

Jacob Wrestles with God (Genesis 32)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Genesis

I. Background, from Prior Lessons (Genesis 29-31)

- a. After Jacob cheated his brother Esau out of his inheritance blessing, Esau plots to kill Jacob. Jacob flees to Mesopotamia to the house of his uncle, Laban.
- b. Jacob marries Laban's two daughters, Rachel and Leah. He builds a large family, including 11 sons to this point. He had become a wealthy man, with large flocks and herds of animals.
- c. After 20 years of serving his deceitful Uncle Laban, the Angel of God tells Jacob to depart Haran and return to his homeland. Jacob leaves secretly, with his family and possessions. Laban comes after them, but God warns Laban in a dream not to say anything bad to Jacob.

II. Jacob Prepares to Meet Esau, Afraid (Read Genesis 32:1-21)

- a. Elements of the story
 - i. Laban departs, returns home
 - ii. Jacob passes a place where he sees the "hosts of God encamped". (Sounds like angels, to me.)
 - iii. Jacob messengers ahead, to tell Esau that he is returning, and to ask for a gracious reception.
 - iv. Messengers return to Jacob and tell him that Esau is on his way to meet Jacob...with 400 men with him!
 - v. Jacob is afraid of Esau's approaching army.
 - 1. Divides his group into two companies (so that hopefully at least one group would survive an attack).
 - 2. Jacob prays to God.
 - 3. Jacob sends staggered groups of gifts (sheep, goats, camels, bulls, etc.) ahead, hoping to appease his brother.
 - a. Maybe hoping that his brother's 'love language' is gifts?

b. Possible lessons from Jacob here

- i. As soon as one problem goes away (Laban, who cheated him), sometimes an even greater one approaches (Esau, who had wanted to kill him)!
- ii. Even a great hero of faith like Jacob, who has seen God working powerfully in his life to protect and bless him, can be terrified.
- iii. Jacob is creative in the face of this challenge
 1. He splits his group in two ("Don't put all your eggs in one basket")
 2. He gives gifts to his brother, to try to appease his anger.
 - a. "A gift in secret pacifies anger, And a bribe behind the back, strong wrath." (**Proverbs 21:14**, NKJV)
- iv. Jacob turns to God in prayer, in his distress. His prayer is instructive, and holds lessons for us.
 1. He starts by reminding God that He was the one who told Jacob to return to the land of his birth. "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, *the Lord who said to me 'Return to the land of your nativity, and I will deal well with you.'*" (**Genesis 32:9**, LXX, OSB)
 2. Jacob acknowledges that God had taken care of him thus far, and that it was the Lord who took him from poverty to the wealthy man he now was. "I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, and now I have become two companies." (**Genesis 32:10**, LXX, OSB)
 - a. Later, in the Wilderness, Moses would warn the Israelites that when they became wealthy in the Promised Land, they should never forget that God was the one who gave them that opportunity and ability. (That quote from Moses follows.)
 - b. "Therefore you shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him. For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, that flow out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing; a land whose stones are iron and out of whose hills you can dig

copper. When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you. Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today, lest—when you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them; and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage; who led you through that great and terrible wilderness, in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water; who brought water for you out of the flinty rock; who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end—then you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.’ And you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day. Then it shall be, if you by any means forget the Lord your God, and follow other different gods, and serve them and worship them, I testify against you this day that you shall surely perish.” (**Deuteronomy 8:6–19**, NKJV)

- c. Wealth has a spiritual danger. Israel ultimately forgot the lesson Moses taught in **Deuteronomy**. They lost their gratitude for God when they became comfortable; Jacob did not. Jacob remembered that God had delivered him through trials and had taken him from poverty to wealth. His grateful heart was reflected in his prayer, even in a time of great distress.
 - d. We should be grateful for all that God has done for us, the abilities He gives us to produce wealth. We should never forget God during times of blessing.
3. Jacob is brutally honest with God. Nothing flowery or ‘super-spiritual’ here. Admits that now he is afraid of Esau, and asks for God’s protection. “Deliver me from the hand of my brother, Esau; for I am afraid of him, lest he come and attack me and the mother with the children.” (**Genesis 32:11**, LXX, OSB)

- a. Jacob has 12 children and it looks like they are all about to die! Jacob reminds God once again that He had better do something to keep the promises He made to Jacob. "For You said, 'I will surely treat you well, and make your seed as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'" (**Genesis 32:12**, LXX, OSB)
- b. One of the reasons to know the Scriptures well is to grasp all the promises that God has made to us. Can you think of any promises that it would be good to remind God of, when you are praying? (Important to note that some of these promises are conditional upon things we are called to be or to do!)
 - i. **Regarding temptation.** "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it." (**1 Corinthians 10:13**, NKJV)
 - ii. **Regarding being forgiven after we sin.** "But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (**1 John 1:7-9**, NKJV)
 - iii. **Regarding not to worry**, because God will provide for our basic needs (not pleasures and extravagances) *if we seek first his kingdom and righteousness.* "Therefore, do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." (**Matthew 6:31-33**, NKJV)
 - iv. **Regarding prayer**, that it can be powerful, practical and effective for the righteous person. (It is not just a means of feeling good or taking

away stress and anxiety.) “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.” (James 5:16, NKJV)

- v. **Regarding the righteous who meditate on the Word of God day and night.** “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper.” (Psalm 1:1-3, NKJV)
When the times of drought come, we can be just fine!
- vi. **Regarding the Lord never leaving us.** “Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’” (Hebrews 13:5, NKJV; there quoting from Deuteronomy 31:6-8 and Joshua 1:5) If we are content, not covetous for other things, God will be with us.
- vii. Let’s be like Jacob, who reminded God of His promises!

