

Wrestling With God
Genesis 32:24-32

Turn to Genesis 32. Jacob wrestled with God. This short story leaves us wondering about several things. We'll just pay attention to what it does say, because it is an important story for all of us. We all have struggles. We fight against these things, we fight to survive.

It sometimes seems like these things will destroy us, but they never quite do, or at least they haven't yet. They cripple us, and we know it. These things limit us, hold us back. It's discouraging. We pray to God many times for help. Sometimes there's great help, but quite often the relief we want does not happen.

Jacob wrestled all night with someone he does not know. This story gives us another way to look at these long nights where this thing never quite defeats us, and we never quite defeat it.

Jacob's Fear

Jacob is in a situation that terrifies him. Jacob left home twenty years earlier, running for his life. He had stolen his brother Esau's blessing, and Esau was so angry that he said he would kill Jacob, and he meant it. So Jacob ran away from home, ended up working for Laban, and married two of Laban's daughters, Leah and Rachel.

But now the Lord tells Jacob to go back home, and promises to be with him. But Jacob fears Esau. As he travels home, he sends messengers ahead to bring peace gifts to Esau, but when his messengers came back, they just say, "Esau is coming with four hundred men to meet you." It doesn't sound good, and Jacob is very afraid.

So the day before he meets Esau, he gets all his flocks and herds and all his family across the Jabbok river, and then goes back to spend the night by himself. We don't know why.

Jacob's Fight – Gen 32:24-32

A man wrestled with Jacob all that night, until daybreak. No more details than that, that's all Jacob knows. We should assume Jacob is fighting for his life. A stranger comes after you at night – there's nothing friendly about this. To Jacob this is hostile.

The man could not overpower Jacob, could not get the upper hand. When the man saw that, he touched Jacob's hip to wound him. He dislocated Jacob's hip, and it sounds like all he did was touch the hip. Could there be something supernatural about this man?

Then the man says, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." Jacob is hurting, and is partly crippled, but he's not letting go. The man wants to quit, give up and leave, but Jacob won't let him go.

“I will not let you go until you bless me,” says Jacob. Jacob fought for blessing all his life, and he wants a blessing here. Why does he ask his opponent for blessing? We don’t really know.

The man asked, “what is your name?” Could this man does not know who Jacob is? We don’t know. Jacob says his name, “Jacob.” “Jacob” means someone who deceives, someone who takes advantage of others. When Esau found out that Jacob had stolen his blessing, he said, “He is rightly named ‘Jacob,’ he’s done this to me two times.”

When Jacob gives the man his name, it is like a confession. “I’m a deceiver, I take advantage of people.” Jacob cannot give his name without confessing his sins.

And the man said, “*Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and people and have overcome.*” And then the man blessed him. So Jacob named the place Peniel, which means “face of God,” saying, “It is because I saw the face of God and yet my life was spared.” And from then on, Jacob limped from the injury to his hip.

So we find out at the end of the story that Jacob was actually wrestling and struggling to survive all night *with some form of God himself*. Jacob was wrestling with God, but he didn’t know that until later. God gave him his wound, but he did not know that until later. Could this be you?

God was wrestling with Jacob, and God could not overpower Jacob and God could not get the upper hand. How can that be? What’s going on? Then God touched Jacob to wound him. God gave Jacob a new name, and then God blessed him. But the wound was still there.

Let’s go back to v28. “*Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and people and have overcome.*” The name “Israel” actually means “God struggles.” God struggled with Jacob, and Jacob struggled with God.

God struggled with Jacob, and it seems that God let Jacob get the upper hand, God let Jacob back him into a corner so that God had to bless Jacob. God and Jacob struggled against each other, Jacob not knowing it was God, and God let Jacob trap him, so that God had to bless Jacob.

In what sense did Jacob overcome God? Only this: Jacob would not let go of God until God blessed him. He overcame God by not letting go until God blessed him. Try this on: God fights with us in such a way that we overpower him, and he has to bless us.

The Lord’s Prayer

Jesus taught us to pray, “Our Father in heaven, don’t lead us into temptation, don’t lead us into testing, deliver us, rescue us.” But the Holy Spirit *did* lead Jesus into severe testing and temptation, and sometimes he does that to us, too. The tempter wants us to sin, hopes we will sin, the tempter makes sin as attractive as possible, and the tempter is very good at that.

