

“Blessed in the Struggle”

Genesis 32:22–31

Rev. Henry Pascual

Prayer: *Holy God, amid the constant noise of our daily lives, speak your eternal Word of life. Bless us in its hearing, through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Have you ever felt stuck between what was and what comes next? That space where your past is catching up to you, your future feels terrifying, and you’re just left in the dark, totally alone? There are nights when the dark doesn’t just cover the land—it sits heavy on your chest.

That was Jacob on the riverbank at the Jabbok River in the darkest night of his life. He was experiencing an intense existential crisis—what the 16th-century Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross called “*the dark night of the soul*.” It is a season when faith feels dry, hope feels distant, and even God seems silent. But in that midnight place, God met him in an all-night *wrestling match*. Jacob fought, held on, and refused to let go.

While St. John of the Cross described this experience centuries ago, it is no less common today. We see it in people who have grown weary of easy answers, who are finding that the faith they once knew no longer seems to answer life's hardest questions. The psalmist echoes this sentiment of despair and loss of faith when he declares, “*How long, O Lord?... How long must I bear pain in my soul...How long shall my enemy be exalted over me*” (Ps. 13:1-2).

The American novelist Flannery O'Connor wrote, “*The experience of losing your faith, or of having lost it, is an experience that in the long run belongs to faith; or at least it can belong to faith.... 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief,' is the most natural and most human and most agonizing prayer in the Gospels... and I think it is the foundation prayer of faith.*”¹

O'Connor is saying that doubt isn't the opposite of faith—it's often part of it. A shallow belief collapses under pressure, but wrestling with hard questions creates a stronger, more mature faith. The period of unbelief isn't the end of the journey, but can be a sign that your faith is growing.

¹ Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, Sally Fitzgerald, ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 476–479.

The theologian Hemchand Gossal wrote: "If we do not struggle or wrestle with God, our faith remains at a very basic level, untested and unexamined."²

Jacob's prayer, "*I will not let you go until you bless me*," expresses that same foundation of faith. It is another way of praying, "*Lord, I believe; help my unbelief*" (Mk. 9:24).

To understand what happens at the Jabbok River, we need to see where Jacob has been. His journey from Canaan to Syria and back changes more than his address. It changes him.

Genesis 32 finds Jacob heading home after twenty years in exile. He left with nothing. Now he returns with a large family, great wealth, and God's blessing. But one problem remains: he must face the brother he betrayed.

Years earlier, Jacob stole Esau's birthright and blessing, then fled for his life after Esau vowed to kill him. Now God calls him home with one promise: "I will be with you."

Jacob might have thought he was just escaping his father-in-law, Laban. But every step south brought him closer to the brother he wronged. And then the news hits: Esau is coming to meet him with four hundred men.

Jacob is trapped between the brother he wronged and the future he fears. As one commentator puts it, he is "caught between a campfire and an inferno."³

Jacob panics. His old instincts return. He divides his family into two groups for safety. He sends gifts ahead to appease Esau. He prays desperately.

Finally, under the cover of darkness, Jacob sends his family across the Jabbok River and stays behind.

Jacob is alone.

That's a remarkable detail. For perhaps the first time in his life, there is no one left to outwit, bargain with, or blame. The last time Jacob was alone at

² Hemchand Gossal, *Barrenness and Blessing: Abraham, Sarah, and the Journey of Faith* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), 44.

³ Rachel Wrenn, "Commentary on Genesis 32:22-31," *Working Preacher*, October 16, 2022.

night was twenty years earlier at Bethel. There, God met him in a dream (Gen. 28:10-22). Here on a river bank, God meets him in struggle.

Our text says, "*Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.*"

Before Jacob can face his brother, he has to face God. He fights, he grips, and he refuses to let go until God blesses him.

When the sun finally rises, Jacob walks away a different man. God renames him *Israel*—"the one who strives with God"—and marks him with a permanent limp.

But that limp wasn't a mark of defeat. It became a reminder of grace.

We often treat this wrestling match as a sudden, isolated event. But if you look closely at Jacob's story, he has *always* lived on the threshold. Jacob spends his whole life living between one thing and another. Between home and exile. Between blessing and deceit. Between fear and faith.

Many of us know what it feels like to live in the in-between. The long, agonizing wait between a diagnosis and recovery. The gap between a lost career and a new calling. The heavy threshold of grief after a loss. Or the disorienting seasons of cultural upheaval—where the old rules no longer work, and the new reality hasn't taken shape.

Living on the threshold is exhausting. It feels like limbo. But as Jacob's story shows us: the in-between is the very place where God meets us. Our struggles are sometimes the very places where God is at work in our lives.

Jacob doesn't leave that riverbank untouched. As the first light of dawn breaks, his opponent touches the socket of Jacob's hip, wrenching it out of joint. When Jacob asks the stranger for his name, God gives no answer. Instead of providing complete understanding, God gives him something far greater: **a new name and a new identity.**

He entered that night as Jacob the trickster, relying on his own cunning. He emerges at dawn as *Israel*—*the one who strives with God*.

From that moment on, God's people would be defined not by flawless obedience, but by the courage to hold on through the night.

And from that day on, he walked with a limp.

A limp slows you down. It advertises your vulnerability to the world. But Jacob's limp was not a mark of defeat—it was a lasting mark of grace, proof that he had met God face-to-face and lived.

His hip was put out of joint, **so his soul could be made whole.**

He could no longer outrun his past. He could only walk into God's future—slowly, one step at a time, depending entirely on the God who held him.

The story ends with one of the most beautiful lines in all of Scripture:

"The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip."

The long night of struggle was over. The wrestling was done. The sun rose upon Jacob—not on a perfect man, not on a man with all the answers, but on a man who had finally surrendered to grace. And limping into the morning light, he stepped forward to meet his brother.

Friends, many of us are living in the in-between, wrestling through our own dark night of the soul. Perhaps you're facing a transition you never expected. Perhaps you're carrying old wounds or wrestling with doubts about your faith, your future, or your worth. Perhaps you're wondering if this long night will ever end.

If that is you today, hear this good news: **Do not let go.**

Do not rush from the struggle. And do not hide your exhaustion from God. God is not frightened by your questions, your anger, or your tears. Hold fast to God in the dark, even when everything you used to rely on is gone.

You might not get every answer you ask for. You may emerge from your struggle marked by pain, walking with a limp, but you will make it through. And in the very place you were broken and wounded, you will find yourself blessed.

The night will pass. The sun will rise upon you. For as the psalmist assures us, *"Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning"* (Ps. 30:5). Thanks be to God. **Amen.**