

Wrestling with God

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

Genesis 32, verse 22. The same night, Jacob arose and took his two wives and his two female servants and his eleven children and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream and everything else that he had, and Jacob was left alone.

And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day, when the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

Then the man said, Let me go, for the day has broken. But Jacob said, I will not let you go until you bless me.

[1 : 23] He said to him, What is your name? And he said, Jacob. He said, Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.

Then Jacob asked him, Please tell me your name. But he said, Why? Why is it that you ask my name?

And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.

The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. Therefore, to this day, the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. So what do you do when you find yourself hopelessly trapped with nowhere to turn?

[2 : 58] That's where Randy Fogle found himself on July 24, 2002. On that day, Fogle went to work at the Kew Creek Mine outside Somerset, Pennsylvania, just like any other day at the office, never mind the fact that his office is hundreds of feet underground in a maze of tunnel for the purpose of gathering coal.

One misstep could cost you your life. That day, his work, Randy's work, was interrupted in the evening with a crackling voice on the radio.

We've hit water. We've hit water. Randy's fellow miners had accidentally drilled through an adjacent flooded mine.

The miners scrambled to escape, doubled over to avoid slamming their heads as millions of gallons of water began gathering around their ankles.

One team escaped. Randy's team did not. Cut off from all ways of escape, Randy's team of nine miners found themselves trapped in a chamber four feet deep by 18 feet wide filled nearly to the brim with freezing water.

[4 : 28] Can you imagine? I imagine myself and I wouldn't last 10 minutes so terrified of tight spaces but these men were strong and tough, battle tested from years of crawling around, cheating death in the mines but they too must have begun to panic as hour after hour passed with no rescue.

They must have asked is anyone coming? Will they find us? Will they reach us? Before it's too late. After 77 hours they were rescued.

All nine of Randy's men survive. Isn't that amazing? Well this morning Jacob finds himself also hopelessly trapped.

He left home years ago as we remember because his brother Esau was prepared to take his life. He fled to his uncle Laban and there he endured all sorts of misery as his uncle lied to him and

cheated him reduced him to little more than a slave for 20 years.

When he couldn't take it anymore Jacob took off with his wives and children and possessions and ran. Laban caught up with him and made him promise to never pass back that way again.

[6 : 01] So he was cut off from the back. But Jacob keeps on moving heading towards home. In the beginning of chapter 32 he finds out his brother Esau is headed towards him and he's coming toward him with 400 men a battalion of men to take him out.

Jacob is trapped just like those miners Jacob is hemmed in on all sides. He can't turn back. Laban is there waiting for him but he can't continue forward.

Esau is coming to take him out and so the sun goes down on the longest night of Jacob's life.

The true dark night of the soul a night filled with fear and anguish and dread in the darkness of night Jacob finds there's another man waiting for him.

Jacob has a more serious problem than the father Isaac who never loved him or the uncle Laban who cheated him or his brother Esau who wants to kill him. The Lord has come for him.

[7 : 13] Jacob's been running his whole life not just from Isaac or Laban or Esau Jacob's been running from the Lord. So we're going to begin to see this morning and the Lord comes to him this evening to put an end to all his scheming!

and striving! All his lying and cheating and stealing! All his attempts to take matters into his own hand! The Lord has come to put an end to that! He comes in the darkness of night to teach him that the blessings he so desperately wants and the blessing we so desperately need will not be seized by human strength or effort or scheming!

the blessing he wants and the blessing we need comes by faith alone! The peace and security status and approval we long for will not come like Jacob tried by strategy or striving!

