

Wrestling Alone at Night
Genesis 32:22-30

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The poet, James Thurber, once said, “All men must learn before they die, what they are running from and to and why.”

We catch up with our hero, Jacob, today on the muddy banks of the Jabbok River. Twenty years have passed since he left Bethel where God promised to go with him and guide him through all his days. In this productive period of Jacob’s life, he accumulates a couple of wives, eleven children, a host of servants, and a wealth of cattle, sheep, and camels. He has left his father-in-law, Laban. He is preparing to meet his estranged brother, Esau. As night comes, Jacob separates himself from people and possessions, and enters a life and death struggle for purpose and meaning.

Anybody here who has walked through a dark night of the soul, ever been afraid to turn their face toward home, or found themselves in a wrestling match with God, can identify with this ancient struggle of a middle-aged man by the name of Jacob.

Come, let us take a closer look at this struggle in the night. Verse 24, *And Jacob was left alone*. Such times of solitude call us to introspection, evaluation, and alteration. We are busy people. We fill our lives with things to do, places to go, projects to finish, and appointments to keep. But every once in a while, we will be wise to shut the door and separate ourselves from all our stuff, and try to restore our souls.

Henri Nouwen, in one of his last writings, says, “I found myself in a hospital following a car accident. At first I thought it was nothing. Then I was told I was bleeding internally and might not live. Surprisingly, I found the threat of death to be peaceful beyond my understanding. It was when I woke up and discovered myself still alive in this world, that I became restless. In my days of recovery, I discovered I had some unfinished business of the soul. There were certain people I still hadn’t forgiven. There were deep confessions I had hesitated to make. I realized I had been living in denial of my own mortality.”

Suddenly in the night, someone seizes Jacob from behind, and slams him to the ground in a bitter struggle for life. Harold Kushner says this stranger in the night is none other than the conscience of Jacob calling him to accountability. A life of deceit, denial, and duplicity is finally doing him in. Here, alone on the muddy banks of the Jabbok River, he has to face himself.

A tractor-trailer rig got hung under an overpass. A large crowd gathered around

to watch the driver try to get out. He put the truck in low, but the tractor-trailer would not budge. He put it in reverse, shoved the pedal to the metal, but the trailer did not move. When the trucker climbed down from the rig in disgust, a small boy from the crowd approached him saying, "I think I can help." The angry, disgusted drivers says to the kid, "What do you know about tractor-trailers?" "Well," said the kid, "I'd let the air out of the tires, that would free the trailer. You could drive out, refill your tires, and be on your way." That is just what the driver did.

When life has you stuck under some overpass of your own making, it might be time to stop, let the air out of your ego, give yourself some extra room, so you can refill your life with the grace of God's love. People all wrapped up in themselves make very small packages. That night on the Jabbok River, Jacob was all wrapped up in himself.

A careful reading of the text, however, leads us to believe someone besides himself had Jacob in a headlock that night. Jacob is wrestling with none other than God. It is a tug of war, a hand-to-hand combat with the Almighty. It is fingers on the flesh, touched to the bone. Jacob wants a blessing. God wants a new person. Back and forth they struggle and struggle through the night.

Hebrews 10:31 says, *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God.* Indeed it is. You see, God-lite religion will not do in a down and dirty world. The God of Jacob is our refuge. Let us never forget that Jacob's God will get us in the gut, punch our pride, grab our greed, level our lust, demand our honesty and command our all.

When our boys were little, I used to wrestle with them every night after supper on the thickly padded carpet on the hallway floor. It really was not much of a struggle. I was 6'3", 225 pounds and the boys were less than 50 pounds each. The boys grew. Time took its toll. Then one night, one of them jumped from the hallway stairs, cracking one of my ribs with his knee. That night, I declared myself the all-time wrestling champion and retired.

This was no childhood skirmish on the riverbank of Jabbok. This is the Holy Hulk in hand-to-hand combat with Tricky Jake in a life and death match for eternity.

A cartoon I saw once on a church bulletin board advertised "Church Lite," home of the 7.5% tithe, the 10 minute sermon, and the multiple choice commandments. Everything you have ever wanted in a church and less. Religion like that may make you feel good, but it is not likely to do you any good. It may provide you entertainment, but it is not apt to make any alterations in your life. If your life needs a complete overhaul, come to a God who wants your all. The struggle may leave you with a limp, but it will give your soul a lift.

