

Wrestling with God

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- [0 : 00] Kids say all sorts of phrases. Take a look on this little video. Mommy, Dad, Mommy. What is it? I want it, I want it. Mommy, I want it. Mommy, I want it. What do you say? Please. Why are you so upset?
- I want to do chores. You want to do what? Chores. You want to do chores? Okay, let's go find you some chores to do. What do you want to make your bed? No.
- That's why you're ruining me. This or that, this or that, this or that. That's why you're ruining my Christmas. I'm not ruining your Christmas.
- It's not even Christmas yet. Touché. Well, the phrase that stands out for me when one of my girls was about that age was not, I want it or touché or I want to do chores, although I'd be happy with that one.
- [1 : 09] It was by myself. Whenever she wanted to do something, it was always by myself. One time she wanted to cut her own sandwich with a sharp knife and it wasn't safe and I had to try and wrestle the knife away from her so I could do it for her.
- She found it very hard to acknowledge her own weakness and rely on others for help. Of course, she's no different to many of us adults today, is she?
- Rather than admit our weakness or rely on others for help, we try and do everything in our own strength or ingenuity or wit. Or in Jacob's case, he relied on his skillful art of deception.
- But today we return to him and see that he finally admits his own weakness, his own unworthiness, and he starts to rely on God's grace to help.
- And as we do, we'll see the fundamental lessons about how we become God's people and how we can face our fears with confidence as God's people.
- [2 : 19] But let's have a look quickly at what the story is so far in case you've missed the story. So Jacob deceived his brother and his father, stole the birthright, stole the blessings, and now he's fleeing for his life because his brother Esau wants to kill him.
- He's gone all the way up to Haran. So on the map slide, he started off right down the bottom there in Bethel, and Haran is right up the top north, far away, 780 kilometers away.
- And despite God protecting him and providing for him, Jacob acknowledges nothing of God when he gets there. And he spends 20 years working for his uncle, who cheats him and misabuses him and works him hard.
- And during that 20 years of hardship, it seems as though God has been using that hardship, that sin of Laban, to humble Jacob.
- And it started to work. For at the end of 20 years, Jacob now begins to admit that God is with him. For example, when Jacob is told to go back home by God, Laban chases after him to get him.
- [3 : 38] But God keeps him safe. So on the next slide, Laban says in chapter 31, before our chapter, that I have the power to harm you. But God appeared to him in a dream and told him he better not.

And notice what Jacob says towards the end of that chapter. He says, if God my father had not been with me, you'd surely have sent me away empty handed.

You see, he now acknowledges that God has indeed been with him. He's making progress. You see, God had been making Jacob promises.

He'd been keeping those promises. And he'd even been using Jacob's hardship. Also, that Jacob might no longer live life by myself, but rather depend on God's gracious help.

Especially as Jacob has to return home and face a very hairy problem. Esau. Remember? He's hairy like a gorilla.

[4 : 41] And so what will Jacob do? Well, first we actually see the old Jacob, but we also see the new Jacob. So we're at point one in your outlines, chapter 32, verse one in your Bibles.

We're going to just have a look at the beginning of the chapter to try and make sense of that weird and wonderful passage in the middle. So verse one and two, Jacob also went on his way after he departed from Laban, who was trying to get him.

But God protected him. So Jacob went on his way and sometime later, the angels of God met him. When Jacob saw them, he said, this is the camp of God.

So he named the place Mahanaim. Hey, here Jacob sees some angels. The word angel means messenger. And their message seems to be that God is still with him.

Because alongside Jacob's camp is none other than God's camp right next door. Hence, Jacob names the place Mahanaim, which means two camps.

[5 : 41] You know, one for God, one for Jacob. God is right there with him. And so with that encouragement, Jacob now sends his own messengers ahead to his brother Esau.

Verse three, Jacob sent messages ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. He instructed them. This is what you have to say to my lord Esau. Your servant, Jacob, says, I've been staying with Laban and have remained there till now.