It can't be attained with possessions or popularity it can't be bought with riches or wealth! In a word where we're going the only way to grasp the blessing of God is with the empty hand of faith!

the only way to grasp the blessing of God is with the empty hand of faith! We're going to back up a little bit in our points and begin with what I've titled the weakness of strength and I think that's what the Lord wants to teach him here in Genesis chapter 32 1 to 21 our text begins with Jacob making his way home Jacob's returning home because of the promise if you remember in Genesis 28 the Lord said I'll take you all the way there I'll be with you all the time that you're there and then I'll bring you back home so Jacob returning home even when he was with Laban the Lord said if you'll return I'll return with you and be with you so Jacob seems to be obeying the promise but as the text continues it's clear the old Jacob is alive and well some people never change and so Jacob doesn't seem to look in verse 1 and 2 Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him when he saw them he said this is

[9 : 18] God's camp so he called the name of that place Mahanaim he names the place the angels appear to him as soon as he arrives he names the place Mahanaim which means two camps so if you remember the angels appeared to him in Genesis chapter 28 as he's on the way to Laban's house and now the angels appear to him on his way back when he goes and they appear to him on the way he says this is God's house Bethel when he on the way back he says this is God's camp Mahanaim there are two camps of angels sent to guard and protect him it should have fortified his faith God is with him and indeed will keep him wherever he goes but the following verses unravel Jacob's wrestling with faith and unbelief he rejoices in faith this is God's camp but then when he hears Esau is coming with 400 men he begins scheming look in verse 6 the messengers!

return to Jacob saying we came to your brother and he is coming to meet you and there are 400 men with him Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed he divided the people who were with him and the flocks and herds into two camps thinking that if Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it then the camp that is left will escape so Jacob divides his family assuming that if Esau attacks this one maybe he'll get out with the second he can just minimize the losses God has promised that his children would be as numerous as the dust of the earth and yet here he immediately returns to a scheme to save his neck so Jacob rejoices and then he divides his family in unbelief he prays in faith look in verse nine this beautiful prayer oh God father of Abraham God of my father Isaac oh Lord who said to me return that's the command from Genesis 31 look in verse 10

I'm not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness you've shown with only my staff I crossed the Jordan and now I've become two camps please deliver me from the hand of my brother for I fear him that he may come and attack me it's a brilliant I'd love to preach a whole sermon on that prayer and yet immediately after the prayer he began scheming again look in

verse 13 so he stayed there that night and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau the text continues that he prepared this lavish present he sets aside over 550 animals for Esau and then he tells Esau or he tells his servants to space them out so they gradually approach

Esau so that Esau is just waiting for him to arrive and then there's just flock after flock after flock of this gift this present for him this dramatic gift to him what is going on God's blessed Jacob greatly perhaps he's saying I just want to give you some of my gain but that's not it at all Jacob's trying to pay him off Jacob's trying to bribe him Jacob's trying to buy off his anger with a gift as the proverb says everyone's a friend to a man who gives gifts his intentions become very clear look in verse 20 he says for he thought I may appease him with the present this may satisfy his anger that goes ahead of me and afterwards

I shall see his face perhaps then he'll accept me so the present passed ahead of him and he himself stayed that night in the camp that same night even the bribe wasn't enough he took his family or he took his two wives and his two servants and all the remainder of his flock across the river so he even further from Esau so what's going on I think to understand what's going on you have to notice the emphasis upon two running through this passage Jacob is one of two twin brothers he's encountered God at two camps he has two wives and two female servants he separated his family into two camps why the point that the author is trying to make is Jacob has two minds about himself Jacob Jacob is double minded now there's a sense in which we're all double minded that's why that's why

[14:40] David taught us to pray unite my heart to fear your name we'll never love God with all our heart we'll never trust him with all our heart we'll never obey him with all our heart but that's not what's going on here what the author's trying to say is Jacob still has two minds about himself he's still seeking to hold on to faith with one hand to the schemes of unbelief with the other here it is even though God has rescued him again and again throughout this life he's still trying to guarantee the promises of God with his own strength he's trying to seize the promises of God with his own wisdom what the author's helping us see is this is a sham this is a charade it's a halfway house and it will not work it cannot faith makes no bargains with unbelief what we're meant to see is that Jacob has an appearance of faith and godliness but it's only a veneer he lacks the power found in saving faith years ago

