

Wrestled By God | Genesis 32:22-32

I remember coming home once after being out all day. I can't remember exactly where I was or what I was doing during the day but I do remember being tired in a satisfied-that-was-a-productive-day kind of way but now it's time to put the feet up & relax. Lying down on the couch I had that lovely drifting-off-I've-nowhere-to-be-this-evening feeling! Then suddenly just as I had completely relaxed & fallen into a blissful dose I was rudely awakened & found myself under attack. Regan (5 at the time I think) had seen this as the perfect opportunity to get the upper hand & had leapt right onto my chest knees first laughing his head off. For a few seconds I didn't know what had hit me & but I found myself in an unexpected wrestling match with a 5 year old.

In our reading today Jacob finds himself in an unexpected wrestling match in what can only be described as one of the more strange accounts of Scripture. Yet strange as it is, when we look a bit deeper we realise it is a story we all can identify with at some level. A story of wrestling with God! In a sense what happens to Jacob in these verses is like a parable of his life; he **"struggled with God & with humans"** as the NIV puts verse 28. Put this way Jacob's struggle is one every person can identify with whether they be atheist, Christian or something in between...

1. *Jacob Was Left Alone (22-24a)*

It's the middle of the night & Jacob decides to get up & take his family & belongings across the river Jabbok. I wonder why he arose in the night to do so... I also wonder what was in Jacob's mind. Was he thinking of running to avoid seeing Esau again? Was he cooking up one of his schemes? There is a strangeness right from the beginning of this account. Yet all we're told is that he got up in the middle of the night & took his family safely across the river & then verse 24 begins with these five words; **"And Jacob was left alone."** This is the first of two **"Ands"** in verse 24 each highlighting something significant about this strange night. Therefore the first thing to note in this story is that Jacob was alone when this intense wrestle began.

Wrestling of a kind, as we have seen, is not unfamiliar in the story of Jacob. There was the struggle in the womb, the wrestle for the birthright & blessing, the struggle to marry the woman he loved, the wrestle between his wives, the struggle with Laban, his wrestle with fear & now it all leads to this very personal & direct struggle with God. God's has been wrestling with him in & through all the previous encounters. We have noted & seen this. This is why I say this account acts almost like a parable of his whole life. Yet the unique thing about this account is that God gets him alone! All the other wrestling involved others but in this climax moment in the story God wrestles him personally & directly. All the other colourful characters leave the stage so that only Jacob & this surprise wrestler, revealed as God, are left. I think this is because the whole story of Jacob is really about his wrestle with God. I think God needed Jacob to see this & be in

no doubt about it. He needed to see he couldn't wrestle against God & win. It might have seemed like his tactics were working for a while but with one touch God helped him realise how helpless he was against his sovereign power & will. This is a realisation each of us needs to come to & it came to Jacob when God got him alone in the night!

How hard it is for God to get us alone these days! In his book *The Man Who Wrestled with God* based on this account, Greg Haslam writes in a chapter entitled *Darkness, Separation & Silence*; *"Sometimes we have to just turn off the "noise" that fills our life & cut out all possible distractions. Many people hate the thought of being alone, so we create a personal soundtrack for our life, we fill it with activity & noise designed to mute the solitude – the TV, radio or iPod is constantly on, we have several books on the go, then there is the local pub for a drink with friends, or the golf course, or the movies – all because deep down we are afraid of the silence & especially of encountering God in the solitude. But when we are finally alone & at the end of our resources, that is often when God can come to us in new ways."*

Walter Sandor called solitude *"an audience chamber with God."* For Jacob that solitude, that *"audience chamber with God"* became a wrestling ring that brought him to the end of himself & into a new beginning with God! A few pages after the last quote Haslam writes; *"There are some things we cannot receive from God while we are still running – we have to stop running, stand still & sit alone in the terrible silence, & finally face God & our true self."* That place of *"terrible silence"* for Jacob also became a place of *"new beginning"*, because as dark, confusing, lonely & painful as it can be – this encounter was all these things for Jacob – it is here that the light of God's severe mercy & relentless grace shines on our soul & dawns a new day in our lives. All this serves as a great metaphor for God's work of sanctification in the believer.

2. Jacob Was Wrestled (24b-26)

We can be quite familiar with this strange account but if we were reading this for the first time who would we assume this man to be? It's not until verse 28 that we're given insight into who the character is. The story starts with suspense! Why has Jacob got his family up in the middle of the night & crossed the river? Why did he stay behind alone? And now who is this man that attacks him? If we had never heard this story before would we assume this man was Esau ambushing him to get revenge? For remember this encounter is found right in the middle of the account of Jacob's reunion with Esau... Yet what we find as the account unfolds is that it is someone much more powerful & much more terrifying than Esau that has attacked Jacob. Jacob has been leapt on by the living God himself! All of a sudden encountering Esau again isn't so scary!

