

Wrestling with God

In the name of him who is to judge the living and the dead, dear friends in Christ: There are certain passages of the Bible that make you do a double take. You read over the words and say, “What? Did I read that right?” Then you go back and check, and sure enough, there it is: something that doesn’t make any sense or that appears to be an impossibility. There are many passages like that; but today’s Old Testament lesson really takes the cake.

It’s the story of the Patriarch Jacob spending an entire night wrestling with an unnamed man who seems to appear out of nowhere. You’re forced to wonder, “Who is this guy and what’s he got against Jacob?” As you read on it turns out that the man is none other than the Lord himself—which only raises more questions: “Why would God come down to earth in human form to spend a whole night sweating, straining, and rolling around in the dust in a knockdown, drag out fight with a mere mortal?” Does that even begin to make sense? And if that hasn’t got you completely confused, then you read on to your utter astonishment that in the middle of this fight the Lord finds that he isn’t able to beat Jacob. *What? The Almighty can’t win in a fair fight?* Apparently not; that *is* what the Scripture says. So instead he cripples Jacob—and even then, with Jacob’s hip out of joint, the Lord still isn’t able to get away from him. *God can’t escape from a wounded man* – a wounded man who happens to be somewhere in the neighborhood of 100 years old when this incident occurs. Really?

What’s going on here? What is this story about? And what is it revealing to us about the Lord God and his plan of salvation in Jesus Christ – because as we heard in today’s Epistle, that is the purpose of all the God-breathed Scriptures. So bear with me, if you would, because if we take the time to unravel the mysteries here, our efforts will be rewarded.

To begin, let’s back up a bit. Who is Jacob and what events and circumstances brought him to this most unusual encounter with God? Recall that Jacob was one of the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekkah. Isaac was Abraham’s son, so Jacob would be the grandson of the first of the patriarchs; the one to whom the Lord had first promised to give the land of Israel and through whom he had promised to bring the Savior into the world. You may remember too the strange and prophetic circumstances of Jacob’s birth. His mother, Rebekkah, while she was pregnant, noticed an excessive amount of motion going on in her womb. She did not yet know that she was carrying twins; but the Scriptures inform us that the two boys were fighting – literally “crushing” each other—as if locked in prenatal conflict. When she inquired of the Lord about what was going on within her, she was given a cryptic prophecy that told her two nations would be separated from her; one would be stronger than the other, but the elder would serve the younger. And I’m pretty sure *that* word of God was every bit as confusing to her as this morning’s text is to us.

The time came for her to give birth to the boys. The first to appear was covered all over his body with a thick coat of red hair. They named him Esau, the Hebrew word for “hairy”, apparently because he looked to them a lot like the reddish brown goats they raised which were also called “esaus”. (Side note here to future parents: it’s probably best *not* to name your kids after livestock.) It’s worth noting that these goats that Esau was named after were used by the family when worshipping. They were what they offered to the Lord as sacrifices for their sins. And that suggests Esau himself was going to be a sacrifice of some kind – which in turn suggests that he is a Christ figure in the story. Keep that in your mind as we proceed. The next baby appeared soon afterward, literally at the heels of Esau. In fact, the baby was actually seen clutching at his elder brother’s foot which is why they named him Jacob. It means “heel

grabber". And in Hebrew idiom, to grab someone's heel means to trip them up or to take advantage of them in a deceitful way. It's sort of like we say, "you're pulling my leg" to mean "you're joking around with me". In Hebrew a "Jacob" or "heel grabber" is someone who lies, cheats, and steals to get ahead at the expense of someone else. (And yes, at this point Isaac and Rebekkah should have had their license to name children revoked.)

As the two boys grew their parents made their preferences known. Isaac was drawn to the rough and tumble Esau, who became a rugged outdoorsman and a skillful hunter. Or say it another way: the father loved his firstborn son – which reinforces the idea that Esau is a Christ figure because Jesus is the beloved firstborn of the Father. Rebekkah, we are told, loved Jacob; who seems to have been more of a homebody; maybe even something of a momma's boy.

