

WRESTLING WITH GOD

Jacob is a fascinating and complex character. It's my own fault that we are only spending one class with him. He is certainly worth a whole series of classes. On the other hand, I try to keep remembering that you already know Jacob quite well. This is only "Review & Renew" time. We are not starting from scratch; just picking some highlights to fine-tune our perspective a bit.

Even so, let's get oriented. When we hear the phrase "The Children of Israel," to whom are we referring? Right – the children of Jacob. Jacob is the father of twelve sons, who become the twelve tribes of Israel. But Israel IS Jacob, for Jacob's name was changed to Israel. And we are talking about the very story that brings this name change. (Genesis 32:28) Jacob is renamed Israel because of the way he wrestles with God. "Israel" means "he strives" – he is contentious. "Islam" means "submission," and "Israel" means "those who strive with God." But of course, all religions are the same; everybody knows that. At least they are until or unless we start paying some attention to them.

So Jacob is born clutching at his brother's heel. ("Jacob" means "to seize at the heel" [to overreach, to supplant]). *"My brother Esau is a hairy man, but I am a smooth man."* And you know the stories that set the scene for later drama: Esau sells his birthright to Jacob for a mess of potage. Later, the blessing (the blessing of the father) is stolen by deceit. How is it that Jacob, growing up in a famed household of the patriarchs, is so unprincipled and immoral? He was only obeying his mother! (Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel and sister of Laban.) Laban and Rebekah are brother and sister, and both are completely unprincipled – that is, they are willing to do anything to get their own way. Unless, of course, Rebekah is actually responding to the urgings of God. Looking back on this story from our famous "hindsight" perspective, two things stand out.

1.) Isaac doesn't carry much weight, so therefore the responsibility for carrying the promise and the destiny of Abraham falls pretty much on Rebekah.

2.) Can we really imagine Esau fulfilling the role of the Second Patriarch? Twenty years after Jacob ran for his life, we find Esau down in Seir (Edom, south and east of the Dead Sea). He shows no interest in the Land of Canaan, and seems totally unaware or uninterested in any legacy or destiny coming down to him from Abraham. “The God of our fathers: Abraham, Isaac, and Esau.” It won’t fly.

Back to the story at hand: After stealing his father’s blessing (a very interesting story of its own) (Genesis 25:27-34), Jacob runs for his life from Esau (up to Haran). On the way he has the first of a number of “spiritual experiences” that will awaken him to other realities, and eventually change him from a scoundrel and a momma’s boy – into an amazing man, a faithful servant of God’s, and the true leader of what will become the Jewish nation. This first encounter (at Bethel) is usually referred to as “Jacob’s ladder.” (Genesis 28:10-17) From it come: Devotion. Tithing. A personal covenant with God. Already Jacob is changing from the self-centered, spoiled, “I’m the only one who matters” kind of man – into a much more interesting person. A little fear, having to run for your life, the loss of everything familiar, and a spiritual encounter will sometimes have that effect on a person.

So now we summarize much of Jacob’s adventures in Haran. Jacob meets his Uncle Laban, who is a devious and deceitful man. Jacob works under Laban for seven years for the hand of Laban’s daughter Rachel. Rachel is the love of Jacob’s life, and theirs one of the great love stories of the Bible. But doubtless there had been a good deal of wine at the wedding celebration; Jacob went to bed with Rachel, but woke up with Leah, her older sister. (This is a familiar experience, which I only talk about at men’s retreats.) By the way, most people assume that Leah was not very attractive; she had “weak eyes.” Yet “weak eyes” can just as accurately be translated as “soft eyes,” or we sometimes say “bedroom eyes.” Leah may have been very nice to go to bed with.

No time to get into a discussion about monogamy, or the four women with whom Jacob had children. Jacob loved Rachel all his life, and his children with Rachel (Joseph and Benjamin) were special and favored in his eyes. (Which of course caused a lot of jealousy, and got Joseph sold into slavery and nearly killed. But that’s another story.) When Jacob later loses Rachel – she dies just outside Bethlehem, giving birth to Benjamin – Jacob is heartbroken for the rest of his life. But that does not mean Jacob had no regard for Leah, that she was not a good

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wife, or that she was not a pleasure to be with. How many children did Jacob and Leah have together? Seven: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Dinah. (And some fairly important people came from these children: Moses, Aaron, King David, Jesus, among others.)

