

# Wrestling Your Way to a Vital, Personal Faith

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Genesis 32:22-31

The Children's Time or Children's Sermon is one of the few moments of high drama left in the typical church service. That is, unless the minister has schooled the children in the art of giving safe, predictable answers.

One such pastor began his children's sermon by saying, "Today we're going to play a guessing game. What is furry and small, collects nuts, and runs up and down trees?"

The children stared at him blankly.

"Let me give you another clue," said the pastor. "This little fella has a gray, bushy tail."

Again, there was no answer and the preacher's frustration was starting to show.

"Now come on, children," he coached. "Surely *someone* knows."

Finally, one brave little boy raised his hand.

"Yes, Johnny," said the preacher. "And who is our furry little friend?"

"I know the answer's supposed to be Jesus," the boy answered, "but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me."

Some of us--maybe many of us--grew up in churches where we were supposed to give the right answer instead of the one hurting our heart, troubling our mind, or stirring our soul. But

then one day, like Jacob, we found ourselves at the river Jabbok, where the safe, predictable answers would no longer do.

The things we learned in Sunday School just didn't match up in our first college class in philosophy or astrophysics. Or we worked hard and played by the rules but still got blind-sided by divorce or unemployment, disability or disease. Or we discovered in a deepening relationship with a new friend that the things we grew up believing about Muslims, or gays, or people of color were not only profoundly untrue, but profoundly hurtful.

At such moments, we instinctively know that unless we start telling the truth to ourselves, to others, and to God, we're going to turn into someone we don't want to be.

That is Jacob's dilemma. When he lands back at the holy land after a twenty year sojourn in the far country, he is still lugging around his daddy's faith. And while he has done his best to believe in the God of his father, Isaac, and his granddaddy, Abraham, it just isn't working for him. Sure, Jacob saw angels at Bethel when he left the holy land and then again upon his return. But for him, as for us, any vision of angels soon fades, and he is left to fend for himself.

So Jacob scopes out a strategy for re-engaging his brother, Esau, from whom he stole a blessing and a birthright, twenty years before. He doesn't count on angels; he counts on his native wit and the crafty, manipulative character that won him the nickname, "the Heel."

Jacob sends a message promising his brother a flurry of gifts. Then he strings out his herds and possessions and wives and children in a long, winding procession, hoping to soften his brother's rage on others before it falls on him. Then Jacob offers a perfunctory prayer before falling into a fitful sleep by the riverside.

In the wee hours of the morning, Jacob is ambushed. Suddenly, he is fighting for his life with an unknown assailant. The two of them tumble down the river bank into the murky waters, splashing and kicking and gouging. The prophet Hosea said Jacob's enemy was an angel, but

if so, it isn't the kind of angel apt to show up on a Hallmark card. No, this angel is scrappy and brawny, muscular and mean.

The two combatants fight on and on through a long, weary night. Finally, as sunrise peeps over the horizon, the adversary wrenches Jacob's hip out of joint. Jacob shrieks in agony but refuses to let go.

"Let me go!" the shadowy stranger cries, "for dawn is breaking."

"I won't let you go unless you bless me," Jacob shouts back.

So the angel blesses him, a sly grin hidden in the night. For it was God's intention all along, to bless Jacob in just this way. "You shall no longer be called Jacob," decrees the angel, "but Israel, the one who strives with God. For you have wrestled with God and humans and have prevailed."

At that point, the angel disappears, leaving Jacob gasping and groaning in the night. He lies there a long time, trying to fathom what happened. And when at last, in the light of a new day, he rises to resume his journey, he walks with a limp for he has been both blessed and broken . . . by God.

Indeed, that is the stunning surprise at the heart of the story. The scrappy stranger who ambushes Jacob in the dead of night is not his brother, seeking revenge, or a river demon protecting his turf. No, the stranger who starts this epic battle and more than that, *delights* in it, is God. For God, like a father playing with a toddler on the floor, tussles and tumbles, taunts and teases and tests, helping Jacob discover not how weak he is but how strong.

