

## **When You Wrestle With God**

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**Rich Nathan**

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**Genesis 32**

As a child growing up in NYC I loved to watch professional wrestling back in the 1960's. This was the pre-sleaze professional wrestling. This was before Hulk Hogan and Randy Savage. These were the days of the great wrestling names: guys like Gorilla Monsoon and Killer Kowalski. He had a stomach claw hold that a guy couldn't get out of. He would grab your stomach. And Haystacks Calhoun, who at one time tipped the scales at over 600 pounds. His basic wrestling move was to fall on people. Then there was Bobo Brazil, who would slam his head into people and knock them out with a Coco Butt.

Then there were the sadistic wrestlers like the Sheik, who would throw fire into the ring at his opponent. That was absolutely forbidden by the rules. But whenever he would throw fire into the ring there would be a big X across the TV screen that would sort of black out what he was doing.

The referees were always clueless in these professional wrestling matches. They would get distracted by something going on outside the ring; one of the guys' managers yelling at them, or a fight would break out in the stands. In the meantime, in the ring one of the wrestlers who played the role of the heel, the evil sadist, guys like the Sheik or Gorilla Monsoon would be hitting one of the good

guys over the head with a chair. The referee would be oblivious and the announcer would be screaming, “Tony Valentine is tied up in the ropes and he’s being hit with a chair. The ref needs to turn around; the ref needs to turn around.”

Then there were the midget wrestlers. The high point of the midget wrestling matches was when the midgets would jump out of the ring and chase each other under the ring. I always liked that – watching those little guys running under the ring chasing each other.

They had women wrestlers back then who were always pulling each other’s hair and gouging one another with their nails. They weren’t as interesting to me as a little boy.

But in today’s text we’re going to read about another wrestling match that features a man with a great wrestling name – Jacob; his name means “the grabber.” It that not a great wrestling name, The Grabber? And this particularly wrestling match we find Jacob not facing someone like the Sheik, or the Baron, or Gorilla Monsoon. In this wrestling match we find Jacob, the Grabber, grappling with God.

Anyone who wishes to have a life of faith, anyone who wishes to serious engage in all that a relationship with God means, is signing up for a wrestling match. I’ve

been doing a series from the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis. A series in which we've been looking at the lives of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph and their wives, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah. I've been looking at the family dynamics at work in these patriarchs' lives. What we are going to discover today is that behind all of the conflict, feuding and dysfunction in the patriarchs' families is a deeper reality. What is fundamentally going on is human beings wrestling with God and God's will for their lives. I've called today's talk, "When You Wrestle With God." Let's pray.

Let me set the scene for you of this extraordinary experience. After working for his father-in-law, Laban, for 20 years, Jacob finally leaves the land of Paddan Aram and heads back to the Promised Land with his two wives, Rachel and Leah, and their 12 sons and daughter, and all of the flocks and herds that he had earned while working for Laban. He went to Paddan Aram as a single man, penniless, and he came back with a huge family and a huge fortune.

On his way back to the Promised Land, he has this unusual spiritual experience.

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Jacob's unusual spiritual experience

SLIDE Ge 32:1-2

1Jacob also went on his way, and the angels of God met him.

2When Jacob saw them, he said, “This is the camp of God!” So he named that place Mahanaim.

What we’re going to discover is that his experience with angels did not change Jacob at all. There is a myth regarding spiritual experiences. A lot of people think that: If I saw an angel, or if I had a dramatic experience with God then I would be set for life. I wouldn’t doubt that this Christian faith is real; it would give me a foundation for completely surrendering my life to Christ. But you’ve never had one of these dramatic, radical spiritual experiences and so your Christian life has always been lived at a mediocre level. There are always shades of gray rather than Technicolor.

The fact is that unusual spiritual experiences are rarely life-changing unless they are acted upon. If they’re not acted upon, they’re just another experience – dramatic, to be sure, something to talk about in subsequent years, but not life-changing. In fact, dramatic spiritual experiences turn out not to be all that unusual. There was a study done for the national opinion research center at the University of Chicago. Nearly 35% of all adult Americans have at one or another had a classical, mystical experience, a spiritual experience that they found overpowering, overwhelming. In the vast majority of cases, the spiritual experience did not result in conversion. It didn’t lead people into a deeper love of God, a deeper commitment to do God’s will.