Back to our story: Jacob now has to work another seven years to have Rachel for his wife, but this time it's on the buy-now, pay-later plan. You understand that Jacob came out of Canaan in such a hurry that he had nothing but the clothes on his back. Therefore, to acquire wives – to start making a life for himself – Jacob had nothing except his labor to bargain with. However, he is very hard-working and conscientious. Laban and his whole clan thrive and prosper because of Jacob's labors. And Jacob works his way into a growing prosperity despite everything Laban can do to cheat him out of as much as possible. God is with Jacob, as the covenant at "Jacob's ladder" suggested he would be. Jacob is quite obviously more than a match for Laban (having spent some apprenticeship time learning to be a trickster himself). So Jacob prospers, and he ends up with many sons. (All but one of the twelve is born to him in Haran. Benjamin, as we mentioned, will be born just outside of Bethlehem (Ephrath) as Jacob travels toward Hebron.)

A brief refresher on Jacob's children, and then we will get to our story. Jacob ends up having children with four women: Rachel, Leah, Bilhah (Rachel's handmaiden), and Zilpah (Leah's handmaiden) (see below). So, adding in the jealousy and the huge emphasis the ancient world put on bearing children, Jacob is kept pretty busy. It still seems clear to me that it was love at first sight between Jacob and Rachel, and that will last all of Jacob's life, even after Rachel is gone. His great favoritism for Joseph, and later for Benjamin, is mostly in honor of this love for Rachel. At least that's how I read it.

LEAH

- 1.) Reuben
- 2.) Simeon
- 3.) Levi
- 4.) Judah

- 9.) Issachar
- 10.) Zebulun

- Dinah

BILHAH

- 5.) Dan
- 6.) Naphtali

ZILPAH

- 7.) Gad
- 8.) Asher

RACHEL

- 11.) Joseph
- 12.) Benjamin

And finally, to the main part of our story: Jacob is heading back to Canaan. He had experienced a profound vision (epiphany) at Bethel as he left the region twenty years earlier. Now Jacob will experience an even more dramatic encounter on his way back home. And this encounter is the famous wrestling match with God which will last all night.

How many of you understand from personal experience what is being portrayed here? I don't mean to imply that all the details will be the same, but I suspect you also have struggled over some very significant choice – something that had you so concerned you couldn't sleep – and you wrestled first on one side of the decision and then on the other, and you couldn't come to any resolution for maybe days, or at least for hours. And when you finally became convinced that you knew what you were supposed to do, the mark of the struggle was indelibly imprinted on your consciousness – for the rest of your life. If you have no memory of such a time, you will not understand this story. [Some possibilities: A divorce. Changing careers. Confronting an issue that has your family or your business stymied and stuck. Maybe a turning point of even greater magnitude.]

Most people will tell you that Jacob's wrestle had something to do with his fear of Esau. I think that has to be true. Twenty years ago, Jacob had run for his life from Esau's wrath. And Esau had sworn to kill Jacob as soon as their father died. Is Esau still angry? It would seem to be a likely possibility. As this part of the story unfolds, Jacob receives the information that Esau is coming to meet him with four hundred men. Is there some way to interpret that as a friendly gesture? That is a huge army by the standards of the time. (Abraham had defeated a coalition of four Kings with three hundred and eighteen men.)

Is Jacob wrestling over whether or not to turn back – to go back to Haran? Or maybe he should make a run for it to some other area and start over (like Tyre or Sidon, for instance). But if Esau is really angry, won't he just continue in pursuit? And Jacob cannot travel very fast with all his flocks and herds and women and children. Flocks and herds and women and children are not a speedy consort. Four hundred men can be.

Where did Esau *get* four hundred men? Has he promised them the booty – the spoils – if they will come with him? Esau lives in Edom (Seir) and will return there. But where did he get so many men? Is the number symbolic of something we don't understand? They do funny

things with numbers in Genesis. Or did somebody actually *count* the men coming with Esau? Nobody expected us to care about such details four thousand years later, so they are not explained. Okay, so four hundred men.

