

“Struggling with God”

Genesis 32:22-32

Dr. Randy Working
Christ Presbyterian Church
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When I was six years old we lived by a creek, and all kinds of wildlife would wander along the creek bed on their way into the foothills. One night when I was in bed I looked out the window and saw a mountain lion looking through the dark into my bedroom. I wasn't sure if it was real or only a dream, but I was so scared I hardly dared move. I was sure that if I did, it would come crashing through my window. I was too scared to even call my parents, so I closed my eyes as tightly as I could and didn't move. I felt completely alone.

The next morning, I told my mom about it. I wanted her to say “It's okay; it was only a bad dream. Mountain lions don't look into windows.” But instead she said, “You know, it probably was a mountain lion. Some people found tracks by the creek a couple weeks ago.” Great. That's reassuring!

Do you remember a time when you felt completely alone? Maybe a time you wanted God to be near you, to reassure you fears, and you wondered when he would answer your prayers? The story about Jacob tells us it's sometimes in the lonely times, sometime in struggle that God meets us in a new way and gives his blessing.

First, Jacob was a man who needed changing.

His name itself is a clue to his character. Jacob means “the one who supplants,” or literally “grabs the heel,” one who takes the place of another by scheming. It's the name he was given at his birth. He was a twin, and he and his brother Esau struggled in their mother Rebecca's womb. When Esau came from the womb, his heel was grasped by his brother's hand. Just like they fought in the womb, they would fight most of their lives.

Maybe you know the story of the birthright. It was a privilege of the first born son, but Jacob cheated his brother out of it. Then we see the story of Jacob's shady dealings with his uncle Laban. He has a pattern of deceiving to get his own way, and he's not a model character.

But in a real way, his life is a picture of God's grace, of his undeserved kindness, *because* he is so imperfect. God promised to bless Abraham and his descendents, and God doesn't give up on Jacob even when he's not a good moral example. Jacob doesn't deserve God's care or blessing, but God loves him anyway and changes him for the better.

Second, Jacob set everything aside to meet God.

Jacob set aside his family, his servants, his belongs, everything.

He hadn't seen his brother since he cheated him. Now messengers came to tell Jacob that his brother was coming to him with 400 men, so Jacob broke camp in the night and sent his family and servants across the Jabbok River with all his goods. When Jacob was preparing, all by

himself in the middle of the night, he met a mysterious person who threatened to keep him from crossing the river into the land God had promised his grandfather Abraham.

It's a strange story, but we can be sure it was no ordinary man who confronted Jacob in the middle of the night. The opening of the chapter tells us that angels had already met him, and he said "This is the camp of God!" God is already present, and doing something in that place. Then, in verse 30, after he wrestles with the mysterious person, Jacob says "I have seen God face to face." Later, the prophet Hosea would write about that strange encounter,

In the womb he grasped his brother's heel;
as a man he struggled with God. (Hosea 12:3)

It was more than just a dream. This wasn't an ordinary angel. It was an appearance of the pre-incarnate Son of God, the second person of the Trinity before he came as a baby born in a stable in Bethlehem. And when Jacob cleared everything else aside, he met God.

Third, Jacob struggled until he got a blessing.

He found out that it was not his brother Esau he had to worry about, it was God. Last week we saw that God tests us sometimes, not to make us fail, but to change us, to clear the junk out of our lives, and to make us stronger. That's what was happening here. God was testing him. Jacob was tenacious, but against the angel, it's no contest.

It's not that the angel couldn't prevail against Jacob—we see that when he dislocates Jacob's hip. It's not that Jacob could bend the angel to his will; it's that the angel chose to let Jacob struggle and wouldn't simply overpower him.

I like Jacob's courage, here. He insisted that he wouldn't leave that place without a blessing from God.

Again, Hosea writes about Jacob,

He struggled with the angel and overcame him;
he wept and begged for his favor.
He found him at Bethel
and talked with him there. (Hosea 12:4)

No longer should Jacob be known as a supplanter, for now he was a man who prospered because of his faith in the power of God, and so the name Israel was given him.

Verse 28 states:

"Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."

All Jacob could do was to hang onto the Angel of God and beg for his favor. In this sense, God was overcome by Jacob. In this same way we who are his children and the heirs of his blessings can prevail with God. God is moved with compassion when you hang onto him, and insist on his blessing.

Since he prevailed with God, Jacob would win the victory no matter what the human opposition. Prayerfully prevailing with God assures us of prevailing with our human struggles. If God is on our side, we cannot be overcome. Like Paul said, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” That’s what verse 28 was telling Jacob. In learning how to prevail with God, Jacob had also found how to prevail with people.

The lesson Jacob learned is one every Christian has to learn. You can only receive God’s blessings by godly means. The blessings God promised Jacob—land, a descendent, the power to change the world for good—you can’t get these things through human strength. To receive what God had in mind to give him, and to become the person God wanted him to be, Jacob had to learn to wage spiritual warfare. And he had to come to understand that his brother wasn’t the one he had to worry about or overcome. It was God. Once God is with us, you’re already a winner.

All of Jacob’s life he had struggled to obtain God’s blessing. Now Jacob finally learned you can’t get it through manipulation or self-effort. You can only get a life of blessing the same way Jacob got the blessing of God, by clinging to God to fulfill his promises, by depending on *him* to provide and protect when we are opposed.

This is where Israel gets its name as a nation. Israel’s blessing as a nation can’t come any other way than what Jacob learned from his struggle with God. This is what the Israelites had to learn when they tried to enter the land of Canaan and receive God’s blessings. They were supposed to be a people unlike any other, blessed by God to be a blessing to the world. It wasn’t by beating the world at its own game. It was God who would defeat Israel’s enemies for them if they trusted in him.

It’s the same for us. No matter what the dangers we face, our ultimate enemies are spiritual forces opposed to God. Our warfare is a spiritual, and you can’t win it by worldly methods. Paul writes about this in the book of II Corinthians:

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. (II Corinthians 10:3-4).

What did Paul do? He relied on the strength of God, and put aside human strength. This was a spiritual conflict and it called for spiritual methods.

“Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the Lord Almighty” (Zechariah 4:6).

What an irony! This is the secret of the Christian life. Paul, again, says:

“That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:10)

So how do we prevail with God? Jacob’s story helps us understand.

We have to recognize our own helplessness. We have to come to the end of ourselves and recognize the futility of our own schemes. Jacob came to understand this in Genesis 32. He couldn’t even stop Esau, and he certainly couldn’t defeat the mysterious person who opposed him. With his dislocated hip, he was completely helpless.

We have to trust in what God has promised to do. The word of God was the only claim which Jacob had upon God. We have to hang onto God until he accomplishes what he promised to do, even when it seems humanly impossible.

Do you ever feel alone, like you're at the end of your rope, up against insurmountable odds? Like the mountain lions are staring you down? That's when God does his best work. For when we are weak, then he is strong.

God saves everyone who calls on him. Have you made this first step? By clinging to God and trusting him to do what he has promised, you can have the blessing of eternal life. And every other blessing will come in the same way—by faith in God to accomplish what he has promised.