

## Origin Stories, Jacob the Wrestler, Genesis 32, 5/19/24

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found. Was blind but now I see.* The words of one of the most powerful hymns of the Christian faith were written not by some great evangelist like Billy Graham, or a great servant like Mother Theresa. They were written by a slave trader, John Newton. One day he found himself on a boat in a fierce storm, terrified for his life. And at the moment when the ship was going down, he got onto his knees and clinging to the mast as if it was the feet of Jesus, "Lord, if you get me out of this alive, I will surrender my life to you." Maybe that's a prayer you've prayed in a storm of your life. Well guess what? God did spare his life. And out of the storm, John Newton did what he said he would do, surrendered his life and wrote this hymn. This is an interesting window into how God uses storms in our lives. As one pastor says it, "God takes our adversity and turns it into a university."<sup>1</sup> That seems to be gateway to understanding our text today in Genesis 32.

[Title Slide] We encounter Jacob in verse 24 trying to find some rest between two burned bridges.<sup>2</sup> How did Jacob find himself here? Because Jacob was a "Jacob"- a heel grabber, a trickster, a deceiver as his name means. We have a saying, too smart for his own good. That we Jacob. He tricks his brother into selling him his birthright, he tricks his father into giving him the covenant blessing instead of Esau. And because of this, Esau vows the next time he sees Jacob he will kill him, and so he runs off to his Uncle Laban's house 400 miles north. Bridge #1 Burned.

In Chapter 29, while at Laban's house he meets the love of his life, Laban's daughter Rachel and works seven years to marry her, and on his wedding night, he realizes for the first time in his life he's the one tricked- he spent the night not with Rachel but her older sister Leah. So he works for Laban seven more years in order to finally marry Rachel. But Jacob wasn't just going to work for Laban 14 years and call it even, in chapter 30 he devises a clever plan to increase his flocks through a selective breeding technique that all but wiped-out Laban's herds. And so the tension between Laban and his family, and Jacob and his growing family is growing. It's like one of those old western scenes in the bar- "This town ain't big enough for both of us." In the height of the tension, God calls to Jacob and says it's time to go back home. In chapter 31, we read that Jacob has one more trick up his sleeve, he waits until sheep shearing season when Laban and the sons are out in the fields and he packs up his whole family, his flocks, his possessions he gets out of dodge. Burned bridge #2.

And so Jacob starts on the long journey from North to South back to the promised land of Canaan, where his father Isaac lives. But there is a problem with going back home when you've burned bridges isn't there? You must face your past. And Jacob knew that he was going to have to face his brother, face what he did to him. And he anticipated this would not be a particularly happy family reunion...no BBQ, lawn games and watching old family slides...things might be ugly. And so in chapter 32:3-8, Jacob pulls a Jacob one more time...he concocts a plan to grab his heel one more time, this time by appeasement. He divides his camp into two and sends a

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<sup>1</sup>Pastor Fredrick Douglass Haynes, as quoted by Charlie Dates, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJLU0Xkf4qg>

<sup>2</sup> Also Charlie Dates image

caravan of gifts ahead of him, trying to smooth things over so Esau will be distracted by the gifts and Jacob can either pacify him or, if that doesn't work he can at least save his own skin. However, he hears from his servants that Esau has a band of 400 armed men that are coming his way to meet him. Not this time. Jacob realizes he is out of tricks.

He's is terrified, he's filled with anxiety...he's in the storm, between two burned bridges, and just like John Newton did- in Genesis 32:9-12, he prays a prayer of desperation. We don't know for sure, but this might be the first sincere, humble, faith-filled prayer that Jacob ever prayed and for the first time he realizes how much he desperately needs God. Not only God's protection and blessing, but he needs to encounter God himself. He needs not just provisions of God, he wants God to be with him like God was with his grandfather Abraham and with his father Isaac. And so the night before he would face his greatest fears, he spends an evening alone...a night that would transform him in a way he never would have imagined.

#### Genesis 32:24-25

*So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. 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 he wrestled with the man.*

What in the world is going on here? Did this really happen? Who is mysterious wrestler who comes out of nowhere? And why is this in the Bible? You've got some questions and so do I...First of all, let me say- I love that this passage is in the Bible. I grew up watching this kind of wrestling [picture]. And the first time I heard this story as a little kid I pictured two men in a ring in boots and tights body slamming each other and jumping off the turn buckle. [Blank slide] And then I learned at age 7 that's fake, and the real thing happens on a mat, so I joined the wrestling team. And I also love that this is in the Bible because it proves that it's God's favorite sport. OK, well enough of that. So let's answer some real questions in this text. First- **Did this really happen?** Or is this spiritual or metaphorical? As a wrestler, I can tell you that going hard in a match for just 6 minutes requires significant stamina and training. It would be hard to imagine these guys grappling all night until the break of dawn. And yet, the Bible seems to suggest it really happened, after all, Jacob now walks with a limp after the match. One author suggests that what started as a spiritual struggle in his sleep, became physically manifested as the dawn came.<sup>3</sup> Well, whatever the case, Jacob was locked in the match of his life.

