

## Genesis 32:13-33:20 Wrestling With God

A sermon delivered at Calvary Chapel DC Metro  
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We live in a city that is packed with very competent, very powerful, very skilled and accomplished people. Weakness gets you moved on or passed over. It is seen as a liability and some go to great lengths to either compensate for it or to try to be rid of it. But that just breeds a kind of self-reliance that either burns you out or puffs you up.

God has a very different view of weakness, in fact, sometimes He causes it.

Turn with me this morning to 2 Corinthians 12. Here Paul talks about a physical weakness in his life, quite possibly a physical injury, and what it meant.

[7](#) And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. [8](#) Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. [9](#) And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. [10](#) Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul's weakness taught him to rely even more on God, his weakness brought out God's strength.

This morning we will see something very similar to Paul's experience in the life of Jacob – he will be both weakened physically and strengthened spiritually at the same time.

We pick things up this morning with Jacob on his way back home. Remember, he had fled twenty years earlier because his brother had threatened to kill him for cheating him out of their dad's blessing. Jacob hasn't spoken to him since. He has just sent messengers to let Esau know he is coming home and they came back with the message that Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men. Jacob has no idea what that means, so he has prayed about it, taken action to divide and protect his family and flocks in case they are attacked, and now he is making his final preparations.

[13](#) So he lodged there that same night, and took what came to his hand as a present for Esau his brother: [14](#) two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, [15](#) thirty milk camels with their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten foals. [16](#) Then he delivered *them* to the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass over before me, and put some distance between successive droves." [17](#) And he commanded the first one, saying, "When Esau my

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brother meets you and asks you, saying, ‘To whom do you belong, and where are you going? Whose *are* these in front of you?’ [18](#) then you shall say, ‘They *are* your servant Jacob’s. It *is* a present sent to my lord Esau; and behold, he also *is* behind us.’” [19](#) So he commanded the second, the third, and all who followed the droves, saying, “In this manner you shall speak to Esau when you find him; [20](#) and also say, ‘Behold, your servant Jacob *is* behind us.’” For he said, “I will appease him with the present that goes before me, and afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me.” [21](#) So the present went on over before him, but he himself lodged that night in the camp.

*Jacob is relying on prayer and acting prudently. He has faith and is also taking action. He prayed to God and now he is relying on God. And, did you notice, when he prayed, he didn’t get a direct answer from God – he just took this step because it seemed like the appropriate thing to do at the time. His motives were pure, he had sought God’s favor, now it was time to do something.*

Often times, it is the same with us. A situation comes about, and we have to do something. Not all the time - sometimes we can wait, watch as things unfold, and apply the Scriptural command to ‘be still and know that I am God’ but at other times, like now, life is coming at you full speed and you have to do something.

You might pray at such a time, like Jacob did here, but also like Jacob, not get an answer. And there you are, left to figure out what to do. What do you do at times like that?

Answer: do the right thing, regardless of results. We pray anyway, even if we don’t see or hear the immediate answer to our prayers. Things may be at work that we do not or cannot understand right now, *but the answer is coming* - that will become very clear to Jacob in a few hours.

Paul’s situation was similar – three times he had to ask God for healing until he got an answer, but when the answer came it was definitive and meaningful. We could look at this and say, why did he have to ask three times, why not just once, but I look at this and say sometimes I wish I could get such a definitive answer by the third time! For reasons we may not be able to understand at the time, God doesn’t always immediately answer our prayers in the way we expect.

Chuck Smith taught me something, he says – never give up something you do know for something you don’t. If you know God has told you to do something, follow through, even if you don’t understand. This is what we see Jacob doing – he doesn’t know how things are going to turn out with Esau, but he knows God has promised to watch over him and has called him back to this land. In a sense, if problems arise with Esau, it’s God’s issue to take care of. Jacob is resting on what he does know in the face of something he doesn’t understand.

[22](#) And he arose that night and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed over the ford of Jabbok. [23](#) He took them, sent them over the brook, and sent over what he had.

[24](#) Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day.

[25](#) Now when He saw that He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. [26](#) And He said, "Let Me go, for the day breaks."

But he said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me!"

[27](#) So He said to him, "What is your name?"

He said, "Jacob."

[28](#) And He said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed."

[29](#) Then Jacob asked, saying, "Tell *me* Your name, I pray."

And He said, "Why is it *that* you ask about My name?" And He blessed him there.

[30](#) So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: "For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved." [31](#) Just as he crossed over Penuel the sun rose on him, and he limped on his hip. [32](#) Therefore to this day the children of Israel do not eat the muscle that shrank, which is on the hip socket, because He touched the socket of Jacob's hip in the muscle that shrank.

