we need, because he promises to do that too and so on. It's not a bad model of a prayer, but in the story of Jacob, what it's really showing us is the first step to being saved.

And that's to admit our moral weakness, our unworthiness. You see, we have all sinned against God. We have all ignored God and lived like Jacob by myself, relying on ourselves rather than God, as Frank Sinatra famously sang, I did it my way.

[10:50] Yep. And ignoring God means we're not worthy of his kingdom or eternal life. Instead, we are actually worthy of judgment for ignoring him in life. And so no matter what we do, we cannot save ourselves.

We cannot make ourselves perfect again. Instead, we must humbly admit that we are unworthy and rely on God's grace, his generosity to save us.

Not by myself, but by God's grace. And this is what the new Jacob does here. But the old Jacob is not far away. So in verses 13 to 15, he gathers a massive gift of animals for Esau.

And then in verse 16, notice what he does. He keeps each herd by itself and then said to his servant, go ahead of me and keep some space between the herds.

And verse 17, say to Esau, these belong to your servant Jacob and they are a gift or an offering for my Lord Esau. And verse 20, he thinks to himself, I will pacify Esau with these gifts.

[11:55] I'm sending on ahead later. When I see him, perhaps he will receive me. The gift or the offering is not the issue. It's the, you know, relying on this strategy, this scheme of separating them so that he might wear down any anger Esau has with these waves of gifts that come and meet him.

This is classic Jacob. Now, I need to say that there's nothing wrong with using our wit or wisdom to be shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves, as Jesus says.

But the issue here is, who are we going to ultimately rely on to save us? Yeah, our wit or God's help. Well, it seems Jacob is a bit torn between the two and how yet his new willingness to admit his unworthiness seems to be enough for God to save him because that's what we now see.

God gives him a new identity and saves him, but it's in a very odd way. So we're at point two in verse 22. And 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 sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. In verse 22, he's obviously still troubled because it seems he gets up after going to bed and then he takes his family and crosses in the middle of the night, something that's dangerous to do even in the middle of the day.

[13:36] And it's hard to know if Jacob was planning to stay or to follow. But before he could do either, a man appears out of nowhere and starts wrestling him.

I grew up with two brothers and we used to wrestle quite frequently, much to my parents' distress. And one time we were wrestling and we even put a hole in the wall of the house.

Luckily, though, there was a picture just next to it. So we just kind of moved the picture across and covered up the hole. In fact, we forgot about it and our parents only found out 10 years later when they sold the house.

Wrestling between brothers often happens, but a seemingly random stranger at night? What's going on? Well, this wrestling match seems to be a real illustration for Jacob's life over the past 20 years. Just as Jacob has struggled with men like Laban, who kept changing his wages and working him hard and so on, and so now Esau as well, it seems. So Jacob struggles with this man.

[14:42] It's called this man to kind of highlight his struggle with other men. But he's also in the dark, not yet realizing that this man is an angel who acts for God.

So on the next slide, that's what Hosea tells us, that he struggled with the angel. So that's what seems to be happening here. And again, that's also like Jacob's life because he may have thought he was just struggling with people like Laban and Esau, but he's actually also been struggling with God.

How? Well, by living by myself. Relying on his own wit and deception rather than trusting God and relying on his grace. But at the same time, God has also been wrestling with him, working to

humble Jacob that Jacob might cling to God.

As C.S. Lewis once wrote, God whispers to us in our pleasures, but screams to us in our pain. That is God will often use difficulties, pain and hardship to kind of shake us and wake us up that we might come back to him and trust and rely on him.

And this is how God seems to have wrestled Jacob, using his hardship to try and wake him up. And so this parable of Jacob's life, this wrestling match, it goes the whole night and ends at verse 25.

[16:13] When the man saw that he could not overpower Jacob, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched and as he wrestled with the man.

Then the man said, let me go for his daybreak. But Jacob replied, I will not let you go unless you bless me. And now he, given the man could just touch Jacob's hip and throw it out, suggests that this man actually had the power to overcome Jacob, to win the wrestling match.

