



FAMILY
CHURCH

when God
changes
the way
you walk



When God Changes the Way You Walk

***Finding Strength When the Struggle Is Bigger
Than You***

Introduction

When the Struggle Is Really About You

Some struggles arrive without warning. Others have been following us for years.

They appear in relationships, careers, families, finances, disappointments, and uncertain futures. Sometimes the struggle has a name: a person who wounded us, a decision that went wrong, a door that refuses to open, or a situation that will not change. At other times, the struggle is harder to identify because it is happening inside us. We are trying to prove something, control something, escape something, or become something.

Jacob understood that kind of struggle.

Long before the night when he wrestled beside the Jabbok River, Jacob had been wrestling his way through life. He entered the world grasping the heel of his brother Esau. He negotiated for Esau's birthright. He deceived his father to receive a blessing. He fled from the consequences, spent approximately twenty years living with his uncle Laban, and eventually began the long journey home.

Jacob's life had become a story of grabbing, striving, calculating, running, and trying to control outcomes.

Yet behind all that striving was an extraordinary irony: Jacob was fighting to obtain things God had already promised.

Before Jacob was born, God had declared that the older brother would serve the younger. God had a purpose for Jacob before Jacob had a strategy for himself. But knowing God's promise did not automatically mean Jacob trusted God's process.

That tension is remarkably familiar. It is possible to believe in God while still struggling to trust Him. It is possible to pray about a situation and then spend the rest of the day attempting to

manipulate every circumstance surrounding it. It is possible to say, "God, this is in Your hands," while quietly keeping one hand on the controls.

Jacob's story reveals something deeper about those seasons.

Sometimes the greatest thing God wants to change is not the situation surrounding us.

Sometimes God wants to change the person walking through it.

Chapter 1

The Exhaustion of Trying to Control Everything

Jacob had a promise, but he also had a problem: he struggled to believe the promise could unfold without his help.

When Esau returned from the field exhausted and hungry, Jacob saw an opportunity and negotiated for his brother's birthright. Later, when Isaac prepared to bless Esau, Jacob and Rebekah went much further. Jacob dressed in Esau's clothing, covered his hands and neck to imitate his brother's hair, brought food to his visually impaired father, and lied about his identity.

When Isaac asked who was standing before him, Jacob claimed to be Esau.

Think about what had happened. Jacob became someone else in order to receive what he believed he needed.

The deception succeeded in the moment, but success is not always evidence that something was right. Esau was devastated and became determined to kill his brother. Jacob fled home, leaving behind the family, security, and future he had tried so desperately to secure.

This is one of the dangers of control. Control promises security while often producing greater anxiety. It convinces people that everything depends upon their ability to manage the outcome.

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"If this doesn't get fixed, everything will fall apart."

"If this person doesn't approve of me, something must be wrong with me."

"If this opportunity disappears, there may never be another."

"If something isn't done immediately, God's promise may never happen."

But God's promises do not need sinful shortcuts.

Years later, Jacob began the journey home. He had acquired a family, servants, livestock, and possessions, but one unresolved reality waited in front of him: Esau.

The last time Jacob had seen his brother, Esau wanted him dead. Now Jacob received word that Esau was approaching with four hundred men.

Jacob was terrified.

He divided his family and possessions into groups. He prepared an enormous gift for Esau. He strategically arranged the gifts to arrive in waves. He prayed—and then continued planning.

Jacob was doing what Jacob had always done.

He was trying to manage the outcome.

Eventually, everyone and everything was sent across the Jabbok. The plans were made. The gifts were sent. The family was moved.

And Jacob was left alone.

"Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak."

— *Genesis 32:24 CSB*

The man who had spent his life controlling circumstances suddenly entered a struggle he could not control.

There are moments when God allows everything we normally lean upon to move out of reach so that we can discover what has been holding us up all along.

Chapter 2

Whose Approval Are You Seeking?

Much of Jacob's life revolved around blessing.

He wanted the birthright. He wanted Isaac's blessing. He wanted prosperity. Even during his mysterious wrestling encounter, Jacob said:

"I will not let you go unless you bless me."

— *Genesis 32:26 CSB*

Why did blessing matter so deeply to him?

Scripture does not give a psychological diagnosis of Jacob, but his story raises an important question about every human heart: Whose approval has become necessary for you to feel secure?

People spend enormous amounts of energy trying to answer that question without realizing it.

A child longs to hear a parent say, "I'm proud of you." An employee desperately needs the boss to recognize the work. A leader needs people to applaud. A person scrolls through social media measuring personal significance by reactions from people who may barely know them. Someone changes personality, appearance, convictions, or priorities to gain acceptance.

Approval itself is not evil. Encouragement is valuable. Healthy relationships include affirmation. The problem begins when another person's approval becomes the foundation of identity.

Jacob provides a vivid picture. He literally wore his brother's clothes to obtain his father's blessing.

