



Jacob wrestles with God

Gen 32:1-8. 20-30

[based on the sermon preached on 20.11.22 – available on the [church app](#) or at <https://lwac.org.au/sermons>]

KEY IDEAS

1. Jacob had worn out his welcome with his uncle Laban and was returning to his homeland, Canaan, with his wives, children, flocks and herds, a very wealthy man with a big family.
2. But Jacob is still in fear of his brother Esau because he had stolen his blessing and swindled him out of his birthright.
3. So, Jacob presents a large gift, a peace-offering, to Esau to try to appease him.
4. Jacob prays a prayer of great need and humility, very different from the prayer he prayed when on his way to Laban, many years earlier.
5. Jacob wrestles with a man/God, is blessed by God and has his name changed to Israel because he himself has changed.

CONNECT

- Have you ever been afraid that a past decision might come back to haunt you or harm you or present difficulties for you? Share about this, as you are able. Or, have you ever wronged someone and then tried to appease them with gifts, as Jacob did? What was that like?

STUDY

Read Genesis 32:1-8

- Upon returning to his homeland (v. 1), Jacob met the angels of God. Though the text does not tell us who these angels were or why they present themselves, this is not surprising, as Jacob also saw angels upon leaving his homeland in chapter 28, at a place he named Bethel.

- Jacob then sends messengers ahead, to his brother Esau. Why did he do this? What was Jacob hoping to find out about Esau? What did he actually find out? Do you think Esau might have thought Jacob was coming to claim his birthright, his inheritance, which Jacob had bought from Esau for a bowl of stew?
- What does the number of men Esau was bringing with him tell you about Esau's attitude toward Jacob and what he had in mind? Do you think he intended to do Jacob harm, or was he just trying to scare him?
- What does Jacob then do in response to Esau's advancing towards him with this large group (v. 7)? Was this a rational, even strategic move on Jacob's part?
- Returning to the Connect Question, have you ever been in a desperate situation where you thought you were in real trouble or great harm might come to you and/or those you love? What was that like? How did you handle that situation? What strategic actions did you take?

Read Genesis 32:9-12

- In his prayer (v. 9), Jacob addresses the Lord as the God of his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac, but he does not directly address the Lord as 'his' God, the God of Jacob. What do you make of this? Do you think that Jacob himself had a relationship with God at this point? Why or why not?
- Jacob then goes on (in v. 9 and again in v. 12) to remind God of his directive to him to go and his promise to bless and prosper him. Is this a valid reminder and claim of God's covenantal promise, or is Jacob merely crying victim, "you told me to go and now look what is happening!"?
- What attitude does Jacob display in v. 10? Does this help explain and make sense of what he prayed in v. 9?
- What is the request he makes of God as he continues his prayer in v. 11? Does this prayer strike you as honest and blunt, or does he avoid getting to the point? Since Jacob is known as and has acted as a deceiver quite often to this point, do the words of this prayer stand in contrast to that? Is Jacob trying to deceive and manipulate God or is he laying it all out, stating his dependence upon God and crying out for his mercy?
- Have you ever been in a similar situation, where you were facing great difficulty and were in distress, and the only thing you could do was throw yourself on the mercy of God? Share about this as you are able.

Read Genesis 32:13-21

- The text describes Jacob's 'peace offering' for his brother, Esau, in vv. 13-15. In total, this is 550 animals, which Jacob is gifting to his brother to appease his wrath. Especially in those days, that is a lot of animals. What does the size of this offering say about Jacob's wealth, and about his fear of Esau?
- In vv. 16-19 Jacob gives specific instructions to his servants who are tending and driving the flocks. In your own words, describe these instructions? What is Jacob telling them to do? What do you think Jacob hopes will happen to Esau and his desire to fight Jacob when he encounters these successive waves of flocks and herds as gifts? If Esau accepts these gifts, will he be able to fight Jacob if he himself is tending all these animals?
- Jacob himself (with his family) hangs back, intending to meet Esau last of all, after the gifts of the flocks. What was Jacob's thinking behind this approach, sending the gifts first? Was this a good strategic move? Looking ahead to Gen 33:8-9, does it work? Can you appreciate Jacob's fear for his family from a problem he himself had created years before?

Read Genesis 32:22-30

- Jacob then sends his family and his possessions across the stream while he himself hangs back, remaining alone. Why do you think Jacob did this? When facing a great challenge, do you want to be alone sometimes?
- Scholars debate who this man was who wrestled with Jacob. The Protestant Reformer Martin Luther remarked that this text was one of the most obscure in the Old Testament. The options are: A) an ordinary man; B) an angel; C) a pre-incarnate appearance of God in human form, known as a theophany; D) wrestling with the man allegorically represents wrestling in prayer. The Bible itself best interprets this passage for us in Hosea 12 where the prophet declares both that Jacob struggled with an angel and that he sought the blessing of God. Thus, it was God in the form of a human, but in the Old Testament the presence or power of God is often referred to as the angel of God. So, Jacob wrestled with the angel of God or God himself in pre-incarnate human form. A similar difficulty surrounds the identify of the three visitors to Abraham in Gen 18.
- After wrestling throughout the night, the man/God touched Jacob's hip socket, giving him a permanent limp. What is that all about? Why would God do this to Jacob?
- Do you think Jacob's refusal to let him go until his request to be blessed is fulfilled indicates Jacob knew with whom he was wrestling?
- God then asks Jacob what his name is. Surely God knew it, so why then bother to ask? What is important about Jacob stating his name before God changes it?

- To what does God change Jacob's name? What is the meaning of this new name? Why is it significant? Is this an appropriate name, given the history of Israel, both in the Bible and since biblical times? Since the church is the new Israel or the new people of God through Christ Jesus, does "he struggles with God" seem a fair description of us too?
- Jacob then also asks to know his wrestling opponent's name, but rather than tell Jacob his name, the wrestler questions Jacob's asking, saying, in effect, "why do you want to know?" Clearly, though, after the wrestling match is over and Jacob has his blessing and his permanent limp, he understands that in some way his wrestling partner has been God himself.
- Amazingly, in chapter 33, when Esau and Jacob finally meet, Esau's heart is softened toward Jacob and the meeting goes well, better than Jacob could have hoped. But it was not all of Jacob's strategic planning which brought about the softening of Esau's heart and the warmth of his welcome, it was Jacob's prayer. God truly was working on behalf of Jacob, keeping his promises to him, protecting him and blessing him. May this bring us comfort in the midst of our own difficulties today, that God's answers on behalf of our prayers are able to accomplish more than all of our strategic planning, as good and wise as that may be.

APPLY

- Have you ever been in desperate need of God's blessing and cried out for it? What was that like?
- Have you ever had a life episode where it felt like you were wrestling with God? How might Jacob's experience wrestling with God and how he understood it shed light on your wrestlings with God?
- Which other aspect of this study has struck you the most and why? What are you going to do as a result ?
- Identify one or more truths from this study which speak to and can be applied in your life.
 - 1.
 - 2.

PRAY FOR OUR CHURCH AND FOR ONE ANOTHER

- According to need.