

Wrestling with God

Genesis 32:22-32

I don't have some clever fact or intriguing story or joke to start this sermon today. Mostly because nothing can top the uniqueness of the text itself.

Genesis 32:22-32 (NKJV)

Here Jacob wrestles with God, or an Angel, or some manifestation of God.

This story began farther back in time with this guy who was wrestling with him even before he was born. That's not an exaggeration.

Genesis 25:21-23 (NKJV)

When delivery day came, Jacob was already wrestling with his brother.

Esau was born first. He was all hairy and red, so they named him a name that means that. Follow this kind of logic, and there must have been a lot of kids in those days given names that mean "stinky," and "wrinkly" and "always screaming."

Now, hanging onto Esau's heel was his twin brother! So, they gave him the name, "Jacob" meaning "a heel grabber". It's a figurative way of saying, "someone who unseats or deceives – a supplanter."

Sure enough though, both figuratively and literally, Jacob lived up to his name. Throughout his life, Jacob aimed to get ahead of his older brother, and he did fairly well at it. In a way, he was a good wrestler.

Then comes the match of the millennium – Jacob vs. God. That's better than all the Rocky movies combined!

The strangest thing is, Jacob did OK in this wrestling match. In fact, I want you to see that Jacob walked away a winner that day, but not because God lost.

When it was over, God said "you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." God's goal was to have Jacob wrestle for something, not to defeat someone. So, let's consider that need; to wrestle with God, and see how it applies to our own lives.

Author and Theologian, G.K. Chesterton once said, "Christianity hasn't been tried and found empty...it has been found difficult and so left untried."

Jacob needed to deepen his personal relationship with God. He needed an object lesson that would teach him some things about the way he related to God.

This is also one of those times where God changes someone's name (representing their identity) after an encounter with Him.

There are a lot of people today who need to have their Christianity "tried or tested."

For too many it's in name only, or it's weak and shallow, and it needs to be thrown in the wrestling ring to see if it can go a few rounds. There are a lot of people in church who have never really wrestled with God so your faith is still based on what you have been taught, so it's not really your own because you've never had to put it into practice in real life.

You've never wrestled with God over the "Why's of life"? Why do I have his disease? Why am I in this trial? Why are you doing these things in my life?" You need to wrestle with God... to receive your answers.

So, let's look at this obviously literal account and try to understand how it applies to us this morning.

How can we wrestle with God and with people...and overcome/win?

A. Get Alone with God

Notice that God didn't start this rumble publicly. He waited until Jacob had sent everyone else on ahead and He was there all alone. There's a repeated scene of this throughout Scripture. (Moses, Jonah, Paul, Elijah, Gideon) Some of God's best work is done in us when we're all alone.

Jesus set this same example for us while He was on earth.

First thing, after He was baptized, He entered the desert alone for 40 days, where He wrestled with the devil. Jesus frequently went off to lonely places to pray through struggles. The night He was arrested and put on trial, we find Him in the Garden of Gethsemane, wrestling in prayer, alone with God.

I believe that the first part of wrestling with God means creating the time to get alone with Him. Otherwise, there are hindrances that might interfere with the work that God intends to accomplish in our lives.

1. Remove preoccupations

Just to focus this for myself, I began to make a list of the stuff in my life that has the ability to preoccupy me and keep me from being alone with God. By themselves, they aren't evil or even bad but they can each become a preoccupation.

Things like: The internet, Social Media, Ministry work - yes that also, Home maintenance, TV, Reading books, a Corvette under restoration that calls to me..., now a Grandson, the list goes on. Trust me, I have no problem keeping busy.

Yet in today's society, we make busyness our new ethic, and God is not impressed.

Author and Scholar, Eugene Peterson wrote; “Busyness is the enemy of spirituality. It is essentially laziness. It is doing the easy thing instead of the hard thing. It is filling our time with our own actions instead of paying attention to God’s actions. It is taking charge.”

We can’t get alone with God if we let everything else get in the way.

2. Remove self-reliance and other false hopes on which we tend to cling.

Up to this point in his life, Jacob had been relying on the wrong stuff to make something of himself. It began with his brother Esau’s shallow thinking.

