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David Westfall
*Dordt University*, david.westfall@dordt.edu

# "Your Name Shall No Longer Be Called Jacob, but Israel" — Genesis 32:22-31

*Dr. David Westfall* — Assistant Professor of Theology, Dordt University. Preached at Covenant CRC, Sioux Center, IA. (8/6/23)

Well, we've come to the part of the service where I'm confidently supposed to tell you about the truth that God is revealing to us today in his holy word. Which is a daunting enough task on any Sunday, but it's especially daunting when that divinely-inspired word describes a night-long wrestling match between God and a human being—and the human wins it.

What is going on here? Why… *how*, does the Creator of all things, the one who formed the heavens and the earth, let one of his own creatures *wrestle* him *to a draw*? And then, as if that weren't strange enough, why does he then declare him the *winner*—but only after putting his hip out of joint, leaving him disabled? "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, *and have prevailed* (32:38).

What are we supposed to think of Jacob in this moment? Are we supposed to admire his great strength, or at least his costly tenacity? What about his demand for a blessing? Is blessing something that a creature can wrest from the hands of its Creator, and are we to imagine that Jacob has *succeeded* in doing just that?

The wrestling match between Jacob and God at the ford of the Jabbok is one of the most difficult and deeply perplexing passages in all of Scripture. It's one of those texts that stubbornly—and, I think, helpfully—reminds us how much we depend on God's grace as we struggle to understand his word. In that way, our engagement with this Scripture echoes the story it is telling. God approaches and accosts us through his difficult word, and like Jacob, we have to hold on to him in the ensuing struggle, in order to receive his blessing. I'm sure that what I have for you today will be far from the last word on this passage, but I hope it will help us do that. Let's find out.

The anchor that needs to hold us in place as we wonder about what is going on here is the story's central, defining event. It may surprise you that I'm not talking about the wrestling match. At its heart, this isn't the story of Jacob's *wrestling*, but Jacob's *re-naming*. It is a story about Jacob's *identity*. This is the story of how *Ya'akov*—the one who "cheats," who "grasps the *ak'kev*, the heel"—became someone else, *Yisra'el*, a man who strives with God, and whose strivings with God and with other people will have a different meaning than they did when he was just *Ya'akov*. Genesis 32 doesn't simply show us Jacob's *striving*, but the *conversion* of Jacob's striving—and by implication, the conversion of *our* striving—into a new way of relating to God and to other people. With that in mind, we can turn to the story itself.

In the dark of night, Jacob is terrified. He has no idea what tomorrow holds. What he does know is that his brother, Esau, is coming to meet him, along with four hundred men—more than enough to kill Jacob and everyone with him. The man who usually could scheme his way out of any situation knows that this time there is no escape. He will have to face the brother whose heel he was born grasping (hence his name). The brother whom he cheated out of his birthright and whose blessing he stole from their blind father. The brother who was plotting to murder him, last he heard. Jacob has no way of knowing whether or not the decades he's spent away from home have changed anything. He has every reason to suspect they haven't.

On the other hand, Jacob *does* know that God told him to return to the land of his fathers. He knows that God has promised him immeasurable blessing, and he's already seen the beginnings of that blessing in the growth of his family and his possessions while he's been living in exile. Indeed, he already reminded God of this in a prayer, earlier in this chapter—

the longest prayer in the book of Genesis. In that prayer, Jacob recognizes all the "deeds of steadfast love" that God has shown him up to this point and all of the promises that ought to give him confidence as he pleads with God, "Please deliver me from the hand of my brother" (32:11). Nicely done, Jacob.

But that wasn't all Jacob did. He wasn't content to rely solely on God's promise. True to form, he had to do everything in his power to stack the deck in his favor. So he came up with an elaborate plan to appease his brother. He took a bunch of his flocks and herds, divided them up into a long series of separate droves, and sent them off one by one, each as a gift to his brother. As it says in the verses just before our passage, "For he thought, 'I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterward I shall see his face. Perhaps he will accept me'" (32:20). By the time we get to the wrestling match the night beforehand, Jacob already has done everything he can to achieve the desired result. Like always, Jacob has his plans, and the means at his disposal.

Until now, that is. As he sends the rest of his possessions along with his family on over the ford of Jabbok, the narrative strips away everything else that belongs to Jacob, everything he's accumulated and acquired up to this point, everything he has at his disposal, until he's left *alone*. Merely himself: just *Jacob*. Like he was when he first crossed over the river in flight from his brother, years before—nothing but a staff in hand. He won't be reunited with all that he holds dear, nor will he see his brother, until the events of this night are past. There's nothing left at this point to shield Jacob from reality, no leverage that he has available to him. Just himself.

It's like how you may feel sometimes at night, when you're lying in bed at the end of the day and there's nothing left to distract you from simply being yourself. Who are you? What are *you*, when you aren't tangled up in all that is *yours*? Tangled up in all that you have going on? Those may be troubling questions if you're like Jacob, if you're deeply insecure in the conviction that you are your own, and that only your desperate heel-grabbing is going to save you. But it's also in such places of darkness, nakedness, and honesty that God often chooses to meet us. And that's just what happens here to Jacob.