At daybreak, this Divine/human struggle is still intense. The stranger in the

night says, "Let me go." Jacob replies, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

In verse 27, the stranger says to Jacob, "What is your name?" Shakespeare once said, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Shakespeare evidently never considered the Old Testament. For in the Old Testament, a name always symbolizes a character. It is one with nature. Proverbs 22:1 says, *A good name should be chosen over great riches, and loving favor rather than silver and gold.*

Names are important to us as well. We name our children, our cats, our dogs, our boats, our bungalows. Everything has a name. They become personal when we put a name to them. One of my most embarrassing moments as a pastor came a few years ago when I presented a couple at a wedding ceremony using the wrong last name. I don't think they ever forgave me, and they should not have.

Somebody asked me just the other day, how I could possibly remember the names of the 5,400 members of this congregation. In a moment of confession I replied, "I don't. I just fake it a lot." Of course, that can be extremely dangerous. Like the pastor who said to a parishioner, "I cannot remember exactly how to spell your name. Is it with an I or and E?" The stunned member replied, "My name is Hill. You spell it with an I."

The stranger says in the night, "What is your name?" Jacob says, "My name is Jacob." The trickster, supplanter, grabber, heel. "My name is Jacob. My father did not like me. My brother cannot stand me. My mother sent me away." "What is your name?" "My name is Jacob. If I cannot be loved, at least I'll be in control." "What is your name?" "My name is Jacob!" Driven, deceitful, successful, powerful, lonely, afraid. Jacob was not very proud of his name.

I wonder today if there are some names in your life that you need to abandon? Are there names that have gotten attached to you, but do not belong to you? Dumb, drunk, pest, problem, promiscuous, mean, manipulative, victim. I do not know what it is, but you know. You know the name.

When I was eighteen years old, I announced that I wanted to be a minister in the church. My father said, "He might as well be a preacher. He is too lazy to be anything else." It took me 20 years to abandon the name, "Lazy." It threatened my health and my family, and one day I had to turn it loose. Do you understand what I am saying? There are names that have been attached to us over the years. God Almighty is asking you to confess it today in such a way you would be freed from it. "Jacob, what is your name?"

I have news for you, I have a new name for you. In verse 28, the stranger in the night said, *Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and men and have overcome.* The name Israel meant the straight one, God rules, father of nations, patriarch of people, transmitter of truth, the blessed of God. Israel is still a nation today.

I have got a new name for you. You see, Israel was not a new label on an old jar, but a new substance in the life and soul of a single struggling man. That day, a trickster became a treasure. A heel became a healer. A supplanter was transformed into a saint.

The purpose of the dark night of the soul is purification, which will lead us to a new identification. Jacob did not need to get back to his old self that morning. He needed to put on a whole new self. We do not need restoration; we need transformation. Your name is no longer Jacob. Your name is Israel.

By the mercies of God, you and I are given a new name. We have put on the name Christian. Christian is more than something put in the blank space on an identification form for college or job application. To be Christian is to take on a new nature. It is to have your name written in the Book of Life.

Paul says in II Corinthians 5:17, *If anyone be in Christ, he is a new creation. The old is gone, the new has come.* There is a new name written down in glory. Your name is on the dotted line. You belong to the family of God. You are a Christian.

I know, it seems like too much doesn't it? Don't you think Jacob had to feel that way that day? It is something like Bobby trying to become Robert, or Marge trying to become Marjorie, or Dick trying to become Richard, or Pat putting on Patricia. Jacob must have felt weird at first to have taken on this new identity. As he rose that morning to become Israel, the father of all nations, so we must rise to live a life worthy of the name Christian. What is your name? I want to give you a new name and your new name is Christian. Live up to it.

And Jacob called the place Peniel. For there he saw God face-to-face.

I walked life's way with an easy tread,
Had followed where comforts and pleasures led,
Until one day in a quiet place, I met the Master face-to-face.
I met him and knew him and blushed to see,
That his eyes full of sorrow were fixed on me.
And I faltered and fell at his feet that day,
While all my castles melted and vanished away.
Melted and vanished in their place,
Naught else could I see but the Master's face.

