

Behold the Lamb of God

Part 4: He Wrestles with God

TEXT: GENESIS 32:22-32 (ESV)



(About the Art: by Abby Mangan, commissioned for Oak Hills Presbyterian Church's 2009 Christmas Celebration)

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Closing In

Early in this series, we studied how God promised Abraham his descendants would outnumber the stars of the sky and he'd become the father of a great nation through which the whole world would be blessed. We talked about how this was a promise of the coming of Christ—One from Abraham's line who'd accomplish what the Lord foretold Adam and Eve and the serpent in the garden—that one would come from the woman who'd crush the serpent's head. This is the story we're in.

Today we dig deeper into Abraham's story. Abraham had Isaac. Isaac had Jacob and Esau. These two would become an important fulcrum on which this story would pivot. While she was pregnant, the Lord told Isaac's wife, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided. One shall be stronger and the older shall serve the younger." (Gen 25:23) Abraham set the Lord's blessing on his son Isaac, and Isaac upon Jacob the younger. This made Esau so angry that he swore he'd kill Jacob. So Jacob fled for a time to live with his uncle Laban.

Today we pick up the story with Jacob on his way home to confront Esau again for the first time in years. Ever since entering the Promised Land as a nomad, Abraham had only prospered. His family had become a rich people. With wealth comes power. But lest anyone think wealth and power would be the means by which Abraham's descendants would bless the earth, the Lord visits Jacob at the height of his wealth and fear and shows Himself strong while revealing our weakness.

Genesis 32:22-32

²²The night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his 11 children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He sent them across, and everything else he had.

²⁴And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. ²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

²⁶Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." ²⁷And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you've striven with God and men, and have prevailed."

²⁹Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered." ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. ³²Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh.

When A Schemer Schemes

Because Esau meant to kill him, Jacob fled his father's house to live with his uncle Laban until Esau cooled off. There Jacob fell in love with Laban's daughter Rachel. He wanted to marry her, so he swore to work for Laban for seven years in exchange for Laban's daughter's hand in marriage. Laban was happy to oblige. But when the wedding came, the woman under the veil marrying Jacob was not Rachel. It was Laban's other daughter Leah. "Oh," Laban feigned. "You meant Rachel? You know, in our culture, we don't permit the younger daughter to marry first. Didn't you know that? Tell you what, for another seven years of servitude, Rachel's all yours." (my paraphrase of Gen 29:26-27)

Though Jacob had clearly been tricked into marrying Leah, his love for Rachel prevailed. He would do whatever it took to take her as his wife. So Jacob worked for Laban another seven years. (Gen 29:28-30) But Laban wasn't the only schemer there. Jacob quietly worked to build his herds and possessions until his personal wealth rivaled that of his uncle. Jacob even managed to trick Laban out of most of his own livestock. (Gen 30:25-43)

Both lived to swindle the other, and within that system existed a sort of code which said if one schemer was foolish enough to fall for another schemer's scheme, then shame on him. Still, they had to live at peace. Eventually, part of living at peace with Laban meant living apart from him. So Jacob gathered his wives, servants, livestock and possessions and set out for the only other home he knew—the land of his father in Canaan. (Gen 31:17-18) Only now it wasn't really the land of his father anymore. It was the land of his brother, and the last he heard, Esau had taken an oath to kill Jacob the next time he saw him. (Gen 27:42)

Losing Leverage

Though Jacob hoped their paths would never cross again, they would, soon. Though it'd been years, Jacob had no reason to think Esau had forgotten how Jacob had tricked his brother out of his birthright and his father out of his blessing. He sent scouts ahead to hopefully intercept Esau, lavish him with gifts and let him know Jacob was coming. Hopefully they might be able to gauge Esau's reaction. The scouts returned. They found Esau, and while they didn't know his intentions, he was coming out to meet Jacob. And he was bringing four hundred men with him. (Gen 32:6) A prevailing dread came over Jacob. He turned to the Lord, "I am not worthy of...all the faithfulness you've shown your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I've become two camps. Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me." (Gen 32:10-11)

As he prayed, Jacob formed a scheme. He separated his camps so if Esau attacked one, the other could escape. He sent his wives and children to the other side of the river so regardless of which camp Esau attacked, Leah, Rachel and the kids would be hidden safe in the canyons of the Jabbok. ^(Gen 32:6-12) Then he assembled three more parties of scouts, each with herds of livestock to offer as gifts, and he dispatched them one after another like waves of blessing and prosperity hoping they would break over his brother, smoothing over the rough. ^(Gen 32:13-21)

With everyone in place, Jacob waited by the banks of the Jabbok alone in the dark. He and this river were not that different. All through his life, his schemes like streams of thought flowed and gathered from high and hidden places, coming together to run away with no other agenda than taking advantage of the easiest path through the weakest lines of what might have otherwise stood tall, dignified and whole.

Further upstream, at the the fords of the Jabbok, a man could see the river begin. But who could know the manner in which those waters would wind their way through the highlands of Gilead, cutting their course ever deeper until they emptied into the Jordan to be carried away to the desolate Dead Sea?

