

**"Wrestling With God"**  
**Sermon Series on the Book of Genesis**  
**(Gen. 32:22-32)**  
**By Dr Peter B. Barnes**  
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**Introduction**

When I was growing up as a kid, "Live Atlanta Wrestling" was a regular staple in my weekend television viewing with my brothers. This was long before the days of the WWF, which dominates the professional wrestling scene today, and back then the productions were not nearly as elaborate or extensive. Usually the matches were held in a small ring that could fit inside a television studio with a live audience of fifty people sitting in folding chairs.

The wrestlers were colorful individuals like Sputnik Monroe and his brother Rocket, Dick the Bruiser, Andre the Giant, and Bobby "the brain" Hennan. There was Mr. Sato, who was Japanese, and Ray Gunkle, plus the lady wrestlers, the midgets, and, of course, the announcer Freddie Miller who always ended his television promotions with, "Be There!" This was not world-class entertainment, mind you, but we had fun as kids imitating our favorite wrestlers, and occasionally we would carry out an "atomic elbow" on a brother or a neighbor kid.

Years later, when I worked at that same television studio after graduating from college, it was somewhat disconcerting to discover that all those wrestling matches were completely staged. I remember laughing to myself as I watched the wrestlers choreograph their matches out in the hall before going into the studio. I had a sense as a kid that it was all fake, but seeing the farce played out in front of my very eyes burst the remnant of my childhood innocence, as you can imagine.

This morning we read of a very different kind of wrestling match than what I saw on TV growing up. It was a contest between a man and God, and far from being staged, this was a wrestling match whose outcome was not known beforehand. It was a life-changing event, and Jacob would never be the same again. As we consider Genesis 32 and as we prepare to come to the table of our Lord, there are three matters I want you to notice: 1) the trembling of Jacob, 2) the wrestling of Jacob, and 3) the limping of Jacob.

**I. The Trembling of Jacob**

In this passage we see Jacob in a very different light than we have ever seen him before; he is fearful and trembling. You will recall from our previous study two weeks ago that earlier in chapter 32 we learned that Esau, of whom Jacob had been afraid for twenty years, was now coming out to meet him with a small army of four hundred of his men. Jacob was more afraid than he had ever been. He was convinced that Esau was coming to exact vengeance for the way in which he had been cheated out of his father's blessing years before by his younger brother. So Jacob divided his company into two parts, for he thought, "If Esau comes and

attacks one group, the other that is left may yet escape.” Then he hit upon the idea of appeasing his brother with gifts, and he sent some of his livestock across the plain toward Esau as presents for his brother -- goats, sheep, camels, cattle, and donkeys. Now we read that in the middle of the night he got up and took his wives, his maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok river. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his remaining possessions as well.

The picture here is of a man who was restless and agitated. No work is done at night out in the desert; the nights are dark and long. But Jacob was so fearful of his anticipated meeting with Esau that he could not sleep, and he had to do something. He got up, roused his whole household, and moved them across the Jabbok. Finally, he went back across the stream and waited for the morning. Our text says, “*So Jacob was left alone*” (32:24a).

The patriarch was at the lowest point of his entire life. He was frightened and discouraged. He had sent on ahead everything he spent his whole life trying to accumulate – wealth, home, job, and even his family. And he was so tired of running. He had run to his uncle Laban to get away from his brother Esau. Now he’s run away from Laban, and there is no other place to go but back home. There are no new towns to move to, no new jobs to start, no more wives to marry, no more chances for self-improvement. As our text says, Jacob was alone.

Have you ever felt like that? Alone, trembling, fearful, worried about the meeting the next day, unable to sleep? Then you know what Jacob must have been experiencing that restless night. There was real estate developer who was asked several years ago by a friend how he was doing during the economic downturn with all the problems in the building industry. The developer said, “Oh, every night I sleep like a baby.” His friend replied, “You sleep like a baby?! How’s that?” The developer replied, “Oh, I sleep, then I wake up and cry; I sleep, then I wake up and cry!”

All of us at one time or another have been there. We know what it is like to feel a heavy and worried heart, we’ve spent a night tossing and turning in fretful anticipation, and therefore we should learn from Jacob’s experience and how God wrestled with him in the midst of the challenge.

## **II. The Wrestling of Jacob**

Our passage tells us that suddenly, out of the darkness, a hand seized Jacob. “Who is this?” Jacob thought to himself. Was it a wandering bandit who was trying to murder him for his clothing? Was it an assassin sent on ahead by Esau to kill him? In a flash, Jacob found himself in hand-to-hand combat, wrestling as if his life depended on the outcome.

Who was the individual the text in Genesis simply calls “a man?” In Hosea 12:4, a later commentary on this passage, he is called “the angel”. But even this does not give the whole picture, unless we realize that “the angel” is not just any angel but “*the* angel of the Lord”. We have already seen Him on another occasion in the book of Genesis. This was the figure who appeared to Abraham as he sat under the great

trees of Mamre in Genesis 18. On that occasion there were three figures, two of whom actually seem to have been angels, while the third, who spoke to Abraham, appears to have been God Himself in some physical form. Many scholars consider this figure to be a preincarnate manifestation of the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ Himself.

The Bible says the whole night through, Jacob wrestled with God. I believe this fight is a symbol of Jacob's entire life. He had actually been wrestling with God for a long time, only he didn't know it. His struggle with love and his struggle with work were caused by his struggle with himself, and he would never resolve these things until he had settled the matter with God. That night, as Jacob wrestled with the Lord, he finally got to the core issue of his whole life. Now that he had lost everything that he had worked to gain for himself, he was ready to contend with the One with whom had been dealing all along – God Himself.

