

Striving with God

Genesis 32:1-32

When our kids were little, I loved to wrestle with them on the floor. I would lay on the floor and Tara would grab hold of one arm and Michael the other. We would laugh and have so much fun together. As they grew it became more and more difficult to break free of their grasp. Inevitably, Ginny would see us laughing on the floor and want to be a part of the action. She would stand over me for a few minutes, and then, she would turn around and sit right down on my chest. Then I was done. Not wanting to hurt Ginny, I could not twist any more. The kids would rejoice in their victory over dad.

I am not sure there were any spiritual lessons in those times, but we sure had a lot of fun together.

Today, we are going to look at a different sort of wrestling match. Jacob will wrestle with God. But instead of laughter and fun, it will have eternal consequences for his soul.

It is through Jacob's wrestling with God that he will obtain the promises of God. Jacob's wrestling is not merely an isolated incident in history. It is a model for all who desire to inherit God's eternal blessing.

The fact that Jacob must wrestle with God to receive God's blessing comes as a bit of a shock.

Jacob was a covenant child. God had given to Jacob the covenant promises of blessing. These promises were sealed (confirmed) to Jacob in the sign of circumcision, which he received as a young child.

As he was running from Esau, God confirmed these same promises to Jacob in a dream at Bethel.

Jacob has God's word of promise. And he bears the sign and seal of the promise.

It would be easy to conclude that once Jacob embraced the promises for himself in faith, his life would be one of continual peace and joy.

But for Jacob to obtain the blessing, he would have to struggle. He would have to strive with God. Strange as it may sound, Jacob must overcome God to obtain the promises.

Read Genesis 32:1-32.

Jacob went on his way,
and
the angels of God met him.
2 And
when Jacob saw them
he said,
"This is God's camp!"
So he called the name of that place Mahanaim.

Jacob has recently parted with Laban. Now, he knows that he must face his brother Esau. When he was last with Esau, Esau was intent on killing him. Jacob was naturally afraid. And yet, God had commanded Jacob to return to the Promised Land to inherit the promises.

As Christians, much of life is trying to face our fears in light of the promises of God that are ours in Jesus Christ.

And the opportunities to fear just keep coming, like waves on the shore.

The first lesson we must learn as we face our fears is that God is not insensitive to our struggles. He does not sit back and watch us flounder. He engages with us, knowing our weakness.

In His mercy, God takes the initiative to send angels to meet Jacob.

The angels have come to encourage Jacob that he is not alone as he faces his brother. They set up camp near Jacob.

Jacob names the place "Mahanaim".

The significance of this name will change as the story develops.

For now, it is a statement that Jacob is not alone. His God is with him.

While Jacob knows that he must face Esau, he clearly does not want to fight with him. Esau is his brother. He too has received the covenant sign and seal of blessing. Jacob desires reconciliation with Esau. So, he sends a message to Esau, hoping to find favor with him.

3 And
 Jacob sent messengers before him
 to Esau his brother
 in the land of Seir,
 the country of Edom,
4 instructing them,
 "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau:
 Thus says your servant Jacob,
 'I have sojourned with Laban
 and
 stayed until now.
5 I have oxen, donkeys, flocks,
 male servants, and female servants.
 I have sent to tell my lord,
 in order that I may find favor
 in your sight."

6 And
 the messengers returned to Jacob,
 saying,
 "We came to your brother Esau,
 and
 he is coming to meet you,
 and
 there are four hundred men with him."

In the 20 years that Jacob has been gone, Esau has become powerful. He is living in Seir (Edom) which is SE of the Dead Sea. This is outside of the borders of the Promised Land.

We are somewhat surprised to hear Jacob instruct his messengers to refer to Esau as “Jacob’s lord”.

Jacob seems to be acting with humility and deference.

But given the prophecy to Rebekah before they were born it seems odd.

Rebekah was told then that the older (Esau) would serve the younger (Jacob).”