I read the story of the death of English philosopher Jeremy Bentham after he died in 1832 he gave all his money and possessions to the University College Hospital in London with one surprising and odd condition he stated that his dead body should be dissected and his skeleton put together preserved and clothed so that he could attend all the future board meetings of the hospital to this day prior to the start of each board meeting Jeremy Bentham is rolled into the meeting decked out in his 19th century clothing during the roll call the chairman announces Jeremy Bentham present but not voting present but not voting well many Christians could be characterized in the same way what we're meant to see here is that many have the appearance of godliness like Jacob many attend church many say the right things many attempt to do the right things many appear to be Christians but many are present but they still have two minds about themselves they never give themselves over completely to the Lord they never humble themselves completely never truly trust in the Lord there's no encounter between them and the Lord in actuality J.C.

Ryle helpfully says in his book holiness it is not gazing on the lifeboat that saves the shipwrecked sailor but actually getting into it it is not knowing and believing that Christ is a savior that can save souls unless there are actual transactions between you and the Christ what we're meant to see this emphasis on two camps two wives two sons is this emphasis that Jacob has a double mind about himself and yet the Lord has brought him out to have a transaction with the almighty I think in so many ways God is teaching Jacob the utter weakness of his strength there's no peace in his schemes tonight the weakness of an appearance of godliness you know we often think the important question is do we go to church have we been baptized do we say the right things but all those things may just be the veneer the important question is Christ inside now I don't mean did you ask him into your heart that's not what I'm talking about does he live within you have you had this transaction and with he's made all things new everything's about to change for Jacob everything can change for you this morning to the transformation of faith so the power of weakness or the weakness of power weakness of human strength and the transformation of faith that same night Jacob encounters a man in the darkness after Jacob sends his family across the

river he's completely alone look in verse 24 and Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of day now what is going on here suddenly WCW enters our Bible you know who is this man you know this unknown unnamed man enters our text of scripture we don't know immediately we've been waiting for Esau to surround him we've been fearful that Laban may come back and pounce him but unlike the play acting that

[19 : 50] Ric Flair has made famous Jacob and this man wrestle the unknown adversary lays his hands on him and they begin to wrestle tossing and tumbling thrashing about through the night what's going on why are they wrestling I think the best explanation is that in the ancient world one of the ways legal cases were settled was through wrestling a trial by combat hand to hand combat and Jacob is on trial Jacob is on God's trial in so many ways Jacob has been wrestling his whole life all his life has been a trial if we could say it like that the Lord promised before he was born that he was to receive the blessing that an inheritance would pass to him even though he was the younger son that it would pass over Esau and fall on the younger son but the story of

Jacob's life the story of one who refuses to trust God to do what he promised and wrestles the blessing out of everyone's hands he begins wrestling in the womb grasping at his brother Esau's heel desperately trying to become the firstborn son as if no no no you can't come out first me he continues wrestling as a young man cheating his brother Esau out of the birthright and then out of the blessing he wrestles a massive stone off the well as we saw last week to woo Rachel he wrestles and fights with Laban for 20 years all his life Jacob has been on trial all his life his faith has been on trial will he trust God to do what he promised will he cling to faith alone again and again and again he refuses he takes matters into his own hands Jacob is synonymous in our mind with someone who lies and cheats and steals he schemes his way into the blessing again and again and again and tonight he assumes his problem is coming down the road tomorrow but the Lord has come to him tonight so that he faces the test of his life the trial of his life as the night carries on Jacob and his adversary are wrestling and Jacob realizes this is no mere man this is the angel of the Lord he's been wrestling with everyone throughout his life but in a real sense he's been wrestling with the Lord all along then this wrestle between faith and unbelief this divided house this man of two minds all his life and now it's just him and the Lord and them two alone just like God tests Abraham up on the mountain to see if he would give away everything and trust the Lord to provide and cling to the Lord alone but Jacob continues to fight as daybreak approaches the angel Lord realizes he will not stop though no doubt covered in sweat and exhausted from a night of wrestling he will not be pinned with one touch the angel Lord puts Jacob's hip at a socket Jacob crumbles as the strength of his leg gives way like a boxer stumbling after a crushing blow but he refuses to let go he clings to the Lord with all his might hanging around him like a rag doll as his useless leg drags behind and the angel Lord turns to him look in verse 26 he says let me go for the day has broken what he's going up why is the angel leaving is the angel conceding defeat to Jacob is Jacob winning this battle I don't think that's it at all now Ezekiel tells us man cannot see the face of God and live so perhaps he was protecting Jacob's life but I don't think that's it either I think this is the real test this is the real test of wrestling through the night and the angel says let me go for the day has broken the real test is coming will Jacob let the Lord walk away he's wrestled with the Lord and different people all his life will he let the Lord walk away will he be satisfied!

