

Jacob Wrestling with God

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning. Please keep your Bibles open at Genesis 32 and 33. We're going to dig into those chapters in a bit more detail now. Well, this morning I want to talk to you about a man named Jacob. He was a head of state. He married multiple wives.

He had a record throughout his career of theft and deception by means of which he enriched himself and built up his personal estate. Do you know who I'm talking about? Well, no, I'm not talking about the previous president of South Africa.

I'm actually talking about one of the main spiritual heads of both the Christian and Jewish faith, Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham, who I think many Christians and Jews are a little bit embarrassed about him being part of their spiritual heritage.

You know, he's like that uncle who did time in prison and you don't really talk about it. Polite family gatherings, a bit of a stain on the family's reputation. I think Jacob's a bit like that for Christians and Jews alike.

He's not someone we tend to be proud of when we look at his reputation, his history. His name itself means supplanter or grasper based on the fact that he was grasping his brother Esau's heel as they came out of the womb.

[1 : 25] And right from then, he's literally been a grasper. He was well named. He spent his life taking from others, grasping from others and benefiting from the loss of others.

And so it started, well, it probably started earlier than it's recorded. But the main ones are how he blackmailed his brother Esau out of his birthright. He tricked his dad into giving him Esau's blessing that was meant for Esau.

He fleeced his father-in-law Laban out of all of his agricultural wealth we saw most recently. That was just who he was. That was his character. And yet, despite all that, despite who he was, despite being this rather shady character, a rather kind of morally compromised character, it turns out he was the guy who God chose to be the father of the tribes of Israel, and through whom God was going to carry out his covenant to Abraham back in Genesis 12 to bless the rest of the world.

God ensured and chose that Abraham, I mean that Jacob, was going to be the man through whom that promise and that plan of salvation was going to continue. A plan of salvation that we are still part of today.

But what is up with that? How does that work? I mean, you think God could have chosen some better candidates to be part of his plan of salvation, right?

[2 : 50] Until, of course, you realize, well, that's kind of the point. These stories in Genesis that we read reveal to us a foundational truth that we need to understand.

And that is that being part of God's covenant people, being part of God's saving plans for this world, isn't ever about who we are, who we start out as.

But rather, it's all about who God plans to make us into. And just how he does that, how he changes us to be worthy covenant members, who are blessed and become a blessing to others.

Well, that's what this story of Jacob is here to show us. How God changes this dodgy character and makes him into a new person, makes him into the person that God intends for him to be.

And it so happens as we read these chapters, the way God does that is through a wrestling match. This famous account of Jacob wrestling with God, I must admit, it's one of the strangest stories in the Bible.

[3 : 59] And yet, hidden in it, if we understand it properly, hidden in it is a key lesson about how God makes his covenant people, how God makes us into the people he wants us to be.

But before we get there, before we look at that episode itself, we need to understand where it fits in, where we are in the story so far. And where we are is that Jacob's history has finally caught up with

him and landed him in a rather precarious situation.

So he's now heading back to Canaan at the beginning of chapter 32, the land that God has ordered him to go back to, the land of promise, the land that he must establish himself and his family in.

And he's taking his whole family, his four wives, all his newfound wealth from his time with Laban.

But there's a problem. So to get there to Canaan, he's got to go through his brother Esau, who has rather inconveniently sworn to kill Jacob for what he did to him years ago.

And so it would be an understatement to say that Jacob was nervous about his journey, so nervous that he sends some diplomats ahead of him to make nice with Esau before he arrives and hopefully kind of soften the blow.

[5 : 13] But when they come back, their news is not that encouraging. From verse 6, when the messengers returned to Jacob, they said, We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you with 400 men.

Now, considering that Esau was a skilled hunter and a warrior and his men probably the same, this is basically an ISIS militia on the road coming to meet Jacob and his family.

And so Jacob, understandably, freaks out some more. We're told he was in great fear and distress after hearing this. So what he does, he splits up his people and his possessions into two camps, so that if one is attacked, the other has a chance to escape.