III. Jacob Wrestles with God (Read Genesis 32:22-32)

- a. Elements of the story:
 - i. Jacob sends on his family and possessions; remains alone.
 - ii. He then wrestles with *someone*, all night long. The match ends in a ‘draw’, with neither side able to defeat the other.
 - iii. His opponent touches the socket of Jacob’s hip and causes problem with a muscle (or tendon or nerve) there; Jacob limps afterward.
 - 1. As a result, the Jews do not eat that muscle of animals.
 - iv. At daybreak, Jacob will only let his opponent go if he gets a blessing from Him.
 - v. They sort-of exchange names.

1. Jacob gives his name and the other man tells him that he will now be called Israel because, "you have prevailed with God and with men."
 2. The other man refuses to give His name.
- vi. Jacob names the place of the all-night wrestling match '*Peniel*' in the Hebrew text, or '*Form of God*' in the LXX; "for I saw God face to face and my soul was saved". (**Genesis 32:30**, LXX, OSB)
- b. Any moral lesson or example for us, in Jacob's wrestling all night long?
- i. Jacob, as an older man (at over 60 years of age, with a hard life and a big family) is still strong.
 - ii. He simply will not give up; continues wrestling all night (maybe eight hours?). This is an extraordinary example of persevering through trial. (For perspective, a typical US college wrestling match consists of three periods of 2-3 minutes each, with a full match totaling only seven minutes!)
 - iii. The same Greek root word used for 'wrestling' in **Genesis 32:24** in the LXX (where Jacob "wrestled" with the man all night), appears only once that I am aware of in the New Testament. Where do you think that is?
 1. Hint: it is *not* in **Colossians 4:12**, where Epaphras is agonizing in prayer for the brethren. A different Greek word is used, which only the NIV translation renders 'wrestles'.
 - iv. In **Ephesians 6**, Paul tells us that we are now in a major wrestling match, of our own. And our very souls are at stake in the outcome.
 1. "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand." (**Ephesians 6:10-13**, NKJV)
 2. We are in the wrestling arena, wrestling for our eternal salvation.
 3. Our wrestling match is not against other people (flesh and blood); it is against the spiritual forces of evil: Satan, the angels with him, and demonic forces.

4. This is the *real* professional wrestling 'Royal Rumble'. But this is not a phony staged contest for entertainment purposes, with ladders and chairs. In this match, you are not a spectator; you are *in the arena*. The trash talk is being directed at you. The opponents are not wearing make-up to make them *look* evil; beneath the surface, this is how they really are! Your opponents are evil, and powerful. Plus, there are many of them, working together to defeat you. Your opponents fight dirty, they use illegal holds, they hit below the belt whenever they can. They strike you even harder when you are down.
 5. Our challenge is to follow the great examples of the heroes of faith, of Jacob the wrestler, and of Jesus. We need to take all the spiritual weapons that our great Coach and Trainer has given us for this battle, if we are to win. Paul says we need the truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the spirit which is word of God, and praying always.
 6. The challenge for us is that we be found still standing when the dust has settled, the day of evil has come and gone, and the contest is finished. The challenge is to persevere to the end of the wrestling match, no matter what it takes. Just like Jacob.
- c. Who is that 'man' that Jacob was wrestling with?
- i. Was it God, an angel, or another man?
 - ii. What does it say in the text?
 1. His opponent refuses to give his name, but tells Jacob "You have prevailed with God and with men."
 2. Jacob says, "I saw God face to face." So clearly Jacob believes it was God that he wrestled with, and that he saw.
 - iii. There is one problem with the idea that Jacob saw God "face to face".
 1. Read **Exodus 33:12-23**, when Moses asked to see God, while the Jews were encamped at Mount Sinai.
 - a. The Lord told Moses, "You cannot see My face; for no man can see My face and live."
 2. Speaking about the return of Jesus, Paul tells Timothy that God (the Father) "will manifest in His own time, He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light,"

whom no man has seen or can see..." (1 Timothy 6:15-16, NKJV)

