

A Wrestler Learns to Cling

By Brad Allison on 2/20/2005

Scripture Reference *Genesis 32*

This story of Jacob wrestling with God is one of the most revealing events in his life. There are times when a single incident can illustrate a person's entire life. For example, in the movie *About Schmidt*, Jack Nicholson plays a character who retires from his career as an executive at an insurance company. He has labored for his entire career at this company, and he prepares for his retirement by carefully preparing boxes of documents to be used by his successor. Several weeks after he retires, he goes back to the company to see if that successor has any problems or questions that need his help. The man assures him that he doesn't need any help, so Schmidt leaves the office feeling a little disappointed. Then as he is leaving, he walks past the back door of the office and sees all his carefully-prepared boxes of files sitting in the dumpster. It's a poignant scene that serves as a metaphor for his entire working career.

Such illustrative incidents are not just negative. When Jesus stooped to wash the feet of the disciples, that moment illustrated his entire life of service. He came to serve, not to be served. This incident in Jacob's life serves as a snapshot that captures the major themes of his life. Just as he wrestled with God here, he had been wrestling his entire life. At the time he emerged from the womb, he did so grabbing onto the heel of his twin brother, Esau. The sense is that he was wrestling to be first even when he had no awareness of what was happening. Then he wrestled with Esau first for the birthright and then for the blessing. When he arrives in Haran to live with Laban, the first thing he does is to wrestle this huge stone all by himself. And then for his entire 20 years with Laban, he wrestled repeatedly as he tried to be treated fairly by his cruel uncle. And now, in this culminating moment of his life story, he wrestles with God. But the story doesn't end with his wrestling. After God touches him and injures him at the hip, Jacob gives up wrestling and begins clinging to God for blessing. That movement from wrestling to clinging is the movement of spiritual maturity. The essence of spiritual growth could be summarized in this change from wrestling with God to clinging to God. It is the change from striving to resting. That's the change I want us to look at this morning, because it's the same with us. We grow as Christians as we learn to stop striving and start resting.

I. Stop Wrestling

There are several confusing parts to this story. First, who is this character who wrestles with Jacob? At first he's called a man, but by the end of the story it is clear to Jacob that this is no man. Jacob clings to him for blessing, and ultimately only God can bless. And then he re-names Jacob, and such an act is something reserved for God. Jacob names the place "Peniel" because, he says, "I have seen God face to face" (v. 30). But if this is God, then why is it that he didn't prevail against Jacob in this wrestling match?

We can move toward an answer to these questions by understanding the big picture of what's happening here. Let me say first that this was a real wrestling match. It wasn't just a dream Jacob had in which he was wrestling with God. He actually grappled with God, complete with headlocks, attempted reverses, and everything else that accompanies wrestling. We know that because Jacob limped away from this match and carried this injury for the rest of his life. Notice too that God initiated this encounter. Jacob was left alone, and God came to him in the form of this man and wrestled with him. Why did God come and wrestle Jacob? Why didn't he employ another type of encounter? For example, why didn't he come and argue with Jacob? The answer is critical in understanding this entire passage. God came to wrestle with Jacob because he had to engage Jacob at the point of Jacob's strength, and then show

Jacob the inadequacy of his strength so that Jacob might learn to trust in God rather than in his own strength.

We're clued in to Jacob's physical strength back in chapter 29, where we saw that he was able to move this giant stone all by himself, a task normally requiring several men. Jacob also seemed to have verbal strength, easily able to trick first of all his brother Esau and then his own father into giving him the blessing. When people entered into a conflict with Jacob, they usually lost. Ultimately, even Laban lost to Jacob, in spite of Laban's vast skills in the area of trickery. Jacob lost some early battles, but ended up winning the war as he left Laban with a great deal of what had been Laban's property. As God pursued Jacob to bless him, it was vital that Jacob learn not to trust in his strength, but to trust in God. He had to learn to stop wrestling and striving, and to trust instead. The way God works in our lives is along the same lines. We too must learn to stop trusting in our strength and look instead to God.

