



WOUNDED BY GRACE

SERIES: *WRESTLING WITH GOD: THE JACOB NARRATIVE*

By: Scott Grant

Cursing God

In a classic scene in the movie *Forrest Gump*, Lt. Dan, bitter over a war wound that cost him his legs and robbed him of his destiny, has it out with God. When he senses God's presence, and apparently hostile intentions, in the middle of a fierce storm, he responds with relish. He lashes himself to the mast of a shrimp boat in the Gulf of Mexico, and his bitter conflict with God reaches its climax. He yells at God: "You'll never sink this boat! Come on! You call this a storm? ... It's time for a showdown—you and me! I'm right here! Come and get me!"(1)

In Genesis 32:24-32, Jacob's lifelong conflict with God comes out in the open and reaches its climax. Like Jacob, we too are often unaware that we've been fighting with God until he meets us in apparent hostility. Then we may find, like Jacob, that God wounds us in our conflicts with him in order that he might bless us.

In Genesis 32:1-23, Jacob, returning to the Promised Land, received word that his brother Esau was coming to meet him and possibly attack him. What happens next will change Jacob forever.

A man wrestles with Jacob

Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob's thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. (Genesis 32:24-25)

Jacob is preparing for his meeting with Esau. He has arranged to be by himself, with neither family nor possessions, for one last night before meeting Esau. Jacob, perhaps, is expecting to meet with God again, as he did when he was leaving the Promised Land. Whatever he expected, he couldn't have anticipated this encounter. A mysterious visitor, identified simply as "a man," appears on the bank of the Jabbok River. The narrator gives us Jacob's perspective. It's dark, and all Jacob can say about the visitor is that he's a man.

The visitor doesn't appear simply in order to meet Jacob; he appears in order to fight him. Jacob is worried about his meeting with Esau, but he has more than he can handle with this character. Before he meets— fights?—Esau, he must first fight this man.

Jacob has sent everything ahead of him, and he has no weapon with which to defend himself. However, neither is the visitor carrying a weapon. If the visitor were intent on killing him, it seemed he would have armed himself. The contest is a long one, for it lasts until daybreak. Jacob—and we readers—wonder: What is this man up to?

The narrator gives us a tantalizing hint by using the word "wrestled" (*yabok*), which appears only in this passage in the Old Testament and which in Hebrew sounds like the name Jacob (*yakob*). This wrestling match has something to do with Jacob's name, so it has something to do with his identity and his character. The word

“wrestled” is also a play on the name of the river, Jabbok (*yabbok*). On the bank of the river that sounds like his name, Jacob has an encounter that has something to do with his name. The poetry of this encounter suggests that it is a meaningful one.

The match is even. Jacob was a man of great strength, so this is surprising (Genesis 29:10). The narrator now gives us the perspective of the visitor, who “saw” that he had not prevailed against Jacob. The visitor therefore dislocates the socket of Jacob’s thigh, and he does so with a mere touch. This raises some questions: Who is this “man” with this strange power? If he has this power, why didn’t he use it earlier? Why doesn’t he simply defeat Jacob instead of wrestling him to a draw? Why doesn’t he kill Jacob?

Jacob, the man of strength, is injured in a critical area. If he survives this encounter, his wound would make him vulnerable for his confrontation with Esau.

Jacob holds on

Then he said, “Let me go, for the dawn is breaking.” But he said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” (Genesis 32:26-27)

If this man is powerful enough to injure Jacob with a simple touch, he is powerful enough to free himself from Jacob’s grasp. Nevertheless, he *asks* Jacob to release him. The reason given for his request is that dawn is breaking. The daylight would reveal more of the visitor than he wants known at this time.

Jacob realizes that he’s met his match. He knows he’s in the presence of a superior foe, perhaps a messenger of God of some kind. Remember, prior to this he’s had two encounters with angels (Genesis 28:12, 32:2). And although he’s hobbled, he continues to hold on. Jacob, who came out of the womb grasping the heel of his brother, and has grasped for things his whole life, continues—in pain—to cling to this powerful visitor. Jacob must believe that the man, despite the appearance of hostility, has benevolent intentions. Why cling to someone who can kill you with a mere flick of the wrist unless you trust him?