So we've seen Jacob praying to God, now we see him pinned by God. What in the world is going on here? Martin Luther said, "Every man holds that this text is one of the most obscure in the Old Testament." So if it makes you scratch your head a bit, don't worry, you're in good company.

Options:

1. It was spiritual
  - a. It was a dream.
  - b. It is an allegory.
  - c. It was wrestling in prayer.
  
2. It was physical – there was after all, a real, physical outcome in Jacob's limp. So who was he wrestling with?
  - a. It was with a man. Doesn't answer the issue of his hip being put out or the statement that he 'wrestled with God'
  - b. It was with an angel.
    - i. We have already seen angels in human form in Genesis – eating with Abraham, and fetching Lot from Sodom. An angel could certainly put his hip out, but we're still left with the fact that it says he "wrestled with God."
  - c. Our final and most likely option - It was a Christophany – Jacob wrestled with God in the form of man.

In light of that, we have two more questions to ask, then two observations to make and three outcomes to note.

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**Question One:** Why was the wrestling such a struggle? The ‘man’ can’t overcome him, but can instantly touch his hip and put it out of place? What’s going on?

This is a statement of Jacob’s tenacity, not God’s weakness.

When I wrestle with my boys, I throw them around, across the room, literally – into a pile of pillows. We go round and round and round, but they never give up. They’re little balls of energy that won’t stop. I cannot, in a sense, prevail against them, because they just keep coming back for more. **But** they’re only able to come back *because I’m limiting myself* in my wrestling with them.

We see something similar to Jacob with Job who, in a sense, held on to God by refusing to deny Him even when he didn’t see or understand what was going on. And so, you and I can prevail with God simply by not letting go – by clinging to Christ as your life preserver and pressing on in faith and hope.

**Question Two:** Why did the match occur? It was Jacob’s final submission to God, this was the moment to remember for the rest of his life, in fact, it became memorialized for all of his descendants every time they had a leg of lamb.

It was the final breaking of Jacob’s self-sufficiency – his life isn’t going to become suddenly perfect, but a LOT of improvements had been made since he first left home. In the coming chapters we will watch him cause some problems by showing favoritism among his sons, but we won’t see him striving to build his own kingdom any more. He is a humbled man, a man changed by his interaction with God – a man who prays and leans on God for strength – which is also what we see with Paul in his ministry, remember, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.”

**Observation One:** Last week we saw Jacob come to God in prayer, but here we see God coming to Jacob. **He** confronted Jacob – He does the same with us – He initiates and it’s not always a comfortable thing, sometimes it can almost feel like God is pushing and shoving you, trying to get your attention, but it’s all a reflection of His grace – He wants us to know He is not way out there and unreachable, He is present and real in our lives – as comforting or as uncomfortable as that might be.

But, when He comes to you, you’re either going to submit or get slammed. If you submit there is a blessing for you just like with Jacob. But those who don’t submit will eventually get slammed into the mat – on judgment day He’s going to touch a whole lot more than just hips, and there won’t be any tapping out. You want Him to wrestle with you like He’s your daddy, not like He’s your mortal enemy.

**Observation Two:** All of this happened on the *border* of the Promised Land. Jacob is not allowed to enter on his own – he must be **permitted** in – he cannot earn or scheme or even

wrestle his way into the land, he must receive it as a blessing and a gift. The same thing is true with us.

In the New Testament, the Christian, and the church have the idea of the Kingdom of God instead of a Promised Land. We are a kingdom of believers, dispersed across the globe instead of gathered in one nation. But like the Promised Land, the Kingdom of God can only be entered by encountering God - by praying to Him and getting pinned by Him.

Of course, that wrestling has some impacts – let’s take a look at the outcomes.

**Outcome One** – a limp – Jacob has something to show for the encounter that will be a reminder for the rest of his life.

- We think we need strength to get ahead, maybe what we really need is weakness. We need to know that we are reliant on God.
  - o In Christianity we call this being “broken” and it’s actually a source of great strength. If you’ve ever been around someone who has been broken, you know how much you can learn from what they have been through. They speak with a true depth and wisdom that makes you think, “man, if there was any way to have what they have without going through what they’ve been through, I’d take it.”
  - o Remember what God told Paul - “My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Your weakness, your frailty, your excuses why you can’t do it, are only a liability if you leave things there, but if you turn to God to fill in the gaps you may just see great things happen.

**Outcome Two** – a new name – an identity rooted in God. The limp was a physical change, but it was only an outward sign of what had been happening inside. Jacob, whose name meant ‘supplanter’ or heel-catcher, the boy who grew up to be a scheming conniver, was now Israel, ‘a Prince with God.’ No longer governed by self or selfish desires, he is ruled by the God who made him.