There is a difference between conversion and an experience. Jacob meets angels, and yet, he still is not willing to fully surrender his life to God. He is still not willing to allow God to take the reigns of his life. He still doesn't really believe that God is with him and that God will bless him. Even though God allows him to experience angels, Jacob is still committed to do life as an independent agent. He still does life on his own terms.

John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard movement, who died in 1997 often spoke about the impact of spiritual experiences. John regularly had people come up to him and tell him things like, "I went to a meeting and received prayer. God's presence was so powerful that I fell down. I was out in the Spirit for an hour or two hours. I couldn't get up. I even had a vision while I was down under the power of the Spirit."

John would respond and say, "You fell down, great. But the question is not whether you fell down, but what you did when you got up. When you got back up were you changed in any way? When you got back up off the ground, did you repent of a particular attitude that was offensive to God? When you got back up, did you respond to a calling that God had on your life? When you got back up, did you try to serve God, or serve people, or love someone, or forgive someone? It's great you had an experience, but unless the experience changes you, unless you respond to God in a certain way, the experience is just an experience."

In this case the experience doesn't change Jacob. In vv. 3-7 we read about Jacob's great fear.

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Jacob's fear

SLIDE Ge 32:3-7

3Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom.

4He instructed them: "This is what you are to say to my lord Esau: 'Your servant Jacob says, I have been staying with Laban and have remained there till now.

5I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, male and female servants. Now I am sending this message to my lord, that I may find favor in your eyes.' "

6When the messengers returned to Jacob, they said, "We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him."

7In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and herds and camels as well.

Jacob heard about his brother, Esau, coming to attack him with 400 men.

SLIDE Ge 32:6

6When the messengers returned to Jacob, they said, "We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him."

Jacob had fled from the Promised Land to Paddan Aram 20 years before because he knew that his brother, Esau, was going to kill him back then because Jacob had deceived their father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing that was intended for his brother, Esau. Apparently, at least in Jacob's mind, nothing had changed. So two decades later he believes Esau is still seething with anger, still nursing the grudge, and that Esau is still gunning for him and so he is afraid.

SLIDE Ge 32:7

7In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and herds and camels as well.

Have you ever been in the grip of great fear? Psychologists say that the two most powerful emotions are fear and love. Can you think back to a time when you have been overwhelmed by fear – the fear that something terrible would happen to you that you had no ability to stop. Because of the bad economy, you are afraid that you will lose your job. Because you would lose your job, you are afraid that you will lose your home. Because of a diagnosis, you were afraid that you might die and leave your spouse without a mate, or your children without a parent. Because of your age you are afraid that you will never marry and will always be alone. Because of a mistake you've made in your marriage, you are afraid that your spouse will divorce you.

Sometimes overwhelming fear concerns someone we love – a child, a spouse, a sister or a brother, a fiancé.

Sara Groves is a Christian singer and songwriter. A year ago she gave birth to her first child, a son, who she named Kirby. She experienced all the normal joys of being a first time mom at age 33. And she also found herself being overwhelmed by fear. The aftermath of her giving birth, several of her friends and family members experienced tragic losses, someone they loved died. And so she began to be overwhelmed by the feeling that she was bringing her child into an incredibly scary world.

Sara had already been functioning on very low reserves as the result of a rigorous touring schedule. She found herself unable to shake off the “what ifs” for her son. She got more and more paranoid. She read articles about bacteria getting stronger and stronger and becoming more and more immune to antibiotics. She got really crazy in her thinking that computer hackers were stealing her VISA card number on her computer and that they were going to steal her identity. She started to constantly worry about people abducting her son. She worried about food allergies; she worried about the pond in her backyard. She feared something terrible would happen to her son. She just knew something awful would happen.



She always said to the Lord, “Your will, not mine,” but there was one thing now that she couldn’t surrender to God and that was her son, Kirby. The possibility that he might be taken from her was all-consuming.