Jacob holds on because he wants a blessing. No doubt he remembers that Melchizedek, a mysterious visitor from Salem, blessed Abraham, Jacob’s grandfather (Genesis 14:17-20). Jacob posed as Esau in order to get the patriarchal blessing from his father. He wants something other than a blessing obtained through trickery. To be blessed because your father thinks you’re someone else doesn’t, in the end, feel like much of a blessing. Now Jacob knows he’s in the presence of someone superior, and he wants a real, face-to-face blessing.

The visitor asks a question that takes Jacob on a tour of his life: “What is your name?” To know someone’s name was necessary to give a blessing. The person’s name was usually included in the blessing. Jacob’s name meant “Heel Grabber,” “Supplanter” and “Deceiver” (Genesis 26:26, 27:36) He has been true to his name in his dealings with Esau, Isaac and Laban.

He didn’t admit his name when he sought a blessing the first time. His father asked him, “Who are you, my son?” Jacob answered, “I am Esau your firstborn; I have done as you told me. Get up, please, sit and eat of my game, that you may bless me” (Genesis 27:18-20). How will Jacob answer this time? Jacob, who used a multitude of clever words to manipulate the people in his world, including his father the last time he sought a blessing, answers with only one word: “Jacob.” And so, for the first time, Jacob confesses. The mirror that God held up to Jacob’s face in Haran has worked. In Haran, Jacob reaped what he had sowed and sowed what he had reaped. He has seen himself, and it isn’t a pretty picture.

Here, then, is a different Jacob. Jacob, who hid behind animal skins to get a blessing from his father and who even moments ago sent a gift ahead of him to protect himself from his brother, comes out of hiding. This Jacob answers with his name. And if he is going to seek a blessing, he will seek it by being himself and admitting his flaws: “I am Jacob, yes! I am the Heel Grabber! I am the Supplanter! I am the Deceiver! And I want a blessing!”

A new name for Jacob

He said, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.” (Genesis 32:28)

The visitor responds by giving Jacob more than a blessing; he gives him a new name: Israel. The name is related to the Hebrew word for “strive.” The visitor connects the name with Jacob’s contentious nature. Jacob has “striven with God and with men.” Jacob’s struggle with men—Esau, Isaac and Laban—has been evident. His struggle with God has been less evident, but it has shown up in his struggle with men, which demonstrated his insistence on doing things his way. But the stranger’s words make one wonder: Is this “man” who Jacob has wrestled with in some sense God?

The visitor declares an intriguing victor in Jacob’s struggles. The victor is Jacob! In his struggles against God and men, Jacob has “prevailed.” Such a conclusion leads us to ask, “How has Jacob prevailed?” The man had not defeated Jacob, though he certainly could have. Neither had Jacob defeated the man. The match was even. How can it be said that Jacob has prevailed?

The victory of Jacob is his wound. He fought with God and men so long and hard that he finally snapped—literally. He pushed against life, and it pushed back. He was wounded so that, at least physically, he could fight no longer.

His injury was the final step on the long road to self-discovery. He realized that he could not possibly defeat this man. He understood the limitations of his strength and his wound showed him the weakness of his heel-grabbing approach to life. His greatest defeat, then, was his greatest victory. He had striven with God and men and had been wounded, but the wound was the final lesson that taught him to answer, “Jacob.” The wound also taught him to hold on and ask for a blessing. Here is extraordinary trust: Jacob clings to someone who has the power to kill him in the hope that he will bless him. And so, Jacob gets a new name—that is to say, he gets a new destiny (Genesis 17:5, 15). He has been transformed into the father of a nation—the nation of Israel, the nation that will save all nations. The name Israel evokes Jacob’s injury. It would be a reminder to him that his strength would be in his weakness, which taught him dependence.

The visitor blesses Jacob

Then Jacob asked him and said, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And he blessed him there. So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved.” (Genesis 32:29-30)

So, who is this strange visitor? Jacob wants to know: “Please tell me your name.” The man not only refuses to answer the question, he asks *why* Jacob asks it. This interaction foreshadows an encounter between Manoah, Samson’s father, and the “angel of the Lord” in Judges 13:17-18, which casts light on the meaning here. The angel of the Lord was a manifestation of God himself, for Manoah said to his wife, “We shall surely die, for we have seen God” (Judges 13:22). The man who wrestled with Jacob, then, seems to be saying, “Don’t you know who I am?” The answer to that question, Jacob realizes, or will soon realize, is God.