But it says that he could not overpower Jacob. So how does that work? Well, I suspect this angel who represents God chose to limit his strength just to match Jacob's and to see if he could outlast Jacob, to see if Jacob would give up.

That's a bit like this wrestling on the next slide. I had to put a pair of shorts on the sumo because I don't wear enough clothes. Clearly the big guy could overpower the little guy, right?

But he's not. He's limiting his strength just to match the little one. And so there's this kind of stalemate happening and he does that and he'll keep doing that to see if the little one will just give up.

[17:31] And so when it says this man could not overpower Jacob, I think it's saying he wrestled Jacob all night matching Jacob's strength to see if he could get Jacob to give up, to overpower Jacob's perseverance, if you like, to outlast him.

But he could not for Jacob keeps clinging to God. And so when this angel sees Jacob would not let go and that the day was breaking, he touched his hip and wrenched it from its socket, which would have hurt, right?

We've got a number of people who've had hip replacements here. If you're not sure, go and ask them. But even then, Jacob still clings to God, doesn't he? But now, from a position of weakness and pain, and it's from this position of weakness is that Jacob asks for a blessing.

And no longer can he rely on his wit or deception to steal blessings like he's done in the past, you know, with Esau, his dad Isaac, even his uncle Laban. Rather, now he must rely on God's grace to simply give it out of God's generosity.

As Hosea seems to put it on the next slide, if you go to the next slide, thanks, Paul. It seems like when he was struggling with him, he also wept and begs for favour. It's no longer by myself, but now by God's grace.

[19:00] No longer relying on himself, but now clinging to God. This is what we saw earlier in the prayer in verse 9, where he depended on God to save him. And because he now clings to God in weakness, because he now relies on God's grace rather than his own wit, or deception, then God gives him a new identity and he does save him.

So verse 27, the man that 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 men 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 face to face and yet my life was spared or saved.

Same word as verse 11, saved. He got us for Jacob's name, which was kind of embarrassing really. I mean, remember in the Old Testament, your name said something about your character.

Esau means hairy, so he was hairy. And Jacob means heel grabber, deceiver, cheat. Can you imagine introducing yourself at a dinner party? Hi, I'm Deceiver.

[20:16] Nice to meet you. Now, of course, God knew his name. Of course he knew his name already. He was really asking Jacob to confess his character. And Jacob does.

Just as he confessed his unworthiness before. And then the man gives Jacob a new name, Israel. The name Israel actually means God struggles.

The actual word Israel means God struggles. And that's true. God has been struggling or wrestling with Jacob over the last 20 years to humble him. But the angel highlights the opposite as well and says, because Jacob has struggled with God and men and has overcome.

How? Well, by God's grace, generosity. For God graciously intervened to save Jacob from Laban. Remember the dream he told Laban not to harm Jacob?

And so it's through God's grace that Jacob overcame Laban before. And now God graciously spares Jacob's life. Since no sinful person is supposed to be able to see a holy God's face and live. [21 : 24] Jacob has overcome his, survived his struggle with God and men by being saved on both occasions. And so as the sun rises in verse 31, it's a new day and Jacob has a new identity along with a new limp.

It began with a humble prayer that admitted his unworthiness and it's ended by being marked out as God's person. And all this not by myself but by God's grace.

God's grace. And this is the second step to being saved. First, we admit our unworthiness and second, we cling to Christ in our weakness. Not physically clinging to him of course, but by trusting in him.

You see, we're all going to encounter God on judgment day. We're all going to meet him face to face. And since we have all sinned, you know, ignored him, Frank Sinatra, my way, all that, then it doesn't bode well for us, does it?

But in God's gracious or generous character, he gave his son, Jesus. And at the cross, Jesus took the punishment our sins deserved so that we could be saved from that punishment.

[22 : 38] And so he is the one we had to cling to in order to be saved. It's like our second reading where Jesus says you have to be like little kids to enter the kingdom of heaven, if you remember that.

It doesn't mean we have to have tantrums and throw things across the room and so on. It means we trust in Christ like kids, little kids trust in their parents. I had a baptism this morning at nine o'clock and I remember having another one previously to try and illustrate this to the group.