It's in this aloneness, dark and devoid of all pretence, that Jacob suddenly finds himself under attack: "And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day" (32:24). In Hebrew, there's some wordplay going on here. Jacob (*Ya'akov*), the one who grasps the heel (*ak'kev*), now wrestles (*ye'avek*) at the ford of the *Yabbok.* It may not be utterly essential for understanding what's happening, but it's one of those details that helps us see what a perfect setup we have here for a certain kind of story. A story where identity comes to expression, to fulfillment. A story in which Jacob's identity as the cheater, as the heel-grabber, will be most fully realized. When Jacob will prove his Jacob-yness once and for all.

Except, that isn't what happens. The story surprises us. It doesn't *confirm* Jacob's identity as the heel-grabbing cheat. It disrupts it. Despite the wordplay, it isn't *Ya'akov*, the heel-grabber, the cheater, who wins the wrestling match. It is *Yisra'el*—Israel. The one who *strives with God*.

In and of itself, the name change doesn't seem to tell us very much. It's not clear what it's giving us that we don't have already. *He strives with God* : But we already know that, and the name *Jacob* seems perfectly adequate for making the point—especially given the wordplays we just observed. But this is why the placement of the re-naming is so important: Jacob's striving results in victory and new identity only after that striving has been radically *transformed* through the touch of his opponent: "When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him" (32:25).

This touch reduces Jacob from *holding his own* in the wrestling match to simply *holding on*. "I will not let you go unless you bless me!" (32:26), he cries. At this point, we shouldn't be imagining Jacob with his opponent in a headlock. Think more of a child who's latched on to your leg and stubbornly clings to it as you lumber around trying to walk away. He's no less tenacious, no less dogged and determined than he was when he wrestled the stranger to a standstill. But his striving now is no longer the same.

That's because, whereas Jacob strives in his

*ability*, Israel strives in his *in*ability, in his *dis*ability. Whereas Jacob strives to manipulate and to control the blessing for himself, Israel strives in a radical dependence on God to *give* the blessing. And it's in his *dis*abled state that Jacob prevails, that he's declared the winner, receives a new name and a blessing, and then goes to meet his estranged brother. Paradoxically, Jacob prevails when he finds himself most fully at the *mercy* of his enemy—at the mercy of God, whom he now recognizes, and the next day at the mercy of the brother he wronged—and the mercy he now receives becomes the mark of a new identity.

Why is this important—so important, in fact, that it becomes the name of God's covenant family, the "children of Israel"? Something momentous seems to be happening here, something that goes beyond just improving Jacob's personality a bit (though that is badly needed).

What this story shows us is God's determination to have a covenant partner who will truly *rely* on him for his blessing. God is determined to bless Jacob, but he's equally determined that the blessing will be something that Jacob *receives*, not something that he forcibly *takes*, as he did when he stole it from his older brother. "I will not let you go unless *you* bless *me*," Jacob said. God could have appropriately replied, "So you finally get how it works!"

God truly wishes to be *prevailed upon*, to be conquered, by his creatures. He positively desires to be accosted and laid hold of by us, in a sense to be at our disposal. The victory God hands to his disabled opponent here isn't a joke. It isn't sarcasm. God *wants* Jacob to win. But he wants him to win *as Israel*. He doesn't want to be *prevailed upon* by the pride and self-sufficiency of his creatures. He will not be a tool in our project of trying to secure ourselves and possess ourselves in the specious *freedom* of our own autonomy. The Creator wants his creatures to *prevail upon* him, to possess him, to conquer him with their *needs*. With their reliance on him and their demand for his care. With their recognition of him as the source and the provider of every good thing. And to get us to conquer him in *that* way, God first has to wage war on our addiction to ourselves.

That is the story of the entire Bible, and the story of humanity. It is the story of the human heart's unwillingness to accept the fact that its security depends on something beyond its control and manipulation. And that unwillingness, that resentment of our own contingency that's taken root in our nature, breeds in us a deep *anxiety:* a desperate, growing fear and dread that things might not work out if we're not careful, if we don't do everything in our power to take hold of whatever we think we need.

Anxiety like Jacob's as he faced the arrival of his brother. Anxiety like yours and mine. It's the same anxiety that built the tower of Babel, that enslaved the Israelites and drowned their children in the Nile, the same anxiety that refused to enter the promised land and wanted to go back to Egypt. It's the anxiety that lies beneath the surface of nearly any human evil imaginable: war, theft, racism, misogyny, abortion, human trafficking, drug addiction, mass incarceration. It's the anxiety that put Jesus on the cross. It's the anxiety that runs through the bloodstream of the entire human race throughout the ages back to that terrible moment in the garden when the serpent's voice whispered the lie that we can be *like* God without *needing* God.

