

Wrestling with God

Genesis 32

Jacob has suffered under Laban's control for 20 years and is finally headed back to the Promised Land. He tries to avoid a violent confrontation with his murderous twin brother Esau, but ends up fighting God instead. Like so many stories in Genesis, this is foundational episode for God's people. Jacob is renamed as Israel. He strives with God and wins, limping to glory.

Jacob Fears

Jacob escapes the covetous violence of Laban and is met by angels (v1). Just as God's messengers met him going out, now they camp with him coming back (28:12; v2). His camp has been doubled by God's angels, so he names the place Mahanaim, "Two Camps." When he left Canaan, Esau was plotting to kill him for "stealing" his inheritance, and now that God blessed him, he goes out of his way to make peace with and bless Esau (27:41; vv3-5). But when Esau hears about it, he gathers 400 men, the standard size of a militia, and comes out to meet him (v6). Jacob is rightly afraid, and he responds faithfully to plan and pray (vv7-8, 9-12). His prayer shows he understands sheer and potent grace, acknowledging God's covenant promises to his ancestors, himself, his people, those who will come after him, and the fact that he doesn't deserve any of it (vv9-12). Fear leads to prayer, and prayer to wise action: 550 animals divided into nine companies (vv9-21).

Jacob Fights

Jacob has been wrestling all his life. He caught Esau's heel out of the womb. He tricked his father Isaac who (against God's command) was going to give the blessing to Esau. He dealt with Laban who duped him into marrying Leah, changed his wages ten times, and treated him like a servant for 20 years. Now all alone, a man grapples with him all night (vv22-24). The darkness conceals the aggressor's identity. It could be Esau, but where are his men? It could be Laban, but God seemed stop and shut him up already (31:29, 52). Isaac is 157 years old and has repented of his foolishness. Not until Jacob is winning does the man dislocate his hip and give some indication of His power and identity. Jacob hasn't been struggling all these years in vain. His real opponent hasn't been Esau, Isaac, or Laban, but God Himself. He has been teaching, guiding, testing, correcting, shaping, and encouraging Jacob to grow up into the image of God. This doesn't mean God commits sin, but it acknowledges Him as the author of the story in which we struggle against sin and sinners. This match is long just like Jacob's other battles. He is alone with the Lord as before, and in the dark. He is also completely engaged, body and soul (cf. Hos. 12:4). Jacob is a sweaty, dirty, probably bloody, bedraggled, limping mess. We fight against principalities and powers, but we fight with everything we have (cf. 1 Cor. 9:27).

Jacob Wins

Who beats God in a wrestling match? God is like a father who gets down on the carpet and wrestles with his kids. He isn't punishing Jacob but pushing him to his limit just like He always has. Jacob was a "complete" man from a young age, but God was training him so he could wrestle the Angel of the Yahweh all night and win. The Lord wants to go at sunrise because no man can see His face and live (v26). This is why Jacob is astonished to be alive, and why he names the place Peniel, "Face of God" (vv26, 30-31; Ex. 33:20). God doesn't want us as slaves or to remain as children, but challenges and grows us so we can come into His counsel like Abraham did, and cling to Him for blessing like Jacob (Gen. 18, v26). Jacob has learned to rely on the Lord. His new name could mean "God wrestles", "God's wrestler", or "One who wrestles God", which are all true. This is what means to know God. Jacob's limp is a sign of his victory. Prosperity theology wants victory without any scars, but three-dimensional Christians made and redeemed in God's image always have weaknesses (2 Cor. 12:7-10). Jacob is ready to limp into the Promise Land. The Church as a whole also limps, a sure sign of our victory and the gospel's in the world.

NOTES FOR LITTLE SAINTS

Today's Passage: Genesis 32:22-30

22 And he arose that night and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed over the ford of Jabbok. 23 He took them, sent them over the brook, and sent over what he had. 24 Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. 25 Now when He saw that He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. 26 And He said, "Let Me go, for the day breaks." But he said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me!" 27 So He said to him, "What is your name?" He said, "Jacob." 28 And He said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed." 29 Then Jacob asked, saying, "Tell me Your name, I pray." And He said, "Why is it that you ask about My name?" And He blessed him there. 30 So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: "For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved."

1. Who was Jacob wrestling with and for how long?
2. Jacob has been "wrestling" with people his whole life. Why do you think the Lord wrestled with him here all night? What does Jacob want the Lord to do (verse 26)?
3. God loves Jacob and teaches him that all his life the Lord has been challenging, leading and teaching him. What does Jacob name that place, and what does it mean (verse 30)? In what place is God challenging you right now?
4. Draw picture of Jacob wrestling with the Angel of the Lord.

Memory Verse to Recite Next Week:

And He said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed." —Genesis 32:28