

God Wrestling with Jacob

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[0 : 00] Let us now turn to the passage of scripture that we read, the book of Genesis and chapter 32. And we may read again at verse 24.

And Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. A man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.

The picture that is given to us in the Bible of this man Jacob is not always a flattering one. He is regarded as someone who could be called a trickster or a supplanter.

One who goes behind people to get an advantage for his own selfish ends. When you see him in the home of Laban, and the deception practiced by Laban, you cannot but wonder whether this kind of behavior is possibly genetic.

Because Laban himself is no slouch when it comes to practicing deception, as Jacob found out to his cost.

[1 : 30] So it may be that it is something that is genetic in the life of Jacob. I wouldn't like to go too far down that way, but it is possible.

And here we have Jacob returning to the land that he left under a cloud, so to speak. He had settled matters with Laban, but now there was the matter of settling with his brother Esau.

And the purported meeting seemed to have ominous signs. Jacob is informed that Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men.

Coming with 400 men to meet the one he regarded as a deceiver, one whom he viewed as stealing his birthright.

The signs were very ominous. 400 men. And we are told of Jacob's reaction of intense fear and distress.

[2 : 38] And then we note the shrewd and calculating detailed planning on the part of this crafty individual.

Esau, in Jacob's view, was the main threat now. It didn't seem to enter his head that somehow that God might become his opponent.

And so you find him engaging in prayer. Verses 9 to 12. He pleads for help on the basis of God's covenant, God's promise, God's mercy, God's deliverance, and God's faithfulness.

And then he made the careful arrangements, it seems. It seems as if he is not quite confident that God will undertake in all things.

And therefore he requires to make these appeasement peasants, as he sees it, in order to be reconciled to Esau.

[3 : 49] Oh, how like yourselves. Perhaps you may think he's not. But I'd like you to reflect for a moment on this.

How often do we look to our own meager, bankrupt resources, seeking somehow to have God on our side, but to implement that from our own meager and bankrupt resources, as if somehow God requires our help.

And that is what comes across to me from the planning of this man. Yes, he has sought the help of God, but he thinks God might need a little more assistance.

And so he devises all of these plans. That's often how we think. And finally, he escorts his family across Jabog, and the impression is conveyed of a restless, agitated man, and he is left alone.

Some would see much significance in the fact that the Bible says Jacob was left alone. And there is no doubt but that solitude can be a time for reflection.

[5 : 30] But do not be under the misapprehension that solitude is always a time of positive reflection. Remember, in solitude your sins follow you just as surely as they do when you are not in a position of solitude.

Remember, they can crowd into your mind when you are alone. You might think that if you are out on the moor, if you are after sheep, oh, you are all alone and you can be with God.

You might be just as much exposed to the dangers of the adversary there as you are in a crowded room. I am not sure whether this time of the fact that he was alone, if it was significant or not, if he had time for reflection.

I know that one of the men whose congregation I was for a time as a student and for whom I had the highest regard, the late Douglas Macmillan in his little book on Jacob, he speaks and he uses this illustration of solitude here of how sin alienates us from God and from man.

And he makes the point that solitude is a time to reinforce his guilt and a time when he had to face the accusations of conscience.

[7 : 12] Well, I am not sure of Jacob had time of all of these reflections before he was gripped by this mysterious opponent.

Yes, he was certainly alone with God. And that can be very solemn and sometimes be very frightening.

It can at times be extremely uplifting to be alone with God. One thing I of the Lord desired will seek to obtain to be in the house of God.

Why? To enjoy that level of communion and fellowship and intimacy with God himself. And so we have this fascinating encounter that I'd like to reflect on just for a few moments and be able to draw one or two thoughts from this encounter.

Because it seems to me that the wrestling that is set before us is set before us in two ways. From the perspective of the opponent and the perspective of Jacob.

[8 : 31] And you notice the first is represented as a has been transacted in total silence. A man wrestled with him.

And the Bible tells us he does not prevail. When the man saw that he did not prevail he touched him with repercussions.

And in the second episode there is an exchange of speech. Jacob strives with the man and does prevail. You have striven with God and man and have prevailed.

Now perhaps those two things are two sides of one. And I hope that I can sort of set that before you.

Two sides of one. Two ways in which God is bringing men and women and boys and girls like you and me into subjection to himself.

[9 : 50] And it seems to me that both are essential. A man wrestled with him. That's what we are told.

