

A Struggle With God

Genesis 32:24-32

In my own struggle to fully understand this passage, I was encouraged by the similar struggles of some noteworthy commentators. I was rather relieved to read one man's opinion that "there is no commentator who can so expound this experience as to clear up perfectly every difficulty involved." So my expectations were lowered. I don't have to clear up perfectly for you every difficulty here.

Martin Luther says clearly, "Every man holds that this text is one of the most obscure in the Old Testament." Another commentator writes more fully, "This section is indeed one of the most difficult to understand in the Bible. Did [Jacob] actually wrestle with a man, or with an an angel, or is the entire description simply an allegory of the spiritual battle through which he passed that night?"

Well, it is easy to begin to answer that question. This is not simply an allegory. This was not simply a dream. Rather, this was an actual event, a true and literal experience of Jacob. But with whom did he wrestle? An angel? A man? God?

Well, yes. Does that clear it up for you? Yes, he wrestled with a man. But actually that man was an angel in the form of a man. That is consistent with other appearances of angels. Angels can certainly take for themselves the form of a man. So this was a real wrestling match. A real, physical, athletic contest of two men wrestling all night long.

But that angel, in the form of a man, was actually the angel of the Lord, or the Lord himself. For Jacob says,
v.30

The prophet certainly considers this a literal encounter with God also, writing about Jacob in,

Hosea 12:3. "He took his brother by the heel in the womb, And in his strength he struggled with God. 4 Yes, he struggled with the Angel and prevailed."

So I'll just start off with that. This was a real wrestling match. The man with whom Jacob wrestled was an angel, actually the angel of God, whom we can rightly say was God himself. So Jacob wrestled with God. Even if that doesn't perfectly clear up every question you have, it's a good foundation and starting point.

But I should ask, more importantly, what is the significance of all this? Why did this event take place? Which is to ask, why did God appear to Jacob in the form of this angel? Why did Moses see fit to include this event in the pages of Scripture, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? What is the lesson to be learned and the application to be stressed?

I can answer all those questions with one word, prayer. This event is a profound example of the level of communication that is to take place between God and man. That communication we simply call "prayer." So my focus this morning is on prayer. Three things, specifically. What is prayer? How should we pray? And why should we pray?

First, the what. What is prayer? I want to answer that question by describing the context of prayer, that which we see in this text.

I. THE CONTEXT OF PRAYER IS THE PRESENCE OF GOD.

Now, what do I mean by that? Simply this. The simplest definition of prayer is to describe it as entering the presence of

God. Prayer is, therefore, at it's most basic level, an encounter with God. Before you try to figure out what you are supposed to say, how you are supposed to say, when and where you should say it, before all that, realize that prayer is coming face to face with God. Like Jacob!

v.30

Keep that perspective throughout our study today, and keep it in your mind every time that you pray. Prayer is an encounter with God, with the Living God, the one true and living God, the creator of heaven and earth. Two things about that God become obvious in this wrestling match, his power and his glory. So, when we pray, like Jacob,

A. We come face to face with the power of God.

v.25

Now, on the surface, that verse almost seems to contradict the doctrine of the power of God, the omnipotence of God, for it says that "He saw that He did not prevail against him [Jacob]." Surely, if the angel, who was God, couldn't overpower him, then he wasn't an all powerful God? That's logical, isn't it? Indeed, the angel had to ask Jacob to "let me go."

But that can't possibly describe the powerlessness of God, because of what we read at the end of,

v.25 "He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him."

I must say that all of this is far more personal to me than it has ever been, six weeks after a total hip replacement myself. It only took a touch of the finger, then Jacob's hip was put out of joint, and the presumption I get from verse 31 was that it was a permanent deformation, a permanent limp. All from just a touch.

And I have had to learn what that limp is all about.

v.31-32

The fact that the angel couldn't overpower Jacob must mean something like he couldn't shake him off, he couldn't wear him out, a testimony of Jacob's faithfulness, not a testimony of God's own weakness of limitations. The point is that Jacob wrestled with an all-powerful God. That makes it all the more astounding. He hung on in that wrestling match even after his hip was put out of joint. He knew what he was facing. He knew whom he was facing. And that was the very reason he didn't give up.

Because God is all-powerful, because can do anything, anytime he chooses, because Jacob knew that, he was so bold to cling to his request that we might think it outlandish when compared to the puny nature of our own requests in prayer. Jacob prayed, "I will not let you go unless you bless me!"

Jacob prayed that prayer because he knew that he had come face to face with the power of God, face to face with the God of power. And Jacob's bold request was appropriate because it was reverent. Reverence doesn't cancel boldness in prayer!!! Reverence and respect don't do away with audacity and even apparent brazenness when we pray! Jacob's reverence is simply his awareness of the infinite glory of God.

