

FGBC: Our Stories Begin: The Beginning of Losing to Win

Genesis 31:1-36:43

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We've now nearing the end of our worldview walk through Genesis. Genesis is about beginnings. The beginning of the world and humanity, the beginning of sin and separation, the beginning of the promised Seed that would fix everything, the beginning of covenant, the beginning of election, the beginning of God coming down rather than us climbing up to Him, and the beginning of a people God would relate with. And each of these seven beginnings continues to shape the world we live in.

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Now over the last three weeks we've been zeroing in on what relationship with God looks like because this is the reason for everything else. Humanity exists because a loving, communal God wanted to increase His glory by sharing Himself with us.

And this starts happening with Abraham. Abraham is the first person to have a relationship with God. Now this doesn't mean that others didn't interact with God. So God communicated His will to Noah and Noah obeyed. And of course Enoch walked with God for 365 years – both these guys are before Abraham. But their stories aren't stories of relationship. Enoch gets a couple verses, and Noah's story is about God extending covenant to humanity.

But with Abraham we get something totally different. The point of Abraham's story is that God is offering Himself to humanity in a personal and intimate way.

And the point with all seven of these beginnings is that these stories are our story. We are people created by a loving communal God for relationship with Him.

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Now we've spoken of this before, but the Bible isn't like any other religious book. Religious literature around the world is about heroes of morality living lives worth copying, but the Bible doesn't read like this. What we get are messed up people who deserve rejection but get relationship instead. And that's because the Bible isn't about how to live a good life, rather it is about how to meet God and receive His grace in order to live a transformed life.

And Jacob is a classic example of this. His spiritual gift is screwing up. He's a mess from the beginning and yet God keeps pouring His grace out on him and the result is a great finish. And the wrestling story we are looking at today is the point of transition in the journey. This is a story about how to have a life changing encounter with God.

So grab your Bible or open the one on your phone to Genesis chapter 32. We are going to pick it up in verse 22.

[Read Genesis 32:22-32]

Now this is a strange story for all sorts of reasons. Just for starters Jacob wrestles with God and God can't overpower him. And then there's the whole beef tenderloin thing – we aren't going to touch that. This is a weird story. But it turns out the weird stuff is the gospel. And the gospel is about how people like you and me can relate with God.

What this means is that if you want God to show up in your life then learn this story. It's a weird one, but so is your life. God meets us where we are.

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So there are three steps or progressions that this account lays out for us. First, if we are going to meet God we have to do it alone. Second, we have to meet Him in our weakness. And finally, we have to meet Him in His weakness.¹

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The passage starts with Jacob sending his family across a river named Jabbok, but staying on the other side by himself.

Now you can't see this in English, but in Hebrew this story is funny because almost every second word is Jacob. So Jabbok sounds like Jacob, and then the word wrestle means "physically seek to advantage yourself against an opponent" – and this is also the word Jacob – it's a parallel to the word deceive. So Jacob crosses the Jabbok to Jacob with God and surprisingly he Jacobs and gets Jacobed. And then his name gets changed to Israel. Crazy story.

So here's the context. 13 years have passed since Jacob married Leah and Rachel. During this time he has worked for Laban who kept changing his wages in an effort to abuse him, and yet at every turn God has prospered Jacob. So now he is rich in money and family and he has left Laban to head back to the Promised Land.

But he's nervous because the last time he saw his family he was jacobing them – he was tricking his father and stealing his brother's birthright. And now he hears that Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men. What would you do? This is a defining crisis.

And so Jacob starts shooting gifts at Esau. He sends 200 goats off to Esau and a bit later thirty camels. And a bit later a bunch of cows. He's thinking "it's going to be hard to kill someone who is throwing gifts at you."

And then finally he gets his family to safety across the Jabbok and prepares to meet Esau in the morning.

And verse 24 notes that now Jacob was alone. And he's incredibly alone. He isn't just by himself, he is wallowing in the unknown. He has no idea whether Esau has accepted any of his gifts – none of the goats were equipped with go-pros.

And so all Esau is able to do is wait until morning. It's a total moment of crisis. And it is in this moment that he has this incredible encounter with God.

¹ Sermon outline adapted from Tim Keller's <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/the-fight-of-your-life-5250/> (Accessed November 8, 2018)

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Now isn't it funny how often it is the worst times in our lives that turn out to be the best? When we get the things we want; the job, the recovery from illness, the restoration of relationship it is easy to grow complacent. And that's because the best thing that can happen to us is not that we get a job or recover from sickness. The best thing that can happen to us is that we see God. There is no greater joy than feeling the veil of heaven tear open and encountering the intimate presence of God. And these encounters often happen in moments of crisis.

