

Wrestling with God

¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran.

¹¹ When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep.

¹² He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

¹³ There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying.

¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.

¹⁵ I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

¹⁶ When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it."

¹⁷ He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

It's interesting to study the people of the Bible. We find out that they're not much different than we are. They dressed different and ate different things. Certainly they lived in different times and a different culture. Yet when we begin to take a closer look at their nature and their response to God, they are the same in so many ways. We can see ourselves in so many characters of the Bible. We soon discover that God has similar lessons for us as He had for them. The weaknesses and problems we see in their lives, we also see in our lives. Yet on a more positive note, the great things God did in their lives, God can do in our lives.

Let's take a look at Jacob. The text we see today is the one we are most familiar with in the life of Jacob. He is known as the man who wrestled with God. Isaac and Rebecca were expecting their first child and it had been a difficult pregnancy. They were expecting twins! This was before sonograms and all the tests they do now. So when they produced twins, it was a surprise! Genesis 25:22-23 tells us that the two sons jostled each other (wrestled) while still in her womb.

She inquired, "What's going on? Why is this happening?" God told her that within her womb were two nations. One nation would be stronger than the other. There would be contention between them.

Very seldom are children born into the same family similar in personality. I'm always surprised at how our girls are each so different. The same was true for Jacob and Esau. Esau was the rugged hunter and outdoorsman. It says he had a taste for wild game. Jacob was a mama's boy. Gen. 25:27 says he was a quiet boy and stayed among the tents. Later in that same chapter, God clearly said that the younger would receive the *birthright*. This wasn't the usual custom. The older son usually received the birthright. With the birthright came both the headship of the family and financial inheritance, a double portion of blessing. The promises of God were passed down to the one with the birthright

(Ch. 25 v. 30) One day Esau came in from hunting and he was hungry. Jacob saw an opportunity "Ya know that birthright that you don't care about? I'll trade it for a bowl of chili!" (Bible says, "Some of that red stuff". NIV says stew) Now, jump ahead to the time when Isaac is about to confer the blessing on Esau. Jacob and his mother plot to make sure Jacob gets the blessing. Once Isaac blesses Esau, it's binding. They panic ... they're not willing to trust God to keep His Word to confer blessing on Jacob, so Jacob and his mother take matters into their own hands. They make Jacob up like Esau and Jacob pretends to be Esau. Isaac is old and half-blind, so he doesn't know he's blessing Jacob.(27:27-29). When Esau finds out, he's furious. He promises to kill Jacob as soon as their father Isaac is dead (27:41). Jacob has to flee for his life.

The first night on the run, Jacob has a dream. He sees a ladder or staircase and sees angels going up the ladder to Heaven and down the ladder from Heaven. (28:12-15) This is a picture of prayer. God is telling Jacob that He will answer his prayers. But for this to happen, Jacob must trust God. Jacob thought that when he ran away from Esau, he had left God behind too. Jacob is angry at God. God didn't do things his way, that is, the way *Jacob* wanted. The birthright didn't bring him instant success.

At this time in his life, Jacob is far from God spiritually and relationally. He's a schemer, a conniver and a trickster. We saw this evidenced in his manipulation of the birthright. Now, he is trying to run from God. As God quite often does with us, the Lord is letting him know that He's the God of mercy, grace, and pardon. We experience this each time as we go to God in prayer. We learn a few things about us and about God.

First, we learn God doesn't love us in proportion to our love for Him. God's love is everlasting. No matter what you do, God couldn't love you any more or any less than he does right now. We too often think we have to perform to make God love us. The truth is, we should seek righteousness *because* God loves us.

Secondly, We learn we still have access to God even though we forsake Him. He will never forsake us. He is in this for the long haul. His love doesn't falter even when ours does. He is waiting with arms open wide.

This experience makes an impression on Jacob. On the other hand, he can't help but make a bargain with God (28:20-22). **“If God will be with me and watch over me on this journey and give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I can return safely to my father's house, then the Lord will be my God.”**

So Jacob planted a stone there at Bethel. Did you know that this same spot became the place where the Temple was built? This place at Bethel meant “House of God.”

I have been wrestling with God lately and I need your help. I am hoping that you will join me in that wrestling match. I'm hoping that like the angels ascending that ladder to heaven, your prayers are also ascending that ladder as we consider what God would have us do as his church congregation. See, a church without prayer is weak and powerless. A Church that does not continuously seek God's will and purpose becomes ineffectual and useless.

Next Sunday we celebrate our founding. I am convinced that 120 years ago, our founders said something similar to what Jacob said. “Lord, if you will walk with us and guide us on our journey, then we will be your children and you will be our guide. And in tribute to your faithfulness, we will lay this cornerstone (not on this location, but on a location down near 27th and Vine.)

Over the course of 120 years, it becomes easy to lose our way, forget why we exist, become consumed with running an organization rather than becoming the vine and the branches. It was a few years later after Jacob had married both Rachel and Leah, that he prepares to return to his father's house to make peace with his brother Esau whom he had tricked. Again, he has a fitful night of sleep, this time as he wrestles all night long with an angel. At daybreak, the angel touched his hip and caused it injury and the angel gave him a new name. Instead of Jacob, he would be called Israel.

Have you ever wrestled with God? Has God engaged you in a spiritual battle to get your attention? I had a big wrestling match in August of 1996. I had said “no” to going to Bismarck as Pastor because it seemed apparent to me at the time that the Bismarck congregation was not ready for a pastor. That August I was going with my family to the World Mission Conference at Green Lake. Just before we left for the conference, I was approached again about moving to Bismarck. I said reluctantly, “I'll pray about it.” So I spent a week at Green Lake at the World Mission Conference wrestling with God. I would get up in the morning and take long walks as the sun was coming up about 5:00 a.m. I would pray and ask for a sign and hope that God would give me a clear view of His purpose.

Wrestling with God is not necessarily an adversarial role where one is trying to push their own will in the face of God. Sometimes it is simply grappling with God's will. Trying to figure it out and make sense of it. (one is defiance and the other is compliance) As time went on, I believed that God was showing me that it was time to move on from my ministry in Lisbon and begin to face what He had for me in a new place.

That is how I see Jacob's experience. That night as he dreamt of Angels ascending and descending a ladder and then years later when he wrestled with God throughout the night, he awoke with a limp from his hip being out of joint. Yet when he awoke, he was a changed man. Scripture tells us in Gen. 28: 16-17: **When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." ¹⁷ He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."**

That place was called Bethel and he said it was the house of God because it was the gateway to heaven. That night was pivotal in the whole history of Israel. God dealt with Jacob and that prepared him for the life that lay ahead.

I don't know if we can look back in our congregation's history and identify those pivotal moments. The day in January of 1890 when with a prayer and a stroke of a pen, this congregation was established. The day in the late 1950s when they voted to build this building – way out on the edge of Lincoln in a nearly unsettled area.

Along the way, there were some difficult struggles and wrestling matches that involved two or maybe ten different ways of doing something, but through prayer and compromise, a single path was forged. There were the moments of congregational poverty when it was uncertain how the bills would be paid.

Jacob could have never imagined how God would use him to establish his people. How will God use us to build his kingdom? How will this congregation be used to expand the kingdom of God. Probably more than we can imagine.

I hope that as we struggle and wrestle with God, our conclusion will be **"Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it."**