

## Wrestling with God

### Genesis 32:22-30 (NIV)

<sup>22</sup> During the night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two slave women, and his eleven sons, and crossed the ford of Jabbok. <sup>23</sup> He took them and sent them across the stream, along with all his possessions. <sup>24</sup> Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. <sup>25</sup> When the man saw that he could not defeat him, he struck Jacob's hip socket as they wrestled and dislocated his hip. <sup>26</sup> Then he said to Jacob, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." <sup>27</sup> "What is your name?" the man asked. "Jacob," he replied. <sup>28</sup> "Your name will no longer be Jacob," he said. "It will be Israel because you have struggled with God and with men and have prevailed." <sup>29</sup> Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he answered, "Why do you ask my name?" And he blessed him there. <sup>30</sup> Jacob then named the place Peniel, "For I have seen God face to face," he said, "yet my life has been spared."

It had been 20 years since Jacob had last seen his twin brother, Esau, and it was not under good circumstances. Esau had vowed to kill Jacob as soon as their father Isaac had died. This was because Jacob had lived up to his name, "Heel-grabber." Although it was an accurate description of how he was born, clutching Esau's heel, a "heel-grabber" also causes people to trip so that they can get ahead of them. Jacob tripped up his brother, conning him out of his birthright for the price of a bowl of red stew. With the help of his mother, Rebekah, he tripped up Esau again by impersonating Esau to their father Isaac so that Isaac would bless Jacob instead of Esau. This is what moved Esau to be angry enough to plot murdering his brother Jacob.

So, their mother pushed to have Jacob leave and spend time with her family. Once there, Jacob immediately fell in love and made arrangements to get married, but it was far from a happily ever after. Laban, his father-in-law, did some "heel grabbing" of his own, constantly altering his deals with Jacob. During 20 years of employment, Laban changed Jacob's wages 10 times, always trying to stack the deck against Jacob, but Jacob schemed against Laban's scheming. It finally reached a breaking point when Laban despised Jacob's success and considered his misfortune all Jacob's fault. Then God told Jacob to pack up everything and head home.

What would happen when Esau saw Jacob? Would he greet him with swords or with a hug? Would he lure him in, making him appear safe, only to cut him down at an opportune moment? Would Esau hurt Jacob's family and make him watch them suffer to inflict on Jacob some amount of the suffering that he had inflicted on Esau?

Wrestling with what could happen, Jacob still went. God had told him to and had given him a big promise. "Go back to the land of your ancestors and to your family, and I will be with you." (Genesis 31:3) It was a renewal of the promise God had given Jacob when Jacob first left his family. "Look, I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go. I will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (Genesis 28:15)

Even with God's big promises to be with him and protect him, Jacob did what he often did and tried to create an advantage, a safety net, in meeting Esau. "During the night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two slave women, and his eleven sons, and crossed the ford of Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, along with all his possessions." (verses 22-23) At least his family would be safe, but this also left Jacob all alone.

That night, Jacob wrestled with God in prayer, going back and forth between holding to God's promises but also thinking about the worst case scenarios and what Jacob could do to overcome them. Then the mental wrestling turned physical as an apparent adversary appeared. "A man wrestled with [Jacob] until daybreak." (verse 24) Spoiler alert: the man was God in human form as Jacob remarked at the end of this match, "Jacob then named the place Peniel, 'For I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been spared.'" (verse 30)

When have you wrestled with God? Maybe you've found yourself filled with anxiety, that the worst-case scenarios play over and over in your mind. It fills you with dread, even though sometimes you can logically see that it's irrational. It keeps you up at night, causes you to lose sleep. You try to stop the thoughts, but they keep coming. You know that God doesn't want you to worry. You pray that he would take the anxiety away. You read Bible passages to remember that we can bring all these cares to him and that he is our stable rock and refuge. But the anxiety doesn't go away. And so you wrestle. Why, God, are you not answering me? Why are you not just taking this away from me? Are you actually getting in my way, opposing me on this? Don't you want to take away my anxiety? God feels like an adversary, trying to defeat us as we try to figure our lives out and move on.