Even though Jacob’s position in the covenant is greater than Esau’s, he does not use this as an excuse to gloat over Esau. This same situation is repeated later with Joseph and his brothers. Only Joseph gloats over his brothers. And they hate him for it.

Jacob seems to be learning humility.

We too are given a privileged position in God’s kingdom. We are chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. But this should not lead us to arrogance. We should become the servants.

This is what it means to have the same attitude of Christ Jesus.

Philippians 2:5-9 ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,

In addition to calling Esau “lord”, Jacob makes sure that Esau knows that Jacob no longer desires to steal from Esau. All that he seeks is Esau’s favor.

The messengers deliver the message and then return.
But the news that they bring is troubling.
Esau is coming... and he is bringing a small army with him.
Even though Esau's intention is not entirely clear, it certainly looks to Jacob that he intends harm.
Jacob must be thinking, "Esau still intends to kill me."

Even though Jacob has the assurance of God's presence, the presence of this fast-approaching army invokes fear within his heart.

This is the theme repeated throughout this chapter. Great promises crashing against great fear.

How will Jacob face these fears as a man of faith?

7 Then
 Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed.
 He divided
 the people who were with him,
 and
 the flocks and herds and camels,
 into two camps,
8 thinking,
 "If Esau comes to the one camp
 and
 attacks it,
 then the camp that is left will escape."
9 And
 Jacob said,
 "O God of my father Abraham
 and
 God of my father Isaac,
 O LORD who said to me,
 'Return
 to your country
 and

Jacob divides his camp into two camps. This is a further development of the name "Mahanaim".

Jacob does what must be done, practically speaking. But, we are not supposed to like his plan.

At best, Jacob will save only half of his family.

This would mean terrible loss for Jacob.

But even more terrible would be the loss to the Covenant Promises.

It is the combination of Covenant Promises and fear of the loss of those promises that drives Jacob to pray.

Up to this point, Jacob has not been a man of prayer. He is an heir to the covenant promises. But until now, we have not seen Jacob purposely lay hold of those promises in prayer.

This is the longest, most developed, prayer in all the book of Genesis.

Who do you think orchestrates the trial that produces fear in Jacob?
God.

Why would God do this?

God is bringing his covenant child into a true dependency upon himself.

God must first lift our hopes of blessing.

Then God must bring us into some situation where the blessings are threatened.

All for the purpose of driving us to cling to Him in prayer.

The specifics of Jacob's prayer are helpful to consider.

How Jacob addresses God is important.

Jacob reveals what he believes about God.

Jacob calls upon God as the God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac.

Jacob has not found a new God.

He is calling upon the same God that his father and grandfather claimed as their own.

Eventually, Jacob will address God as “my God”.

But that is not to be critical of his address now. In fact, Jacob is simply repeating the names that God spoke to him at Bethel.

Genesis 28:13 ¹³ And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring.

The God to whom he is praying is also the God “who spoke to him”.

Jacob says to God, “You are the one who said to me...”

What is it that God has said to Jacob?

God is the One who told Jacob to “return to the Promised Land.”

In other words, Jacob is telling God that he is in the current predicament because he is obeying God’s command.

And in repeating God’s Word, Jacob is also reminding God of his promise to do him good.

Next we see that even though Jacob remembers God’s promise to do him good, he also knows that he is unworthy of this blessing.

Jacob knows that he has not “merited” what God has given him. Not even the least bit of it.

Our prayers should regularly express our unworthiness before God. Rather than deserving God’s blessing, Jacob grounds his hope of blessing upon two Hebrew words:

Hesed and Emet.

Hesed is translated “steadfast love”.

And Emet is translated “faithfulness”.

These are foundational words that will keep coming up throughout the OT and even into the NT. Allowing that the NT is written in Greek instead of Hebrew, the case can be made that John is referring to these two words in John 1:17.

^{ESV} **John 1:17** For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

When it comes to fulfilling His covenant promises to His people, everything depends upon God's steadfast love and faithfulness.

After Jacob has acknowledged God's past work to do good to him, he uses that as a springboard from which to ask God for immediate help in his current crisis?