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People still wear other people's clothes metaphorically. They become the version of themselves they believe will be accepted.

Jesus described people who "loved human praise more than praise from God" (John 12:43 CSB).

That is the deeper danger. Whatever approval becomes most important eventually gains tremendous influence over our decisions. The desire to be accepted can make people hide, exaggerate, compromise, perform, overwork, or pretend.

But Jacob's encounter beside the Jabbok moves in the opposite direction.

During the struggle, the mysterious man asks Jacob a simple question:

"What is your name?"

— *Genesis 32:27 CSB*

The question is striking because God does not need information.

Years earlier, when Isaac had effectively asked Jacob who he was, Jacob lied: "I am Esau." Now, standing in a divine encounter, there is no disguise.

"Jacob," he answers.

No brother's clothes. No goat skins. No pretending.

Jacob.

Heel-grabber. Striver. Manipulator. Runner.

And it is only after Jacob acknowledges who he is that he receives a new name.

Grace does not require pretending before God. There is no need to manufacture an image for the One who already knows the truth.

Transformation begins when pretending ends.

Chapter 3

What Are You Running From?

Jacob was a runner.

After deceiving Isaac and provoking Esau's anger, he left home. For approximately twenty years he built a life somewhere else. Eventually God told him to return, which meant Jacob had to travel back toward the person and the history he had spent years avoiding.

There are many ways to run without ever changing addresses.

People run from difficult conversations. They run from apologies. They run from responsibilities, failures, consequences, memories, wounds, commitments, and truths they would rather not confront.

Some run from the past.

Others run toward the future.

They chase success, money, recognition, relationships, positions, experiences, or some imagined version of life where everything will finally feel secure.

Running can feel productive because there is movement. But movement and progress are not necessarily the same thing.

A person can be moving incredibly fast while still moving in the wrong direction.

Jacob's return home forced him to confront something he had avoided for years. Yet before Jacob encountered Esau, he encountered God.

That order matters.

Jacob probably believed Esau was his greatest problem. If Esau could simply be changed, everything would be fine. But before God dealt with the person in front of Jacob, He dealt with the person inside Jacob.

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That possibility changes the way difficult seasons can be viewed.

The instinctive prayer is often, "God, change this."

Change the marriage. Change the boss. Change the child. Change the circumstances. Change the diagnosis. Change the finances. Change the person creating the pain.

Those prayers may be entirely appropriate. But another prayer can stand beside them:

"God, while this situation is changing—or even if it does not change yet—change the person walking through it."

Teach patience.

Expose pride.

Develop courage.

Create humility.

Deepen faith.

Reveal unhealthy dependence upon approval.

Break the need to control everything.

Some circumstances are not merely obstacles standing between a person and a better life. God can use them as places of transformation.

Jacob approached the Jabbok afraid of Esau.

By sunrise, Esau was still ahead of him.

But Jacob was different.

Sometimes God's answer to the struggle is not immediately changing what is ahead of us. Sometimes it is changing who will walk into it.

Chapter 4

When God Breaks Self-Reliance

Jacob wrestled through the night.

Then something happened that revealed the true nature of the encounter.

"When the man saw that he could not defeat him, he struck Jacob's hip socket as they wrestled and dislocated his hip."

— Genesis 32:25 CSB

The encounter should not be understood as though Jacob possessed greater physical strength than God. The touch to Jacob's hip demonstrates the opposite. Jacob's determination was extraordinary, but the power belonged to the One with whom he wrestled.

Suddenly the man who had spent his life grasping was no longer standing in his own strength.

He was wounded.

Yet Jacob did not release his grip.

The struggle changed from wrestling to clinging.

That may be one of the most beautiful pictures in Jacob's story. The man who had relied upon cleverness, manipulation, strength, possessions, and planning was finally reduced to dependence.

His wound was not the end of his story. It became part of his transformation.

This does not mean every painful event, illness, injury, tragedy, or loss should be interpreted as God directly striking someone as He did Jacob. Scripture does not give permission to make that assumption.

But Scripture repeatedly shows that God can use human weakness to teach dependence.

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Paul understood this when he described his own "thorn in the flesh." After pleading for it to be removed, he learned something about the sufficiency of God's grace:

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness."

— 2 Corinthians 12:9 CSB

There are seasons when the prayer is understandably, "God, get me out of this."

But another prayer may be equally important:

"God, don't let this season end without teaching greater dependence upon You."

Self-reliance says, "I've got this."

Faith says, "God, hold me."

Self-reliance needs to control the outcome.

Faith obeys and entrusts the outcome to God.

Self-reliance hides weakness.

Faith discovers that weakness can become the very place where God's strength is experienced most deeply.

Jacob entered the night standing on his own strength.

He left leaning.

And sometimes leaning on God is stronger than standing alone.