**Well who was this mysterious wrestler?** It wasn't Macho Man, and it wasn't the Rock it was none other than God himself. Jacob at some point in this match comes to an understanding of the identity of this mystery man.<sup>30</sup> *So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."* This is what theologians call a theophany, a physical manifestation of God in human form. And this isn't the first time and certainly won't be the last time God manifests himself in the flesh.

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<sup>33</sup> Henry Morris, *The Genesis Record*, p.500

**Why is God wrestling Jacob?** This is really the million-dollar question because in understanding why God wrestles Jacob, we will learn why God wrestles us as well. You say, "What? God doesn't wrestle me..." Oh yes he does! It may not be physical (if that happens let's talk), God is a wrestler, make no mistake about it. And just like Jacob, maybe we will realize today that some of us have been wrestling God our whole lives. Let me share with you three reasons God wrestles Jacob and each of us.

### **#1 So we Learn Dependence on God**

All of Jacob's life he has been trying to cling to financial security, cling to his mother's comfort and cling to his father's approval, cling to a beautiful woman, cling to safety in numbers and his flocks, cling to his own cleverness. But when he found himself in the valley between two burned bridges, when his life is on the line, he seems to finally realize that there is only one place to cling that is a solid foundation for his life, one person that will save him. That's why we see him clinging to God the wrestler, even with a busted hip vowing in verse 26 **"I will not let you go unless you bless me."** *I need Thee, oh, I need Thee; Ev'ry hour I need Thee; Oh, bless me now, my Savior, I come to Thee.* Finally, Jacob learns dependence on God. He learns to cling to God alone.

See, God wrestles us to teach us the same dependency on him. He wrestles us through trials, in anxieties, in our disappointments, when you find yourself between a rock and a hard place, between burned bridges, when we've messed up our lives. He wrestles us when our foundations get shaken, when our marriage is in crisis, when our health is failing. When we aren't getting our own way and our well laid plans go through the shredder. He's got some of us in a headlock right now...and he's saying are you ready cling to me? **C.S. Lewis said, "God whispers in our prosperity and shouts in our adversity."** You need to know this about God, He will wrestle away things you cling to that have become idols, your self-assurance and self-dependence, he will wrestle with you to bring you to your knees so that we learn to cling to him alone. Do you feel his grip on you? And it's in that place of clinging that he also teaches Jacob and us...

### **#2 So we Learn Surrender to God**

Even as dawn began to break, the match had still not been settled, so God dislocates Jacob's hip with a tap (that would be against the rules today...but I'm not going to argue with God) therefore Jacob had no choice...all he could do was hold on, but he wasn't going to win this match. So Jacob lost? Well no, actually Jacob won. You say, what? No he didn't, he lost. Well let's see what happens.

**<sup>27</sup> The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. (God makes him say his name to admit that he's a Jacob...a deceiver and trickster) <sup>28</sup> 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."** God changes his name, and with it gave him a new identity. He was calling him to a new way of life with this new name...and I believe what's happening with this is God is saying "Now you are no longer going to wrestle against me you are going to wrestle alongside of me." Tag team partners. Your going to stop fighting and resisting me and surrender to me and work with me for my purposes in your life. **<sup>29</sup> Then he [God] blessed him there.** Jacob's win came

through losing. It wasn't until Jacob surrendered his will to the will of God that he prevailed and God blessed him, do you see that? Does this sound familiar? What did Jesus say? **Luke 17:33** *Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it.* Do you know this is the only way to be saved. We cannot be saved until we lose. Until we surrender our self-salvation plan. That we are good enough to get to heaven, that we can will ourselves there by our own effort and religion and achievement. In surrender, humility, recognizing utter defeat and asking God for his blessing of salvation alone that he provides in Jesus, this is the only way to win spiritually and get God's blessing of eternal life.

