

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL

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Worship Series: Lord, Increase Our Faith

Service Theme: Faith Demonstrated Through Persistent Prayer

Sermon Theme: Wrestling with God (October 16, 2022)

Genesis 32:22-30

There's no need to sugarcoat it. This is an odd section of Scripture. One of those Bible stories where pastors and parishioners alike are left asking lots of questions that God doesn't answer. And that might lead us to think that "**Jacob Wrestles with God**" is a section of Scripture we can quickly skim, shrug our shoulders, and forget about. But I would argue that despite the oddity and unanswered questions, this account about **Wrestling with God** is far more important and applicable for your life than you've ever realized.

Picture it like a movie. Opening scene: two men locked in a wrestling match in the early morning darkness. The sound of the rushing waters of the Jabbok River drowned out by the sounds of struggle. Earlier that day, our main character Jacob had sent his family and all possessions across that river, leaving him alone on the other side to pour out his heart to God in prayer. As the two men struggle, the scene transitions to the very beginning. How did we get here?

This wasn't Jacob's first wrestling match. The Bible records that Jacob and his twin brother Esau had wrestled in their mother's womb. Sounds like brothers, right? When the twins were born, Esau emerged first, and Jacob followed, clinging to Esau's heel. So his parents named him Jacob, which means, "Heel Grabber." It was a fitting name, not just because of the way he was born, but because of the way he lived. "Heel-grabber" was a nickname for a crafty and deceptive person. And Jacob certainly lived up to that reputation. There's a recurring theme that plays through Jacob's life. Despite the promises God had made to him, Jacob often doubted that God would deliver, and resorted to deception, rather than trust.

Even before the twins were born, God had promised that opposite the normal cultural primogeniture, when it came to Jacob and Esau, "**The older will serve the younger.**" And yet, twice Jacob uses deception to get what God had already promised to give. Once, tricking Esau into selling his birthright for a bowl of soup. And another time deceiving his blind father to get the blessing intended for Esau.

That last deception left Esau vowing to kill his brother, prompting Jacob to flee alone with almost nothing to his name. But during his flight, God gives Jacob another reassuring promise, "**Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.**"

At the next scene, Jacob spends 20 years working for his uncle Laban, during which time Jacob and Laban alternate deceptions to get the better of each other. But God was faithful in keeping his promises, blessing Jacob with 12 sons and prosperous flocks and herds. However, God knew it was time for Jacob to return home, commanding him, "**Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you.**"

But although God promised to be with him, Jacob knew who would be waiting for him—Esau, who had sworn to kill him. As he got close to home, messengers came to tell Jacob: "**Your brother Esau...is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.**" Why would Esau be coming with an army, except to attack him and his family?

Distressed by the message, Jacob sends impressive gifts to hopefully pacify his brother, and divides his family and possessions into two groups, hoping that if Esau attacked the first group, the second might escape. But the heel grabber knew he couldn't deceive his way out of this one. His only hope was the God who'd been making and keeping promises to him since before he was born. And so Jacob prays, praying

back all of the promises God had made to him, to remind himself of God's promises more than anything. Then, after sending his family and his possessions across the river, he spends the night alone to do more of the same.

And we're back where we started: Jacob locked in a midnight wrestling match with an unnamed man. Which brings up so many questions. How did this wrestling match start? Did this stranger stroll into Jacob's camp and go, "Hey, wanna wrestle?" Did he jump Jacob while he was praying? The question goes unanswered, but ultimately, it doesn't matter. What does matter is who Jacob was wrestling.

Jacob had spent that night verbally wrestling with God in prayer, holding onto God's promises, and holding God to his promises. But suddenly, Jacob found himself physically wrestling with God. But how? How could God, an all-powerful spirit so vast that he fills the universe possibly wrestle Jacob without crushing him like a grape? How could sinful Jacob wrestle with the holy God and not melt like the Nazis in Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark? Again, the question goes unanswered. God must have taken on a human form and set aside the full use of his power in order to teach Jacob this important, visible lesson.

At first, Jacob seems to be winning, as God in human form ***"saw that he could not overpower [Jacob]."*** You can almost picture Jacob's confidence growing, thinking that he'd be able to get out of this struggle by his actions too, just as he'd used deception and cunning to get by his whole life. But with a simple touch, God showed Jacob how powerless he really was. ***"[God] touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man."***

I was never a wrestler, but I imagine it's nearly impossible to defeat a powerful opponent in a sport where lower body strength and leverage are critical when your hip's out of socket. There was only one thing Jacob could do: hang on tight and not let go. And that's what he did, telling the man, ***"I will not let you go unless you bless me."***

And that's exactly what God does. But first, God renamed Jacob, "The heel grabber" to Israel, "The God wrestler," because Jacob had become a different man. No longer dependent on his deception or craftiness to get what he wanted, but instead clinging to God and his promises, and refusing to let go, with a lifelong limp to remind him.