This type of struggle is only done at night, when it is dark and when we are tired. It comes when we are spent and out of personal resolve. It may be daytime for other people, but it is night for the person who is wrestling with God. There isn't enough light in these times to see that it is really the Lord with whom we are wrestling. By the time you get a glimpse of His face, the struggle is almost over. Some of the great saints of old called it "the dark night of the soul."

A friend of mine says that when he counsels with people who are in the midst of wrestling with God in these dark nights, sometimes they ask, "How long will this go on?" He always replies, "Until the day breaks." There is nothing anyone can do to make the night shorter. You're not done until you are done.

At first, Jacob was wrestling in his own strength and in his own way. Eventually Jacob's strength was broken, and all he could do was simply cling to God for the blessing He would give. Exhausted, all the patriarch could do was to hold on with a desperate tenacity that would not let go. It is the determination and strength of faith to hang on that eventually brings comfort and hope to the follower of Jesus Christ. This is the struggle of a person who believes in God's promise but who can't see how it is going to happen.

Are you wrestling with God this day? Are you clinging with a tenacious faith? When all else is stripped away, sometimes the only thing left to do is to hang on till the day breaks. Perhaps you've had a biopsy, and you're waiting for the test results. Or maybe your spouse has sent you papers filing for divorce. Or a family member has walled you out, and you can't break through in that broken relationship. Hang on. Hang on.

### **III. The Limping of Jacob**

Finally, at daybreak the blessing came for the exhausted and broken Jacob. However, it was not the blessing he had spent his whole life imagining. He received no new wealth or position in life. No, the blessing God gave him was simply a new name. That's all. The Lord said that he would no longer be called Jacob, the Striver. Now he would be called Israel, which means "he struggles with God." The

Lord said to Jacob, “*You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have struggled with God and with men, and have overcome*” (32:28).

Overcome? How has this bankrupt hustler overcome? Just this. Just this. He has learned to cling to God no matter what happens to him. That was the blessing all along. As a friend of mine writes, “The blessing of life comes not from *what* you are holding, but *whom* you are holding. More to the point, blessings come from the One who is holding you.”<sup>1</sup>

Throughout Scripture we read of the way in which God changed a person’s name. Abram became Abraham, Sari -- Sarah, Simon -- Peter, and Saul -- Paul. A new name was given at the point that the individuals were ready to receive the blessing of God. They were converted and became changed people, and it was only fitting that they wear a new name. Now they would be men and women who cling to God.

It is interesting that whereas none of the other people in the Bible ever went back to their previous names, Jacob is only sometimes called Israel in the events that follow this sacred night. Other times he is called Jacob. It was as if he struggled to accept his new identity, and he had a temptation to pretend that he was still the Striver after all.

However, what is even more interesting is that in the course of wrestling with God that night, Jacob’s hip was thrown out of its socket, and from this night on he would always walk with a limp. From all appearances this wound in Jacob’s life was permanent. What a picture. The man who was constantly on the run now limps through life after his encounter with God.

There is nothing in the Bible that promises we will have perfect lives if we only call upon the Lord. What is promised is that we can cling to God for a blessing in the midst of our struggles, but that brings consequences, as we can see in the life of Jacob. After a real encounter with God, we may emerge limping like Jacob, forever a testimony to God’s severe mercy. We bear the scars of death, disappointment, disillusionment, discouragement, perhaps for the rest of our lives.

We may lose our wrestling match with God, but our loss will be our victory, for at last we surrender ourselves to Him. We win by losing and are now able to go on, no longer resting in our own strength but in the strength of God and with a new name. We may limp through life; and in the world’s eyes we may be cripples, but God’s strength is made perfect in our weakness, and it is when we appear weakest from the perspective of the world that our spiritual strength is the greatest in Christ Jesus. I would suggest to you that an army of grace like that is invincible in this world.

Many of you recall that last fall my friend Trevor Smith, who has preached here before, lost his son in a tragic accident as he rode his bike to class at William and Mary College one morning. The last five months have been a dark night of the soul for Trevor and his family. There is an ache in his soul that will not subside. I remember him telling me, “Peter, there is not a single point of doctrine in the Christian faith that I have come to question in the wake of this loss, but I must

confess that God feels very hard and very demanding. I don't know what to do with my sadness."

When our covenant group was with Trevor just after the funeral, we were eating breakfast at Denny's, and as the conversation dragged on, it was as though Trevor turned away and entered a dark place on his own. We tried to go there with him, but we weren't allowed. He had to go there by himself.

I read in Jerry Sitsler's book that when the night comes upon us, we are tempted to run to the west and try and stay ahead of the nightfall, but you can't outrun it. The best and quickest way to find daybreak is actually to go east and plunge into the darkness. It is only by traveling into the darkness that we will eventually see the sunrise. And as Easter tells us, the Son *did* rise.

The next morning it was time for Jacob to confront Esau. We will read about this later in May after we take a break for Holy Week. The crippled Jacob hobbled toward Esau, and when he saw him he fell to the ground bowing seven times as he crawled along. But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and wept. It is striking that Jacob expected to have a great struggle with Esau, but from him he received grace. He expected to receive grace from God, but that only came through a great struggle. After you have survived the dark night of wrestling with God, it is difficult to be afraid of the world around you. I believe that this is because you have learned to cling to the blessing of God and to Him alone.

It isn't easy to wrestle with God, and you will certainly leave with a wound or two after your encounter. However, in time you will see that even these wounds are the marks of God's grace and your salvation. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Barnes, *Hustling God*, p. 138.