What do we make of Jacob's strategy? He splits his very impressive entourage into two camps, and sends one on ahead in the hope that if Esau attacks one of these groups, the other may yet survive. Let's see if I have this straight: Jacob further deploys three droves of animals to go ahead of him, with significant space between each drove. The herdsmen, when they meet Esau, are each to tell him that their drove is a present from Jacob to Esau. Each drove is made up of goats, sheep, camels, cows, and donkeys, and each drove is made up of five hundred and fifty animals. If you think Jacob is weak, poor, or helpless, I suggest that you do not understand the significance of five hundred and fifty animals at this time in history. And of course, the droves that are designated as gifts for Esau are not the only animals that Jacob owns; the droves are only what Jacob is giving away as a present to Esau. I think we should add that they are not just gifts, but are a way of saying that Jacob is sorry for having treated Esau poorly, and a way of more than making up for any loss Esau may imagine he has sustained because of Jacob's past actions. But now we also remember that there are three such droves. So the present to Esau is one thousand six hundred and fifty animals! Jacob has just made Esau rich beyond his wildest dreams.

Even so, Jacob sends the women and children across the Jabbok River behind him, and then waits alone for Esau to come. It will be a long night. One more significant factor to add to our picture: Jacob prays. He prays in the context and with the memory that it was God who told him to return home, and that God has promised to do him good and to renew in him the promise God had made to Abraham: to make of him a great multitude beyond counting.

So Jacob has the reassurance and the promises of God to comfort him. But like many of us, he is not sure that the power of God will be enough to protect him from the wrath of Esau. God has promised to bless and prosper him, and so far it has been dramatically so. Why, then, is Jacob still so afraid? I'm not trying to rub it in so much for you as for myself: Has God been with me so far? Have I ever starved to death? Has God not stayed with me through failure, stupid choices, betrayal, threats, anger, disease? When will I catch on? When will I get truly

grateful? When will I turn into the wind and be truly trusting, adventurous, obedient, and joyful? Lots of times we get reassurance from God, yet still manage to worry and fret as if we were paying it no mind.

What is Jacob really wrestling with? It is subtle and makes no sense. But we are humans, so we know: He is wrestling with the fear that this time God will abandon him. He has in fact done what he was supposed to do. But he is wrestling with the possibility that maybe he should not have trusted his prayers – that maybe he should not have trusted his spiritual instincts. He is torturing himself with the visions of what will happen if he has been mistaken – if he has chosen the wrong approach. Oh *why* did he decide to be a man of peace? Why did he decide to try to reconcile with his brother? He should have faced Esau and the four hundred men head-on. Is he not the most powerful chieftain in the near east, as was his grandfather before him? Indeed yes, and far more so. Why give Esau the chance to undo him? So there would be some bloodshed, but then it would be over and the outcome certain. In our kind of world, better to play Cain than Abel.

But Jacob has chosen the harder way. He is trusting not only God, but Esau. He is saying he is sorry – making amends – and hoping Esau will respond to his sincerity and generosity. And now, as a result, he is vulnerable. He has deployed all his resources toward peace, not war. He cannot do both. How frequently that is true. So Jacob has risked everything. What if Esau decides to take it all? What if Jacob has been wrong? There go his wives, his sons, the covenant, and the twelve tribes of Israel – everything he has worked for and hoped for – along with his own life. The battle has switched from the outside to the inside. And it rages all night. “I will not let you go. You are all I have left – at least all that matters.” And so Jacob wins. But he will limp for the rest of his life.

Wrestling with God usually means we are also wrestling with our selves – and with our lives, and all that they have been like, and all that they have been for and about. Isn't that what it's like when *you* wrestle with God? Is Jacob finally God's man – or is he back in charge of his own life now that God has so richly blessed him?

This is a huge turning point – a huge transformation time – in Jacob's life. He has been turning more and more toward the faithful man he is destined to become. I do not mean “destined” to suggest in any way that it is inevitable or that he has no choice. But it is his destiny if he will turn toward it, and choose it. Because he does choose it, he becomes

one of the most remarkable men in the entire Old Testament story: The final and fulfilling patriarch – the Father of Judaism. “*The God of our Fathers – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.*” God’s promise is fulfilled, and the story continues because of Jacob. He carries and continues what Esau could in no way have accomplished. The Children of Israel *means* the Children of Jacob.

Why does Jacob limp for the rest of his life? Not sure, of course. But we do know that it is hard for us to remember even some of our most important lessons, vows, truths, commitments. Why does Jesus ask us to remember Him every time food or drink passes our lips? Yet we still forget, constantly and continually. We forget who we belong to, who we serve, what the New Life is like in comparison to the old. Well, Jacob limps. He will never take another step, as long as he lives, without remembering his wrestle – and the different kind of life that it opened up for him.

How many times have you wrestled with God? And how many times have you come away the same person you were before?