Jacob may be asking the name of the visitor because he now wants to offer him a blessing in return. But the man is not here to receive a blessing, only to give a blessing. God grants Jacob the blessing he sought, but it becomes anticlimactic after the name change. The narrator says nothing about the content of the blessing. Notice that the *place* of blessing becomes more important than its content: “And he blessed him *there*.” God blessed Jacob in the place where he wounded him, so for Jacob, the place of wounding becomes the place of blessing.

Jacob has been blessed and named by God. Jacob, however, cannot bless God, much less name him, but he can name the place where he wrestled with God. Twenty years ago, Jacob named the place where he encountered

God Bethel, which means “House of God.” This place he names Peniel (or Penuel), which means “Face of God.” His reason for doing so is that “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved.”

Jacob identifies the mysterious visitor as God himself. In this case, God briefly appeared as a man. One day, he would take the form of a man permanently (John 1:1, Philippians 2:5-11). If Jacob had known this was God from the beginning, would he have wrestled with him? Well, probably not. God kept his identity hidden from Jacob, at least in part so that Jacob would get the picture: He’s been wrestling with God his whole life.

In Jacob’s worldview, anyone who has an intimate encounter with God should not expect to survive (Exodus 33:20, Isaiah 6:5). Of all people, Jacob, the deceiver, would expect to be destroyed by such a meeting. Yet, he has been preserved. Both the humility and grace of God are on display. The match is even, God *asks* Jacob to let him go and Jacob’s life is spared.

His hip, however, is not spared. The old Jacob has not survived, either. A new Jacob is born. We are still left to wonder, however: Will Jacob survive his face-to-face encounter with Esau?

A new day for Jacob

Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Penuel, and he was limping on his thigh. Therefore, to this day the sons of Israel do not eat the sinew of the hip which is on the socket of the thigh, because he touched the socket of Jacob’s thigh in the sinew of the hip. (Genesis 32:31-32)

The narrator reports a sunrise. He reported a sunset in Genesis 28:11, just before Jacob’s encounter with angels and God at Bethel. Since then, it’s been 20 years of darkness, so to speak. Finally, as Jacob moves toward the Promised Land, in fulfillment of God’s promise to him, he feels the warmth of a new day. It’s a new Jacob, a new day, a new era.

In verse 31, the narrator uses a more recognizable spelling—Penuel instead of Peniel—for the name of the place where Jacob wrestled with God (Judges 8:8-9, 17; 1 Kings 12:25). Jacob leaves the place of his encounter with God and moves forward into his new life. But the place has left its mark on him; God has left his mark on him. He limps into his new life, every step reminding him of this place. Every step reminding him that he is weak and dependent and he will limp into the reunion with Esau that he has dreaded ever since he left the Promised Land.

The sons of Israel (the nation of Israel) would also be reminded of this place. They would commemorate Jacob’s encounter with God by setting aside the sinew of the hip of the animals they ate. The nation would not only remember Jacob by this, it would identify with him. The nation of Israel would prevail by being wounded. She would be a wounded nation, dependent on her God.

Is it any wonder, therefore, that the Messiah of Israel separated himself from others to meet with God alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, as Jacob did by the Jabbok River, and that he was wounded beyond recognition on the cross of Golgotha? The church of Jesus Christ, like Israel of old, is a wounded people, who take up their crosses, and the pain of the world, in order to bring to it the healing of their Savior.

Wrestling with God

Whatever we expect of our meetings with God, we don’t expect to encounter him this way. What if we came to church to worship God and he responded by attacking us? We are usually more concerned about our encounters with the Esaus of our world, until God shows up in apparent hostility. And we know that before we take on whatever it is that terrifies us, we must first take on God himself.

Our wrestling match with God has something to do with our identity and our character. We want to know,

“Who are we? How should we live our lives?” Or, perhaps we don’t want to know because we’re afraid of the answers. The answers often emerge, whether we like it or not, in our conflicts with God.