Let me point out a couple of things about Jacob's trust in his own strength and the way God dealt with it. First, I notice that the strengths we trust in often surface during times of tension and pressure. Jacob was feeling very insecure in our passage. He had recently had two very narrow escapes that must have had him feeling vulnerable. His first narrow escape was when Laban chased him down and caught up with him. When Laban found Jacob, he said to him, "It is in my power to do you harm. But the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad'" (31:29). Laban had both the will and the ability to harm Jacob, but he narrowly avoided such harm because of God's intervention. But then there was a second near miss when we read at the beginning of chapter 32 that the angels of God met Jacob on his way back to the Promised Land. Most commentators are of the opinion that this verb "met" has the sense of accosted. It entails a threatening encounter. The two camps after which Jacob names this place are armed camps. But Jacob somehow escapes this threat too.

Then there is a threat that seems more ominous than the first two. Jacob sends messengers to his brother Esau with a message of reconciliation. When Jacob's messengers return, they report that they saw Esau headed toward Jacob with 400 men. That was not good news, because that was the standard number of men in a raiding party. What interpretation should Jacob put on this fact? It didn't necessarily indicate a malicious purpose on Esau's part. But Jacob remembered Esau's words just prior to Jacob's departure 20 years earlier, in which his mother told him that Esau comforted himself by thoughts of Jacob's murder. And Jacob was probably also influenced by his own guilty conscience at the way he had treated Esau when he last saw him. So he becomes convinced that Esau's purposes are violent ones. Jacob is trapped. He can't turn around and go back the way he had come, because he had entered into a pact with Laban not to come back to that area. We get an idea how desperate Jacob is when we read that he divided his camp into two camps. This was doubtless an attempt to minimize his losses, thinking that if Esau slaughters the one, at least the second may be able to escape. As it turns out, Jacob's conclusions were all wrong. Esau's intentions were not to attack Jacob, but to escort him to safety. But he only learns of that later. For now, the point I want to make is that pressure is what makes us resort to our strengths.

Let's take just a moment to apply this. Where do your thoughts and efforts go when you are feeling weak or threatened? Jacob resorted to his strengths of physical power and cunning. To what do you resort when the pressure is turned up in your life? I resort to task accomplishment. If I'm feeling a little depressed, I just find something to do. "Go get something done, and you'll feel better about yourself," I tell myself. The message is never that explicit—it usually works at a level below my self-consciousness. It is just an instinctive response. What strength do you resort to? Here are some possibilities. Many men resort to the strength of being successful at work. Others may resort to physical conditioning and

spend lots of time at the gym. Some look to well-behaved, accomplished children, others to good grades in school, being well-liked, beauty, intelligence. The list could go on and on. What you need to see is that there is nothing wrong with anything on this list by itself. As a matter of fact, much good can come from most of them. Take, for example, my strength of getting things done. Many people benefit from that. It is a good gift from God. But what happens is that we are such sinful people that we take God's good gifts and use them against him. My ability to accomplish tasks is a gift from God that I take and use in order to be independent from God. That's what Jacob had done here. God had given him his physical strength and his intelligence, and he uses them both to depend on himself instead of God. This is why you will sometimes hear me speak about repenting not just of our sin, but of our righteousness as well. If we would walk with God, we must come to see our misuse of our best parts. That's the point to which Jacob now comes. The pressure is on more so than any other time of his life, and his response is to go to his strength. It is God's response to that that brings us to our next point.

Remember that Jacob's wrestling is an indication of his trust in his own strength. The first truth we see about that is that he resorts to his strength in times of trouble. The second truth I want to point out is the way God deals with Jacob's trust in his own strength. I see two things that God does. First, he lets Jacob exhaust himself in the effort and still not win. God wrestles him to a tie. Obviously, God could have prevailed at any moment, as we see him do eventually. He simply touches Jacob's hip and cripples him permanently. He could have done so during the first few seconds of the wrestling match, but chooses not to. Why? Because it's the normal way God deals with us in teaching us to repent of dependence on our strengths. He knows that we must learn the hard way, so he says to us, "You think that you will deal with life by your intelligence and hard work. Fine—have at it." Have you discovered what Jacob discovered here—that it never works? My dependence on task accomplishment for dealing with life never works. It exhausts me, cuts me off from other people, and leads to anger at others who I think don't work hard enough. Like Jacob discovers here, it doesn't work.

