



Applied Faith Men's Bible Study

South Hills Baptist Church

7350 Granbury Rd.

Fort Worth, TX 76123

Wrestling with God

Jacob, Lesson #2

Genesis 32:22-32

What do you really need from God right now? What blessing do you want from him? How badly do you want it?

There are times when God only releases his blessings on us after a season of prolonged and even painful wrestling with him.

The Strangest Wrestling Match in History

In Genesis 32, Jacob is on his way back home to Canaan with his small tribe of wives and children after a 20-year sojourn in Paddan-aram. And he is scared to death, because his estranged brother, Esau, is coming to meet him — with 400 men (Genesis 32:6). This is no welcome party; it's an army.

So, after splitting up his household into two camps to try and avoid complete annihilation, Jacob, understandably suffering insomnia, intends to spend the night alone — no doubt in desperate prayer.

But a strange man who shows up and wrestles Jacob till daybreak rudely interrupts his plans. At some point during this weird contest Jacob realizes that he is wrestling God. And when God decides it's time to end the match, he dislocates Jacob's hip and demands to be released. And Jacob, in significant pain, replies, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Genesis 32:26).

This response clearly pleases God, who pronounces this blessing on Jacob: "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob [deceiver], but Israel [strives with God], for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed" (Genesis 32:28).

Jacob then limps toward his tense reunion with Esau with a weakened body and a strengthened faith. Having wrestled with God, he knows his prayers regarding Esau will be answered.

Multiple Blessings Came Through the Wrestling

Take note of what God did when he wrestled Jacob. Jacob began the night dreading Esau's arrival. He was full of fear and desperation. But he ended the night of struggle with God's blessing and a renewed faith. All our struggling with God in faith leads to peace.

And isn't it interesting that God did not simply speak to Jacob in a dream or vision as he had at other times (Genesis 31:13) and reiterate his promise and speak comforting words? This time God addressed Jacob's fear by requiring him to wrestle all night. This probably felt to Jacob like a badly timed hassle when he just wanted comfort and assurance. But later he realized just how comforting it was. Sometimes

when we want God's comfort, he sends it in unexpected and even unwanted packages.

God even afflicted Jacob with a debilitating injury. This had the effect of making Jacob even more vulnerable to Esau, forcing Jacob's faith to more fully rest on God and not himself. If necessary, God will cause us to limp to increase our faith.

Lastly, wrestling with God changed Jacob's identity. He was no longer to be known as one who received his blessing by deception. This time he received God's blessing by prevailing with God by faith. This struggle turned out to be a profoundly gracious gift of restoration that God gave Jacob, not unlike the gift Jesus gave Peter by letting Peter affirm his love for Jesus as many times as he had denied it (John 21:15–17). Jacob's tenacious faith pleased God and he rewarded Jacob's request (Hebrews 11:6). When God calls us to wrestle with him, there's always more going on than we first understand and God always uses it to transform us for good.

God Is Not Reluctant to Bless You

When God makes us wrestle him for some blessing(s), it is not because God is reluctant to bless us, even if that's how it first feels. It is because he has more blessings for us in the wrestling than without it.

Remember, God pursued Jacob for this match. God was the initiator. Jacob was stewing in his own anxiety over Esau and his approaching slaughter squad when God showed up. And the wrestling drew Jacob out of his fearful preoccupation and forced him to focus on God.

I doubt at first that Jacob wanted this forced focus or even believed he needed it. It wouldn't surprise me if at the beginning Jacob

had prayed, “God would you get rid of this guy? This is the last thing I need right now.” But what he discovered was that the wrestling was a means of God’s grace, a channel for God’s blessing on him.

The same is true for us.

Do Not Let God Go Until He Blesses You!

So, I’ll ask again. What do you really need from God right now? What blessing do you want from him? How badly do you want it?

God will meet you in your anguish, fear, and uncertainty. But he may not meet you in the way you expect or desire. Your greatest ally may show up looking at first like your adversary, inciting you to wrestle with him.

If so, remember Jacob. There are multiple blessings in the wrestling. You may not need soft words of comfort, you may not need to be left alone with your thoughts, you may not need sleep, you may not even need a healthy hip! What you need is God’s blessing!

So, when God calls you to wrestle with him in prayer, it is an invitation to receive his blessing. Stay with him and don’t give up. Do not let him go until he blesses you! He loves to bless that kind of tenacious faith and you will come out transformed.

I Will Not Let You Go Unless You Bless Me

Is there a fear staring you in the face right now? Are you finding your faith in God’s promise shaking? If so, you are likely praying desperately for God to be with you. God will answer you. But you might, like Jacob in Genesis 32, be surprised by his answer.

