

Taken to the Mat Genesis 32:22-32

It happened at the 1912 Summer Olympics during the Graeco-Roman style wrestling competition for the Middleweight A division, which is up to 165 lbs. A field of 38 wrestlers from 13 nations were competing. It was a double-elimination tournament. Each wrestler drew a number. You faced off against the wrestler with the next number unless they had already faced that wrestler and that wrestler was not from the same nation unless it meant a bye. When only three wrestlers remained, the double-elimination ended and a special final round determined the order of the medals.

The match began July 6 and ended on July 15. There were eight rounds including the final medal round with the three remaining wrestlers. Martin Klein representing Russia
Claes Johanson representing Sweden
Alfred Asikainen representing Finland

Klein and Asikainen drew the first match of the medal round, which turned out to be the last match in the tournament. Their match lasted 11 hours and forty minutes, setting a world record as the longest wrestling match in modern history. Klein eventually defeated his opponent and claimed the victory. However, he was so exhausted officials ruled that he was unfit to compete in the final. Johanson had only one loss in the preceding seven rounds, which was to Asikainen, and so received the gold medal.

Our passage in **Genesis 32** is about another lengthy wrestling match, one that would last all night but have far greater significance than winning a gold medal. It was more than just a physical match up. For Jacob, it was also spiritual. So with your Bibles turned to **Genesis 32**, we will be looking at **verses 22-32** this morning. In this encounter, Jacob's faith is again tested resulting in a change to his outlook and nature. It shows us that we all have struggles with which we must contend, struggles that will shape our faith. They are God's methods of showing the need for surrender.

Jacob's entire life has been a litany of never-ending

struggle. It began in the womb when Rebekah wondered at the struggle going on inside her. God told her that there were two children who would in time both become nations. In their struggle with each other the older would serve the younger.

At birth he struggled by grasping the heel of his brother Esau. He was appropriately named heel catcher or one who grabs at the heel and so given the name Jacob. He lived up to his name as one who is a deceiver, a liar, a cheat. He cheated Esau out of his birthright and lied to his father to get the blessing.

Then he struggled with Laban over his wives and his possessions and even his very life.

If we didn't see the sovereignty of God in all this, we might agree with the saying that some people are born for trouble. That seemed to be Jacob. Everywhere he went trouble seemed to follow him.

Knowing about all his struggles that characterized his life helps us understand the passage better that we are considering today. Some have said he was driven, perhaps even bordering on ruthless. But he was also a man full of fear and anxiety. I believe that comes with being a deceiver. That kind of person may be moving forward with his feet but he is always looking over his shoulder in fear of someone coming after him. Jacob did that as he fled home until he reached Bethel where he met God for the first time. He couldn't help but wonder if Esau, who had spewed out murderous threats, might be chasing him. They weren't idle threats mind you. He intended to snuff out the life of his nemesis.

When he left Padan-aram in fear of Laban he couldn't help but look back over his shoulder. I believe he had that gnawing feeling Laban would catch up with him. It's the kind of feeling that makes the hair on the back of your head stand up. Fear and anxiety are inherently attached to deception and lies. They are joined at the hip.

Jacob is at a crossroad in his life. It's a pivotal time as he prepares to meet his brother. I said last week that the tests of faith never end. There will always

be another. We'll never know when it will come or how it will unfold, so we must be prepared. Jacob was preparing for the next one. This next test of faith was coming in the form of a meeting with Esau. He was coming to see him and from his perspective it appeared to be a hostile meeting.

Hearing that 400 men were riding with Esau sent shock waves of despair coursing through his body. We saw in **verse 7** that he was in great fear and distress on hearing the news. Now remember that in **verse 1** he had just seen the host of God's angels who were surrounding and accompanying him. This was not a vision or dream. He could see them and they were a reminder of God's protection. But here Jacob is scared to death. It's not a welcome wagon coming to meet him. It's an army with uncertain intentions. It's probably been a long day of anticipation. The next day would be their meeting.

Before this meeting Jacob has another meeting and we see in **verses 22-23** Jacob's actions.

I. JACOB'S ACTIONS – vs. 22-23

We discover in **verse 22** that it is nighttime. Jacob took his four wives and 11 sons and sent them across the Jabbok river. Let me give you a picture of where they are. Here is the Sea of Galilee to the north and the Dead Sea to the south with the Jordan River running between the two. The Jabbok River is a tributary of the Jordan River located about 20 miles north of the Dead Sea. It's on the east side. Jacob is on the north side of the river. Esau is coming up from the south. Jacob sent his family and all his possessions across the river at night. Why he did that is unclear. We learned last week that he was hoping to appease Esau or should we say hoping that after seeing his family Esau might have some compassion. In a moment we'll see that he didn't join his family but stayed on the other side of the river. Some might view that as cowardly. Maybe he was falling back to his old deceptive nature when in reality if Esau attacked everyone else he could escape. I think he had another motive.