[24 : 59] thinking that he overpowered the Lord will he be lost forever because the way Jacob needs to win is not by seizing but by finally letting go look at Jacob's response verse 26 he says I will not let you go until you bless me now it's clear it seems clear to me enough that Jacob has been changed he's clinging to God alone he's not resting in his strength anymore he's resting in his faith he does not win with his strength he wins when he realizes that all his strength is not enough to seize the blessing that only comes by faith then the Lord says what is your name he says Jacob he says your name shall no longer be

Jacob but Israel for you striven with God and with men and have prevailed now what does all this mean Martin Luther called this the most obscure passage in all of the Old Testament we can agree a wrestling match come on I believe the purpose is to bring about this transaction between the Lord and Jacob that Jacob so desperately needed Jacob would not humble himself any other way the Lord presented numerous opportunities and he refused with Esau Laban we could say it like this does he humble himself I think he does in two ways we could say it like this Jacob gives God his sin Jacob gives

God his sin finally did you notice that the angel said what is your name and he said Jacob now Dale Carnegie in his book how to win friends and influence people famously said a person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in the world his point was if you remember people's names you'll get more money so think you care about them I don't know I haven't read the book but it seems like it's a business book so that's probably the way it goes in the context of the Bible though a name is not significant because of how it sounds and how it makes us feel a name is significant because of what it reveals it tells others who you are it uncovers your true character Jacob's name means he cheats so

Jacob means in all his life he's been running from it if you remember when he deceives his blind father hiding beneath the animal skins and carrying a bowl of his favorite stew his favorite stew his father asked who are you says I am Esau your first born as he moves closer with the soup so his father can eat it his father asked him again are you really my son Esau and he says I am after Jacob Esau discovers what Jacob has done he says is he not rightly named Jacob for he's cheated me these two times taking away my birthright and behold now he's taken away my blessing but he does not come clean he runs from his brother runs from his home runs from his name for 20 years it's hard to exaggerate the significance of what is going on in this moment in the musical also the book

I presume but in the musical Les Miserables the character Jean Valjean seems to be patterned after Jacob Valjean if you've seen the musical is a convicted criminal number 24601 he spends 20 years in prison the same number that Jacob spent in prison as a slave to Laban he's released he cannot seem to shake his pass he steals some items from monastery and must take off on the run again much of the musical tells the story of Jean Valjean running from a from a police man named Javert he changes his name he starts a new life he owns a factory with hundreds of workers he gains a reputation he's kind of like a mayor in the town a reputation for being a good man but then he hears that the police have captured a man named

[30 : 16] Jean Valjean and one of the most moving songs called who am I he has this internal deliberation will he let this man be him or claim to be him before the authority he knows this man is not Jean Valjean he knows he is Jean Valjean he knows that if he does not speak up this man will be the man condemned to slavery and in that powerful song Valjean says if I speak I am condemned if I stay silent I am damned this wrestle if I speak I am condemned if I stay silent I am damned the song continues he goes to the police he says who am I who am I I'm Jean Valjean 24601 I mean that's what's going on in this passage as well when he says I am Jacob Jacob is not saying a name that helps him feel loved