God does not want us to sin, God helps us not sin. But he does sometimes lead us into testing and temptation, and then he helps through it. God did this for his Son.

Biblical Stories of Wrestling with God

The Old Testament story is full of this. When Israel has troubles, they come from God. When Israel get rescued and restored, that also comes from God. And we say, “yes, but that’s because they sinned.” That’s true, but there were always righteous people caught up in this.

Job was a righteous man, and he always assumed his troubles came from God, he told God so, and he was right. Job told God he was not being fair. And God disagreed with none of this.

Job always knew that God was making Job’s life hard, and God took his time bringing Job out of it. Job did not know why, but he knew he was wrestling with God, and he was right.

There are several psalms where God is the problem as well as the solution. Ps 88 begins, “Lord, you are the God who saves me.” But later he says, “Lord, you have put me in the lowest pit; Lord, you have overwhelmed with all your waves; Lord, you took from me my closest friends.” The God who saves him also puts him in the lowest pit. And not because of sin.

I found six different psalms where God caused the trouble and at the same time God was the only one who could save (Pss 44, 74, 79, 80, 88, 89). All of these people were wrestling with God, and yet they were not conquered by God. They were wounded, as Jacob was, yet they would not let go of God. None of these psalmists thought their sin is the problem.

Here is how John Calvin put it, writing on Jacob wrestling with God: God challenges us to this contest, and at the same time God gives us the ability to resist him. He fights against us and for us at the same time.

He fights against us with his weaker left hand, says Calvin, and he fights for us with his stronger right hand. Even while he lightly opposes us, he supplies invincible strength so we can overcome (in Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 303). In what way did Jacob overcome? He did not let go until God blessed him.

We do not feel invincible, we’re on the brink of destruction, but we do hang on until we get his blessing, because he makes sure we can hang on, because he wants to give us his blessing.

Here’s how to insult God: treat him as if he’s not part of your troubles. It is just you suffering from your weaknesses, your dislocated hip. It’s just you and those bad people, you and bad luck, you in this evil world, you and your inability to get your life together. But there’s no chance God is doing this to you. That insults God, that’s thinking like an atheist.

I was squeamish about this for a long time, but I was wrong. I did not think the Lord was a God who overwhelmed people with all his waves, but according to the Bible, he is that God.

The believers who got the letter to the Hebrews were being persecuted. The writer tells them in Heb 12 that the persecution is the discipline of *the Lord*, *the Lord* is treating you as children he loves, so endure this as coming from a *wise and loving Father*.

Peter also wrote to believers who were being persecuted, and says the same. How should they respond to evil persecution? Humble yourselves under *God's* mighty hand. *God* opposes the proud, and *God* favors to the humble. "Commit yourselves to your faithful Creator and continue to do good." (1 Peter 4, 5).

God never stirred up persecution against his people, of course. But he takes responsibility, says the Bible. We don't enjoy it. But he's a wise and loving Father who treasures his children. John Calvin said that Jacob's wrestling with God "is daily fulfilled in the individual members of the church, that in our temptations, it is necessary for us to wrestle against God."

What if God is wrestling with you like this? What if God has brought these things into your life? What if God, in a sense, is working against you, while at the same time making you invincible, so that you won't let go of him until you get his blessing.

Jacob was told, "you have struggled with God and people, and have overcome." Jacob overcame by not quitting, he would not let go until he got blessed. God loved that, God said, "you defeated me, Jacob, you forced me to bless you." That's exactly how God wanted that long night to end.

So Jacob got blessed after God wounded him, but his wound did not go away. He was still wounded and limping, and also blessed.

Somehow, God wants us to see him behind the problem. Humble yourselves under God's mighty hand, so that he may lift you up in due time. Commit yourselves to your faithful Creator, and continue to do good. Amen.

PRAYER: O God, this calls for a lot of faith. We have trouble seeing you behind these painful things, we have trouble seeing that you yourself led us into this. On the other hand, we don't want to insult you by talking as if you were not the Sovereign Ruler of the universe. Strengthen our faith. Father, we put ourselves in your hands, our bodies and our souls, we put them in your hands. We commit ourselves to our Faithful Creator. Send your Spirit so we can continue to do good. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what pleases him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.