She told a girlfriend, “If something happened to Kirby, I just don’t think my faith would survive.”

For the first time in her life she began to say to God, “There is something in my life that I can’t trust you in. I simply can’t take you at your word.”

Now, Jacob should not have panicked. He just had had an experience with God and the promise of God made 20 years ago with him; a promise that God renewed by reminding Jacob that he was the God of Bethel.

SLIDE Ge 31:13

13I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land.’ ”

God is the one who sees you; God is the one who remembers. Yet we are so like Jacob and so many things make us afraid. Jacob never asked the question, “Why is God allowing Esau to come into my life at this moment?” Jacob had the patriarchal blessing; Jacob had met with God at Bethel; Jacob had the promise

renewed; Jacob met with angels; he never stopped and asked the question, “Why is God allowing Esau to come into my life at this time?”

And, friends, you know whatever has come against you; whatever is threatening your security, or your safety, or your future, or a loved one’s security or future, understand that whatever your Christian theology, you at least must say, “God has allowed this.”

Why did God allow Esau to come? Why is God allowing this in your life?

I think I know. Chapter 32.9 says:

SLIDE Ge 32:9

9Then Jacob prayed, “O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, Lord, you who said to me, ‘Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,’

Jacob did what lots of fearful folk do not do. Lots of people, when they are overwhelmed by fear, turn away from God. They try to medicate away the pain. Maybe if I throw myself into my work, I won’t have to deal with this thing that I’m really afraid of – the specter of losing this relationship; the specter of death that’s haunting me; the specter of being left alone. I will throw myself into my work, keep myself busy; medicate myself with drink, drugs, food, sex or relationships.

Jacob does one thing right when he is afraid;

SLIDE

Jacob prayed

SLIDE Ge 32:9-12

9Then Jacob prayed, “O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, Lord, you who said to me, ‘Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,’

10I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps.

11Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children.

12But you have said, ‘I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.’ ”

Jacob had his back against the wall. He had a few relatives and a few people working for him, but they were absolutely no match for 400 armed men. But God in his sovereignty did Jacob a favor by allowing Esau to come into his life. God doesn’t make someone hate you. God doesn’t make someone abuse you. God

doesn't create cancer. But God does allow Esau to come into our lives so that we, like Jacob, would draw near to him.

See, Jacob had been running from God his whole life and he didn't realize it. Jacob's whole life was all about grabbing – grabbing whatever he could, manipulating his father, deceiving Esau, fighting with his father-in-law, trying to placate his two wives. Everything and everyone in life was taking a piece out of Jacob and all that he knew to do was still not enough to deal with this threat. Esau was coming with 400 men.

All the self-help and self-reliance works pretty well for the normal level problems of life – fixing a meal, balancing our checkbooks, doing our jobs, working on basic relational issues. Self-help, self-reliance, living by your wits, working your way out of stuff, figuring out solutions – that works pretty well with the normal stuff of life. Most things we don't need a lot of help with.

But every once in a while we are faced with an Esau, a problem bigger than we can manage. We always think, "Well, I can fix this; I can manage that. I can always rally myself." And then we encounter something bigger than we are – depression – and we discover that all of our self-help and our will is not sufficient to deal with the overwhelming power of depression. We can't will ourselves to be happy again. We feel like we're always walking in a drizzle. It's hard to get out of bed; hard to be enthusiastic about life.

Friend, when you are facing an Esau, something too big for you, you need to do what Jacob did. Jacob prayed.

Let me ask you a question: When was the last time you prayed about something with your whole heart like this prayer of Jacob's? When was the last time you cried out to God with your entire being?

Jacob had everything going for him. He had two wives, 12 sons, a daughter, wealth; but, he didn't have God. At least he didn't believe that he had God. He didn't believe God's promises.

The Esau's in our lives are God's invitations to us to draw near to him and to pray. Look at Jacob's prayer. It is a humble prayer.