We are often resolute in our resistance to God, wrestling with him into the night, and into the years. Some of us spend our entire lives wrestling with God before yielding to him. Some of us never yield. But, when we’re wrestling God, we’re contending with someone who has the power to destroy us with the flick of a wrist. We may be strong, but we’re not very smart. Nevertheless, God doesn’t destroy us; he only wounds us. He wounds us so that we feel vulnerable in our world, without the health or the skills or the intellect or the appearance or the relationships that we consider essential.

Does Jacob’s story resonate with you? Do you find yourself, perhaps even to your own surprise, wrestling against God and his will?

Seeking God’s blessing

Note the humility of God: Our match with him is even. He does not defeat us. He meets us, but he does not overpower us. He even asks us to release him—to let him be who he is and do what he wants to do in our lives. He lets us choose whether we want to yield to him and his ways. Although he will not defeat us, neither will we defeat him. No matter how strong you are, you cannot overpower God. When you’ve met him, you’ve met your match.

When you realize that you can’t win, it’s time to give up. But don’t let go. Instead, like Jacob, hold on. Perhaps, like Jacob, you’ve grasped for things your whole life, but you’ve never held onto God before, at least not like this. You haven’t done so because you haven’t been convinced of his goodness. But now, as you see that he has entered your life not to destroy you, it begins to dawn on you that his intentions must be good. So you cling to him as if your life depended on it, even if you’re hobbled and in pain—especially if you’re in pain!

To receive the blessing of your world, perhaps you’ve felt that you’ve had to be someone else. But, to be blessed because you’ve tricked the world into thinking you’re someone you’re not feels no better to you than it felt to Jacob. Like Jacob, you want a real blessing, a face-to-face blessing, and you want it from God. However, God first asks you a question: “What is your name?” With this question, he gives you a tour of your life. Who are you? The answer goes something like this: “Jacob.” Truthfully, there is a Jacob in each of us—a heel grabber, a supplanter, a deceiver. Up to now you haven’t wanted to admit it, in part because you think someone like that couldn’t possibly receive a blessing. But now that you see yourself in a wrestling match with God, you say, “My whole life has been like this.”

What’s your name? In one way or another, you’ve been answering, “Esau.” And you have said to your world: “I have done as you told me. Get up, please, and appreciate what I have prepared for you that you may bless me.” You have tried to offer your world a more acceptable version of yourself. But God will have none of it. So finally, you come out of hiding and you cry out to God: “I am the Heel Grabber! I am the Supplanter! I am the Deceiver! And I want a blessing!”

A letter to Jacob

Brennan Manning writes of when he not only recognized the Jacob in himself but wrote a letter to him, whom he calls “the false self,” “the imposter” and even “you little jerk”:

When I was a little shaver and first knew that no one was there for me, you intervened and showed me where to hide...At that moment in time, you were invaluable. Without your intervention I would have been overwhelmed by dread and paralyzed by fear. You were there for me and played a crucial, protective role in my development. Thank you....

But then your malevolent side appeared and you started lying to me. “Brennan,” you whispered, “if you persist

in this folly of being yourself, your few long-suffering friends will hit the bricks, leaving you all alone. Stuff your feelings, shut down your memories, withhold your opinions and develop social graces so you'll fit in wherever you are."

And so, the elaborate game of pretense and deception began. Because it worked I raised no objection. As the years rolled by, you-I got strokes from a variety of sources. We were elated and concluded that the game must go on.

But you needed someone to bridle you and rein you in. I had neither the perception nor the courage to tame you, so you continued to rumble like Sherman through Atlanta, gathering momentum along the way. Your appetite for attention and affirmation became insatiable. I never confronted you with the lie because I was deceived myself.

The bottom line, my pampered playmate, is that you are both needy and selfish. You need care, love and a safe dwelling place. On this last day in the Rockies my gift is to take you where, unknowingly, you have longed to be—into the presence of Jesus. Your days of running riot are history. From now on you slow down, slow very down.