So like Jacob, when we pray,

B. We come face to face with the glory of God.

Look at,

v.30

Time for another Hebrew lesson. And the meaning of the Hebrew word "peniel" is the key to that whole verse, actually this whole passage. In recording this event, Moses gives us the

Hebrew vocabulary lesson himself. The word “peniel” means “the face of God.” Jacob understood that he had confronted the face of God. Jacob realized that he had seen the face of God. And lived!

We find precious few examples in Scripture of such encounters. Moses himself was the greatest example. That godly man even had the courage to ask God to show him his glory.

Exod. 33:18 And he said, “Please, show me Your glory.” 19 Then He said, “I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.” 20 But He said, “You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live.” 21 And the LORD said, “Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. 22 So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. 23 Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen.”

Moses got a glimpse, but only a glimpse! “For no one may see me and live.” Similarly, do you remember Isaiah’s encounter with God?

Isa. 6:1 “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. 2 Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one cried to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!” 4 And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 So I said: “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips;

For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts.”

“I am undone.” “I am ruined!” That’s the appropriate response to God’s glory! “I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”

But of course, the answer to that sense of ruin is immediately given. It’s the promise of cleansing.

Isa. 6:6 “Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. 7 And he touched my mouth with it, and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; Your iniquity is taken away, And your sin purged.”

There is no greater promise in all of Scripture, no clearer explanation of the promise of the gospel is found anywhere. But the impression when coming face to face with the glory of God is to be your own uncleanness.

Such is the context of real prayer. Much of our prayer is all too common, ordinary, profane. All too often we don’t recognize or meditate upon the glory of God or the power of God. We pray as a habit, or a duty. We pray with common expressions that have become trite, often threatening to become nothing more than vain repetition. We ask for small things with small thoughts.

The reality is that your conception of the power of God will be revealed by what you pray for. Your sense of how big God is, will be revealed by the bigness of what you pray for. And in a very real sense, the effectiveness of your prayers is directly related to your comprehension and experience of the presence of God. Please don’t ever pray with anything less than the conscious awareness that you are standing in the throne-room of the King of

Kings and the Lord of the Lords, the creator and master of the universe, the one who made you and everything else in all of creation by the word of his power, the one “who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.”

That is the context for prayer. The presence of God. That is the ultimate answer to the question, “What is prayer?” Prayer is the contemplation of the presence of God.

Then the how. How do we pray? Using Jacob’s example, I call it, the posture of prayer. And from Jacob’s example, that posture is,

II. FERVENT PERSISTENCE.

If you want to learn how to pray, I would simply say, be fervent. And be persistent. In other words, wrestle.

Illus: I was never interested in wrestling when I was young and athletic; neither was I very good at it. But I always understood the nature of wrestling. I understood full well the concentrated effort it takes to wrestle.

It’s such a good illustration of how to pray. Imagine yourself a wrestler, in a ring, with an opponent. And your job is to pin him down to the mat. Prayer is described with that image. In order to pray effectively, in order to be truly fervent in our prayers, then you must do what Jacob did.

A. We should wrestle with God.

That’s seems almost irreverent, doesn’t it. Even blasphemous, perhaps. But it’s not. This is the whole point I’m trying to make. Prayer is wrestling with God.

v.24

Let me show you that prayer is the appropriate meaning and application of this event.

Hosea 12:2 “The LORD also brings a charge against Judah, And will punish Jacob according to his ways; According to his deeds He will recompense him. 3 He took his brother by the heel in the womb, And in his strength he struggled with God. 4 Yes, he struggled with the Angel and prevailed; He wept, and sought favor from Him. He found Him in Bethel, And there He spoke to us—5 That is, the LORD God of hosts. The LORD is His memorable name.”

Did you notice how the prophet defined Jacob’s wrestling? Verse 4: “He struggled with the angel and prevailed; He wept, and sought favor from Him.”

That’s fervent prayer. Weeping and making supplication. That’s wrestling. That’s the agony of prayer, what prayer ought to be.

If you think that prayer is hard work, it is. If you struggle in your praying because it is such hard work, then I’m here to tell you just this, it is hard work. There is no way to avoid that, no way to sugar coat it. No way to simplify it. It is hard work. Prayer is wrestling with God.

Col. 4:12 “Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.”

Also, Rom. 15:30 “Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me.”

“Strive together with me.” Join me in my struggle. Wrestle with me; by praying to God for me. That is what the apostle says. And very much related to that,

B. We should struggle with God.

I want a slightly different emphasis here, with the word “struggle.”
v.28

This Hebrew word carries the idea of persistence. The persistence that simply will not let go. Such persistence is obviously defined in,
v.26

This element of persistence is missing in so much of our praying. Dogged determination, unrelenting insistence upon gaining the blessing of God. We think that we should pray respectfully, like the lessons often to our children about not asking for things more than once. It's a terrible sign of disrespect for a child to keep asking for the same thing. But that is precisely what we should do when we pray to God.