But whatever else he was, Jacob certainly lived up to his less than complimentary name. His brother Esau, as the firstborn, was in that culture entitled to both the birthright, which was an extra share of his father's estate, and the prophetic blessing of his father. Jacob set his heart on wresting both away from Esau so that he could have them for himself. He got his chance with the birthright one day when Esau came stumbling home from a hunt physically exhausted and faint with hunger. Taking advantage of his brother's weakened condition, Jacob talked him into trading away his immensely valuable birthright for nothing more than a hot meal. Later, with his mother's help, he managed to steal the blessing from his brother as well. Isaac, who had gone blind in his old age, had sent Esau out on a deer hunt telling him to prepare his favorite meal of roast venison and then, after the two had dined together, he would give him the coveted blessing. Seizing the opportunity, Rebekkah and *her* favorite son conspired together to trick Isaac into thinking that Jacob was his older brother. They took a couple goats from the flock and cooked them up the way Esau prepared his venison. Rebekkah even used the goatskins to cover Jacob's forearms and neck so that he would feel to Isaac like his hairy brother. Then she dressed him in Esau's clothes, and she sent him into Isaac's tent to trick his father and get the blessing. "Who's there?" Isaac asked. "I am Esau, your firstborn" Jacob lied. And Jacob's deceptions did indeed fool old blind Isaac. He left with the blessing he came for.

And that means there was no blessing left over for Esau when he showed up having done exactly what his father asked and expecting to get what he had been promised. Instead, though he was his father's beloved son who had faithfully done his father's will, he got a curse – a curse that condemned him and his descendants to desert places and to be the servants of Jacob and his offspring. And hopefully you can see that this is exactly how our Father in heaven deals with us. He treats us to the blessing and birthright that rightly belong to his beloved firstborn Son and gives him the curse that properly belongs to us on account of our sin. He makes Jesus our servant and makes him bear our terrible burden when he suffers and dies on the cross.

Esau, for his part, was furious with Jacob for his treachery. I think we can understand why: his behavior was despicable. Esau was so angry that the Scriptures inform us he consoled himself with thoughts of how much he was going to enjoy killing Jacob. Apparently these thoughts found their way to his tongue because when Rebekkah heard what Esau was planning, she knew she had to get Jacob out of harm's way. She insisted that Isaac send Jacob away to her home country, to her brother Laban in Paddan Aram, some five hundred miles away, ostensibly for the purpose of finding a wife. She didn't tell her husband the real reason was to get him safely beyond Esau's reach.

So it was that Jacob, the one to whom now belonged both the birthright and blessing, was forced to leave them behind while he fled for his life. And what I'd have you see here is

that it's a picture of the fall of man. Jacob had up until this point lived a very privileged life. He was born and raised in the Promised Land, and his folks were very wealthy. He probably never had to work a day in his life. Now he was being cast out of his earthy paradise, under the threat of death, with little more than the shirt on his back. Why? Because he'd taken it upon himself to reach for forbidden fruit. And now he was going to have to work hard for his daily bread. I'm sure it was with all kinds of worries and fears that he set out. But before he left the Promised Land, the Lord appeared to Jacob in a dream. The Lord told him that he would be with him, that he would defend and bless him, and that one day he would bring Jacob safely back to the Promised Land. All of which sounds a lot like the promises that God gave our first parents when they were expelled from Eden.

At length Jacob arrived at his uncle's home in Paddan Aram. And unfortunately for Jacob, Laban was made from the same mold that he was—maybe even more so. Underhanded, dirty dealing was Laban's specialty. And so for the next twenty something years, life for Jacob was pretty miserable as he and his uncle fought a long war of pretending to be friendly on the surface while trying to outwit and out-cheat one another under the table. Jacob tried all kinds of dirty tricks to get ahead; but usually Laban was a step ahead of him. But despite the many heartaches and setbacks he suffered, the Lord kept his word to Jacob and blessed him abundantly with a large family (four wives and eleven children to be exact) and with great wealth – mostly in the form of vast herds of livestock. And near the time his sojourn in Paddan Aram was coming to its end, the Lord also gave Jacob a vision in which he saw that it wasn't his clever efforts to cheat his uncle that gave him what he had; but rather God's overflowing grace that blessed him in spite of his dirty business dealings.

It was lesson that Jacob seems never to have taken completely to heart, for the day finally came when the Lord called Jacob to return home to the Promised Land, and he was none too happy about it. First, he was certain that Laban wouldn't agree to let him go, and secondly, and even more problematic, it meant having to face Esau again whose righteous wrath and murderous designs were the reason he was here in the first place. To deal with the first problem, Jacob tried sneaking away from Paddan Aram when Laban was out of town on business. It gave him a three day head start, but that was not enough to prevent Laban and his armed entourage from overtaking him. Jacob probably thought he was doomed; but it happens that once again, the Lord intervened on his behalf. He appeared to Laban in a dream and warned him that Jacob, his family, and all his possessions were strictly hands-off.