Was God wrestling Jacob in order to oppose him, defeat him? I mean, since this is God, we know as well as Jacob did that God could have soundly defeated Jacob at any time. Yet, they wrestled all night until daybreak. This doesn't happen because Jacob is so strong.

This happens because God wants Jacob to wrestle with him. He wants Jacob to hold on to him. But this is a wrestling match. God doesn't just forfeit or give up. In fact, he makes it harder on Jacob. "He struck Jacob's hip socket as they wrestled and dislocated his hip." (verse 25b) But this isn't to defeat Jacob. God doesn't call the match, declare himself the victor and walk away. He let Jacob hang on to him even when Jacob could not physically win against God.

God did not come to Jacob that night and wrestle with him as an adversary. He came as a sparring partner. A sparring partner does not wrestle with the other person in order to win. He grapples to teach the other person, to give them a workout, to make them stronger, faster, better. God wrestled with Jacob to work out of him his "heel-grabbing" self-reliance. Instead of trusting in his power and his scheming, this wrestling match was a tailor-made training program to get Jacob to hold on to God and not on himself.

It took more than 20 years, but God had trained Jacob to not let go of him, even when his hip is dislocated, when he had no advantage and no chance of winning. The man said to Jacob, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." [Jacob knows that he is holding on to God.] "What is your name?" the man asked. "Jacob," he replied. "Your name will no longer be Jacob," he said. [You're not the "heel-grabber" anymore.] "It will be Israel because you have struggled with God and with men and have prevailed." (verses 26-28) God had changed Jacob by wrestling with him, making him stronger, giving him the strength to hold on because he held on to the God and the rock solid promises he had made to him.

God comes to us today to have us wrestle with him. He doesn't do this to stand in our way, to be our adversary, to beat us. No, he comes to strengthen us as he pushes us to give up relying on ourselves and our schemes, to give up our "heel-grabber" ways, like he did for Jacob. He knows that it makes you weak to look to yourself to fix all your problems, to fix your anxiety and worries and whatever else you wrestle with. He pushes you to hold on to him, to his promises. The more he causes you to wrestle with him, the stronger your faith in him gets and the stronger you are because you are forced to fully rely on him.

God gave Jacob very specific promises to hold to while wrestling with him. What promises has God given you for you to cling to while you wrestle with him? He has promised you a Savior, one who is stronger than us, one who will never give up on us or fighting for us. Our Savior perfectly endures and goes the distance and wins every match even though we often rely on ourselves, get tired, give up. He did this to be the all-time champion against every evil force of this world and then hoist us up to take the podium with him so that we are champions along with him. Through the victory and endurance of our champion, Jesus, we are promised forgiveness and belonging with God. He promises to keep his arms open to us, to embrace us to him on that victory podium. This is what we cling to when we wrestle with being a failure, that we worry all too often. When we feel all alone in our battles with anxiety, God gives us the promise that he is with us always to the very end of the age, walking with us, even carrying us, through the valleys and mountains of life. God gives us these promises to set us up to succeed as we wrestle with him, to hang on to the victory we have through him.

Wrestling with God is hard. It's not fun. It's tiring, exhausting even. But a wise pastor recently told me that the fact that something is hard is not a reason in and of itself to not do it. Instead, we should split the question. Is it hard? Yes. Okay, you know it's hard. Second question: is it worth it? When it comes to wrestling God, yes! It's always worth it to wrestle with God because he sets us up to succeed, to shed our self-reliance and instead gain muscle in trusting in him as we hold him to the promises he has given us.

Knowing that it's both hard and worth it to wrestle with God, how can you be an encouraging sparring partner for someone else? Who can you challenge to be better? Who can challenge you to be better? Part of that challenge is coming here where people will challenge you, not to defeat you, not to stand in your way, but to make you stronger, to help you shed the self-reliant attitudes we easily fall into. I challenge you to find a sparring partner here today, someone who will put God's promises before you and push you to hold to them when it's really hard to do so.

Sometimes God squares off against us in our prayers. He wrestles with us, not to lose, not to stand in our way, but to focus us on his solid, unwavering promises so that we win and get stronger by holding on to him, just like Jacob did. Help us, Lord, to do the hard thing and wrestle with you knowing that you will bring us victory. Amen.