Quite a clever thing to do. And also, an even cleverer thing to do is that he prays to the God who has been with him so far in all his journeys. He prays desperately.

He recalls God's dealings with his fathers so far and God's promises to them and basically says, You know, God, you've promised my family that you'll keep us safe, that you'll bless us.

[6 : 22] Well, now's the time. If there ever was a time, now's the time I need you to do what you've promised. And so he prays this prayer. It ends. And then there's no answer from God.

God is silent. You know, the God who has been with him and helped him and blessed him, now in his greatest time of need, doesn't seem to be there.

Doesn't seem to be interested. I wonder if that's an experience you can relate with, as a Christian maybe. Often, you know, the most desperate times in our lives, when we need God's intervention to come and do something the most, that's when it seems he's furthest away, doesn't it?

Well, that's kind of what Jacob must have been feeling. And so the tension in the story rises even more. Is God going to hear his prayer? Is God going to answer? Is God going to come through for Jacob?

Or is his own past going to catch up with him and bring tragedy? What's going to happen? And so Jacob's still in panic. And what he does is he decides to just send gift after gift to Esau.

[7 : 29] If you sum it up based on kind of today's measures, it would probably be a few million rand at least of worth of cattle and gifts that he sends ahead of him to kind of hopefully placate his brother's wrath before they meet.

And in the meantime, in case that doesn't work, he takes his family the opposite direction and crosses the Jabbok River at night. It's a river which was running east and west, one of the tributaries of the Jordan River.

And that itself, him crossing the Jabbok River with all his possessions and his family, itself is quite a thing. It's not the safest river to cross with your family, especially at night in pitch darkness.

This is what it looks like today. And this is what it would look like at night. Right? So you can understand, not the safest thing. But Jacob is that desperate.

And so he orders them across, along with all his valuables and his possessions, trying to make some distance between him and Esau's little militia on its way. And they all manage to get over.

[8 : 34] Jacob is the last to go. He's about to cross over. He's on the original bank, all alone, in the darkness, when the most unexpected thing happens.

He gets tackled to the ground and finds himself wrestling on the floor with a mysterious figure who's appeared out of nowhere. And initially, we're told nothing about who this mysterious figure is.

All we're told is he's a man. A man starts wrestling with Jacob, just out of the blue. And Jacob's probably going, what on earth? What's going on? Who is this? Is he a bounty hunter sent by Esau?

Is he one of Esau's scouts? And so he engages this guy in an extended session of hand-to-hand combat. There, in the mud, in the darkness, these two men struggling, scrapping on the ground.

And it goes on for hours, right up until sunrise. And Jacob puts up quite a fight. We're told this mysterious man couldn't subdue him through normal means.

[9 : 36] Jacob must have been quite a kind of fighter guy. And so, what this guy does, this mysterious figure that he's fighting with, eventually, he has to dislocate his hip.

And he does it in such a way that Jacob realizes that this is no mere man. The text says this in verse 25. He merely touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.

Now, if you're fighting with someone and he dislocates your hip by touching it, best practice is to give up at that point, right?

Anybody who's ever had a dislocated joint will know just how debilitating that is, what excruciating pain that is. You've got to stop what you're doing. Even Lurt de Yaga understands that, right? As we saw in the Rugby World Cup Final. And that should have been Jacob right now. But no, not Jacob. Even in his weakened and no doubt painful state, he was adamant to hold on to this mysterious figure.

[10 : 45] And the reason was because he wasn't that mysterious anymore. He had worked out who this was. He had worked out that it was actually God himself who he was struggling with.

Or more accurately, the angel of God. The physical form through whom God often appears to people. But Jacob knew this was God.

That, in fact, God hadn't ignored him. God was right here. But oddly enough, God was fighting him. And so he just clung on with all his strength.

And he said he would only let go if God blesses him first. I mean, that's really quite cheeky in itself. Jacob is in no position to make demands. Here later, in his own words, when reflecting back, he's amazed he didn't die.