In the thick darkness of his lonely night he's gripped by an appallment. Now that must have been a terrifying experience.

To be gripped by someone as far as you were aware whom you had never met. Was this someone sent by Esau?

Was this someone who was violently opposed to him? Who was it? Did he have some kind of very evil thoughts with regard to Jacob?

And so he is under attack. It begins with the mysterious antagonist. It doesn't begin with the patriarch.

[11 : 05] Often we think of Jacob wrestling with God. Let's remember the order. God or the mysterious opponent wrestles first with Jacob.

God and you may be here tonight and you too may be in the grip of the same man and he is wrestling with you.

Wrestling with you in your inner life. I am not saying that he is physically wrestling with you. Some would dispute whether there was a physical wrestling match here.

I am not subscribing to that because of the fact that he was touched. But some would go that far. But this I do know that the same man who wrestled here with Jacob is also wrestling with men and women to this present doubt.

And it may be that you are in this company tonight and he is wrestling with you in your inner thoughts, in your heart, in your inner life, in the secret life and he is wrestling with you.

[12 : 18] The wrestling match begins with his initiative, not with yours or mine. It begins with God.

And so underneath the canopy of darkness there is this wrestling match ongoing. And it's a struggle and the struggle is ongoing until Jacob is weakened.

You know, the impression that is given in the scriptures is not that Jacob was a kind of wimp of any kind, but that he was a man of considerable strength.

death. And I base that on this fact when Jacob was looking for the home of Laban.

And you remember he met shepherds who were grazing their flocks. And there was a place where they watered the flocks.

[13 : 31] And there was a stone on the mouth of the well. It was large. And when they went to water their flocks the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well and water the sheep.

But you see when Rachel came and she wanted to water the flocks at the well's mouth Jacob came near and pulled the stone from the well's mouth.

That seems to me to indicate that this man had physical power and strength that he wasn't just a kind of wimpish individual although very crafty but that he was also a man of strength and that is why the wrestling that took place here is indicative of strength on his part.

The prophecy of Hosea tells us that he strove with the angel and prevailed.

The book of Genesis doesn't tell us it was an angel. All it says was there was a man. It doesn't reveal the identity of the man until the end of the chapter and Jacob says I saw God face to face.

[15 : 03] So that gives you a sort of clue as to the identity of this person. Here is God appearing in human form.

In other words a pre-incarnate appearance of the Son of God and he's wrestling with this man Jacob.

What's the meaning of the struggle? Well it seems to me that it's not just a struggle that takes place just then and has no import for what has happened before in the life of Jacob.

It seems to me that this wrestling that takes place all night is symbolic of all the wrestling God had had with his character Jacob.

From the day that he had left his father's tent and God had revealed himself to him as the God of covenant faithfulness. The God whom Jacob had often forgotten.

[16 : 23] And it seems to me that Jacob's disappointments and his successes and the sudden changes in his life were all leading to the yielding of Jacob to the will of God.

No, I'm not saying that Peniel represents the conversion of Jacob. I merely say that it represents his yielding wholly to the will of God.

Abowing to his will. And here is God striving with him. Trying to teach him how sin always comes home to roast.

So here you are. This as it were. Wrestling much in the silence of the night.

And Jacob had to recognize his nothingness to enable him to see what a poor worthless helpless creature he was. To teach us that in our recognized weakness there is strength.

[17 : 51] A man wrestled with Jacob till the breaking of the day. It was a long time. He wrestled with him to the breaking of the day.

And the close of this wrestling match is marked by the disabling of Jacob. Jacob. And it's strange.

Here is a man who could disable his opponent with a mere touch. touch. If he could do that without touch, what could he do if he exerted the fullness of his power?

Could he not crush and snap Jacob like a brittle twig? Oh, it wasn't with lack of strength.

It wasn't with lack of strength. But it was an order to throw new light on the struggle that was ongoing. It was the striving of a power that didn't care so much for a mere outward victory.

[18 : 58] If that had been the case, his power would have been exerted. But that would have only served to crush this feeble man, Jacob.

He was wrestling with him in order that Jacob might yield. Remember how Job posed the question, would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?

And we like Jacob are all brittle twigs in the hands of the Almighty. God mercifully restrains his power in his merciful striving with man.

He's not striving with you in order to break you. He's striving with you in order to heal you and to restore you. Here is a man who had trusted in his own guile, in his own resources, in his own shrewdness, someone who had not been over scrupulous and was successful.