Jacob leaned on his staff, staring at the stars. He was looking for hope. “Number the stars, if you are able to number them. So shall your offspring be” (Genesis 15:5). Yahweh had promised this to Father Abraham.

Jacob’s body was tired, but his mind was restless. Daylight was approaching and Esau with it.

He wrapped himself tighter in his cloak and squatted down. He was cold and the fire had cooled to glowing coals. He stared at the ground. “Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth” (Genesis 28:14). Yahweh had promised this to him two decades ago when all he carried to Haran was this staff.

Now he was returning home with eleven sons and a daughter. A God-blessed abundance of offspring, even if not yet the dust of the earth.

But Esau was coming. And four hundred men with him. Hadn’t the fire of revenge cooled after twenty years? Four hundred! More than enough to turn his beloved children into the dust of the earth.

He prayed desperately. O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, deliver me from Esau! You commanded me, “return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred.” And you promised, “I will be with you” (Genesis 31:3). Yahweh! Four hundred men will wipe us out! Please! I need you with me!

Just then he heard splashing. He looked up, squinting toward the Jabbok. A man was crossing the ford, heading toward him. He didn’t recognize the determined gait. Jacob stood. Fear shot through him. Esau? No. He knew Esau’s stride. But he wasn’t relieved. He knew this man was coming for him.

The stranger stopped three feet in front of Jacob. He looked strong. His eyes were intense and inscrutable. Neither man spoke. Jacob felt a familiar fear. But he couldn't place it. Had they met before?

Instinctively Jacob began to raise his staff in defense. With startling speed, the man wrenched it away and threw it aside. Jacob was more confused. What did he want? Then the stranger struck a stance every Semite boy would recognize. Wrestling was an ancient martial art. This silent adversary wanted a contest. Jacob was perplexed, but knew he had no choice.

The men circled twice eyeing each other. Then a twitch, an adrenaline rush, and the two locked in grappled combat. This nameless foe was powerful. Yet Jacob was surprised at his ability to counter him.

But the longer they struggled the more Jacob sensed that his opponent was no mere man. He now placed the familiar fear. It was what he felt at every encounter with Yahweh. And he began to understand that this wrestling was somehow connected to all that lay ahead of him tomorrow. Who was this? An angel? Was it God? Was this struggle an answered prayer?

The men broke apart, each leaning on his knees to catch his breath. They shared a glance of recognition. And a desperate resolve formed in Jacob. Having been a deceiver living among deceivers, he had learned that God was the only rock that could support his trust. And the only real source of his hope was God's promised blessing. His life depended on it, now more than ever. God was now within his grasp. Jacob would not let him leave without his blessing.

The stranger's attention suddenly turned to the horizon. Light was glowing over the eastern hills. And Jacob saw his moment. Darting quickly, he seized his opponent from behind and locked his hands

around his chest. The challenger tried to free himself but Jacob held fast. Then he swung his fist down on Jacob's right hip. Jacob screamed as the pain exploded. His leg gave way. But his grip did not. He could endure pain, but not this day without God's blessing.

For the first time, the man spoke: "Let me go, for the day has broken."1 Jacob wincing hard whispered through clenched teeth, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." Instantly he felt the man yield. The contest was over. "What is your name?" the man asked. "Jacob," came a groan. "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed."

Jacob crumpled to the ground and grabbed his hip. Striven with God? Panting, he said, "Please tell me your name." The man's eyes were intense with affection. He said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And with that he turned and crossed back over the Jabbok.

Jacob began the night believing his greatest need was to escape from Esau. He ended the night believing his greatest need was to trust in the blessing of God's promise. And what changed him from fearing man to trusting God's word was prolonged and painful wrestling with God.

Sometimes, in your battle with unbelief, your greatest Ally will wrestle you — he might even make you limp — until you're desperate enough to say, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." It is a great mercy to be brought to the point where you're desperate enough to insist on what you need the most.

Application/Activity

We have all wrestled with God at some point in time. Whether because of something bad going on in our lives or because of something we are wanting from God. That “wrestling” tends to be more like negotiating with God. “God, if you will just do this then I will do or not do this, this and this.” Sound familiar? This week’s application is to find the one thing you currently want most from God. It can be a deeper relationship, healing, freedom from a particular sin. Only you know. Once you have figured out what that one most important thing is, I want you to spend at least 15 minutes per day in prayer on that one subject. Have a conversation with God, not a negotiation. Ask God about it, talk to God about it, seek His advice about it. 15 minutes per day, on this one subject. Feel free to say prayers about all the other stuff in your life, but single out this one currently most important subject and spend some quality time with our Father about it.