Because he was just, he was in the presence of God. But in the heat of the moment, in typical Jacob fashion, he wants to see what he can get out of this situation.

[11 : 45] Classic Jacob. And the thing is, he does end up getting something out of this situation. But what he ends up getting out of it, we see, is way more than he ever bargained for.

Because God replies to his request to bless him. By doing something very interesting. He asks him his name. Now, God already knows his name.

But he wants to get Jacob to say it. He wants to get Jacob, essentially, to admit who he is. That he is Jacob, the supplanter. He wants to remind Jacob why he's in this situation in the first place. Before, God then gives him a new name. There, while they're struggling on the ground, Jacob gets a new name from God.

A whole new identity. Have a look at verse 28. 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.

[12 : 51] And this thing about God changing a person's name is something we see often in Scripture. God is often doing this with his covenant people at significant times.

So, Abram to Abraham. Sarai to Sarah. Simon to Peter. Saul to Paul. You see, it's a way God reminds his people that he's not so interested in who we are now.

Or who we started as. But he's interested in who he's planning to make us. But it's in this story, importantly, this Jacob episode, that we see how God does that.

How he makes his people into who he wants them to be. And that is through struggle. And it's a struggle that seems like defeat when it comes. You know, Jacob technically lost this fight after his hip got dislocated.

And he ended up rather pathetically still clinging to his opponent. As Hosea, the prophet, later interprets it. He says, he wept and begged for God's favor.

[13 : 52] It was quite a pathetic scene. But God actually says he won that fight. He prevailed. He overcame. It's the basis of his new name.

But in what way did he win that fight? Well, he won. He overcame. Because he didn't let go. Until God blessed him. He clung to God in his weakness.

And his defeat. And according to God, that was his victory. That's what caused him to become the person God wanted him to be.

Israel. And from that point, the whole story as we read on. Leads to a very unexpected but happy conclusion. You can read about it in chapter 33.

But not only does he meet up with Esau. And unexpectedly, they embrace in tears. And they make friends with each other. But he turns out to be a blessing to Esau.

[14:50] He gives him all part of his wealth. And his riches. And the relationship is restored. And Esau walks away a much richer man for it. And the story actually ends with Jacob settling in the promised land under God's blessing.

Just like God had planned for him. And so in the story, and the way it's structured is that you've got the tension and the problem in chapter 32 at the beginning. But then you've got the wrestling match with God.

And then everything works itself out. So this wrestling match is key to understanding what's going on in this whole story. And in it, right here near the beginning of the Bible in Genesis 32.

As we've been going through these chapters and learning about what it means to be part of God's covenant people. Because these are the chapters when this idea of covenant is established. And we learn what it means to be in covenant with God.

Well here in this wrestling match on the banks of the Jabbok. We actually get to learn a key lesson about how God's people are changed to become the people he wants them to be.

[15:53] To become Israel. To become a blessing to the world. Which is through clinging to God in weakness. Even when, particularly when, that weakness has been brought about by God himself.

Because it's that weakness that we actually need to become the people who God wants us to be. This is a very important lesson. A hard lesson. But an important one that we learn from Jacob's life. And it's also how God has always worked in his people. He's always caused his people to become who he wants them to be through weakness, not strength. And often it's a weakness that he brings about.

So Israelites, as slaves in Egypt, in their weakness he rescued them. And drew them out to become the nation he wants them to be. The conquest of Canaan. As they went into Canaan against overwhelming odds.

God formed them into the people he wanted them to be through their weakness. Gideon saying, my clan is the weakest. I am the least in my father's house. But that's who God chose to do his work.

[16:58] David, the youngest and least built of his brothers. In weakness as he faced down Goliath. But clinging to God.

Insistent on seeing God's promise of blessing fulfilled. We see it over and over again. But ultimately as we read on in the Bible. We see it in the life of Jesus. Insistent on seeing God's blessing. God's plan of salvation fulfilled to his people. Jesus goes on knowing that for that to happen. For his mission to be fulfilled. For God to be glorified. And for God's blessing to flow into this world. He, Jesus, needs to be made weak first. He needs to be injured. And even in the darkness of the cross.