That threat behind him, Jacob turned his attention to one he had yet to face. He sent an emissary to Esau to inform him that he had done quite well for himself while he'd been away. He wanted Esau to know that he was well enough off that he wouldn't need to be stealing from him anymore, and perhaps he was suggesting that he might be able to "pay off" his past offenses in the form of a juicy bribe. Part of the messenger's mission was to ascertain Esau's mood. Was he open to negotiation? Could we talk about this? The man returned to Jacob with only this message: Esau is coming to meet you riding at the head of a column of four hundred armed warriors.

And that brings us to the passage we heard this morning. It's night. Jacob knows that in the morning he will meet the brother he treated so poorly; the brother who last we heard from, wanted Jacob dead. Now it seemed he was going to get his wish. And there's something about crossing bodies of water in the Bible. It usually represents crossing over from one life to the next, like when the Israelites left Egypt through the Red Sea leaving behind their lives as slaves, or when they ended their forty years of wilderness wandering by crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land. That's precisely what's going on in this story. Jacob is facing his death. That's what the Jabbok stream represents to him. He sends everything else across – nothing he owns

is any help to him now; but he himself stays behind in the dark, fearful of what awaits him on the other side.

But he is not alone. God is with him as he promised he would be always. The trouble is that Jacob does not trust the Lord to keep his word. As a result, his whole life has been one of trying to take, or finagle, or grab, or lie, cheat, and steal blessings that the Lord wanted to give him by his grace alone – blessings that the Lord *did* give him by his grace alone in spite of the fact that Jacob faithlessly kept trying to get them by his own pathetic and sinful efforts. So let me suggest that this strange wrestling match is a microcosm of Jacob's whole life: He's been fighting against God and man to secure for himself blessings that God was going to give him anyway – that God had ordained to give him before he was even born. By trying to do it the hard way, that is, by his own efforts, he made a wreck of his life; but the Lord planned to bless him still. That's the reason the Lord can't defeat him. It's his gracious plan and purpose for Jacob to win—the trouble is that Jacob won't give up the fight to do it his way. And so, at length, the Lord has to take the fight out of him by injuring his leg.

And then at last we see Jacob in the proper posture. And to fully get the image, you have to picture Jacob on the ground, his arms locked around one of the Lord's ankles as the latter vainly struggles to free himself. The thing is that the Lord doesn't want to be free of Jacob. His whole intent is to be here *for* Jacob – and for Jacob to be clinging to him for all he's worth, refusing to let go – for that's what faith is: the spiritual hand by which we take hold of God and look to him in complete expectation of receiving the blessings of his grace he's promised to us. And that's why the next exchange is the key to the story. The Lord asks Jacob his name. "I am Jacob" he replies. Recall that the last time he wanted a blessing, he lied about his name. He pretended to be Esau, the father's beloved son. So now when he speaks his name it's more than the truth – it's a confession of his sin. "I'm the heel grabber, the liar, the cheat". "Not any more", the Lord replies, "now you are Israel: the one who wrestles with God and wins.

How? By holding him by the "heel", of course. It goes back to Genesis chapter three when the Lord first promised a Savior for fallen mankind. Then he said to Satan, "He will crush your head, and you will strike his *hee!*" There the wounded heel of the Savior is the Bible's first reference to the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross. That's what Jacob is holding onto: the heel of the Savior that would one day receive sin's painful venom and cause his death, and with which he would crush the head of the serpent destroying his power over mankind once and for all. So just as he was born clutching the heel of a representation of Christ, now he faces death holding onto the real thing – and he is blessed, blessed beyond expectation. For the next morning when he crosses the stream to face the brother he betrayed, firmly convinced that he'll be killed, Esau greets him with a bear hug, a brotherly kiss, and hearty welcome home. All is forgiven and forgotten.

What does it mean for us? Everything. For we are all Jacob. Born in the water of Baptism by which we take hold of the wounded heel of Jesus: that is, his death for our sin. And all our lives through the Lord wants us right there: holding on to him by the death of Jesus through which he has promised to give us all good things. In this way we become Israel: those who wrestle with God and win. Understanding this, let's not make it a fight like Jacob did all his life. Let's learn from his mistakes to trust the Lord at all times in life, at the hour of death, and when we go to meet the beloved Son we have betrayed so many times through our sins, who is eagerly waiting to welcome us home. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!