Esau, driven by his appetite, in a matter of seconds traded his rights as the 1st-born in the family for a bowl of soup and some bread. Granted, Esau was being shallow in a quest for immediate gratification, but Jacob was also taking advantage of his brother’s weakness, and using it for his own gain.

Sometime later, when their father Isaac was nearing death and wanted to give his blessing to his 1st-born son, Jacob deceived him and robbed the better blessing for himself. The wrongness of what Jacob did was apparent even to someone as shallow and simple as his brother Esau.

Genesis 27:36 (NKJV)

Because of his deception, Jacob had to run for his life from his twin brother and found a home with his uncle in another City. There, Jacob finds in his uncle Laban someone very much like himself, a shifty and underhanded man but even there with his uncle, Jacob manages to turn life his direction.

Somehow by his creativity and sneakiness he profits. By the time he leaves, he has built up a big family, has many servants and livestock. Up to this point in his life, Jacob could look at it all and say, “Yeah, look what I have done for myself.”

A lesson I see that God wants us to learn from this text today is how necessary it is for every one of us to have times in our lives when we get alone with God and wrestle through life’s issues. Instead we tend to surround ourselves with stuff, with distraction, with stresses and concerns, and then wonder why we don’t feel very full of God.

The reason is simple: we’re too full of the world to give God the room He requires!

God needs some “elbow room” to work His purposes in us and our lives. Believe it or not, we’re not the best judges of just how much room he requires. When we’re full of all the other stuff, there’s not enough room when we try to add God on at the end.

What I’m saying is: we’ve got to get alone with God.

He's not going to give us the one-on-one treatment if we're always in a crowd, whether that crowd is people, or entertainment, or money, or career. Fill your life up with everything else, and there's not room to let God have His way.

One of the ways you can tell if your life is too full of everything else is to simply do some inventory and measure how much room God is taking up in your decision-making, your calendar, your choice of friends, your time, and your checkbook. If there's not much of God in the middle of all that, you need to start creating the places where you're going to be alone with God.

B. Be Authentic with God

Authentic is the theme God gave me and was prophesied over my ministry.

James Houston in "The Transforming Power of Prayer" wrote; "Behind much of the rat-race of modern life is the unexamined assumption that what I do determines who I am." In this way, we define ourselves by what we do, rather than by any quality of what we are inside.

It is typical in a party for one stranger to approach another with the question "What do you do?" Perhaps we wouldn't have a clue how to reply to the deeper question, "Who are you?"

Would you have an answer to that question? Who are You?

There's a great irony in David's life found in Psalm 139.

Psalm 139:1-2 (NKJV)

And David proceeds to testify that there's just no place he can go that's outside of God's sight. Yet, at the end of the Psalm, there's this invitation:

Psalm 139:23-24 (NKJV)

I urge you to turn to it. Circle it. Underline it. Highlight it. Pray it often.

It's a perfect exercise in being authentic, to place ourselves in front of God without pretense, with bare honesty and say, "Here I am, Lord. Whatever You see that shouldn't be here, please, help me deal with it."

You can also use the text we're using today.

One of the lessons we can learn from this story is what it means to be authentic with God. To walk away a winner from the wrestling match, you're going to need to be able to be...

1. Humble

This divine vs. humanity was a fixed fight. You realize that, don't you? As it went on all night, and Jacob sees himself still holding his own, the Lord touches his hip socket, and POP! it's out of joint.

That's all it took. So Jacob goes from "wrestling" to now just "clinging." There's an absolute humbling effect in that.

I've heard humility defined as seeing ourselves the way God sees us. It's only when we reach that point that we really even have a reason to seek God's blessing. Otherwise, who needs the Lord? If we're sufficient enough on our own, if we have it all together, who needs the Lord?

Without humility, we don't have a reason to seek Him.

Spend some time wrestling with God and you'll end up a humbled person. Talk to God about your achievements and plans, about your weaknesses and tendencies, and about your disappointments. You'll end up a humbled person when the match is over.