I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, male and female servants. Now I am sending this message to my lord that I may find favor in your eyes.

Here for the first time in his life, Jacob calls Esau my lord. And he calls himself your servant. In fact, this language will keep popping up.

It seems as though he's learned humility. Well, the messenger returns in verse six and says, we went to your brother Esau and now he's coming to meet you.

[6 : 43] And 400 men are with him. I'm guessing this is not quite the response Jacob was hoping for. Esau is coming to meet him with an army. So how will Jacob respond?

Well, verse seven over the page in great fear and distress, Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups or literally camps and the flocks and herds and camels as well.

He thought if Esau comes and attacks one camp, the other camp that is left may escape. Now, on the surface, it's not a bad strategy, is it? And one of the guys in my Bible study group said it's kind of like risk management.

But given God's promise to be with him and the recent reminder from the angels, this is actually classic old Jacob, isn't it? He is relying on his own schemes and wit, dividing his camp into two camps just in case one is attacked.

Although dividing his group into two camps seems to have reminded him of the two camps he saw earlier in Mahanaim. Because now the new Jacob starts to emerge, the one that depends on God.

[7 : 58] Verse nine. Then Jacob prayed, oh, God, my father, Abraham, God of my father, Isaac, Lord, you who said to me, go back to your country and your relatives and I will make you prosper.

I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed the Jordan, but now I've become two camps.

Save me, I pray from the hand of my brother Esau, for I'm afraid he will come and attack me and also the mothers with their children. But you have said I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.

And now we might think that Jacob is reminding God of his promises, you know, to try and twist God's arm and, you know, guilt trip him. But verse 10 would speak against that.

Because in verse 10, for the first time in his life, he calls himself unworthy. For the first time in his life, he calls himself God's servant.

[9 : 03] In fact, for the first time in his life, as far as we know, he prays to God. Every other time it's been God talking to him.

This is the first time he actually reaches out to God. In fact, the significance of this prayer is highlighted by the fact that it's the longest single prayer in the whole book of Genesis, 50 chapters worth.

This is a new Jacob who admits his weakness in terms of his unworthiness and his dependence on God to be saved.

That's also not a bad model of prayer, is it? I think I may have shown you before this child's prayer on the next slide where she says, Dear God, thank you for my baby brother.

But what I prayed for was a puppy. We can pray for all things, including a puppy, says the Bible, whatever we're anxious about. But Jacob's prayer here is a good model in two ways.

[10 : 05] First, it shows us how to pray with humility, doesn't it? And second, it shows us what to pray according to God's promises.

And so it's good and right to pray that God would forgive us because God promises to do that. It's good and right to pray that God would provide for us our needs, not our wants, our needs, because God promises to do that and so on.

But in the story of Jacob, what it's really showing us is the first step to being saved. And that's to admit our moral weakness, our unworthiness.

You see, like Jacob, we have all sinned against God. We've all ignored God and tried to do it by myself. In the words of Frank Sinatra, who sang, I did it.

Yeah. And doing it my way, ignoring God and so on, means we are guilty of sin and not worthy of his kingdom or life eternal.

[11 : 11] And no matter how hard we try, we cannot get ourselves in. We cannot become perfect. In fact, we are only worthy of judgment and we cannot save ourselves from it.

Instead, we must humbly admit we are unworthy and rely on God's grace, his generosity to save us. Not because we deserve it, but just because of his kindness.

But here we see Jacob, the new Jacob, not by myself, but by God's grace, he's saying. And yet, the old Jacob's still there.

Because in verses 13 to 15, he gathers a massive gift for Esau. Loads of camels and donkeys, hundreds of thousands of dollars worth in today's terms, apparently.

Then in verse 16, he keeps each herd by itself and says to his servants, Go ahead of me and keep some space between the herds. And then in verse 17, say to Esau, these belong to your servant Jacob and are a gift or offering for my lord Esau.