Notice that Jacob is not afraid to specifically ask to be delivered from the hand of Esau.

Is the final fulfilment of God's promise of blessing dependent upon Esau not killing Jacob? Yes and no.

Not in terms of Jacob experiencing eternal blessing. Remember, Abraham believed that God would even raise Isaac from the dead to fulfill his covenant promises.

But in terms of Jacob becoming a nation through whom God would give his Law and establish his covenant king, yes.

But either way, it is entirely appropriate for Jacob to ask what he does. God is pleased with Jacob's request. In some sense, it is God who has prompted Jacob to make the request.

Jacob appeals to God on the basis of God's previous covenant promise.

The Covenant Promises are not given so that we would sit back and passively expect their fulfillment.

If your view of God's sovereignty results in your not living a life of prayer, then you have misused God's sovereignty.

At the same time, we should not view the Covenant Promises as though they were insignificant.

We should not think that Jacob's prayer would have been just as effective if God had not made any promises to Jacob.

If you think that you could rely upon God just as well apart from Covenant Promises then you are foolish and lack true humility.

The Covenant Promises are given to encourage those to whom they are given to engage the God who gave them in faith. (As Dr. Beeke says, "They are pleading ground.")

Jacob says to God, "But you said..."

Jacob's approach to God is certainly a good model for us.

We are to approach God as the God of the Covenant, the God who has been faithful to those who are our ancestors in the Lord.

We are to approach God with humility.

We are to ask for specific help with specific problems.

And we are to remind God of his covenant promises to us (who are recipients of the promises).

After Jacob has finished his prayer, what does he do?

13 So
 he stayed there that night,
 and
 from what he had with him
 he took a present for his brother Esau,
14 two hundred female goats
 and
 twenty male goats,
 two hundred ewes

and
twenty rams,
15 thirty milking camels and their calves,
forty cows
and
ten bulls,
twenty female donkeys
and
ten male donkeys.
16 These he handed over to his servants,
every drove by itself,
and
said to his servants,
"Pass on ahead of me
and
put a space between drove and drove."
17 He instructed the first,
"When Esau my brother meets you
and
asks you,
'To whom do you belong?
Where are you going?
And
whose are these ahead of you?'
18 then
you shall say,
'They belong to your servant Jacob.
They are a present sent to my lord Esau.
And moreover,
he is behind us.'"
19 He likewise instructed the second
and
the third
and
all who followed the droves,
"You shall say the same thing to Esau when you find him,

20

and
you shall say,
"Moreover, your servant Jacob is behind us."
For he thought,
"I may appease him
with the present that goes ahead of me,
and afterward
I shall see his face.
Perhaps he will accept me."

What do you think of Jacob's plan? His present for Esau?
Moses takes a good amount of time to describe the present Jacob gives to Esau. Why do you think he does this?

The size of the present is emphasized. Jacob has been made very wealthy by God. He has enough to give to Esau without making himself poor. The gift shows Jacob as being generous. He is not hoarding his wealth.

And, Jacob is actively using any means that he can think of to appease Esau. This is not contrary to trusting God. Trust in God and human means are not always opposed.
God can use means. He can work without means. And He can overrule means.

Jacob has done everything that he can think of doing to gain Esau's favor. All that is left is to wait.
And Jacob decides to wait alone.

21 So
 the present passed on ahead of him,
 and
 he himself stayed
 that night in the camp.

22 The same night
 he arose and took
 his two wives,

his two female servants,
and
his eleven children,
and
crossed the ford of the Jabbok.
23 He took them
and
sent them across the stream,
and
everything else that he had.
24 And
Jacob was left alone.
And
a man wrestled with him
until the breaking of the day.

Jacob sends his wives and children across the river. He is not being a coward. In the next chapter we will see that he goes before them to meet Esau.

Jacob simply needs to be alone.
Maybe he is hoping for an encounter with God. We do not know.

Moses wants us to know that Jacob's encounter was in his solitude. There are times for corporate experience of God, but there are other times where we must meet with God alone. There is no other way that it can be done. You must deal with God by yourself.