I gave an order of service to the infant who was being baptized and she trusted me. She just took it, no questions asked. I thought, oh, ripper, illustration's working. And then she put it in her mouth, chewed off a bit and started to choke on it.

Not so good, I don't use that illustration anymore. But this is how Jacob is saved. Not by choking, of course, but by clinging in trust. This is how we are to be saved, by clinging to Christ in weakness, like little children, trusting in him.

And so can I ask, have you done that? Have you put your trust in Jesus or are you still wrestling against God, living life by myself?

[23 : 50] God? And for us who have put our trust in God, then as we continue to cling to Christ, that's what we're to do, to continue to cling to Christ, relying not on ourselves but on God's help, as we do that, then it will give us confidence to face our fears, even in weakness.

And this is what happens for the new Jacob, which is our last point, but we're not going to make it time to do the whole thing, so just have a look at the first few verses of chapter 33. So chapter 33, Jacob looked up, that's the next day, Jacob looked up, and there was Esau coming with his 400 men.

So he divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two female servants, he put the female servants and their children in front, Leah and her children next, Rachel and Joseph at the rear. It kind of looks like he's going to put himself last again and hide.

But verse 3, he himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground, seven times as he approached his brother. But Esau ran to meet Jacob, embraced him, threw his arms around his neck and kissed him, and they wept.

Jacob is weak from wrestling all night, he has a limp, so if you want to make a quick get away, going right out the front to meet him is not a good idea, is it? And yet that's exactly what he does, because he's now confident, even in his weakness, to face his fear of Esau.

[25 : 16] Why? Because he's clung to God and relied on God's grace and it's given him confidence to face his fears, even in his weakness.

For us, it's like praying and saying, God, you can handle this, I'm handing it over to you, I can't do this thing that's in my life at the moment. It doesn't mean we then do nothing, think, we still use the resources God's given us.

It just means that we know it doesn't depend on us ultimately and that frees us not to stress about it, not to think, oh, if I don't do this or that, it's all going to go haywire.

It frees us to have confidence even in our weakness. Let me finish with a bit of a personal example. My dad's cancer has come back.

He had it a couple of years ago and it's just come back a couple of months ago. It's one of the less severe cancers and it's pretty common but it's still cancer so it's relatively significant fear for my parents.

[26 : 24] He cannot get rid of it himself, clearly, but he can have surgery, which he's going to have in about 10 days' time. When I spoke to them on the phone a couple of weeks ago, they said, oh, look, Andrew, we've prayed about it, we're trusting God so we're not really too worried about it at all.

They were clinging to Christ, you see, they were still going to the surgeon, they were still lining up their surgery but they handed it over to God in prayer, you see, and relied on him and it freed them not to fear.

Even to the point that the holiday they'd already booked, well, they're on it now in Canada. Oh, we'll go anyway. The surgery's when we get back. You see, we are not only to cling to Christ in our moral weakness and rely on his grace to save us, to bring us into his kingdom with life eternal, we are also to cling to Christ in our physical weakness.

And when we face fears, whether it's a health fear or a relationship fear or a work and employment fear, we are to continue to cling to Christ and depend on his grace and it frees us not to stress but to face our fears with confidence.

This is why God works in us to humble us, that we may learn to keep clinging to him, that people might see it's only through his strength that we're surviving.

[27 : 54] Well, as I said, we don't have time to look at the rest of the chapter. We see a bit more of old Jacob again come up when he lies to Esau. But let me finish by saying that for the record my daughter can now cut a sandwich with a sharp knife very safely.

And that's what we want for our kids, don't we? We want them to grow up and become independent except when it comes to God. None of us are meant to become independent of God.

Rather, we are to continue depending on him, not by myself, but by God's grace. Let's pray.

Our gracious father, we do thank you for this reminder that you save us, not by our own efforts or wit, but by your grace in Christ.

And father, we thank you for this amazing grace that you've given us. We thank you that in him we have hope in despair, we have joy in sorrow, for we can continue to cling to Christ and hand over our concerns to you, which frees us from fear.

[29 : 13] Help us, we pray, to keep clinging to Christ and depending on your grace. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.