

## Fighting with God

Genesis 32:22-30

The Bible is full of what could charitably be described as characters. Saints and scoundrels who never act in a way that we'd expect. Yet these stories remind us that God is working through actual, flawed people to do his work, and if God can use people as flawed as these, he can even use you and me.

Of all of the characters in the Bible, though, none seem to go through quite as many misadventures as the main character in today's Old Testament lesson, Jacob. It starts before he was born, when he and his twin brother Esau fought in their mother Rebekah's womb. The conflict continued throughout their life, as their differing personalities came out. Esau was a large, hairy, manly man who was known as a great hunter. Jacob was not, instead he was a man of the tents, his mother's favorite. Jacob's name means heel, because he was grabbing Esau's heel at birth. That name also meant someone who tripped others up, who cheated to win.

Jacob lived up to that name. As author Frederick Buechner describes Jacob...

Twice he cheated his lame-brained brother, Esau, out of what was coming to him. At least once he took advantage of the blindness of his old father, Isaac, and played him for a sucker. He outdid his double-crossing father-in-law, Laban, by conning him out of most of his livestock and, later on, when Laban was looking the other way, by sneaking off with not only both the man's daughters, but just about everything else that wasn't nailed down including his household gods. Jacob was never satisfied. He wanted the moon, and if he'd ever managed to bilk heaven out of that, he would have been

back the next morning for the stars to go with it.

As our lesson begins today, though, Jacob's past had finally caught up with him. Despite all of the wealth he'd gained, despite his wives and children, he was still afraid of the brother he'd spend his whole life fighting with. He was still afraid that the brother he'd cheated out of his birthright and blessing twice wanted to kill him. And so he sent everyone ahead, and waited alone on the other side of the river.

Not suspecting anything was about to happen, Jacob was jumped by an assailant. A long wrestling match followed, a wrestling that lasted through the night, and through it Jacob came to realize he was wrestling with God.

Jacob's name means "heel," which is ironic when we think of him wrestling. In professional wrestling, a heel is the one who is a villain, a rule breaker. The heel's role is to get the crowd riled up, booing them and jeering them. The heel will cheat to win, using any dirty trick they can think of.

Jacob wrestling with God is the culmination of all of the struggles he's had. He struggled with his older brother. He struggled with his parents. He struggled with his father in law. And now he struggled with God. Jacob and God wrestle all night. Jacob's hip even gets dislocated. Yet he persists. Yet he keeps wrestling. Yet he refuses to give up. And because he does so, he wins.

God wrestles with Jacob, and God loses. How could that happen? Because God cheats. Jacob thought he was the best cheater out there. He had nothing on God. God could win at any time. God even pops Jacob's hip out of joint. Yet God loses. Because in losing, God knows He wins. Jacob, the cheater, gets cheated. Even

though God is defeated, God gives a blessing. And in that blessing Jacob is given a new name, a new understanding of who he is.

We see God win by losing the same way on the cross. It seemed to everyone as if Jesus had lost. He suffered and died, and that was the end of it. In the strange and dreadful strife when life and death contended, it seemed like death won. Yet it was in losing that Jesus won. It was in dying that Jesus defeated death.

We, too, wrestle with God. Like Jacob, we don't get to pick the times and places where we do so. We don't pick the times when we cry out, "Lord, what's going on here? Why are You letting this happen?" We don't get to pick when troubles come into our lives, and when we start struggling with God. Yet we also know that God is big enough to handle our questions and challenges, to take on what we think we can dish out.

Martin Luther described that wrestling with God as *tentatio*. "Anfechtung. This is the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God's Word is..." It's the trials that drive us back to God.

Troubles come, even though we don't like them. But see why troubles are so beneficial to the Christian. It has nothing to do with earning points with God. It has nothing to do with toughening you up mentally or physically or psychologically or spiritually. It has everything to do with driving you back to God and the Word of God.

Jacob was blessed through that long night of wrestling and when dawn finally came he had received a new name, Israel, because he had fought with God. Wrestling with God got Jacob a new name. Instead of being a heel, a cheater, he became one who had fought with God, and

won. That name wouldn't just stay his name, though. It would go on to name his descendants, who would continue to fight with God. When they did, though, God would continue to be with them and fight to bring them back to the way they should go.

There's a variation of the famous Footprints in the Sand poem. In the original, the footprints show Jesus walking with the poet, and when there is only one set of footprints, that's when Jesus carries them. In the alternate ending God points off in the distance and says, "Now, THAT long groove is where I DRAGGED you, kicking and screaming."

Fighting with God doesn't leave us unscarred. Jacob walked with a limp the rest of his days. Wrestling with God gave Jacob a limp. That limp reminded Jacob that he was special.

Although it's never easy, when we see the troubles and trials of life as occasions to grow in the ways of God, we are blessed at dawn by a new understanding of what it means to carry the name of Jesus ourselves.

Jesus wrestled with death and the devil, with heaven and hell—and he won. He won for you. He didn't lie, cheat, or steal, except for cheating the devil out of what he thought was his. Jesus forgives us for all the times we do lie and cheat and steal. And he gives us what we never thought to ask for, but wanted to give us all along: he blesses us.

Troubles come. And when they come, they show us our own inadequacies. They point us to God. They point us to His Word, and the promises found there. And the God who meets us there, the God who wrestled with Jacob and was with him all the time he was on the run, gives us his presence. What a great promise.

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