[12 : 20] And in verse 20, he thinks to himself, I will pacify him with these gifts I am sending on ahead. Later, when I see him, perhaps he will receive me.

Here is classic old Jacob. The gift is not the problem. It's the scheming and devising. That's the issue rather than relying on God.

He sends these gifts spaced out to try and wear Esau down with kindness. You know, that he might be pacified by wave after wave of gift.

Now, there's nothing wrong with using our wit and wisdom. Jesus says to be as shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves. The issue, though, for Jacob is, who is he ultimately relying on here to be saved?

Now, his wit or God's help? It's the same for us. And for Jacob, though, he seems to be torn. And yet his new willingness to admit his weakness, his unworthiness, it seems to be enough for God.

[13 : 30] For God now gives him a new identity and does indeed save him. But in a very odd way. Have a look at verse 22. That night, Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his 11 sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.

After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled him with him till daybreak.

It looks like in verse 22 that Jacob is still troubled by the situation. He goes to bed, then he gets up again. And then he crosses his family in the middle of the night across a river that's dangerous to cross in the middle of the day, alone at night.

And it's hard to know if Jacob was planning to stay or follow after him or them. But either way, a man gets to him first out of nowhere and starts to wrestle him.

I grew up with two brothers and we admittedly used to wrestle. In fact, one day we were wrestling so much we put a hole in the plasterboard of the wall. But it was okay because there was a picture next to it.

[14 : 38] So we just kind of moved the picture across and covered up the hole. It was only 10 years later when my parents sold the house that they discovered the hole. I feel a bit guilty about it. But wrestling, you know, brothers, that often happens.

But a random stranger at night? What's going on here? Well, this wrestling match seems to be a real illustration of Jacob's life over the last 20 years.

You see, Jacob has struggled with men like his uncle Laban who kept cheating him and changing his wages and so on. And now it seems he's going to be struggling with Esau too.

And so Jacob struggles with this man to represent the struggle with these other men he's had in his life. But he's also in the dark. And so Jacob's not yet realized that this man is also an angel who acts for God.

On the next slide, that's what Hosea says, that Jacob struggled in his life with. And in this instance, it was an angel of God.

[15 : 43] But again, that's what Jacob's life was like. He may have thought he was just struggling with men like Laban and Esau. But he's also been struggling with God, whether he realized it or not.

How? Well, he's been living by himself. Relying on his own wit and deception rather than trusting God and rely on his help. And so at the same time, though, as he's been wrestling against God, trying to live his way, thanks Sinatra style.

God has also been wrestling with him, trying to humble him that he might cling to God and live by grace. As C.S. Lewis once wrote, he says, In other words, God will often use hardship caused by something in our lives.

But he'll often use that to kind of shake us and say, hey, I'm here. Wake up. That's what he seems to be doing with Jacob here. This is how God has also wrestled with him.

And this parable of Jacob's life, this wrestling match seems to last the whole night until verse 25. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.

[17 : 06] Then the man said, let me go for his daybreak. But Jacob replied, I will not let you go unless you bless me. And now, again, it's hard to work out what's going on here. Clearly, this man had the power to overthrow Jacob.

I mean, if he can just touch Jacob's hip and throw it out of place. Obviously, this guy, this angel who represents God has the power to do it.

But it says he could not. What's going on? Well, I suspect this angel of God has deliberately limited his strength to match Jacob's.

To see if he could outlast Jacob. To see if Jacob would give up. It's a bit like this wrestling match on the next slide. He's a sumo wrestler.

I had to put shorts on him because I don't think they wear enough clothes. But he's a sumo wrestler and he's a little kid pushing against him. Now, the sumo wrestler could quite clearly take out the little boy, couldn't he?

[18 : 06] But he's just pushing against the boy's own strength just to match it to see if the boy will give up. To see if he can overpower the boy's perseverance.

And that's what seems to be happening here. When this man says he could not overpower Jacob, I think he's saying he wrestled Jacob all night, matching Jacob's strength for strength to see if he could get Jacob to give up.