In that sense, God's wrestling with Jacob, unique and memorable though it may be, is really emblematic of something universal and disturbingly ordinary. It is a flashpoint in God's ongoing war with the voice of the serpent. It isn't ultimately *Jacob* whom God is attacking here: it is the voice of the serpent *in* Jacob, the hidden source of all Jacob's fears. Jacob has spent his whole life listening to that voice, and it has made him deeply insecure. It has also made him like the one to whom that voice belongs: a manipulative opportunist, whose words bend the truth, who specializes in deceit.

And yet, unthinkably, it's precisely *this* man, this insecure, anxious, serpentine fool, whom God chooses to become the child of the promise, the heir of the covenant, and the individual who embodies and bears the name of his elect offspring, Israel. Not because of anything he deserved, not because of his achievement. Before he and Esau were even born, God told his mother, "The older will serve the younger" (Gen 25:23; cf. Rom 9:10-13). But because of

his amazing grace, God wages war on the enemy who holds his chosen one in its grasp. And he saves Jacob from that enemy, by saving him from himself.

It's the same for us. Your and my addiction to the voice of the serpent, our fear and anxiety rooted in the belief that we are our own: all of it is the target of God's redeeming grace—even if at times that grace seems more like an attack than a gift. Like God is accosting us, at war with us. The truth is that in this conflict, only a touch that *wounds* each of us in some way will heal us. Only an act of God that awakens us to our radical need for him can save us. In the economy of grace, it is *weakness* that renews our strength to rely on God, *disability* that enables us to reflect God's image most fully. When we can see that, the very things we fear, the weaknesses and vulnerabilities that awaken all our anxiety and tempt us to cheat and grasp, instead become a chorus of voices that truthfully remind us *we are not our own*, and that inexhaustible blessing is to be found only in the one to whom we belong, who cares and who provides.

What a struggle it is for us to hear that message. I am sure it is a struggle that continued for Jacob, well after his encounter with God that night. We shouldn't imagine that the person who walked (or limped) away from this fight was a wholly new man. For one thing, despite his new name, the narrator happily continues calling him "Jacob" in the next chapter and throughout the rest of the book of Genesis. The name "Israel" gets sprinkled in only towards the end. The same Jacob whom we hope has finally *learned his lesson* here will go on to ignore the dignity of his daughter and play favorites among his sons. Even here, on the morning after his wrestling match, mistrust will remain between him and his brother.

Still, for all that, something new *has* happened in Jacob. A shock of recognition has taken place, as he realizes what has just happened: "So Jacob called the name of the place *Peniel* [face of God], saying, *'I have seen God* face to face, and yet my life has been *delivered'"* (32:30). Jacob becomes aware that his *victory* is not the result of his sufficiency, his ability, his strength. It is God's *gift*. And if Jacob's victory—if our victory—is ultimately God's gift, then the blessing that comes from that victory isn't truly ours. It must be a gift too.

This awareness of grace in his encounter with God that night is what will make all the difference the next morning, as Jacob limps up to his brother in fear and trembling and suddenly finds himself being embraced rather than slain. Instead of seeing the success of his own efforts at control and manipulation, Jacob sees mercy. He sees grace. He sees the deliverance that he had prayed for, in the undeserved forgiveness and generosity of his brother. And that's why Jacob can truthfully say to Esau, "I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me" (33:10).

It is when Jacob has seen the face of God, disabling him and delivering him, freeing him from himself and awakening him to his need for grace, that he is then able to recognize the same God in the face of others who show him grace. It is when we experience the grace of God, disabling and delivering us, disarming our serpentine bent on control and domination and telling us that we are secure in God's favor *as we are*, that we can begin to experience the world and others in it as conduits of God's generosity to us, not as plunder and pawns for us to control.

Not only that, but we can begin to *share* with others the same grace and blessing that we have received, when we recognize that it's not ours, but a gift. And maybe it's here that we see the greatest change that God's wrestling and wounding produced in Jacob. When his brother tries to return the now unnecessary gifts that Jacob had sent to win his favor, Jacob replies, "Please *take my blessing* that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough" (33:11, modified).

*Take my blessing. God is gracious, and I have enough.* That statement is nothing less than the victory of God over the voice of the serpent, the voice that said, *Take the fruit. God is withholding, and you don't have enough.* That's the voice we've all heard throughout our lives, the voice that holds the world under its spell. But there's a different way to be human: *Take my blessing. God is gracious, and I have enough.* The grasping fear behind Adam and Eve's failure has been trampled and subdued, as their descendant

opens wide his hands, both to receive what God eagerly wishes to give him, and then to share it eagerly with others—even his enemy.

That's what it means to be *Israel*. That's what it means to be the covenant family, the seed of Abraham who brings God's blessing to the nations. That's what it means to be the image of God: a wounded healer, a disabled man who powerfully wields the grace he has been given.

It is the victory that overcomes the world: it is God's victory in us over the voice of the serpent, God's triumph in our weakness, and our triumph in God's grace. In the end, it is the victory of the cross, where the disabled God himself—Israel's seed and Israel's king—crushed the head of Satan with healing wounds and open hands.