Just a side note here, Jabbok means wrestler, so the name was probably given after this event.

It is in **verse 24** that we see Jacob's aloneness.

II. JACOB'S ALONENESS – v. 24a

I find that word very ominous. It seems to cast a long shadow or create a dark cloud overhead that follows you everywhere you go. It's sort of the Eeyore complex. Just saying it gives underpinnings of despair. You do understand there is a difference between being by yourself and being alone, right? Being by yourself means that no one else is around. We can also call that being alone, but even though by yourself there is contentment. Some don't mind it on occasion. **In April I will be alone as Robyn and David head to DC for a class sponsored trip. Even though they won't be around, I won't find myself lonely, just by myself.**

Some people though find being alone a time of loneliness. You can be by yourself and be lonely. You can be in a crowd and be lonely. Being alone is when you believe there is no one else you can rely on. Being alone or by yourself is state. Being lonely is a feeling.

Society has created a negative connotation around being alone. When in reality psychologists say that it can be a most rewarding time. It's been suggested that if you let the loneliness consume you, you will lose the rare chance to figure out some things about yourself.

Jacob is alone, but it's unclear if he's lonely, if he feels like there isn't anyone he can rely on. He was in that same place 20 years earlier when he was fleeing from home because of Esau's threats. Not the same location, but the same state. He is alone. 20 years earlier he was at Bethel, this is Jabbok. Although they are not the same location, where Jacob finds himself is similar. As it was then, so it is here. It's a spiritual crisis. Bethel was his first, Jabbok is his second. John Phillips draws comparisons between the two. At Bethel he saw the ladder. At Jabbok he saw the Lord.

At Bethel he became a believing man.
At Jabbok he became a broken man.

At Bethel he became a son of God.
At Jabbok he became a saint of God.

At Bethel he died to sin.
At Jabbok he died to self.

I would suggest that each of us has had times at Bethel and Jabbok where we have been alone in the midst of a spiritual crisis. There are similarities for us as well. We have spent time pondering the past, the present and the future trying to understand how we have come to be in the situation we are in and how we can get out of it, if we even can. It can be a time when we truly find God.

It was British essayist Walter Savage Landor who called solitude “the audience-chamber of God.”

Alone times are when God has our attention. It’s when we can finally be still and know that He is God. It’s when we see ourselves as God sees us and recognize that change is necessary.

Jacob found himself in the audience chamber of God. I believe his intention for being alone was not out of cowardice but for prayerful contemplation, a time of concerted prayer. I think it was a time of soul searching. That’s a necessary endeavor when one begins to follow the Lord. God had told him to return home. He was obeying the Lord’s command, but there were some skeletons in the closet he had to deal with and that’s when it happened.

Verse 24 not only shows us Jacob’s aloneness, we also see Jacob’s adversary.

III. JACOB’S ADVERSARY – v. 24b-26

There has been considerable debate about this adversary. Was it a man? Was it an angel? Was it God? Is it just an allegory that speaks of the spiritual battles we wrestle with?

Hosea 12:3-4

Hosea seems to indicate that it was an angel. But did you also notice the intensity or fervency in pleasing as he wept for God’s favor. We’ll see this mystery man’s identity in a moment. In the meantime, this as yet unknown assailant has perhaps been watching in the shadows, hidden

behind some boulder or tree. It is nighttime after all, so it’s conceivable that Jacob didn’t see this mystery man in the dark. He thought he was alone, it was night, but we know from Scripture that we are never alone. **(Hebrews 13:5 “I will never leave you or forsake you.”)**

Notice though something that oftentimes remains undetected in the text. It’s easy to overlook something that is in plain sight. I love trying to find Waldo in all those pictures. What is in plain sight for us in the text that we overlook is that this adversary was the one who initiated the wrestling match. It doesn’t say that Jacob wrestled with the man, but that the man wrestled with Jacob. Kids would say “he started it.”

Once again, Jacob found himself engaged in another struggle, this time with someone he didn’t know. And we read that this wrestling match lasted until daybreak. It wasn’t quite as long a match as the 1912 Olympic games, but it did last all night. This match was not for sport but was intended to grow Jacob’s faith, to help him recognize what he was really wrestling with.

All night long it was a draw. Neither had an advantage. Jacob was still trying to win by his own efforts. He had no idea this was the pre-incarnate Christ he was wrestling against or what he was in fact wrestling for. The mystery man saw no clear advantage over him physically, so He did something supernatural. He touched Jacob’s hip socket and put it out of joint. Now in pain, all that Jacob could do was hang on. My first reaction would be to let go, but not Jacob. I think it was at that moment he realized who his opponent was.