**[Lesson #2 Slide]** But this isn't just for our salvation, this is the lifelong journey of faith with God. The more we cling to our own will in this life, the more we forfeit the life, presence and blessing of God. Many of us are wrestling with God right now and you are unwilling to surrender your will to Him. Maybe God's been asking you to forgive someone and you've been wrestling with him and saying, but I don't feel like it. Or maybe God has been trying to loosen your grip on your money to be more generous and you have been resisting him. Maybe you are in a wrestling match because something in your life didn't turn out the way you thought, the promotion didn't come through, or you didn't get into the program or school you wanted, or your health has kept you from the retirement dreams you had to travel and you are angry with God, you are resisting his will, you are in a wrestling match of wills, yours or God's?

You know during the wild days of the pandemic when church suddenly was all virtual for a few months, and we were asked to mask up and distance, and the social issues began raging and dividing. And for the first time in my ministry I experienced the hurt of some people that I had poured into, who I baptized, disciplined, cried with and helped through hard times, people I thought were friends and allowed into my life who, in a low, vulnerable moment for me, said somethings that were hurtful and I thought unfair and left the church and I felt personally betrayed. While it was happening I don't think I could admit that, but we are far enough away from it for me to see that clearly and admit that to you. And what I wanted to do is defend myself instead of humble myself. What I wanted to do was have a pity party for myself, and what I wanted at moments was to be vindicated, and gossip and slander them to make them look like the bad guys and me the good guy. Now I know the Bible, and I have the Holy Spirit and I knew God wanted me to humble myself and forgive them. But in my flesh, I didn't want to do any of that, pure and simple. So, onto the mat, the Lord and I went. You say, well, how did that work out for you? Well, I lost. That's how it worked out for me. I surrendered; I tapped out. Eventually, I went ahead and did what he asked me to do. I lost. But it's okay that I lost because 22 years ago, I dedicated my life to the lordship of Christ, which means, listen, that I agreed to lose every wrestling match between me and the Lord. Do you understand that? I may go on that mat and I may huff and puff and try to blow the house down, but when it's all over, Lord, I'm going to lose because that's the commitment I made.<sup>4</sup>

This is one of the great paradoxes of the Bible. When we lose, we win. When we lose to God's lordship, we win God's blessing. And that's the reason I made this commitment 22 years ago

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<sup>4</sup> Lon Solomon taught me how to wrestle with God like this, grateful for him.

because I want God's blessing more than I want my way. I want God's blessing more than I want my will. I want God's blessing more than I want my plans. And God has blessed me and taught me and made me into a more seasoned, faithful pastor because I lost that wrestling match with the Lord. This is what he wants to do in your life. Surrender your will to his will. What is it you are clinging to? Surrender to him. So we learn dependence on God, surrender to God....

There's one more critical lesson God is trying to teach us if we go a little deeper under the surface of this story...and the only why we get there is asking this question: If this is God wrestling, then why does it seem like they are evenly matched? How is it that God couldn't overpower Jacob immediately? I think what God is doing here is similar to what I did when my boys were little. I would descend to their level of weakness. "Oh you got me!" Of course at any moment I could break them. To this day that remains unquestionably true. But I'm willing to make myself weak to get on their level, to meet them where they are at. And this is what I believe is happening here with God and Jacob. God was descending to Jacob's level of weakness to relate to him. At any moment God could have crushed him, in fact, that's what Jacob deserves, but he doesn't, not only does he not crush him, he blesses him! What God is teaching Jacob and us today...

### **#3 So we Learn the Grace of God**

Just like Jacob, God does put his full weight on us...we deserve that because of our sin. We should be crushed, he shouldn't put up with us. But not only does he not crush us, he blesses us with salvation and a new life! How is that possible?

Because there was another divine wrestler who came in the flesh, who descended all the way down into our weakness, Jesus Christ the Son of God.<sup>5</sup> He wrestled the sin and evil of mankind. But this time, Jesus allowed the sin and evil of mankind have their way with him. He surrendered to the mocking and slander. He accepted the blows of the soldiers. They pinned his back to the wood of a Roman cross as they nailed his hands and feet. Jesus wrestled the full weight of our sin and took God's just punishment for us. But he held on. He wouldn't let go until we get the blessing. Jesus took the curse of the law of sin and death for us. And because Jesus was willing to lose his life, we gain eternal life...and he becomes the ultimate victor over death in his resurrection from the dead. *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind but now I see.*

God is a wrestler. But he's not trying to defeat you, he's trying to free you and make you victorious...will you cling to him, will you submit to him, will you accept his grace in Jesus?

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<sup>5</sup> Grateful to Tim Keller for this connection. <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/the-fight-of-your-life/>