At first, all we know is that "an unknown man" begins to wrestle with Jacob. They wrestle all through the night.
We are not told that this was a vision.
It seems that Jacob is physically wrestling with this man.

For those of us who know the story, Jacob is wrestling with God, in human form.

At some point, Jacob realizes that He is wrestling with God.
But it may not have been from the start.

Why would God take the form of a human and enter a wrestling match with Jacob?

What does He want from Jacob?

In what way does God want you to wrestle with Him?

We should not expect God to take on human form so we can wrestle with him all night.

But this physical wrestling expresses to us a spiritual lesson.

God desires for all his children to wrestle with Him.

What does that mean?

What does that look like?

First, let's try to understand the details of Jacob's encounter.

25 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.

26 Then
 he said,
 "Let me go,
 for the day has broken."

 But
 Jacob said,
 "I will not let you go
 unless you bless me."

27 And
 he said to him,
 "What is your name?"

 And
 he said,

"Jacob."
28 Then
he said,
"Your name shall no longer be called Jacob,
but
Israel,
for you have striven
with God
and
with men,
and have prevailed."
29 Then
Jacob asked him,
"Please tell me your name."
But
he said,
"Why is it that you ask my name?"
And
there he blessed him.

After wrestling all night long, what does the man "see"?
That he did not prevail against Jacob.
Jacob was winning the wrestling match.
Jacob is 97 years old. (Walton)

How can a man prevail when wrestling with God? (Do not answer yet)

Only after the man sees that he is not prevailing does he touch the socket of Jacob's hip. What happens when he does this?

- Jacob's hip was put out of joint.

What is the significance of this "touching"?

The "man" is communicating that the wrestling match is only happening because he is allowing it to happen.

The man could have easily crushed Jacob.

What does this tell you about Jacob's ability to prevail?

Jacob is only prevailing because the man wants him to prevail.

At the same time, we should not think that this was easy wrestling. Jacob is in a life and death struggle to obtain something from this man. (And in the Sovereign Providence of God, Jacob is prevailing.)

What does the man then say to Jacob?

Let me go for morning has come.

Jacob has prevailed in the struggle.

It seems that the man (God) is telling Jacob that there is no longer any need to struggle. He has prevailed. The dark night of the struggle of the soul is now over. The day is breaking.

But Jacob is not yet satisfied. What does Jacob say?

But Jacob said,

"I will not let you go unless you bless me."

Now we begin to see what they are wrestling over. What is it that Jacob is trying to obtain from the "man"?

- Blessing!
- Jacob knows that he is wrestling with God.

Jacob has prayed to his covenant God for the blessing, but now he has also wrestled with God for that same blessing.

What does it mean to wrestle with God for blessing?

It is to hunger and thirst for the blessing.

It is to burn with passion for that blessing such that you pursue it relentlessly. It is to not cease clinging to the promise in the face of your fears.

I will NOT let you go unless...!!!!

Jacob wants assurance from God that he will be blessed!

Here is the tension: God has unilaterally promised blessing to Jacob. But Jacob must wrestle with God in order to obtain the blessing.

Next we have a discussion of names.

What do names have to do with obtaining God's blessing? To know someone's name implied a certain "authority over" the other person or at least "ability to gain from" them.

Who divulges their name and who does not?

Jacob divulges his name.

God does not divulge his name.

This implies that God remains in authority over Jacob, even though in the struggle Jacob has prevailed over God. (wink: because God wanted him to prevail.)

God not only "learns" Jacob's name, but he also changes it. What is implied in his doing this?

We are learning that God is transforming Jacob. He is changing him such that he now has a new identity.

What is the new name that God gives Jacob?

- Israel

What is the meaning of Israel?

He strives with God. This is how we know that Jacob's experience, in some sense, is for all who trust in God. The banner over us all is "Israel", he strives with God.

Striving with God is waiting upon God, continuing to cling to God to fulfill all of his promises of blessing.

Jacob is striving "with" God. He is not striving "against" God.