In his presence, I notice that you have already begun to shrink. Wanna know somethin', little guy? You're much more attractive that way. I am nicknaming you "Pee-Wee." Naturally, you are not going to roll over and suddenly die. I now you will get disgruntled and at times start to act out, but the longer you spend time in the presence of Jesus, the more accustomed you grow to his face, the less adulation you will need because you will have discovered for yourself that He is Enough. And in the Presence, you will delight in the discovery of what it means to live by grace and not by performance.(2)

Perhaps Jacob, when he finally answered with his name, could have written such a letter. Perhaps we might write such a letter, or at least resonate with the spirit of it.

Strange victory

Although we never achieve more than a tie in our matches with God, there is a way that, paradoxically, we can prevail. When we fight long and hard against God, sometimes we snap, perhaps not literally, like Jacob, but emotionally. We push against life, and it pushes back. Life and even God himself sometimes, wounds us so that we will fight no longer.

Our wound, though, is a step on the road to self-discovery. It helps us to understand our limitations, and the weakness of our approach to life. Our greatest defeats, then, become our greatest victories. We have striven with God and with men and women and been wounded. That means that we have triumphed, if we have the awareness to accept the wound as a victory.

The wound teaches us to answer "Jacob" instead of "Esau." It teaches us extraordinary trust: to hold on and ask for blessing from a God who has the power to destroy us. It teaches us that our strength is in our weakness, where we learn to depend on God. Finally, the wound gives us a new destiny and enables us to enter the world as ourselves, not someone else. The new destiny is often wrapped around the wound. The place where you hurt the most may be the place where you have the most to offer.

The apostle Paul says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Corinthians 1:3).

Larry Crabb writes that his grandmother spent the last years of her life blind. As a teen-ager, he asked her, "Grandma, what's it like to be blind?" Crabb remembers: "With eyes that saw more than sighted people ever could, she looked at me and said, 'Oh, Larry. I can pray so much better for you now than when I could see.

Blindness cuts down on the distractions.’”(3) Crabb’s grandmother embraced her weakness and found a new destiny.

The new you

Perhaps in our mysterious conflicts in life, God is whispering in the darkness, “Don’t you know who I am? Don’t you know you’ve been wrestling with me your whole life?” God fights against us—he helps us give up—only to bless us and fight for us. He blesses the heel grabbers, supplanters and deceivers who come out of hiding. Just as he blessed Jacob “there,” God blesses us in the place where he wounds us. Therefore, the place of wounding becomes the place of blessing.

We have every right to expect to be destroyed by such an intimate encounter with God. But if Jacob, the deceiver, is not destroyed, neither are we. Certainly, the coming of Jesus Christ assures us of this. When we look into the face of Christ, as Paul tells us we are able to do, we are looking into the face of God. As we look into his face, we are not only “preserved,” as Jacob was, but we are saved and transformed (2 Corinthians 3:18, 4:6).

But that which you consider your strength may not survive this encounter with God. You won’t survive, either—at least the old you won’t. In a sense, a new person is born. As you emerge from the darkness, you feel the warmth of a new day. Still, God has left his mark on you. You limp into the future, and into the encounters with the Esaus of your life, with God as your strength. Your new way of walking is, in the words of Manning, “the victorious limp.”(4) You, therefore, understand yourself to be part of the wounded nation, the church of Jesus Christ, people by whom the healing of his wounds is brought to a world in pain.

Embrace of love

If God wounds us in our conflicts with him in order that he might bless us, his intentions are only apparently hostile. When we stop wrestling with him and start clinging to him, we find that his intentions are not hostile and never have been. We may have been wrestling with him, but he has not been wrestling with us; he has been embracing us with his love.

NOTES

(1) *Forrest Gump*, © 1994 Paramount Pictures.

(2) Brennan Manning, *Abba’s Child*, © 1994 by Brennan Manning, Navpress, Colorado Springs, Col. Pp 43-45.

(3) Larry Crabb, *Connecting*, © 1997 by Larry Crabb, Word Publishing, Nashville, Tenn. P. 164.

(4) Brennan Manning, *The Signature of Jesus*, © 1992 by Brennan Manning, Multnomah Press, Portland, Ore. P. 188.

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Genesis 32:24-32

12th Message

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