3. "No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him." (John 1:18, NKJV)
- iv. How do we resolve this apparent contradiction? Jacob says he saw God face to face; however, Moses, John and Paul say in the strongest possible terms that such a thing is impossible!
- v. How early Christian writers explained this apparent contradiction.
 1. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215 AD; a teacher in the church of Alexandria, Egypt) wrote, "But our Instructor is the holy God Jesus, the Word, who is the guide of all humanity. The loving God Himself is our Instructor... And He most manifestly appears as Jacob's instructor. He says accordingly to him, 'Lo, I am with you, to keep you in all the way in which you shalt go; and I will bring you back into this land: for I will not leave you till I do what I have told you.' He is said, too, to have wrestled with Him. 'And Jacob was left alone, and there wrestled with him a man (the Instructor) till the morning.' This was the man who led, and brought, and wrestled with, and anointed the athlete Jacob against evil. Now that the Word was at once Jacob's trainer and the Instructor of humanity [appears from this]—'He asked,' it is said, 'His name, and said to him, 'Tell me what is Your name.'" And he said, 'Why is it that you ask My name?' For He reserved the new name for the new people—the babe; and was as yet unnamed, the Lord God not having yet become man. Yet Jacob called the name of the place, 'Face of God.' 'For I have seen,' he says, 'God face to face; and my life is preserved.' The face of God is the Word by whom God is manifested and made known. Then also was he named Israel, because he saw God the Lord." (Source: Clement of Alexandria. *The Instructor*; Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2, p. 223)
 2. Tertullian (160-230 AD, a writer in the church in North Africa) wrote, "When Moses in Egypt desired to see the face of the Lord, saying, 'If therefore I have found grace in Your sight, manifest Yourself to me, that I may see You and know You,' God said, 'You cannot see my face; for there shall no man see me, and live': in other words, he who sees me shall die. Now we find that God has been seen by many persons, and yet that no one who saw Him died (at the sight). The truth is, they saw God according to the faculties of men, but not in accordance with the full glory of the Godhead. For the patriarchs are said to

have seen God (as Abraham and Jacob), and the prophets (as, for instance Isaiah and Ezekiel), and yet they did not die. Either, then, they ought to have died, since they had seen Him—for (the sentence runs), ‘No man shall see God, and live’; or else if they saw God, and yet did not die, the Scripture is false in stating that God said, ‘If a man see my face, he shall not live.’ Either way, the Scripture misleads us, when it makes God invisible, and when it produces Him to our sight. Now, then, He must be a different Being who was seen, because of one who was seen it could not be predicated that He is invisible. It will therefore follow, that by Him who is invisible we must understand the Father in the fulness of His majesty, while we recognize the Son as visible by reason of the dispensation of His derived existence; even as it is not permitted us to contemplate the sun in the full amount of his substance which is in the heavens, but *we can only endure with our eyes a ray*, by reason of the tempered condition of this portion which is projected from him to the earth. Here someone on the other side may be disposed to contend that the Son is also invisible as being the Word, and as being also the Spirit; and, while claiming one nature for the Father and the Son, to affirm that the Father is rather one and the same person with the Son. But the Scripture, as we have said, maintains their difference by the distinction it makes between the Visible and the Invisible. They then go on to argue to this effect, that if it was the Son who then spoke to Moses, He must mean it of Himself that His face was visible to no one, because He was Himself indeed the invisible Father in the name of the Son. And by this means they will have it that the Visible and the Invisible are one and the same, just as the Father and the Son are the same; (and this they maintain) because in a preceding passage, before He had refused (the sight of) His face to Moses, the Scripture informs us that ‘the Lord spoke face to face with Moses, as a man speaks to his friend (**Exodus 33:11**);’ just as Jacob also says, ‘I have seen God face to face.’ Therefore the Visible and the Invisible are one and the same; and both being thus the same, it follows that He is invisible as the Father, and visible as the Son.” (Source: *Against Praxeas*; ANF vol. 3, p. 609).

3. The idea that it was the Son of God (the Word of God) who was seen in the Old Testament when it says that someone was able to see God actually is supported in at least one place in the New Testament. In **John 12:39-41**, where it refers to Isaiah’s seeing “the Lord of hosts” in the throne room scene of **Isaiah 6:1-5**.

- a. "These things Isaiah said when he saw His glory and spoke of Him (referring to Jesus)." (**John 12:41**, NKJV)
4. Many early Christian writers saw this same pattern throughout the Old Testament, whenever it speaks of someone seeing God as referring to the Son of God (not the Father). They used the Old Testament appearances of God as compelling evidence for the divinity of Christ, the Son of God. For more examples of this, please see the article on *Theophany* (appearance of God) in Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs, edited by David Bercot; available through Scroll Publishing.
- vi. Therefore, both statements (no one can see God, yet Jacob saw God) can be true. It is impossible to see God the Father, who dwells in unapproachable light. Similarly, we cannot look directly into the sun in the sky. *However*, we can behold *the rays that come from the sun*, as we can *see the Word of God*, who was before all things. And that Word appeared many times in the Old Testament, including appearing as the one Jacob wrestled with all night. Jacob *really did* prevail with God and man; Jacob did indeed see God, in the form of the Word of God, prior to his incarnation as Jesus in Bethlehem many years later.
 1. Many Christians have told me in the past, "I want to read the New Testament rather than the Old Testament, *because I want to focus on Jesus.*"
 2. My response: "I want to read the Old Testament...*to see Jesus!*"
 3. Let's all strive to see Jesus throughout the entire Bible!