As he was wounded by God. For our transgressions. As he himself wrestled with his father. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? In the darkness of that.

[17:57] When God seemed distant from him. He still, he still clung on. Trusting his father to vindicate and bless him. In his moment of greatest weakness. Which we were just reminded last weekend.

God did three days later. When he rose him from the dead. And you see that. Victory through weakness is the pattern. God's people in every age.

Are to follow. To willingly receive. To receive God's wounding. And to learn to rely on him. In that greatest weakness.

As Paul did. When he battled. We read at the end of 2 Corinthians. His thorn in the flesh. That God afflicted him with. And he prayed.

Earnestly to God. He wrestled with God. Take this away from me. But God didn't. God kept him under that weakness. So that. In his own words. Paul says he could learn.

[18:54] That it's only in his weakness. That Christ's power could truly. Reside in him. And he realizes. It was for the best. And that is the hard truth. We all need to learn.

In Jacob's story this morning. That God wounds. His own people. In order to change them. And make them fit. To work through.

And be a blessing. To the world. And it's only really through that. Struggling with God. In the darkness. When he seems far away. When we feel defeated. It's only then.

That we truly learn. To cling to him. And it's only then. That we find real victory. And so. Christian. As you face.

Difficulty. And I know. Many of you are facing difficulty. Right now. Salary reductions. Not being able to meet budget. Job losses.

[19 : 53] Loss of opportunities. For work. Health problems. I know. That you are going through struggles. But I want you to also know.

When God seems far away. And seems unwilling to intervene. And solve your problem. You need to realize. What Jacob realized. On the banks of the Jabbok River.

That God is not far away. Like you think. That you are struggling. Not because God is uninterested. And distant. You are struggling. Actually. Because God himself.

Has brought this struggle to you. You need to know that. God himself. Is wounding you. A little bit. But he is doing it for your good. So that you can learn.

How to cling to him. In your weakness. And not let go. Until you receive his blessing. He is teaching you perseverance. He is teaching you. And through that. Making you the person. He wants you to be. The person fit for his kingdom.

[20 : 51] Him. And the person who will be a blessing to others. And he is also. Doing that now. So that when you face your moment of greatest weakness. Which you haven't arrived at yet.

Because your. And my moment of greatest weakness. Will be when we face our death. Which we will all face. Because God doesn't spare his people from that experience. We must all go through that. But it is then.

After your last. Reserve of strength fails. As you experience God's. Ultimate and final. Wounding of you. And as you cling to God.

In the deep darkness. In death. As you did in life. It is then more than ever before. He will show himself. To be powerful. To bless you more than you could have ever hoped.

When he raises you from the dead. And brings you. Into the eternal dwellings. He promised. Long ago. Well let's pray. Lord we thank you for Jacob.

[21 : 50] Help us not to be ashamed of him. Because of his. Rather seedy and dodgy history. Help us to realize we are all. Jacob in a way.

That none of us are worthy of. Your kingdom and your blessing. By who we are. But. Lord thank you for this reminder. That.

It is not about. Who we begin as. It is about who you make us into. Thank you also for this reminder. In this story. That you make us into the people you want us to be. Through struggle.

Help us to realize. When things go wrong. It is not that you are out of control. Or far away. But it is that you are allowing these things. For our good. And for your glory. Help us to have that perspective. And help us Lord.

To learn more and more every day. How to cling to you in our weakness. And so find victory. We thank you Lord. That that victory is assured. We thank you that your ultimate deliverance of us.

[22 : 47] At our greatest weakness. At death. Is going to be assured. We thank you for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Which assures our resurrection one day. All those who are in him. And we pray Lord. That as this new week starts.

With all its challenges. And with all its struggles. That you would help us. To cling to Christ. And find strength in him. Alone. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.