SLIDE

A humble prayer

SLIDE Ge 32:10

10 I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps.

When was the last time you prayed a truly humble prayer and meant it? So often we blame our problems on everything and everyone else. We blame God for the situation we're in. We blame our boss. We blame our ex-spouse. We blame our parents. When is the last time that you got on your knees and with all humility said to God, "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. Father, this current situation is a disaster. The truth is God, that there are so many blessings that you've brought into my life over the years, and I'm unworthy of all of them." When was the last time you prayed that way and meant it?

One of the things that blocks sincere praying is pride. We have to get off of our high horse where we accuse God and demand explanations from him and come to the humble place of saying, "Lord, you don't owe me anything. Everything I have is pure grace."

Jacob's prayer was a heart-felt prayer.

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A heart-felt prayer

He was crying out to God. We don't pray a prayer like Jacob's without shedding some tears. When was the last time you cried during one of your prayers?

See, Jacob is not just praying from the neck up. So many of us have a relationship with God that is purely from the neck up. It is an intellectual relationship with God. Jacob is engaging God with his whole heart. He is doing something right.

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An honest prayer

SLIDE Ge 32:10-11

10I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps.

11Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children.

When Jacob says that he is unworthy, he is telling the truth. He is telling God, “I am a manipulator. I am a cheat; I’m a fraud; I’m a deceiver. I don’t deserve anything from you. Not only that, I am afraid. I live in the vice-grip of fear.”

There is a word that is used several dozen times in the New Testament. The Greek word is “parresia.” It is sometimes translated “boldness,” or “confident.” Sometimes it is translated “outspokenness,” or “speaking plainly.” The word was

borrowed from Greek politics. It describes the right of a free citizen to express his opinion when the city assembly got together. It had to do with the right of a free citizen to say everything that was on his mind, to speak plainly. And it also had to do with the courage to speak one's conviction.

The word "parresia" also was borrowed from the world of friendship, where one friend didn't hold anything back from another friend. They didn't have to butter up or flatter a friend before speaking plainly.

This word, parresia, is used regarding our prayers to God on a number of occasions. For example, in Hebrews 4:16 we read this:

SLIDE Heb 4:16

16Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Now, the NIV translates the word "with confidence." The old King James Version reads this way:

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*Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*



But the one that I think comes closest to capturing the meaning of the word, *parresia*, is the Message version of the Bible. Listen to this paraphrase:

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We don't have a high priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all—all but the sin. So let's walk right up to him and get what he's so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help.

Let's walk right up to him. There is a frankness, a boldness, an outspokenness that you find with people in the Bible regarding their dialogue with God. For example, listen to what Jeremiah says to God in Jeremiah 12:1,

SLIDE Je 12.1

*You are always righteous, O Lord, when I bring a case before you. Yet I will speak with you about your justice: why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease? You have planted them, and they have taken root; they grow and bear fruit. You are always on their lips, but far from their hearts...Drag them off like sheep to be butchered! Set them apart for the day of the slaughter!*

God, I don't get it. People in the Bible speak so freely to God. Now, I need to immediately say that this outspokenness, this frankness, this going right up to

God and asking him for things, this confidence and boldness, doesn't mean losing a sense of reverence. Intimacy does not mean over-familiarity. Jesus is our friend, but he is not our bud. I hate listening to people speak to God as if they are spoiled brats throwing a temper tantrum in a grocery store. It is as if the person we are speaking to is not awesomely terrifying. We are not only approaching our friend, we are approaching our judge and our Creator.

We talk with God honestly; tell God what's on our hearts. But despite this humble, heart-felt honest prayer Jacob is still not broken. So we read about

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Jacob's self-help

Even though he is facing Esau, and despite the overwhelming odds, Jacob is still not quite at the end of his rope. He should be. 400 armed men are coming. He's got 2 wives and 12 little ones and a few shepherds with you. And he's still not at the end of his rope.

How many of us always have a few more feet of self-help rope? How many of us always have another way to fix the Esau-sized problem that we are facing. Some people hit bottom and change. Jacob is like a lot of us, he hits bottom and keeps on digging. He still has one more strategy.