Jacob is not saying what he goes by for the first time in his life Jacob is saying I'm the fraud I'm the deceiver I'm the cheat I'm the steal I'm the man who stole the blessing I am Jacob for the first time he comes and encounters who he is before the Lord if I speak surely he thinks I am condemned but if I stay silent right now I'll be damned forever and you can't become a Christian until you learn to say the same thing until you stop running and say I'm the man I'm the rebel you see all this mess it's my fault it's incredible nobody tells the truth these days and yet here's

Jacob finally turning to the Lord as he says his name he's also waving the white flag so to speak he's surrendering I mean you read these stories you're like Jacob will you finally surrender he's surrendering he's saying I'm done oh man done with all the charades I give my life to God alone I come by faith God blesses him and then God gives Jacob a new life the angel says your name shall no longer he finally admits his name angel says your name shall no longer be Jacob be Israel to name the people of God go by for thousands of years now we've seen the

Lord change people's name Abraham father of nations to or Abram to Abraham a father of a multitude of nations and Sarai to Sarah but those changes were improvements I guess you know tweaking this one's more foundational Jacob means the name means he cheats Israel means he strives with God no longer will be he be known as the one who cheats his way into the blessings but as the one who received the blessings through striving with God through this transaction with the Lord and changing his name the Lord is not merely changing what he goes by the Lord is changing who he is the Lord's changing his character changing his life giving him a new life a new way of life not by strength but by weakness and faith so too we come to

Christ he gives us a new name and a new life years ago I read said that twice today but I did read this years ago and in a book called devoted by God Sinclair Ferguson he's a theology professor tells a story of teaching a class and one of his students in there was from Southeast Asia as they

got to know one another he said to him the guy's name or the game he went by was Timothy he said to him Timothy what's your real name and he replied Timothy he said yes yes I said I'll put it in his words yes I said but referring to his native language I said what's your real name Timothy once again he replied Timothy realizing he was leading me on

[35 : 40] I tried again what name did your parents give you Timothy responded with an Asian name so I said that's your real name right you chose Timothy so it would be easy for us to say us westerners to say he said no Timothy is my real name that's the name I was given when I was baptized now you may not have got a new name when you were baptized but you were baptized into a new name the name of the Father Son and the Holy Ghost not to give you something new to be known by but to send you into a new life same thing happens to Jacob I love the way the scene ends Jacob turns to the angel and says so what's your name the angel says why do you ask my name as if to say do you really need to ask don't you know already

Jacob says for I've seen God face to face and yet my life has been delivered point three strength of weakness strength of weakness now the dark night is over and the sun rises now it's fascinating the sun is setting as Jacob leaves home in chapter 28 but as he returns the sun is rising as if to say all the darkness of night is over just like we celebrate we've been transferred from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of his the kingdom of light his beloved sun and so a new day has arrived the sun is rising because a new Jacob is returning but this Jacob is returning with a limp look at verse 31 the sun rose upon him as he passed through limping because of his hip the limp is a reminder that it was not a dream all that happened to him was for real it's a reminder that it has not been easy it's a lasting reminder the struggle and his need to continually turn from his weakness of his own strength to the strength of his weakness in

God it's not just Jacob who has to limp Bruce walk he says the limp is the posture of the saint walking not in physical strength but in spiritual strength our limp may be physical but it will be spiritual the limp of heartache and regret grief wonderfully Paul tells us power is made perfect in weakness therefore I'll boast all the more of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ will rest upon me for the sake of Christ boast!

My weaknesses and insults hardships persecutions and calamity when I'm weak I'm strong he lifts his eyes look in verse one he lifted his eyes and look behold Esau is coming with four hundred men we're meant to immediately be alert this is what terrified him moments ago but now he's different instead of hiding behind all his flocks and families he goes to the front look in verse one and two he divided his children among Leah Rachel and the two female servants he put the servants with their children in front then Leah then Rachel and Joseph last of all he himself went before him before all of them the old Jacob was a coward but this Jacob is at the front of the line bowing himself to the ground until he came near his brother all his life

Jacob has been fighting to become first and make everyone else his servant yet repeatedly he says to Esau I am your servant he is no longer seeking to be served but to serve and give away his life the author carefully points out instead of presenting a present to Esau and paying him off now Jacob is repaying him Jacob is making restitution just like Zacchaeus when he's rescued by God four fold makes restitution that's what Jacob is doing he gives all this to him back to Esau he's giving back the blessing so to see he's giving back what he stole he's a man who wants a clean conscience if it weren't clear enough up to verse 10 it's very clear in verse!