The account doesn't give a lot of detail about the wrestling match itself; it's not a minute by minute commentary. Instead we're just told a few details. The fight lasted until daybreak... Jacob seemed to be holding his own... Yet one touch from this mystery wrestler dislocated Jacob's hip... Jacob still clings on

insisting he will not let go unless the wrestler blesses him... It's only after this that we find out who the wrestler is! When the wrestler seen he was getting nowhere with Jacob he disabled him. Jacob's wrestler was both described as a man (24) & as God (30). Does this help us with his identity? I'll let you answer that yourself. What is clear is that Jacob understood this to be a face to face encounter with God. He called the place "**Peniel**" which means "*the face of God.*" If Jacob could come face to face with God in this way & survive then surely his face to face encounter with Esau would not be a problem.

Note that this was an encounter with God, his second such supernatural encounter in 20 years. Yet this was a very different encounter than the first & it was an encounter that left him wounded by God! If you or I done this to another human being we would be done for GBH. The Lord who heals wounds the man he has set his love upon! Get your head around that! Have you room for this in your theology, in your understanding about God & his ways? God will not allow us to squeeze him into neat little theological boxes or formulas that say he can only work this way or that way. He will shatter our illusions of who he is & how we think he should act. Sometimes disillusionment with God is good for our souls because it means we have finally come to the end of our illusions about him... Disillusion literally means "*the loss of illusion.*"

God waited until Jacob was alone, in the darkness, then he attacked him & up until verses 26 there is no verbal communication. God does not speak a word to Jacob until daybreak. He does not speak during this dark, lonely, terrifying night but he is there wrestling with the one he loves in the silence... Jacob has no idea what has hit him, what is going on but it is God who has hit him & therefore God is right in the middle of this struggle working to bring Jacob to the end of himself, to the end of his illusions, delivering him from self-reliance through the means of dislocation.

This is the paradox of the life of faith: in loss we gain, by losing we win, in being broken we are made whole, in dying we live, & behind it all is not a cruel God but a loving God who is lavishing grace upon us. He will not leave us as we are, because what we are is not what he intends us to be & he will makes us into what we need to be even if it means taking us on in one to one combat. God will meet us where we need to be met! For Moses, God spoke from the burning bush, for the seasoned soldier Joshua he appeared as Commander-in-Chief; to Isaiah the priest who was grieving the death of his earthly king, he appeared as the exalted & enthroned King of Kings; to Ezekiel the prophet who was a long way from home, he came as a mobile King with wheels within wheels for mobility – a God who is everywhere, yet can show up anywhere. And he appears to Jacob the "heal grabber" as a wrestler because that is what Jacob needed to bring him to the end of himself & into a new beginning with God!

3. Jacob Was Given a New Name (26-31)

Jacob will not let go until God blesses him. Having previously struggled with Esau in order to gain the birthright & paternal blessing, Jacob now wrestles with God in order to gain his blessing. He may have got

the blessing of his father by deceptive means but Jacob seems convinced that without the blessing of God his father blessing isn't enough. In these verses he receives the blessing directly from God puts an end to any doubts about his standing with God in light of his dodgy past. God marks the occasion by giving him a new name; **“Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God & with men, & have prevailed.”** That's a testimony of his life. Jacob literally means “heal-grabber” & Israel literally means “he strives with God” or “God strives” so he is no longer Jacob the heal-grabber but Israel the God-wrestler. The old name recalled his past, but his new name singled a new day. He had wrestled with God in the dark & now a new day had dawned in more ways than one. I love the way verse 31 ones says; “The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.” A new name & a new day is how this terrifying yet grace-filled encounter ends.

As this point I was reminded of the Lord's words in Revelation 2:17 says; **“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.”** One day we will be given a new name. But first we have some things to conquer & that will mean some wrestling with ourselves, others & God. Yet we wrestle – through tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword – as those who are more than conquerors through him who loved us, knowing that: 1. He is interceding for us & 2. Nothing can separate us from his love. Yet what we learn from Jacob's story is that his intercession & love might actually compel him to drag us into the ring with him & wrestle us to the end of ourselves so we are finally ready for the new name & new beginning he has for us! Are we open for such an encounter with the one who is both man & God?

Sources used for this sermon:

Africa Bible Commentary, Tokunboh Adeyemo (General Editor), Zondervan, 2010.

Philip Eveson, *The Book of Origins*, Evangelical Press, 2001.

Gregg Haslam, *The Man Who Wrestled With God*, New Wine Press, 2009.

Zondervan NIV Study Bible, Zondervan, 2015.