SLIDE Ge 32:13-22

13He spent the night there, and from what he had with him he selected a gift for his brother Esau:

14two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams,

15thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys.

16He put them in the care of his servants, each herd by itself, and said to his servants, "Go ahead of me, and keep some space between the herds."

17He instructed the one in the lead: "When my brother Esau meets you and asks, 'Who do you belong to, and where are you going, and who owns all these animals in front of you?'

18then you are to say, 'They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift sent to my lord Esau, and he is coming behind us.' "

19He also instructed the second, the third and all the others who followed the herds: "You are to say the same thing to Esau when you meet him.

20And be sure to say, 'Your servant Jacob is coming behind us.' " For he thought, "I will pacify him with these gifts I am sending on ahead; later, when I see him, perhaps he will receive me."

21So Jacob's gifts went on ahead of him, but he himself spent the night in the camp.

22That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.

Jacob is carrying on an imaginary conversation with Esau in vv. 19-20.

SLIDE Ge 32:19-20

19He also instructed the second, the third and all the others who followed the herds: “You are to say the same thing to Esau when you meet him.

20And be sure to say, ‘Your servant Jacob is coming behind us.’ ” For he thought, “I will pacify him with these gifts I am sending on ahead; later, when I see him, perhaps he will receive me.”

He is still strategizing. Well if Esau says this, I will say that. He tries to pacify Esau in v. 19.

SLIDE Ge 32:19

19He also instructed the second, the third and all the others who followed the herds: “You are to say the same thing to Esau when you meet him.

The word “pacify” here is the same Hebrew word as “atone” or cover. Jacob believes that he is going to atone for his sins against Esau. He is going to cover his sin of cheating and manipulation by giving gifts to Esau. Five different servants are to go to Esau each bearing gifts.

I think one of the reasons why you and I don't let go of self-help methods is because we are trying to somehow atone for our past sins. It is guilt that keeps us on the self-help treadmill. Is there anyone who you are trying to pay off? Perhaps you have a child that you just can't bring yourself to discipline because you feel horrible about your divorce. Or you feel horrible because of some form of neglect.

I remember when my parents got divorced when I had just turned 13-14, they both tried to buy me off. My father came to our apartment with a new bike for me. My mother saw the mini-bike and so she went out and bought me a black and white TV. Those were the days when a kid having his own TV was a really big deal. I knew what they were trying to do. I knew they were trying to buy my love. And as a manipulative teenager, I thought, "Great! You can buy my love, but it is going to cost you."

Is there any situation where you can't stand up to someone, so you feel like you have to pay them off because of a past sin that you are still trying to atone for? Maybe a former spouse who you can never challenge, a spouse you can't ever confront because you feel horrible about your past unfaithfulness, or some secret sin?

Ultimately, friend, all of our attempts to pacify other human beings are really attempts to pacify God.

Jacob didn't realize that his real problem was not Esau. His real problem was God. His whole life he thought that it was Esau, or his father, Isaac, or his father-in-law, Laban, or his two wives, or something else. But his whole life the problem was God.

And so we read about Jacob wrestling.

SLIDE

Jacob wrestling

SLIDE Ge 32:22-30

22That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants 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 human beings and have overcome."

29 Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

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

There is a play on words going on here in the Hebrew. In v. 22 it talks about Jacob and he is at the ford of the Jabbok.

SLIDE Ge 32:22

22 That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.

And in v. 24, it says:

SLIDE Ge 32:24

24 So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.

All of these words have the same Hebrew root. It is something like

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Yaqqob was yaqqobed at the Yabbok

The writer of Genesis loves word plays. But Jacob is wrestling.

And this takes place at night.

SLIDE Ge 32:22

22That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.

It is dark. There are times in your life when things get really dark. Nighttime is the time when all your fears become exacerbated. We are not preoccupied with the activity of the day. It is at night when many of us get attacked.

Jacob is alone.

SLIDE Ge 32:24

24So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.

What God wanted to do in Jacob's life required Jacob to be stripped. God wanted Jacob to see that ultimately nothing in this world, none of his relationships, none of his possessions, none of his smarts, none of his strategies – nothing in this world could deal with the deepest issues in Jacob's life.