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The other day I learned that one of my best friends is dying. And the next morning as I was by myself and praying I was calling out to God in a way I haven't done in a while. It's so easy to get lulled into spiritual complacency. But as I was praying I was thanking Jesus for using difficulty to draw me back. And it was beautiful to feel Him doing this.

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Now God is the one who controls when we are going to encounter Him – no one else can make this happen. But God wants us to encounter Him. Our whole faith is built on this premise. Hebrews says:

It is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to Him must believe that God exists and that He rewards those who sincerely seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6)

So if this is you today, if you are someone who wants to encounter God then Jacob's story gives great insight into how to sincerely seek Him. And the first point is that in the midst of crisis you have to get by yourself.

Now I'm not saying Christian community isn't essential – it is. We do meet God in and through each other. I'm not taking anything away from that. But ultimately everyone needs their own encounter with God. If you haven't met God yourself it isn't enough just to come from a Christian family or spend time with other people who have met God.

It isn't enough just to come to church or attend a Missional Community Group or play on a worship team. These are great ways to grow in your faith if you've got some. But you can't live your faith vicariously through the people around you.

Now who would do this? Nobody, on purpose. But then people generally don't realize they are living vicariously. And faith gets lived out this way by people who spend a lot of time in church and who others wouldn't expect not to have a faith of their own.

So I'm talking mostly about people like myself who grew up in church. It's very possible for people like us to believe we are good with God simply because we do lots of Christian things with Christian people.

Think about the people at the end of the Sermon on the Mount who, on Judgment Day, say to Jesus "Lord, Lord, we did all kinds of awesome stuff in Your name." These are church folk. And Jesus says "You didn't do the will of the Father. I don't know who you are, get away from Me."²

² Matthew 7:21-23

Hear this, the will of the Father is not that you do specific good stuff, it is that you live your life for His glory. And that is something that is only done in relationship with Him. So let God use the crisis in your life to get you by yourself. Cross your Jabbok. Carve out time in your day to be by yourself with God.

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The second thing you need in order to encounter God is to meet Him in your weakness.

Now here is the thing about weakness, it is scary to do anything you aren't good at. Imagine somehow you were chosen to play concert piano in Vanier Hall in front of 1000 people and the only song you know is the two finger version of chopsticks? Wouldn't that be a great day? It's scary to do anything you aren't good at. It is even scary to encounter God in weakness.

So have you ever sinned and felt like you couldn't pray – you couldn't go to God because you weren't worthy – you were too spiritually weak. Alternatively, have you ever had a great day where you were helping at the food bank and going to church and you felt like you could pray – because God was going to be happy to see you coming. Have you ever felt like that?

Both these feelings are based on the premise that it is good to come to God in our strength. But that idea is straight from hell. The only way to come to God is in weakness. Only broken people get saved. But here's the thing, even though weakness is the only way to come to God it still isn't safe, it's scary.

So I love the Chronicles of Narnia. I'm reading them to my kids right now. And one of the best lines is where Mrs. Beaver describes Aslan the lion, the Jesus figure, saying: "Safe!! Who said anything about Him being safe? He isn't safe. But He's good. He's the King you know." And the God Jacob encounters by the Jabbok isn't safe either.

So Jacob is finally getting his life together. He's matured. He's learned his lesson about being a deceiver. And now he's heading back to the Promised Land where God wants him to live. So how do you expect God to respond to a person who is really starting to live their life for His glory? Have you been there?

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In this text God assaults that person. He maims him. Jacob is wrestling with God in this passage. Verses 28 and 30 makes this clear. And God touches his hip and cripples him for the rest of his life. He knocks him down and beats him up. This is what Jacob gets when he finally starts getting his life together. How safe is that?

Now nobody would make this story up. The Bible is full of stories like this that had to have happened because nobody would portray God like this. This God is scary and unpredictable. The God of scripture is a God who wrestles people into a transformed life because He knows a simple invitation isn't enough.

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Has a simple invitation been enough for you? You've had it. God invites. And do you run to Him? Or most of the time have you found yourself lollygagging along following apathetically? Isn't it in the bad times, the hard times, when your faith is awoken and your heart is softened? God wrestles us into a transformed life because He knows a simple invitation isn't enough.

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Now where does Jacob realize that he is wrestling God in this passage? Certainly he knows by verse 28 when the Wrestler tells him you've been wrestling with God. But he actually knows before this. He knows in verse 25. Look there:

[Read Genesis 32:25]

Now it's hard to see this in English but in Hebrew the word "touched" means "just lightly brushed." It's a slight touch.

So Jacob is a beast of a man. Back when he met Rachel He ripped the huge covering rock off the well that took multiple shepherds to move. Jacob is a man who has trusted in his own strength his entire life. He knows he can get the job done. And now he has been wrestling with this man all night. And it's been a brutal fight. It's been an even match. And then all of a sudden when they are locked together there is this slight deliberate move and Jacob's hip is destroyed. His leg has no strength from now on.