Jacob is learning to hunger and thirst for the very thing for which God hungers and thirsts.

Jacob's heart is becoming aligned with God's priorities.

But Jacob is not prevailing over God from a position of strength, as if Jacob is conquering God. Just the opposite. Jacob is increasingly being weakened. His strength is failing. His hip is ripped out of its socket. And yet, Jacob continues to cling. What is it that enables him to keep clinging?

It is the promises of blessing that keeps him clinging.
The same is true of us.

The promises given to us in our baptism are what keeps us clinging. God will fulfill in us what he has promised. As we remember God's steadfast love and faithfulness, in spite of our own unworthiness and failing strength, we continue to cling. And by the grace of God we prevail.

Bruce Waltke speaks of this:

"Only when he (Jacob) is 'broken' does he prevail with God and humans. In the wrestling match, initiated by God, he loses physical strength and prevails only through prayer... Jacob does not quit even when his strength is gone."
Waltke

It is encouraging to know that God does not want us to receive His promises without striving.

If we are losing strength, we are right where God wants us to be.

His Spirit and His Word will strengthen us to keep clinging. But that strength will not look like the strength of the world.

When many of Jesus' disciples were leaving him, Jesus said to the 12, "Do you want to leave me too?"

Peter replies, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!"

As Christians, we strive with God throughout our lives.

Jacob's night of struggling gives to us a pattern.

You might wish that you only had one night to struggle with God.

Sometimes you will be struggling to gain some victory over a particular sin. You are tired of fighting and you cannot understand why you have not made more progress. Your faith struggle is to remain in the fight, to not quit, believing that you are united to Jesus Christ in his life, death and resurrection.

Sometimes you are struggling to believe the whole Christian faith is true. You have inner doubts and fears. You wonder if you even want to keep coming to church. Feelings of fellowship with God have dried up and seem like a fading dream. Your faith struggle is to continue pursuing God through the means of grace – His Word, Prayer, the Sacraments, and fellowship with other believers.

Sometimes you are struggling with your loved ones abandoning the faith. You cannot understand why God would allow such a thing. Your faith struggle is to cling to the goodness and power of God, even without knowing the why.

Sometimes it is friction with family members, or others in the Church. Sometimes it is struggling with depression. Sometimes it is grief over the loss of loved ones. The types of struggling are as varied as there are people and life situations.

Through every trial we are called to strive with God. That is our very name. The name that God has given us. He strives with God. Israel.

The final verses are a sort of prologue.

30 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."

31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel,

limping because of his hip.
32 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.

The prologue helps us to know that we are right to believe that Jacob has been locked in a faith struggle with the God of the Universe.

Jacob calls the place “Peniel”, which means “face of God”.
Not only has Jacob gained the assurance of blessing through his struggle. He has also come to know God better.

This is what it means to see God face to face.
I do not have time to work through how it is impossible to see God’s face.
What you need to know is that it is through struggle that Jacob comes to know God.
And it is in knowing God that we find true life.

Jacob is not angry with God because of this encounter. He is thankful.
He knows that it is only due to the tremendous mercy of God that He has come through this encounter alive.

Jacob will live the rest of his life with a limp. He has become weaker, while his faith has become stronger.

It is in our weakness that He becomes strong.
His strength is made perfect in our weakness.

I need to make one more thing clear. We do not receive the fulness of God’s blessing in this life. The writer of the book of Hebrews makes this very clear.

Hebrews 11:13 ¹³ These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar,

and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

The fact of the matter is that we will spend our entire lives striving to continue in our faith.

The striving will not end until we see Jesus face to face.

Hebrews 12:1-3 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

If you are experiencing internal struggle, remember Jesus.

He too wrestled with God. In his suffering, he has obtained the blessing for you. And He is walking with you as you struggle to believe. He is the author and the perfecter of your faith.

Do not think that something is wrong. Wrestling with God may not be fun, like wrestling with my kids. But it is good, and it will bear fruit for those who continue to cry out, "I will not let you go until you bless me."