Chapter 5

The Blessing of a New Name

After Jacob's hip was injured, he continued clinging to the mysterious wrestler.

Then came the words Jacob had spent his life longing to hear:

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"Your name will no longer be Jacob," he said. "It will be Israel because you have struggled with God and with men and have prevailed."

— *Genesis 32:28 CSB*

A new name marked a transformed identity.

Jacob had spent years trying to create an identity through what he could obtain. Now God gave him an identity he could not manufacture.

This is grace.

Human beings often attempt to build identity from achievement, possessions, appearance, relationships, titles, approval, or success. But anything that must constantly be achieved must constantly be defended.

God offers something deeper.

In Christ, identity is not something that must be manipulated into existence. It is received through grace.

The story of Jacob also points beyond Jacob.

Genesis describes the mysterious wrestler as a man. Jacob later declares that he has seen God face to face, while Hosea 12 looks back on the event and speaks of Jacob struggling with God and with the angel. Christians have historically understood the encounter in different ways, with many seeing it as a theophany—an appearance of God—and some more specifically as an appearance of the Son of God before His incarnation. The source material adopts that latter understanding while acknowledging that Genesis does not explicitly identify the figure as Jesus of Nazareth.

What is unmistakable in the larger biblical story is that Jesus ultimately provides what human striving never can.

Jacob spent his life trying to obtain blessing.

Jesus came to give blessing.

Jacob deceived his father.

Jesus perfectly obeyed His Father.

Jacob grasped.

Jesus gave.

And Jesus willingly surrendered His life so that forgiveness, reconciliation, adoption, and eternal life could be received by grace rather than earned through human striving.

The Christian life therefore does not begin with trying harder to become worthy.

It begins with receiving what Christ has done.

Grace gives what striving can never secure.

Chapter 6

Learning to Walk With a Limp

Morning finally came.

"The sun shone on him as he passed by Penuel—limping because of his hip."

— *Genesis 32:31 CSB*

The detail is unforgettable.

The sun rises.

Jacob moves forward.

But he limps.

He is blessed, but he bears a scar. He has received a new name, but he still carries evidence of the night when God confronted his self-reliance.

Jacob would never walk exactly the same way again.

Perhaps that was part of the blessing.

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The limp reminded Jacob that there had been a night when his strength failed but God remained. Every step could remind him that the blessing did not come because Jacob was strong enough to seize it.

Some of life's deepest encounters with God leave marks.

There are disappointments that permanently rearrange priorities. Failures that destroy pride. Seasons of waiting that produce patience. Losses that create compassion. Struggles that expose how little can actually be controlled.

The goal is not to glorify pain. Pain is painful. Brokenness is not something to pursue for its own sake.

But pain does not have to be wasted.

A scar can become a testimony that weakness was not the end of the story.

Jacob's limp announced something had happened to him.

The same can become true spiritually. An encounter with God should eventually change the way a person walks.

Perhaps there is less pride.

Less pretending.

Less need for applause.

Less obsession with controlling outcomes.

More honesty.

More dependence.

More patience.

More trust.

More willingness to obey God without demanding to know exactly how everything will turn out.

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Jacob walked toward Esau with a limp, but he also walked toward him as a different man.

God had not simply prepared Jacob for what was ahead. God had changed Jacob before he arrived there.

Conclusion

Don't Waste the Wrestle

Everyone eventually encounters something that cannot be controlled through intelligence, determination, planning, connections, or effort.

That moment can feel frightening because self-reliance has reached its limit.

But the end of self-reliance can become the beginning of deeper dependence.

Jacob's story asks three uncomfortable but important questions:

Whose approval are you seeking?

Has someone else's applause become more important than God's?

What are you running from—or running toward?

Is there a conversation, responsibility, wound, calling, truth, or part of the past that must finally be faced?

What might God be changing in you through the struggle?

Instead of asking only for escape, could the struggle become a place of transformation?

Jacob thought his greatest problem was waiting on the other side of the river.

God knew the deeper struggle was inside Jacob.

So before Jacob faced Esau, God met Jacob.

Before the circumstances changed, Jacob changed.

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Before the next chapter began, God confronted the striving, grabbing, manipulating, controlling man who had spent so much of his life attempting to secure what God had already promised.

And when the sun rose, Jacob walked forward differently.

That may be one of the great invitations of Genesis 32. The goal is not to emerge from every difficult season untouched. Sometimes the greater gift is to emerge transformed.

The prayer, then, becomes more than:

"God, change what is happening."

It becomes:

"God, change the way this is walked through. Break the need to control everything. Free the heart from living for people's approval. Give courage to stop running. Teach dependence upon Your strength. And when morning comes, let there be evidence that an encounter with You has taken place."

Because sometimes God's greatest blessing is not removing the struggle.

Sometimes His greatest blessing is changing the person in the middle of it. .