And in this moment Jacob knows he has been wrestling with God. This Man has a power that could have ripped him apart at any moment. It's in this moment Jacob realizes he isn't strong, he's weak.

And it's in this moment that the change happens in Jacob's life. Up till now Jacob has been wrestling to advantage himself against this foe and get away – that's what wrestle means – but now he won't let go.

In verse 26 the man said "Let me go for it is day break." But Jacob says: "I won't let you go unless you bless me." Now Jacob wants God's blessing. He wants God.

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To the bottom of this we have to understand God's line "Let me go because it is daybreak." It's a strange line. It sounds like God is afraid.

So up until this point Jacob's life has been about trying to gain the advantage. He's a trickster, he's a deceiver; he's a wrestler. He wrestled with Esau in the womb. He wrestled over the birthright. He wrestled with Laban. Jacob is always wrestling, and in the end he usually comes out on top. Jacob is a beast.

But here he finds out that his primary fight is not with people but with God. Jacob has always wanted to be his own saviour – we all do. But in the moment he finds himself wrestling God he realizes he can't do it. He needs God's blessing. He needs God. And so he won't let Him go until he gets it.

Now everyone during this time was talking about how nobody could see God and live. And so it's carefully documented here that it is night as Jacob wrestles. He can't see who he is fighting. But daybreak is coming. And so God says "Let me go", not because God is in trouble, but because Jacob is in trouble if the sun comes up.

And Jacob knows this, and that's why this is significant. Jacob has known since verse 25 that he is wrestling God, and so he knows if he sees God he is finished. But now there is this transformation in Jacob as he changes from someone who has been willing to use God to get ahead, to someone who knows God. Jacob realizes that advantaging himself isn't the way to win with God. The way to win with God is to find the place of submission. And it is always the weaker who receives the blessing of the greater.

And this is the blessing he is holding out for. "I won't let you go until you bless me." And this is the blessing he receives in verse 28:

[Read Genesis 32:28]

In Hebrew to be named by someone means to be in submission to them. This is why God names Adam and then Adam names the animals. And the meaning of names in Hebrew is incredibly important too. So Israel means struggles with God. Not "knows about God." Not "uses God to get ahead." But struggles with God. It's a relational name. And if you have a spouse this makes sense.

So if I'm an acquaintance of yours and you do something I don't like, I just make a point of not bumping into you anymore. But you don't get this option if you have a spouse. When they do stuff you don't like you have to struggle it out. And that's the awesome thing about marriage. You get to work through life with someone who loves you.

And Jacob is entering this kind of relationship with God. And he realizes it is a beautiful thing to actually know God. It's even better than being able to get stuff from God. And so even though it might kill him he can't go back to life as he knew it. And so he holds on even though day is coming and he knows he is the weak party not the strong one.

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If you are going to meet God you have to do it alone, you have to do it in your weakness. But you also have to meet God in His weakness.

Now this is the scandal of the story. This is the part that doesn't make sense. Look at verse 25

[Read Genesis 32:25a]

Sure Jacob is a beast of a man. He's super strong, but he's wrestling God, and God can't overpower him? What kind of God is this?

This is a God who is making Himself weak to overpower Jacob.

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So I've got three boys and a princess who likes to wrestle. So often I'm on the floor being pummelled. It's one of the great things about being dad. And when I wrestle I wrestle to win. But the win I'm looking for is not a submission hold – that would be too easy. Currently I weigh the same as all my kids put together. In my house I'm the Hulk! So it would be a piece of cake to hurt those kids. And Mom's job is to worry about that.

And the kids do get hurt, almost every time. But that's not what I'm going for. I'm not wrestling for a submission hold I'm wrestling for love. And to wrestle for love you have to wrestle hard, but then you have to lose. I've got to get pummeled.

And that's how God wrestles with us. Sure He could incinerate the place if He wanted, but that's not what He wants. He wants our love. And so instead of releasing the legion of angels Jesus takes the cross.

The God we serve is the God who wins by being defeated. He's the God who overcomes by being weak. Jesus is the ultimate Jacob.

Jesus wrestles God and takes the full weight of His justice – and it kills Him – but He won't let go until the Father gives us the blessing.

And so if you are going to encounter the God of scripture you have to encounter Him in His weakness. That's the only way we meet Jesus. Only when we see Him being weak are we wooed. Your heart only softens enough to be transformed when you realize that Jesus has become weak for you so that you can become holy for God.

So in this story Jacob – the wrestling deceiver – is the winner because he holds on to God and becomes Israel the one who relates and struggles *with* God. And this same victory is available to us today. So whatever it is you are facing, hold on to God. Go to Him alone. Go in your weakness. And go expecting to meet Him in His weakness. It's when you meet God that you will be transformed into something new.