A couple of questions come to mind. **Is there something you are wrestling with in which it is really God you are wrestling against? Or are they things that cause you to cling to Him more tightly?** When God showed up and initiated the match, Jacob was anxiously contemplating the pending confrontation with Esau.

Let me read an excerpt from The Genesis Record written by Henry Morris who helps to explain that

this was is of greater importance that Jacob's pending meeting with Esau. "This experience must, therefore, have been an exceedingly important event in the history of man's redemption. Jacob, whom God had chosen to be the father of the children of Israel, through whom He would finally come into the world not only in the form of man but as the very Son of Man, was facing the greatest opposition to the accomplishment of his divinely ordered mission. If Esau were to be victorious here, all of God's plans and promises would be defeated, and the world would never have a Savior.

It was essential that Jacob receive both understanding and assurance concerning the supreme importance of his mission. He must learn clearly, as he began the establishment of the chosen nation, that God was all-sufficient and that he had been prepared by God to accomplish this incomparable task. He must know fully his own weakness, but even more he must know the power of God and his right to claim that power.

Little did he dream, as he began to pray that night, that his agony of soul as he cried to God for strength and deliverance would soon become an actual physical battle, and with none other than God Himself. As he earnestly wrestled in prayer, it was as though he sensed that God was really present with him and was declining to grant his request, perhaps because of Jacob's remaining fears and doubts, perhaps also because of his greater immediate concern for physical protection rather than for the fulfillment of God's purposes.

As he felt more and more this conflict, he cried the more earnestly to God, seeing ever more clearly that it was not the immediate dangers that should be the burden of his prayers, but rather the accomplishment of God's will for all men everywhere. God's presence and purpose became more and more real to him until, suddenly, He *was* real! His uplifted arms were actually clinging to God Himself, God in human form. Jacob felt that, if he ever let go, it would mean that God had left him, with prayer unanswered; and so he clung desperately, pleading all the while for His blessing.

God in grace allowed him to hang on, seeing that Jacob's faith and understanding were growing as he clung." (Page 499-500)

God left a permanent mark on Jacob as a visible reminder of his need to cling to God. Jacob was forever changed by that meeting. ***When we meet God, we will never walk the same again.***

Jacob relentlessly clung to God because that's all he could do. God brought him to a point in his life where all his self-efforts were of no help and all he could do was cling to God. He does the same in us as well where all we can do is hold on to Him. He strips us of our pride and self-effort so that we cling to Him. Jacob came to realize that he was wrestling over the wrong thing. He was wrestling with something that was temporal and God redirected his thinking to wrestle over what was eternal.

One author raises these questions: **What do you really want from God right now? What blessing do you want from Him? How badly do you want it?** He further suggests that "God will meet you in your anguish, fear, and uncertainty. But He may not meet you in the way you expect or desire. Your greatest ally may show up looking at first like your adversary, inciting you to wrestle with Him...So when God calls you to wrestle with Him in prayer, it is an invitation to receive His blessing. Stay with Him and don't give up. Do not let Him go until He blesses you! He loves to bless that kind of tenacious faith and you will come out transformed."

James 5:16 says that the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. The KJV describes that kind of prayer as fervent. But remember this, it doesn't mean that we can ask God's blessing on anything we want. Last week we considered that such prayer needs to be according to God's Word and according to God's will. The prayer God blesses is prayer according to His Word and will, earnestly given by a someone who is righteous.

But before he could receive a blessing, Jacob had to make an admission.

IV. JACOB'S ADMISSION – vs. 27-28

Throughout his life Jacob had been a deceiver, a liar, a cheat.

Back in **chapter 27** his mother instructed him to lie to his father by taking him a meal to get the blessing. His father was blind, so Jacob deceived him with a kiss, he deceived him with his clothes, he deceived him with his cuisine, he deceived him with his character.

Who are you? Isaac asked.

I am Esau, your firstborn.

Isaac couldn't tell who he was, but when the truth came out after Esau arrived on the scene, Esau was correct in saying about him **"Isn't he rightly named Jacob?"**

Now Jacob's challenger asked Him to make an admission. Who are you? Give me your name. If you really want a blessing, admit who you are. Jacob needed to admit his true identity not just his name, but his character.

"I'm Jacob." By giving his name he admitted to being a deceiver, a liar, a cheat. **A.W. Tozer is right in saying that "The Lord cannot fully bless a man until He has fully conquered him."**

I have heard it said that admission is the first step to any kind of addiction. Until you admit who you are, you won't be serious about your problem.