Now, sometimes, God gives a rather immediately and direct response to a single request. I can't say that never happens, but realistically, from our perspective, probably not very often. So let me emphasize the greatest lesson which Jesus taught on prayer, which is the lesson of persistence. We see it illustrated in,

Luke 18:1 Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, 2 saying: “There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. 3 Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, ‘Get justice for me from my adversary.’ 4 And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, ‘Though I do not fear God nor regard man, 5 yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.’”

The parable continues,

Luke 18:6 “Then the Lord said, “Hear what the unjust judge

said. 7 And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? 8 I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?”

It takes a lot of faith to be persistent. It takes a lot of faith to keep praying for something, or someone, when God does not seem to be answering, or even listening. Doesn't it?

Sometimes we give up. We assume the answer is no. We give up in discouragement. Or worse, sometimes we get lazy, negligent, careless, and silent.

I can easily point a condemning finger at myself, for I can realize my own inadequacy in persistent praying, my own weakness. But that doesn't stop me from proclaiming the truth of God's word. We are to pray like that widow who kept bothering the judge, badgering him and pestering him so much that he granted her wish, ‘lest by her continual coming she wear me out!’

Be assured, you will never wear God out. You will never bother him. You can never badger him or pester him. For he tells you, he commands you, that you should pray with fervent persistence. You are to wrestle in prayer with God.

To what end? What are the results? Why pray? What are the consequences of prayer? That's simple.

III. GRACIOUS BLESSINGS.

Moses said, “Show me your glory.” That request always amazes me. I wish to imitate it. “Show us your glory.” Jacob is even a bit more specific. “Bless me,” is his prayer.

v.26 “I will not let You go unless You bless me!”

Guess what? God answered that prayer.

v.29

We don't know what that blessing was, thought the overall context of what we've been studying surely suggests that it was at least related to the great covenant promise that had been given to Jacob's father, Isaac, and to his grandfather, Abraham. The covenant promise is God's promise that "I will be with you. I will be your God."

The covenant promise was, in specific terms, the promise of uncountable descendants and an immeasurable land. Simply put, the consequences of prayer are God's gracious blessings. And in this text, from Jacob's example, we see,

A. The blessing of obtaining God's favor.

That blessing is reflected in the new name Jacob received, the name Israel.

v.27-29

As you might have guessed, or read in the footnote of your Bible, the name "Israel" means "he struggles with God" or "he who struggles with God." The name Israel defines a man who wrestles with God in prayer. And prevails.

The name Israel defines a man who obtains God's favor, a man who experiences God's gracious blessings. Because he asks for them! How can I say it any plainer?

I am absolutely, unreservedly committed to the biblical doctrine that God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass. I live and breathe that doctrine every time I stand here to preach. But let me tell you just as surely. The Scriptures say that we are to wrestle with God in prayer, and that his blessings will come to us as a direct consequence of our fervent persistence in prayer.

James' words are too often true in application to our lives, "You do not have, because you do not ask God." So ask!

But one more blessing is identified here, and this gets back to Jacob infirmity, the dislocating of his hip. It took me a number of years to really understand the meaning of this, and I have really benefited from the wisdom of some of the commentators I have read. And all the more, I have come to understand this point all the more this past year with the experiences of my own hip replacement.

So why did the angel cause Jacob to limp? And why the mention of the continual remembrance of that by the people of Israel?

v.31-32

It was, I believe, God's way of granting,

B. The blessing of learning humble dependence.

Recently, I have had to learn that, for several weeks, I couldn't put on my own socks. I couldn't tie my own shoes. I couldn't even walk without a walker, and even then, not very far.

Now think for a moment in order to remember the nature of Jacob's character early in life, even from the womb. He was a man given to deception and self-advancing ambition. His name, Jacob, means supplanter, a name appropriate from the womb, for he was born grasping his brother Esau's heel, trying to supplant. Trying to bring Esau back into the womb, so he could go out first. He showed us human self-exertion, and of course, it got him nowhere but trouble.

But he was transformed, transformed into a man who learned, through this physical disability that I believe was permanent, he

learned humble dependence. Surely this experience broke that awful self-trust and caused him to cast himself wholly upon God's mercy. There is such a great contrast there. A great transformation. From the man whose scheming nature seemed capable of anything in order to bring about his own self-advancement, to the man compelled to bear in his own body a mark of God's power, and therefore a mark of his own humble dependence.

The Apostle Paul also bore such a mark.

2Cor. 12:7 "And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. 8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."

What a blessing that was! What a blessing was that thorn in the flesh. And Paul understood it. For he continues in that very passage,

2 Cor. 12:9 "Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

When you think of God's blessings, don't think merely of material gain or physical well being. Indeed, the more you pray, and the more you might experience those outward blessings, I believe more importantly that you will also know the indescribable blessing of humble dependence upon God. And in that context, wrestle with God in prayer. Come face to face with the presence of God, so that you, too, might taste of the riches of his blessings.