There is a time when God will take everything, all of the supports, all the props, all the things we're resting on for security, for safety, and for managing our world. He'll strip it all away.

It is night time; Jacob is alone. And then Jacob gets jumped on.

SLIDE Ge 32:24

24 So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.

Jacob doesn't initiate the wrestling match. Jacob is just leapt upon. And that is often how Esau-sized problems come into our lives. They jump on us out of the blue. We think everything is great. We may even think that our relationship with God is really deep. We've been praying. We've been serving. We're doing OK and we're happy. And then literally out of the blue you're jumped. Maybe you are facing a problem that is way too big for you to manage. The current level of your spirituality is simply not enough to deal with the size of the issue that is facing you.

Let me apply this in three ways. Sometimes we feel ourselves jumped by failure.

SLIDE

Wrestling with failure

We suddenly find ourselves having failed spectacularly. You may be failing all along, but the rug is suddenly pulled out from under you and you are failing spectacularly. We absolutely have to learn to see the events of our lives, even failures, as potentially the best thing that ever could have happened to us.

Years ago I was counseling a man whose Christian life had crashed and burned in a very public scandal. He was discovered to have been in a long-term affair and he was dismissed from his position working for a Christian organization. So he came into my office completely distressed about his marriage, his job, people were talking about him. After we prayed and he poured out his heart to me, I said to him: "This failure could turn out to be the very best thing that ever happened to you, if you allow it to be. You have nothing else to lose. You've lost your family. You've lost your reputation. You've lost your job. You are in, right now, the most secure place you will ever find yourself – a place that most people are trying to heal themselves from. You have lost everything and so now, for the first time in your life, you can become radically honest with yourself and radically honest with God. And I believe that if you throw yourself on God with all of your heart, God will restore you and bless you beyond your imagining."

This man couldn't do it. He couldn't bring himself to complete and total honesty. He couldn't face himself or face God. And so he kept running.

There was another man. He was a pastor in the UK, who was discovered, as well to be engaged in an affair. He lost his church, but he didn't run. He humbled himself and spent the next several years in that same church setting up chairs, cleaning up, helping wherever help was needed, dealing ruthlessly with his own sin. And that man today over a decade later has one of the strongest prophetic and healing ministries in the entire UK. God is working through him with such miraculous power. There is story after story of healing and life-change that's coming through this guy.

What happened to this man? He did what Jacob did; he held on.

SLIDE Ge 32:26

26Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

Most people let go of God when they are going through failure. Most people let go of God when they're faced with something too big for them. Jacob did something right. He grabbed onto God and he didn't let go.

We not only wrestle with failure, we often wrestle with doubt.

SLIDE

Wrestling with doubt

You know, believing often feels like a wrestling match. And it is a good thing to be honest about your doubts and to wrestle them through with God. Tim Keller, in his book titled *The Reason for God*, says this:

SLIDE *The Reason for God* by Tim Keller

SLIDE

*A faith without some doubts is like a human body without any antibodies in it. People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask hard questions about why they believe as they do will find themselves defenseless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart skeptic: a person's faith can collapse almost overnight if she has failed over the years to listen patiently to her own doubts, which should only be discarded after long reflection.*

*Believers should acknowledge and wrestle with doubts – not only their own, but their friends' and neighbors'. It is no longer sufficient to hold beliefs just because you inherited them. Only if you struggle long and hard with objections to your faith will you be able to provide grounds for your beliefs to skeptics, including yourself, that are plausible rather than ridiculous or offensive.*

I think there are two kinds of doubt. There is the kind of doubt that signals the growth edge of your faith. You are wrestling with a question; you are wrestling

with a personal situation, but you wrestle by taking your questions and your doubts repeatedly to God. That's healthy doubt. That's faith-strengthening doubt. You grab onto God the way Jacob grabbed onto God. You say, "God, I don't understand; I need help. I need wisdom; I need light regarding how to think about this; how to approach this."