The first step in salvation is admitting that you are a sinner. Unless and until we make that admission, we can never receive God's grace and forgiveness, we'll never know His cleansing transformation. That's the difference between the religious leader and the tax collector who came to the temple to pray.

The religious leader couldn't admit he was a sinner. He wouldn't admit he was a sinner. He puffed himself up about how great he was and that he wasn't like other low lives like the poor sinner next to him. Pride gives people a false sense of security about their destiny.

On the other hand, the tax collector was willing to admit he was a sinner in need of God's mercy. He was blessed for his willful admission.

The Lord didn't need to know Jacob's name. He already knew it. He wanted to see if Jacob would finally admit his true character in order to bring about a redemptive work in his heart. Jacob's admission was a significant point in his life, one that gave him a new and better understanding of God's grace. So asking his name was not new information. It was a way of asking Jacob if he was going to continue to be the same deceiver, cheat he had been all his life or was he willing to change.

Would he admit it and let God change him?

It was a time for Jacob to admit his failures, to come to grips with his past, to understand his weaknesses, his sins, all the things he had been running from. It was a time for him to realize that He could go no further without God, but instead must cling to His grace. Only then did he receive God's blessing.

There will never be any real transformation until we admit who we are and that we need God. Then God can begin His transforming work in our lives. **Are we willing to admit our weaknesses, our failures, our sins in order for God to change us?**

Before he could receive the grace of God for trials in his own life Paul had to admit his own shortcomings.

II Corinthians 12:7-10

One author says "Human weakness provides the ideal opportunity for the display of divine power."

Only after Jacob's admission did he receive the blessing. It was in the form of a new name. He would no longer be called Jacob but Israel. There are several variations of what that name means, but essentially it means "he who struggles or strives with God." Jacob wasn't victorious because of his own efforts but because he was willing to admit his weaknesses and cling to God for a blessing.

Jacob the deceiver became Israel the prevailer. It wasn't just a name change. It was a change in character. He had a new nature. He was given a new name and a new beginning.

It's the same for the believer as well. In Christ we have been given a new nature and our old character

is passed away. That is the grace of God at work. After Jacob's admission we see Jacob's awareness.

V. JACOB'S AWARENESS – vs. 29-32

Jacob in turn asked to know the identity of the man he had been wrestling with. But He refused to give His name. The question **“Why do you want to know My name?”** can also be stated “you already know My name, so why do you ask?”

In reality Jacob had come to know who it was he had been wrestling with all night and who it was that had given him a blessing.

And so as he had done at Bethel, he does here giving the place a name. He called it Peniel or Penuel which means “face of God”. From here on out he will walk in the presence of God. His walk will be by faith and not by sight.

We began in **verse 22** noting that it was nighttime. Darkness had fallen, but now we see that the sun is rising. Perhaps it's the authors subtle way of suggesting that a new day was dawning for the man Israel. When we admit our weakness and God's power it is a new day for us to walk in that power.

Jacob will meet his brother with a limp. He will have to rely on God's power and promises to deliver him. I'd like to think that he enjoyed telling others why he walked with a limp and why his name had been changed to Israel.

Let me say again, that when we truly meet God, we will never walk the same again.

Let me offer some closing thoughts to this passage. It is from the pen of Frederick Beuchner who characterizes Jacob's divine encounter as the **“magnificent defeat of the human soul at the hands of God.”**

I hope that through Jacob's life you can see your own struggles: all the fears and loneliness, your vulnerability and powerlessness, your exhaustion and pain apart from God. But know this: it is not God's desire for you to remain in those battles forever. They are meant for your good and His glory and the battles grow your faith and help you

to see that when you are weak you are strong through God. They are meant to help transform us as we completely surrender to Him in all things.

One author suggests that **“In the end, Jacob does what he must do. He confronts his failures, his weaknesses, his sins, all the things that are hurting him...and faces God. It was an exhausting struggle that left him crippled. It was only after he came to grips with God and ceased his struggling, realizing that he could not go on without Him, that he received the blessing.”**

It was only after Jacob had to come to the end of himself and fully surrendered to God that he could be allowed to continue on into the promised land and receive the full blessings of God.

So let me ask in closing, what is it that you are wrestling with God about?

Is it your salvation? Is it in the admission that you are a sinner in need of a Savior?

Are you wrestling with giving God control of something?

Are you still trying in your own effort to do something that only God can do for you or through you?

Will you surrender it to Him?

Don't let it be a lifelong wrestling match. Surrender your all today.

Communion is the perfect time to talk with God and surrender those areas you have been trying to hold onto. He's waiting to bless you.