

JACOB: A LIFE OF WRESTLING

Genesis 25-37

Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road

Plymouth, Michigan 48170

Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 11.10.02

He was the riverboat gambler of the patriarchs. A master of the sleight of hand and fancy footwork, he gained a seamy reputation of getting what he wanted by hook or crook . . . or both.

Twice he dealt hidden cards to his dull-witted brother Esau in order to climb the family tree. He once pulled the wool over the eyes of his own father: a trick that was especially dirty since his father's eyes were rather dim, and the wool he pulled insured him a gift he would never have received otherwise.

He later conned his father-in-law out of his best livestock and, when no one was looking, pulled up stakes and skidaddled.

Yes, Jacob has a salty reputation and deservedly so. For him, the ends always justified the means. His cleverness was outranked only by his audacity. His conscience was just calloused enough to let him sleep, and his feet were just fast enough to keep him one step ahead of the consequences.

That is, until he reached a river called Jabbok. It was at Jabbok that his own cunning caught up with him.

Jacob was camped near the river Jabbok when word reached him that big, hairy Esau was coming to see him. It had been twenty years since Jacob had tricked his brother. More than enough time, Jacob realized, for Esau to stir up a boiling pot of revenge. Jacob was in trouble. And this time he had no more tricks up his sleeve. He was finally forced to face up to himself and to God.¹

These well-written words are from the pen of Max Lucado, Christian author and master story-teller. In the mud of Jabbok, Jacob wrestles with God. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Let's look at this man whose life was an on-going wrestling match with God, with man, and—unwillingly—with woman.²

Before they were even born, Esau and Jacob wrestled within Rebekah's womb. At birth, Esau was first and Jacob was second, but the second came out grasping the heel of

¹Max Lucado, "In the Mud of Jabbok," *Image* 3 (March 15, 1987): 20.

²See the excellent presentation by Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard* (InterVarsityPress, 2001), 133-175.

the first. The second son was named “Jacob”³ which means “heel-grabber.” Jacob goes on to grab whatever he can anyway he can in order to overcome his status as merely number two. Jacob wrestles the birthright away from Esau: Esau yields his birthright for a pot of stew. Jacob’s selfishness is surpassed only by Esau’s stupidity. Then, at a later time, Jacob wrestles both his dim-sighted father and dim-witted brother out of the firstborn’s blessing. Esau cries out in anguish and alludes to the meaning of Jacob’s name, “heel-grabber,” while providing a twist. As used by Esau, the name “Jacob” can also mean “cheater.” To avoid the anger of Esau, Jacob flees from home, never to see again his beloved mother. He comes into the company of uncle Laban, his mother’s brother. Jacob, the shameless schemer, is but an amateur as he wrestles with Laban, the consummate con-artist. Leah’s wedding veil hid not only her face, but also the deceitful dealings of her father Laban as he married-off both of his daughters to Jacob who wanted only Rachel. Jacob, who masqueraded as his brother, is given Leah, who masquerades as her sister. Jacob, who had seized the rights of the firstborn brother, is duped because he failed to see the rights of the firstborn sister. The trickster is tricked and his marriage is troubled: two bickering wives wrestle for first place just as he had done with Esau. Jacob flees from Laban, only to face Esau. Fortunately, Esau is as gracious as Jacob is humble, and the wrestling between brothers ceases. But, like father like sons: Jacob’s boys cunningly and cruelly kill the men of Shechem, and then callously dupe their dad into believing that his favorite son Joseph is dead.

Throughout his life of struggles, Jacob wrestles with God. When he ran away from home in fear of Esau, he runs into God and it is a fearsome encounter.

¹⁰Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. ¹¹When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. ¹²He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³There above it stood the LORD, and he said: “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread

³“Jacob” (יַעֲקֹב) may mean “May God protect” (appropriate for one who was to live his entire life in the shadow of danger); the name also sounds like the word “heel” (קַעֲבֹ), thus meaning “he grasps the heel”—which turns the name into “Supplanter,” “Deceiver,” or “Cheater” (קַעֲבֹ “to supplant”).

out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

¹⁶When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” ¹⁷He was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”

¹⁸Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. ¹⁹He called that place Bethel . . . (Gen 28:10-19a, NIV).