To overpower his perseverance. To outlast him. Survivor style. But he cannot. For Jacob keeps clinging to God. And so when this angel sees that Jacob would not let go, and that we can have enough of the sumo wrestler, thanks, Winner.

He would not let go and that that day was breaking. He touched his hip and wrenched it from the socket. Which no doubt would have hurt. I mean, we had a number of people who have had hip replacements here.

Just ask one of them. It hurts. And then, though, he still clings to God, doesn't he? But now it's from a position of weakness and pain.

[19 : 10] And it's from this position of weakness that Jacob now asks for a blessing. No longer can he rely on his wit or deception to steal a blessing like he did before.

Rather, he must now rely on God's grace to simply give a blessing. As Hosea put it on the next slide, back to that verse again. He wept and begs for favor.

No longer by myself, but now by God's grace. No longer relying on himself, but now clinging to God.

This is what we saw earlier in verse 9 when he prayed to God to save him. And because he now clings to God in weakness, because he now relies on God's grace to save him rather than his own wit or deception, then God gives him a new identity and does save him.

So verse 27. The man asked him, what is your name? Jacob, he answered. Then the man said, your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans or with men like Laban and Esau and have overcome.

[20 : 23] Jacob said, please tell me your name. But he replied, why do you ask my name? Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying it is because I saw God face to face and yet my life was spared or saved.

Here God asks for Jacob's name, which would have been embarrassing. In the Old Testament, name said something about your character. Remember, Esau was really hairy, so his name Esau means hairy.

But Jacob's name means deceiver, heel grabber, schemer, cheat. Can you imagine introducing yourself at dinner parties? Hi, I'm deceiver. Nice to meet you. Now, of course, God knew Jacob's name.

He was really asking him to confess his character. And Jacob does. Just as he admitted his unworthiness earlier. Then the man gives Jacob a new name, Israel, which actually means God struggles.

And that is true. God has struggled or wrestled with Jacob over the last 20 years to humble him. But then the angel highlights the reverse and says, Jacob has struggled with God and men and has overcome.

[21 : 41] How has he overcome? Well, by God's grace or generosity. God graciously intervened to save Jacob from Laban. Remember, Laban said, I'm out to harm you.

I could have harmed you. But God appeared to me in a dream. God graciously saved Jacob from Laban. He overcame Laban. And here, God graciously spares Jacob's life.

Since no sinful person is supposed to be able to see God's holy face and live. And so Jacob has overcome men and God in the sense that he has survived the struggle.

He's been saved in both instances. And so as the sun rises in verse 31, it's a new day and Jacob has a new identity. He has a new name and a new limp.

But it all began with a humble prayer that admitted his unworthiness. And it ended by being marked now as God's person. And all this, not by myself, but by God's grace as he clung to God.

[22 : 48] And this is the second step to being saved. The first was to admit our unworthiness. And the second is to cling to Christ in our weakness.

Not physically cling to him, but by trusting him. You see, we are all going to encounter God on judgment day. Whether we want to or not.

We will all meet him face to face. And if we have ignored him or sinned, then it doesn't bode well for us. But in God's grace or generosity, he gave his son, Jesus, to die for us on the cross.

And there, Jesus took our punishment for our sin. So that we can be saved from it. And so he is the one now we are to cling to to be saved.

It's a bit like our second reading. Where Jesus said, to enter the kingdom of God, you have to be like a little child. How do we be like little children? Do we throw tantrums and throw toys across the room?

[23 : 48] No, of course not. Rather, we trust in Christ. Like little children implicitly trust in their parents. In fact, I remember doing another baptism some time ago.

And to try and illustrate this point, I gave a order of service to the little child in the front row who was being baptized. And she just took it. Completely trusting of me.

Didn't know me, but she trusted me completely. I thought, ripper, illustrations worked. But then she started to chew on it. Bit a piece of paper off and then choked on it. She was okay.