And then there is unhealthy doubt where you let go of God. You say, "Well, God has allowed this, this pain in my life, this Esau-sized problem. I can't continue to believe in him." Rather than holding onto God, we now have God at arm's length. Are you in that place today?

Jacob grabs onto God for dear life. Jacob grabs onto God for blessing.

SLIDE

Jacob's breaking

SLIDE Ge 32:25

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.

The hip is the wrestler's pivot point. The hip, as any athlete would know, is the power of your strength. When you hit a baseball, it's your hips that provide all the strength, not your arms. God can't give Jacob the blessing that God has

always intended to give to him until he breaks Jacob at the source of Jacob's human power.

Frederick Buechner called Jacob's breaking "The Magnificent Defeat." Once Jacob's hip was dislocated, he must have been in incredible pain. Finally, for the first time in his life, Jacob is broken. No more self-help. No more strategies. No more manipulation. No more talking his way out of things.

Let me ask you a question, friends. Have you ever been broken before God?

A number of years ago Marlene and I were facing a family crisis. I was so distraught that I went out for a walk to pray. It was about 11:30 at night. I was walking along the bike trail by myself being really honest with God. It was one of those times when prayer did come from the heart. I began to weep and explain to God that all the things that I was trying to do to fix the problem were not helping. The more I confessed my utter inability before God, the more I began to weep. Finally, I totally broke down and I knelt in the middle of the bike trail at midnight and I said to God, "I give up. I yield. I can't fix this. It's going to be you or it's going to be nothing at all. I'm going to believe in you. I'm going to hold onto you."

That was a pivotal moment in my life. I can't begin to describe the peace that came into my heart as I was broken before the Lord. I had an incredible sense of

resolution. I would finally truly turn this matter over to God and I took my hands off.

It was as a result of breaking Jacob that we read finally of Jacob's blessing.

SLIDE

Jacob's blessing

Jacob holds onto God. He asks for the blessing. We read in vv. 27-28,

SLIDE Ge 32:27-28

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 human beings and have overcome."

Well, when we're wrestling – you're wrestling over some Esau-sized problem, you think you know what you want. I always think I know what I want. Jacob was praying to be rescued from Esau. He thought that was the one thing, if this Esau-sized problem would go, then he would be blessed, then he would be saved. But God has something so much better for Jacob. He doesn't free Jacob from Esau. Esau is still going to come. But what God does is that he changes Jacob.

SLIDE Ge 32:27

27The man asked him, “What is your name?” “Jacob,” he answered.

What is your name? What are you at your essence? That’s what the question means. At my core, at my essence, I am a grabber. I’m a manipulator; I’m a deceiver.

The angel says, “No longer. That is not who you are at your core. You are going to be at your core Israel, someone who wrestled with God and prevailed.”

Jacob certainly wouldn’t have felt that he was victorious over God. He would have said that God was victorious over him. But Jacob that night did not have a more unusual experience that he could look back on and say, “Oh, I had an experience back then.” Jacob that night was transformed. He was changed.

You know, friends, we pray and we pray when we are facing something really huge. And sometimes God makes Esau go away; and sometimes he doesn’t. Martin Luther, the great father of the Reformation, once said,

SLIDE

*God sometimes denies our prayers for silver because he wants to give us gold.*



God wants to give each of you gold. He wants to bring you and me to the end of our self-help methods, to a place where we're finally broken and utterly surrendered to him so that he can bless and transform us. Let's pray.

## When You Wrestle With God

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Rich Nathan

October 30-31, 2010

Genesis: Family Mess Series

Genesis 32

- I. Jacob's unusual spiritual experience (Gen 32.1-2)
- II. Jacob's fear (Gen 32.3-7)
- III. Jacob's prayer (Gen 32.9-12)
  - A. A humble prayer
  - B. A heartfelt prayer
  - C. A honest prayer
- IV. Jacob's self-help (Gen 32.13-21)
- V. Jacob's wrestling (Gen 32.22-32)
  - A. Wrestling with failure
  - B. Wrestling with doubt
- VI. Jacob's breaking (Gen 32.25)
- VII. Jacob's blessing (Gen 32.27-28)