And that's why this text is so incredibly important and applicable for all of us. Because we know what it's like to wrestle with God. Maybe you're thinking, "No, never wrestled God before, seems like I'd remember that!" But you have! Maybe not physically, but you've wrestled with God...in prayer.

What's shocking is that God appears to be Jacob's adversary. The big boss he must defeat to get what he wants. The enemy who wants to crush and defeat him, or at the very least, withhold blessing from him. Like Jacob was wrestling with God to get God to submit to Jacob's will.

It's easy to feel that way when we wrestle with God in prayer over and over again, but nothing seems to change, and God doesn't seem to hear. When you pray for healing, but it gets worse. When you pray to find love, but remain unhappily single. When you pray for your kids would return to their faith, but they remain distant from God. When you wrestle with God in prayer, it's easy to think of God as your opponent; adversary; enemy.

And when we have to wrestle with God in prayer, it's easy to give up. Because in many ways, our culture is "struggle adverse." We want everything to be fast, easy, and efficient. So if something like wrestling with God in prayer requires us to struggle and doesn't seem to produce any results, it's easy to tap out, assuming that prayer doesn't work, or that God is an enemy who doesn't want to bless us, or that we're better off relying on ourselves to get what we want.

But this account shows us that when we wrestle with God in prayer, he's not opposing us to crush us—otherwise, he could have destroyed Jacob in a half-second. And God wasn't wrestling Jacob as his enemy, otherwise he wouldn't have desired to bless him. Rather than Jacob

wrestling God to wrestle God into submitting to Jacob's will, God wrestles with Jacob to wrestle Jacob into submitting to God's will!

That's why God wants us to persistently wrestle with him in prayer, so that through it, he can wrestle our will into submission with his will! How does he do that? The same way he did with Jacob. In a time of fear and uncertainty when Jacob knew deception wouldn't save him, he turned to God in prayer. And as he wrestled with God in prayer, it forced him to remember all the promises God had made to him: Promises to be with him, protect him, prosper him, bring him back to his homeland, continue his family line, and preserve him as the son of the inheritance. Those promises weren't new. But now, in his moment of hopelessness, he clung to God's promises and refused to let go!

Likewise, when God appears to be our opponent, he does so not to crush us, or out of enmity. Sometimes, God has to oppose us in the wrestling match of prayer because he knows that what our sinful hearts want won't be the blessing he intends to give us. And when we have to struggle and wrestle with God when he doesn't give us what we asked for, it forces us to remember God's promises.

And the more we wrestle with God's promises-- to make all things work out for our good, to bless us and not harm us, to give us eternal life through Jesus, to provide all that we need, to never abandon us, to be with us always-- then instead of tapping out because we have to struggle with God in prayer, God wrestles our will into submission to his will. So that like Jacob we can say, ***"I will not let you go unless you bless me."*** And he will. Even when—especially when—we can do nothing else but cling to him and his promises and hold on for dear life, God will bless us, because his will will be done. And that's the best thing we could ever ask for! Clinging to God's promises, we can confidently pray from the heart, ***"Not my will but yours be done."***

We can pray that prayer confidently because we've heard it before. We've heard it from God, when he once again set aside his full power. When he took on not just the appearance of a man, but a true human nature so he could come to this world earth to wrestle with and struggle against sin, death, and Satan. When he wrestled with his

Father in prayer, praying, ***"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."*** As we wrestle with God in prayer, just as the Son of God wrestled with his Father in prayer, we can cling to God's promises and power, most fully revealed at a bloody cross and empty tomb. We can pray like the heel-grabber turned God-wrestler prayed, ***"I will not let you go unless you bless me."***

Once again, God kept his promise to Jacob. Instead of attacking and killing him, Esau warmly received and embraced Jacob, who returned to his homeland and prospered, just as God promised. His family grew and increased, just as God promised. And from Jacob's family line came the one God promised first to Adam and Eve: the one who wrestled with death and Hell-- and won.

As we watch Jacob limp off into the sunrise, the scene cuts to your life as you wrestle with God. I saw a couple reminders of that wrestling this week, as a friend, a 40-year old WELS pastor with a wife, kids, and important Gospel ministry was killed in a car crash. And we wrestle and struggle with God, "Why? Why so young? Why, when he had so much more ministry to do?" On Friday, I visited a WELS woman from South Carolina who's getting treatment at Mayo for colon cancer. But she's at the tipping point where she might make it, or she might not. And she and her husband are wrestling with God: her praying to be freed from her pain in Heaven, and her faithful husband wrestling with God to spare her life so he can be with her. Questions of "why am I still here?" and "Why would God take her?" that are seemingly unanswered.

And yet, clinging to God's promises and refusing to let go as we wrestle with God in prayer, we have the answers. Through faith in Jesus, whether we live or die, we're with Jesus. And through Jesus, whether we live or die, we'll live! So keep wrestling, dear brothers and sisters in Christ. Keep wrestling, clinging to God and his promises, and crying out to God, ***"Not my will but yours be done."*** ***"I will not let you go unless you bless me."*** Keep wrestling, and he will.