2. Needy

Jacob realized, in the match with Almighty God, that he was not the self-sufficient entrepreneur and con-artist who had all he needed. He realized that he didn't need stuff, he needed a blessing from God. So, he's now desperately clinging to God and struggling for a blessing.

The last time he had asked for a blessing was when he tricked his father.

When was the last time you were tenacious in prayer? When was the last time you said to God, "Lord, I have a real need here, and I'm not going to stop talking to You about it until You answer!"

Jesus taught that we're not supposed to give up in our praying. He said to ask, seek, and knock. Sounds like a persistent prayer life to me. Even sounds like wrestling with God.

There's a movie called "Shadowlands" about the life of C.S. Lewis. At one point, Lewis is told by a friend, "I know how hard you've been praying Now, God is answering your prayer."
"That's not why I pray" Lewis says. "I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. Prayer doesn't change God; it changes me."

That's what we find as a result of this wrestling match. To walk away a winner, you must...

C. Find Yourself Altered by God

You can't wrestle with God and be the same as when you started. Consider the change in Jacob.

1. New Name

If I'd been Jacob, I would have been ready for a different name.

He's got this name that means the same as calling someone "cheater", "swindler" or "liar." Imagine today filling out a job application; last name League, first name Cheater...no that looks bad, Liar... no that's not any better, Swindler... oh just forget it!

Jacob's new name meant a change of situation in his life, and a call by God for him to live in a different way.

To get him to come face-to-face with this, God asks him, "What is your name?" Of course, God already knew it but Jacob needed to hear it and think about its meaning.

The last time he asked for a blessing, he was lying about his name and tricking his father.

Now Jacob the deceiver, heel grabber, you're now going to be called "Israel" it means Prince of God, or "Struggles with God." You've finally turned to the One Who will help you succeed. You get a new name and identity.

I like the fact that when we accept Christ, we're given a new family name. In fact, if any person is in Christ, he or she's a new creation. Old things have passed away. New things have come.

We get a new name. Our old name doesn't matter. Whatever it is, God changes it to "Child of God."

2. New Walk

Jacob also had a new walk, with a limp. The hip joint is the largest joint in the body, and the femur, your thigh bone, is the largest bone. Having his hip pulled out of joint would have hurt...a lot! So, he's limping when it's over, and probably limping the rest of his life.

When you wrestle with God, your walk changes. You can't just live like you did before.

Really wrestling with God means that, at some point, He's going to touch you in such a way that you can't walk just like you did before.

3. Notable Change

When Jacob explained his limp, people must have realized the significance of what had happened across the Jabbok brook. It was so profound, they turned it into a Jewish tradition to not eat not eat the tendon or muscle attached to the socket of the hip from any animal. That was to commemorate the whole wrestling match with God, the touch of God and the life change in Jacob.

Scripture shows other examples of people who wrestled with God: Moses, Jonah, Paul, Elijah, Gideon; each one having an excuse, to not be God's man for the time to which He called them.

However, then the wrestling match begins, and God wins, yet wonderfully both come out in the place they are supposed to be.

God, in control and the One setting the agenda, and us, humbled, adjusted, and ready to fit into the place God has for us to be.

Author John Milton wrote; "We read not that Christ ever exercised force but once; and that was to drive profane ones out of his Temple, not to force them in."

1 Corinthians chapter 6 tells us that we each are now the temple of God. If we were to follow the example of Jesus in this case, the times that we should become forceful in the way we take action, is when we take extreme measures to drive ungodly things out of our lives.

Jesus says that wrestling with issues that keep us from God deserves radical action.

Matthew 5:29-30 (NKJV)

I fear that too often in our lives we hesitate to wrestle even when our own eternity is on the line.

Theodore Roosevelt - "There has not yet been a person in our history who led a life of ease whose name is worth remembering."

We all need to wrestle with God. To fail at this is to be less than He has called us to be. An Authentic Christian life is all about change. Jacob's name change is an illustration of that.

A.W. Tozer said, "The Lord cannot fully bless a man until He has first conquered him."

God conquered Jacob by weakening him and he wants to conquer you as well.

We can only have victory in our struggles if we first surrender to God because in the end He will always have the last word and it's a blessing for you.