[40 : 57] look in verse 10 he says I have seen your face which is like seeing the face of God and you have accepted me please accept my blessing that is brought to you because God has dealt graciously with me and I have enough he urged him he took it Jacob said you stole my blessing he comes back gives it to him he said seeing you is like seeing the face of God when you're living in darkness people are only vehicles or obstacles to what you want but when God turns things upside down suddenly you can see people as someone stamped in the image of God isn't that amazing that's what that means incidentally that's in the last song of Les Miserables but then the scene concludes

Jacob and Esau split ways and we never hear of Esau again off the pages of scripture off the pages of redeemed history the only way to grasp the blessing of God is with the empty hand of faith the only way to grasp the blessing of God is with the empty hand of faith several weeks ago I thought the similarities between the story of Jacob and the story of the prodigal son arguably the most famous parable the man who had two sons and the younger son went away like the story of Esau and Jacob it's about a father and his two sons any Jew in the first century when Jesus says I'll tell a

story about a father and his two sons would have immediately thought of like the story of Jacob and Esau the younger son wears the best clothes we saw that he dressed up in Esau's clothes young goats are prepared for the meal in the same way the older brother was in the field when the younger brother came home the older brother becomes angry and fears that his inheritance is being taken away the younger brother is the cheat in the story but the of the prodigal son and the story of Jacob and Esau is the response of Esau look up there with you I have both translations together look at verse 33 4 but Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him now Jacob went home thinking he was going to get all the wrath of Esau that was awaiting! him Esau ran to him embraced him fell on his neck and kissed him so too in the parable of his two sons when the younger brother was still a long way off his father saw him felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him the similarities are unmistakable ran embraced and kissed the idea that I want to leave with us when the Lord Jesus was looking for a way to communicate to us the generous welcome and reception of God to sinners he could find no better example in the Bible than Esau the story of Esau's welcome is the most unexpected response in all of the Old Testament so too the father's welcome of the prodigal son is the most unexpected God's welcome of sinners is all the more unexpected all the more astonishing all the more unfathomable the story is meant to communicate the astonishing reality that

God sent his only son to sweep away every obstacle that stood between him and the people he loved and that's the same welcome that awaits for you by faith in Jesus Christ this morning welcome of a father there's one more thing we need to see we're running out of time God tells the parable of the prodigal son to scribes and Pharisees the people that knew the Old Testament better than anybody else so when he says a man with two sons I said anybody in the first century Jew would have known it but definitely scribes and Pharisees would have known they knew the Bible they knew the Old Testament the Lord Jesus includes the example of Esau's welcome of Jacob to challenge him he's saying

[45 : 58] Esau welcomed his cheat brother and you won't welcome the tax collectors and sinners do you see it it couldn't have been a more blunt rebuke Esau this heathen this one cut off Hebrews 12 tells us even Esau welcome back Jacob and you're grumbling because Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners the warning stands for us will we welcome those who only cling to the promise will we welcome those whose lives are wreck we welcome those who are trying to get sober welcome those whose children are unruly will we be a church that offers a gospel that only requires the empty hand of faith or will we be a church that tells them to put on their best church face to provoking the only way to grasp the blessing is with the empty hand of faith and that's the gospel we offer

Father in heaven we thank you for the privilege of sitting under your word being drawn into this most mysterious of scenes reminded that you are the one who seek and save the lost you're not a God who's content to watch your children perish you're God who seeks and saves runs out to the highways and byways that you might bring your children home that we cling to you by faith this morning to rest in all the blessing of God through Jesus Christ means to us we thank you Christ's name amen you've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens Tennessee for more information about Trinity Grace please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com