Notice God’s last words: *“I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”* God “hangs on” as would a wrestler, waiting on and working on the wily Jacob. Years later, when Jacob returns to Bethel, he acknowledges the goodness of God.

¹Then God said to Jacob, “Go up to Bethel and settle there, and build an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau.”

²So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, and purify yourselves and change your clothes.

³Then come, let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone” (Gen 35:1-3, NIV).

Now note Jacob’s last words as he worships the God *“who has been with me wherever I have gone.”*

Between these two Bethel episodes lies the encounter at Jabbok: an actual wrestling match between Jacob and God. It is the night before Jacob will see Esau for the first time since twenty years earlier he had stolen Esau’s blessing. Jacob is scared, really scared.

^{32:22}That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. ²⁴So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. ²⁵When 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. ²⁶Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.”

But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

²⁷The man asked him, “What is your name?”

“Jacob,” he answered.

²⁸Then the man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.”

²⁹Jacob said, “Please tell me your name.”

But he replied, “Why do you ask my name?” Then he blessed him there.

³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.”

³¹The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. . . .^{33:1}Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming . . . (Gen 32:22-31, NIV; 33:1a, NRSV).

Having seen God face to face, Jacob can face his brother.

A wrestling match between Jacob and God—what a fascinating story! Jacob, solitary and stripped of everything dear to him, is suddenly attacked by a mysterious assailant. Amazingly, Jacob holds his own until the strange man strikes Jacob’s hip. Jacob lies helpless and crippled, but with the desperate grip of one who has been defeated Jacob will not let “the man” go until “the man” blesses him. This blessing will come not through the scheming or strength of Jacob; it will come to Jacob as a pure gift given to one who has spent himself and has been defeated.⁴ Jacob’s name is changed to “Israel,” which means “the one who wrestles with God.” Jacob has wrestled *with God*! God is not the one endangered by the daylight, it is Jacob! To see God in the full light of day would have meant death for Jacob. If Jacob holds on until daybreak, he is a dead man. This says something about Jacob: he is willing to risk death for the sake of the divine blessing. It also says something about God. The name “Israel” can also mean “God wrestles.”⁵ Jacob cannot struggle with God if God refuses to be so engaged. God does not play games with Jacob; God actually wrestles with him.⁶ Yet, even though God takes on human form and stoops to Jacob’s level, He still retains certain powers: God is able to do with Jacob’s name what Jacob is not able to do with God’s name. The blessing comes from God, and Jacob realizes that this blessing can be his only by receiving it as a gift from God.

Like Jacob, you and I need to cross “the Jabbok” and face God. We need to wrestle with Him, and we need to hang on until we finally realize that we are helpless and hopeless without His blessing. Having faced God, when can then face life. It is God that gives us the power to walk. And when we limp, even the limping should remind us that we walk not by our power, but by the power of the one who is willing to wrestle with us.

⁴Dennis T. Olson, “Genesis 32:22-31,” in Roger E. Van Harn, ed., *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday’s Texts*, v. 1: The Old Testament and Acts (Eerdmans/Continuum, 2001), 61-63

⁵Cf. NRSV footnote.

⁶See the excellent discussion of Terence E. Fretheim, *The Book of Genesis*, NIB, vol. 1 (Abingdon, 1994), 566-570.

As I close, I turn once again to the insightful writing of Max Lucado.

We, too, should cross the creek alone and struggle with God over ourselves. We, too, should stand face to face with him and be reminded that left alone we fail. We, too, should unmask our stained hearts and grimy souls and be honest with the one who knows our most secret sins.

The result could be refreshing. We know it was for Jacob. After his encounter with God, Jacob was a new man. He crossed the river in the dawn of a new day and faced Esau with a newly found courage.

Each step he took, however, was a painful one. His stiff hip was a reminder of the three lessons he had learned at Jabbok.

1. Shady dealings bring pain. Mark it down: play today and you'll pay tomorrow.

2. Before God, we haven't a leg to stand on. Try to justify yourself on the basis of your own perfection, and God will humble you with a simple touch on the hip.

3. No man is too bad for God. To transform a riverboat gambler into a man of faith would be no easy task. But for God, it was all in a night's work.⁷

⁷Lucado, "In the Mud of Jabbok," 21.