Jacob's never saw much beyond the fords of his own schemes, though they merged like tributaries to cut a channel hard enough to pass along the consequences of his life to others. Further downstream, many had been cut in two. Many men dreaming of high positions had seen their footing swept out from under them by Jacob's actions. Sooner or later, there would come a reckoning. And Esau was coming.

In the dark, Jacob wondered what his brother was hungry for. Whatever it was, he figured Esau would follow his appetites. When they were younger, Esau offered his birthright as Isaac's heir for a bowl of Jacob's stew. ^(Gen 25:29-34) All their lives their father and grandfather taught them the birthright was everything. God was working through this family, establishing the lineage that the great Redeemer would come out of. The one to carry the birthright of this family was to stand in an unbreakable line that would one day give this world a Savior.

Though it was unfair the way Jacob deceived his father to get it, Esau forfeited that birthright to him years ago. To so brazenly trade it away just to fill his belly was foolish. Though no one could fault Esau for being angry when Isaac gave his blessing to Jacob, this was still a mess of Esau's own making. Regardless, Jacob wondered if the dawn would bring on the fight of his life.

And then, as if from nowhere, someone grabbed him and threw him to the ground. Where his assailant had come from or who he was, Jacob didn't know. All he knew was that whoever he was, he was strong. Adrenaline pounded through his veins as he did the only thing he could. He fought back. Jacob wrestled with every muscle and with every wit. It was exhausting. But alone in the dark, what were his options? Surrender? He prayed.

Surely the son of Isaac, the Son of Abraham, the friend of God, ^(Jas 2:23) had the Lord on his side. Surely the Almighty would give Jacob strength to prevail. Whatever prayers he might have whispered for help were beautifully ironic because he did not know that the very same God he prayed to now was the One who had him tangled up in the dirt. But Jacob stayed in the fight.

As the first signs of morning began to glow in the east, the Lord knocked Jacob's hip—the core of a wrestler's strength, the pivot point—out of its socket. When the angel of the Lord took that away, whatever leverage Jacob might have had was gone.

Without leverage, Jacob went from wrestling to clinging as though his life depended on it. As he held on, the angel of the Lord said, "Let me go." Jacob strained, "Not unless you bless me." ^(Gen 32:26) Jacob didn't want to leave this fight wondering when the next would come. He couldn't win. He was at the mercy of God. So he cried out for the blessing he'd tried to steal from his brother and take his father. He wanted that blessing.

So the angel of the Lord asked him, "What is your name?" ^(Gen 32:27) God never asks a question because He lacks information. He wanted Jacob to testify against himself before the court of the Most High. He wanted Jacob to confess he was the son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham, heir of God's Covenant promises and he wanted Jacob to confess he was a liar and a cheat.

Jacob declared, "I am Jacob." ^(Gen 32:27) God promised Adam and Eve life this side of redemption would be hard. Jacob's whole life had been marked by struggles of his own making. He came out of the womb scheming and never looked back. He wrestled the birthright from his brother, the blessing from his father, two brides from his uncle and enough livestock to make him a prince. He knew he could wrestle away pretty much anything he wanted from anyone he chose. He was good at it. Still, none of it made him happy and none of it brought him peace.

But now, all that was left was to cling to God for His blessing. Perhaps a flicker of hope sparked in Jacob as he realized he couldn't wrestle anything away from God. Maybe he could finally know peace. Maybe he could yield. This was perhaps the only satisfying victory in his life up to that point—this realization that though his brother could trade it and his father could speak it, only God could actually do what He had promised to do.

The angel of the Lord blessed Jacob by changing his name, "From now on, your name shall no longer be Jacob (Deceiver) but Israel (God fights) because you've striven with God and with men and have prevailed." ^(Gen 32:28) As Jacob, he was the scheming son of Isaac. But as Israel, he'd become the namesake of the nation the Lord swore to make of his grandfather Abraham's seed. The nation through which all other nations of the earth would be blessed would take his name, the name God had given him—Israel.

They'd grow to be like their namesake—stiff-necked, proud, prone to schemes and eager to bargain. Though they'd wrestle and God would hobble them, stripping them of their leverage, it would be because God was fighting for them even when they forgot the Covenant God Himself swore to uphold. Their forefather Israel walked before the Lord with a limp. And they did too. But God would rescue them. This was the promise.

The Grace of Defeat

The story of Jacob is our story—a tale of scheming, grabbing for power, taking advantage of the unsuspecting, laying low in the face of confrontation and moving the pieces of our lives around like pieces on a chess board. For many, this is how we live—constantly working the angles, never at peace, like we're in a fight. With Jacob, God picked the fight. There was grace in that defeat. No wealth, power or schemes could save him. Jacob was Jacob's own worst enemy. But through Jacob, God would bring salvation to every tribe, tongue and people. For that, God changed his name. Such an unlikely vessel for so great a purpose. Like Jacob, believers in Jesus are given a new name, and with it a great purpose—to bear witness to the power of Christ. May the One whose name we bear take away our leverage and cause us to cast ourselves upon His mercy. May He meet us in our scheming and bless us with the grace of defeat.