But he had to learn that it was not by might that a man shall prevail. He had to forsake his former ways of operating in the world.

[20 : 25] wrestling with his hands and his limbs if you like. It's not the way to prevail either with God or man. Fighting with God in his own strength.

He is not only unable to obstruct God's merciful purpose towards him, but is powerless. Powerlessness at the grasp of a giant's hand.

If God were to choose to exert his destructive power. And this failure of natural power is the turning point in this wrestling match.

And it symbolizes, I believe, the transition in the life of Jacob and his character from reliance on self and his own resources to reliance upon the divine opponent who became his friend.

And you know, that's the path that we all have to travel if we are to become peace with God. God, the life of dependence on self must be broken and smashed and disabled, in order that in the very moment of discovering our own impotence, we may grasp the hand that smites and find power flowing into our weakness from it.

[22 : 09] It is when he's disabled that he clings, isn't it interesting? Until his resistance is broken.

Oh, how you and I require to be crippled so that resurgence self clings from his heartedly to the one who alone can be the source of our strength.

Oh, we don't have to be physically disabled in a sense that we become crippled physically. Maybe we have to be crippled in physical ways to learn, to cling, to the almighty.

God has his own ways of bringing rebellious man into subjection to his will and his way.

How many times have you seen the crippling or the disabling of a human, man or a woman or a boy and a girl, being instrumental in bringing that person to the will, yielding to the will of the almighty, even in a physical sense?

[23 : 43] Can you not think you're bright Christians in the world? And it was the crippling effect that brought them to yield.

We're so arrogant and so proud of our own resources. And we arrogantly believe that somehow we are capable, more than capable, of going far beyond what God can do.

God brings us to this place and he may have to cripple us. But then that brings me to the second thing, the time is going.

Jacob strives with God and does prevail. let me go, says the antagonist, because the day has broken. Why couldn't he go?

Why did he have to ask, let me go? After all, Jacob was disabled. He was crippled. Why didn't he just lose himself and go?

[24 : 50] Well, it seems to me that there is, I don't know how to put it, but it seems to me that there are parals here that can be drawn with the way Christ acted in the New Testament.

Do you remember when he was with the two on the road to Emmaus? us. And remember, he acted, the Bible says, as if he was going further.

And they pled with him, stay with us. And it seems to me there is a paral here. Let me go, says this man, this mysterious antagonist.

God, and we believe that he's got the power to go. You remember similarly, when he came to the disciples on the water, and Mark tells us, he appeared as though he appeared as though he meant to pass by them.

And it seems to me the principle is the same in all of these illustrations. us. God desires to go if we do not desire him to stay.

[26 : 18] He will go unless we persevere in asking him to stay. So, Jacob, we learn, comes to plead and to appreciate the presence of the one who is here.

The prophet Hosea says, reports that he wept, and there are difficulties with the translation of, in that passage, and I'm not sure, in my own mind at any rate, that that, so much refers to this incident.

Hosea chapter 12, and it says there, he strove with the angel and prevailed.

He wept and sought his favor. I'm not sure that the weeping and seeking of favor refers to the striving with the angel. I think it perhaps refers to his meeting with Esau.

But I throw that out for debate. I'm sure your minister will correct it if he thinks it's wrong. But it seems to me that that is, if you look carefully at how it is set in the context there, but at any rate, the desire to retain God, as it ties and to us.