After God allows Jacob to exhaust himself in his dependence on his physical strength, God touches him and removes his strength in an instant. God touched Jacob and crippled him at the hip in order to teach him not to depend on his strength. The hip is a pivotal joint in the body—remove its health and it doesn't matter how strong the rest of the body is. No matter what your strength, it will one day be removed. If it is task accomplishment, the day will come when it can't be done. If it is beauty, good health, or anything else, it will fail.

II. Start Clinging

So Jacob learns to stop wrestling, to stop trusting in his own strength, and to start clinging. After his physical strength is removed by God's touch, he clings to God for blessing. This is a picture of faith. He looks to God for blessing instead of looking to his own abilities. It is when we stop wrestling and start clinging, when we stop striving and start resting, that we too are blessed. Let me point out three quick truths we learn about this clinging, this learning to trust in God.

First, it is different than a crisis faith. Do you know what I mean by a crisis faith? It is the faith that cries out to God in the midst of a critical need in our lives. Jacob does that earlier in this chapter. He goes to God in prayer and asks for deliverance from Esau. There is nothing wrong with that, and everything right about it. But my point is that there is a deeper blessing God wants to give as he teaches us to repent of our strength and cling to him. It is possible to pray to God in a crisis and still be largely unchanged at a core level.

Second, this clinging to God for blessing is evidenced by a sense of security and contentment. Notice that after this incident, Jacob meets with Esau and gives him the blessing that Jacob had sought for so many years. Though this is not evident in some translations, the ESV makes it clear in 33:11, where Jacob says to Esau, "Please accept my blessing that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me." For years, Jacob plotted, lied and connived to get the blessing. Now he is able to rest in the confidence that God had given it to him, and the striving ended. Have you noticed that when someone is secure in a particular area, there is a confidence, a contentment, a cessation of anxiety and striving in that area? For example, you men who are blessed with a full head of hair even into middle and old age never have to go around saying, "I have a full head of hair." You just do, and your security about that allows you not to do all the things the insecure do. Men with a full head of hair never have to decide about the comb-over technique. It's just not an issue. Once Jacob became secure in the blessing, he no longer had to strive to get it. Once you and I learn to cling to God in faith, looking to him for blessing, it will lead to deliverance from anxiety, and it will produce a contentment no matter what our situation.

The final truth I notice about Jacob's clinging to God is that it is by faith that we prevail. Notice the name change God gives to Jacob. He says, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed" (v. 28). Before this, Jacob had attempted to prevail with both people and God through his physical strength and his trickery. Now he does so by faith. I like the words of Bruce Waltke on this point.

Re-naming marks a change of direction...for the individual... The transformation pertains to the way in which Jacob prevails. Heretofore he prevailed over people by trickery. Now he prevails with God, and so with humans, by his words, not by the physical gifts conferred on him at birth or acquired through human effort. His ambition to prevail has not been changed but properly reoriented." p. 446

CONCLUSION:

Jacob walks away from this encounter with God a blessed man. He is blessed even though he will soon be down 580 animals—gifts given freely to his brother. He is blessed even though his physical strength has been permanently removed. It is a new day for him, literally and figuratively, as he walks away at the break of dawn a changed man. He has learned to stop striving and start clinging.

The following prayer has survived from the Civil War. It is known simply as "The Prayer of the Unknown Confederate Soldier". It expresses well what Jacob learned in our passage and what we want God to teach us.

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve,/I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey... I asked for health, that I might do greater things,/I was given infirmity that I might do better things... I asked for riches, that I might be happy,/I was given poverty that I might be wise... I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men,/I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God... I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life,/I was given life, that I might enjoy all things...I got nothing that I asked for—but everything I hoped for. Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered. I am among all men, most richly blessed.