The mother got it out. It was all okay. I don't use that illustration anymore. But this is how Jacob is saved. Not by choking, but by clinging to God in weakness. By trusting in him to save him.

And so we had to cling to Christ in weakness. Like children who can't do it ourselves. Trusting in him. Have you done that? Or are you still wrestling against God?

[24 : 48] Living life by myself. And for us who do trust in Jesus, then we are to continue to cling to Christ.

Relying not by myself, but on his gracious help. And as we do, it will give us confidence to face our fears. Even in weakness. Which is what happens to the new Jacob.

So very briefly, point three. We're not going to get through all of point three. But just have a look at the first three verses of chapter 33, which really finishes the story. So Jacob looked up.

It's a new morning. Jacob looked up. And there was Esau coming with his 400 men. So he divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two female servants. He put the female servants and their children in front.

Leah and her children next. And Rachel and Joseph in the rear. Oh no, it sounds like he's going to hide behind his family again. But no, verse three. He himself went on ahead this time.

[25 : 46] And bowed down to the ground seven times. As he approached his brother. And then Esau ran to meet Jacob. Embraced him through his arms around him. Kissed him. And they are reconciled.

Now, Jacob was no doubt weak from his all-night wrestling. Plus, he was limping. And so it didn't really make for a good escape if Esau attacked.

And yet, instead of going behind everyone as he did before, he now goes out in front of everyone. And he faces his fear of Esau with confidence.

Even in his weakness, doesn't he? It seems that as he clung to God, relying on God's help, not on his own help. It actually gave him confidence to face his fear, even in his weakness.

And by doing so, God's work in him is highlighted. I mean, how else could this guy go from fear and hiding behind everyone to confidence and going out in front of everyone?

[26 : 51] Only by God's work. As Jesus said to Paul on our last slide, it says, My grace, on the last slide, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

And I know many people who have had to face significant fears in their life, whether it was a health issue or an employment issue or a relationship or family issue.

And they have clung to Christ, relied on his gracious help, whether it was provided through church family or biological family or friends.

Sometimes, I think I've said before, people have got the appointment at the specialist they needed because someone just so happened to cancel and they got it. However it comes, it gave them confidence and contentment to face that fear, even in the weakness, because they clung to Christ and relied on his grace.

To give a personal example, my dad's cancer has come back. It's one of the less severe cancers and it's pretty common, but it's still a relatively significant fear for my parents.

[28 : 04] He cannot get rid of it himself, but he can have surgery to remove it, which he'll have in just over a week's time. And when I spoke to them on the phone a couple of weeks ago, they said, though, look, we've prayed about it and we're trusting God, so we're really not too worried about it.

And they were clinging to Christ, relying on God's grace to help them and sustain them during this time. And it gave them peace, confidence even to face their fear, so much so that they didn't cancel their Canadian holiday, but are actually now in Canada now.

The point is we're not only to cling to Christ in our moral weakness and rely on his grace to save us, to have eternal life, to enter his kingdom. We're also to do it in our physical weakness and with our fears.

For this is why God works in us, to humble us, that we might learn to keep clinging to him and that all might see his power in our weakness.

We don't have time to look at the rest of the passage, but let me finish by saying that for the record, my daughter now can cut a sandwich with a sharp knife all on her own. She's becoming very independent.

[29 : 16] And that's what we want for our kids, don't we? We want them to grow up and be independent, except though, when it comes to God. For to become his people and to be able to face our fears with confidence as his people, we are to keep depending on him, not by myself, but by God's grace, clinging to Christ.

Let's pray we would do that. Let's pray. Our gracious father, we do thank you for this reminder this morning that you long for us to depend on you, to trust and cling to Christ.

We pray, father, you would help us to do this in life. When things come our way, help us to be quick to pray, not to disregard wisdom or resources you provide, but to also and firstly commit it to you, to rely on you.

Help us, we pray, to keep clinging to Christ, not by myself, but by your grace. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.