**Outcome Three** – a restored relationship. Sin severs our relationships, God renews them. Jacob’s interaction with God radically changed his character, he is no longer the conniving scoundrel that he once was and that is going to have an impact on the way he treats others and the way that others treat him. Watch what happens next as he and Esau finally meet.

[1](#) Now Jacob lifted his eyes and looked, and there, Esau was coming, and with him were four hundred men. So he divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two maidservants. [2](#) And he put the maidservants and their children in front, Leah and her children behind, and Rachel and Joseph last. [3](#) Then he crossed over before them and bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother.

[4](#) But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. [5](#) And he lifted his eyes and saw the women and children, and said, “Who *are* these with you?”

So he said, “The children whom God has graciously given your servant.”

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Once again, Jacob gives testimony to the fact that God has been at work in his life. This isn't what he has scraped together, or the result of some big scheme he had plotted and worked, it was the evidence of God's grace in his life.

[6](#) Then the maidservants came near, they and their children, and bowed down. [7](#) And Leah also came near with her children, and they bowed down. Afterward Joseph and Rachel came near, and they bowed down.

[8](#) Then Esau said, "What *do you mean* by all this company which I met?" And he said, "*These are* to find favor in the sight of my lord."

[9](#) But Esau said, "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself."

[10](#) And Jacob said, "No, please, if I have now found favor in your sight, then receive my present from my hand, inasmuch as I have seen your face as though I had seen the face of God, and you were pleased with me. [11](#) Please, take my blessing that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough." So he urged him, and he took *it*.

Evidence that Jacob has changed.

[12](#) Then Esau said, "Let us take our journey; let us go, and I will go before you."

[13](#) But Jacob said to him, "My lord knows that the children *are* weak, and the flocks and herds which are nursing *are* with me. And if the men should drive them hard one day, all the flock will die. [14](#) Please let my lord go on ahead before his servant. I will lead on slowly at a pace which the livestock that go before me, and the children, are able to endure, until I come to my lord in Seir."

[15](#) And Esau said, "Now let me leave with you *some* of the people who *are* with me." But he said, "What need is there? Let me find favor in the sight of my lord." [16](#) So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. [17](#) And Jacob journeyed to Succoth, built himself a house, and made booths for his livestock. Therefore the name of the place is called Succoth.

[18](#) Then Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which *is* in the land of Canaan, when he came from Padan Aram; and he pitched his tent before the city. [19](#) And he bought the parcel of land, where he had pitched his tent, from the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, for one hundred pieces of money. [20](#) Then he erected an altar there and called it El Elohe Israel (God, the God of Israel).

God has done a work in Jacob's life – He has changed this man and there is proof of it – a new name which signifies his new nature, a limp which signifies his reliance on God, and a peaceful relationship with the man who wanted to kill him.

But what about you - have you wrestled with God? If so, how has your life changed as a result? What is the evidence you can point to to prove you have been touched by God?

Where is the weakness in your life? Where is the area where you must totally rely on Him? Where is the area where His strength is made perfect your weakness? Where is the area where His grace is sufficient for you?

The first area for all of us is salvation – none of us can earn it, we all must simply receive it.

But what else – what need do you praise God for meeting, or what is He showing you He wants to address? What task, command, or responsibility do you feel inadequate for right now?

Remember, He is our Father, He desires the best for us, and he allows these weaknesses to remind us to lean on Him, not because He wants us to suffer, but because He wants us to stay close to Him, where we were always intended to be.

Misc Notes:

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 Because J has seen God face to face he is now able to see his brother face to face without fear. A right relationship with God puts order and perspective into our human relationships.  
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Luke 13:22 And He went through the cities and villages, teaching, and journeying toward Jerusalem. 23 Then one said to Him, "Lord, are there few who are saved?" And He said to them, 24 "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able. 25 When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open for us,' and He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know you, where you are from,' 26 then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.' 27 But He will say, 'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.' 28 There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out. 29 They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God. 30 And indeed there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last."

All of his life Jacob had known about God. He knew the stories of his father Isaac and his grandpa Abraham, but Jacob didn't know God personally, experientially. Now he does.

The same thing can be true with us, there is a HUGE difference between intellectual Christianity that knows *about* God, and experiential Christianity that really *knows* God. Which do you have? Are you just sitting here filling your head full of facts about Jesus and the Bible or are you really in a relationship with Him? You have to be able to answer that question for yourself, it's almost impossible for anyone to make that call for you – but it's a question worth asking. Just knowing the name of Jesus and a few trivia facts about Him doesn't save you. You have to enter into a relationship with Him and that relationship involves your submission.