- [28 : 05] All the struggling of the mysterious opponent has been aimed at this. And then he responds to it when there is a response on our part.
- Someone has put it like this, and I think it really summarizes what I'm trying to say. Prayer is power. it conquers God. We overcome God when we yield.
- When we are vanquished, we are victors. When the life of nature is broken within us, then from conscious weakness springs the longing, which God cannot but satisfy.
- God will be like that. And it seems to me that it summarizes what is taking place in us. What is summarized in the life of the apostle, when I am weak, then am I strong?
- It's a paradox. How can you be strong when you're weak? Huh? How is it possible to be strong when you're weak?
- [29 : 23] When you see somebody who's weak, you don't think of strength. Ah, but when you're weak in self, then you are strong. And you know, that is what we all need to be, to be weak in self.
- especially at communion seasons. Because so often we set preconditions before God.
- If God will do this or that on the next thing, then I will do this. While I'm clinging solely to God. And that's where you will find strength.
- That's where you will find encouragement. And God prevails when we prevail. That's the aim. And so here we have the new name.
- Which I suppose in some ways is the reward of Jacob's victory. And the sign of the renewal in his character. Before this time he had been Jacob, the supplanter, the trickster.
- [30 : 36] The one who met his enemies with duplicity. Mainly of the earth and earthy. Ah, but that what time spent as it were in the presence of the most high adult through the outlook.
- And he learned to pray, not as before, just for mere deliverance from Esau and the like. But he learned to pray for continual nearness to God.
- Oh, you know, isn't it wonderful when you learn that lesson, that you want to be holding with him. Not just to be delivered from the things that are causing you anxiety and burdens in life, but that you want that proximity and nearness with the Almighty, that you have that communion with him alone.
- And although the old nature remains, its path is broken. And so he gets a new name. And you notice who gives him the name.
- It's not men who give it to him. It's the one who knows the nature of men who gives him the name. The one who sees into the depths of our heart and to us the right over our hearts and to us the authority to change our name and to give us that name.
- [32 : 20] you have stridden with God and with men and have prevailed. Here is a man who all his life had been trying to gain advantage over his fellow man and to conquer them using his powers of intellect and guile.
- But now the true way to conquer men is open to them through the power of the almighty. It's not by his own intellectual resources.
- Not by his own guile or his own cunning. Not by anything to do with himself. But to do with how he approaches God.
- Oh, his name was a name of character and of spiritual standing. But that was subject to fluctuation and the old self can still arise.
- You know, it's a mistake for us to think that if somehow we have this new name, that the old self is going to disappear. You remember how it was true in the life of Peter.
- [33 : 42] Jesus reminds him of it. Every name of another can, Simon, with the name Simon, Simon Paul demanded to have you.

But here you have it in the life of Jacob too. But you remember how, at the end of his life, how this new name comes to the fore.

more. If my memory serves me right. J. Joseph was told, behold your father, sir, chapter 48, took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, and was told to Jacob, your son Joseph has come to you.

Notice what the Bible says, then he swirled someone to strength, and sat up in bed. Israel summoned strength, and sat up in bed, indicative of the one who has been given the new name.

Well, are you here tonight, and can you say that you have a deep desire after a closer knowledge of God?

[35 : 05] you see, that desire to know the name, or the identity of his foe, didn't come about when he was struggling in the darkness of the night.

It comes about towards the end of this time of combat. when he's asking the name, he's asking surely to be acquainted more with the nature of God, to have this deeper knowledge of God.

Why is it, says his opponent, that you ask my name? And it sounds like a refusal, doesn't it?

It almost sounds as if he is saying, truly I don't need to give you any more revelation of my character. You have enough light.

What you need now is insight into what you possess already. And it may be not just how you are, friend. You have the light, but you need insight into what you already possess.

[36 : 40] Assurance of what you have. So we find, and there he blessed her. There he blessed her.

All he required to herself, as it were, removed out of his life. He needed to recognize God as lovingly striving with him.

He needed to yield himself up to God, to have his heart cleansed and softened. Oh, he needed all of these things.

So, please tell me your name. when you notice how the passage closes, I think it's very significant.

The sun rose upon him. See, past a new room. It's a new day. A new day. Oh, fresh revelation.

[37 : 49] New promises. The sun rose. It wasn't sweating. It wasn't bringing things to our clothes. It was opening up a whole new world to the disabled criminal, a fearful companion.

Recognizing the tear in the presence of God. I have seen God face to face. Oh, perhaps you say, I wish I could have that experience too, but my friend, you are.

you have it in the scriptures. God speaking face to face with you. I don't have a more personal conversation than that with the Lord, addressing you out of the forces.

Speaking to your heart what he says to you and to me, to go on in obedience to him.

We have seen him face to face. We see him by face to face in the truth. it only means, so, may we too have that satiation aware of the fact that we have been disabled from the power of self to enable us to cling wholly and singularly to Christ alone in whom our strength is to be found that wrestled with him a man he's wrestling with you what is your response to the one wrestling with you can you too say tonight I have seen him face to face of your heart you ought to be with the people of God in their gatherings at his table following them throughout life let us pray eternal and ever blessed one always thank thee for thy whole truth for its richness for its depth for its teaching and when we come to it and feel that we are but scratched the surface oh help us to dig deeper that we might know and see more of thee and more of nitty self requiring to cling to the tower of strength who is Christ alone in Jesus name we ask it amen as we're in God amen to the of favor as the of purpose in the well as BA and as the of the

[40 : 59] I'm thinking of the but