Rob Bell, an author infamous in some Christian circles for questioning the existence of hell--at least a hell that lasts forever and serves no redemptive purpose--is now on a whirlwind tour of the Bible Belt. Bell is promoting his new book, *What is the Bible?* in which he argues that the Bible needs to be read *literately* instead of *literally*. In other words, understanding the Bible requires some grasp of its human, as well as divine, origins.

Recently, Bell was scheduled to speak at a theater in Atlanta. Those lined up outside, waiting to hear him, were accosted by well-meaning church folk, warning them of the dangers that lurked inside. Unimpressed, one spunky gal told a reporter, "I was the good Christian girl. I was doing everything right, and our life from the outside looked awesome. But for me it wasn't working. I was so depressed and miserable." Sounds a bit like the pre-Jabbok Jacob, at least to me.

But then she found in Rob Bell--and others riding the wave of a kinder, gentler Christianity--the honesty and grace that is saving her life and in the deepest sense, saving her soul. Shaking her head sadly about her fearful Christian friends, she says, "If you really believe that God is the owner of truth, he's going to show up in all kinds of places and in all kinds of people."

At that, her husband chimes in about friends who say he has abandoned his faith: 'Guys,' he tells them. "I'm finally getting it. This Jesus guy has never been more important to me in my life."

"But they were scared," he adds sympathetically, "because I wasn't talking about it the way they were talking about it."

This sort of going deeper--ditching the old answers that aren't working any more--is what it takes to wrestle your way to a vital, personal faith. Yes, that kind of wrestling can be disorienting and frightening, but that is the price you pay for taking whatever faith you inherited from others and making it truly your own.

As Billy Graham told a young man who confessed, "I have lost my faith." "No," Graham answered. "You have lost your *parent's* faith. Now go get a faith of your own."

And far from blaming or shaming you for having doubts and questions, the God of biblical faith delights in wrestling with you. Until you, like Jacob, are given both a blessing and a new name: *Israel*: the one who *wrestles with God* . . . and prevails.

And yet, the story is not over. Jacob must still face and wrestle with his brother. This is perhaps the most unsettling truth to sound from that epic wrestling match in the Jabbok. Our faith can't be reborn, reshaped, or deepened by wrestling with God alone. No, for that to happen, we must wrestle with our brother or sister too: making amends for wrongs we have done and offering forgiveness to those who have wronged us.

As Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, "When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and *then* come and offer your gift " (Matthew 5:23-24).

This is what happens in the next chapter of the story of Jacob and Esau. Jacob leaves the river Jabbok, limping as he goes, to meet the brother thundering toward him with an army of 400 men. Jacob expects the worst, knowing how deeply he wounded his brother.

And yet when these two old adversaries meet, the animosity and division between them melts in an avalanche of tears. Moved by this reunion, the long-lost brother waves off the gifts Jacob has brought to make amends. But Jacob insists Esau take his fair share of the flocks and herds he has acquired, saying, "No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand."

Interestingly, that word "present" is the Hebrew word, *berakah*, or *blessing*, the same word used for that blessing Jacob stole from his brother long years before (Genesis 27:36). Only after making restitution for defrauding his brother does Jacob utter the line that is the key to the whole drama: "Truly, to see your face is like seeing the face of God" (Genesis 32:10).

Among the Zapoteco Indians in Mexico, the phrase "I forgive you" is translated, "My face heals toward you." When you truly forgive someone, they can see it in your face. Even so, Jacob's face and Esau's face are softened by grace. Until each sees in the other's countenance, the very face of God.

I know, I know. Some of you are thinking, “But you don’t know my brother, my sister, my Ex. There will be no such storybook ending for me.”

You are probably right. The sort of reconciliation Jacob and Esau experience requires two partners willing to work hard and make amends. And the spouse who betrayed you or the parent who abused you may not be available or willing to risk such an encounter. In that case, as you wrestle with God in the Jabbok, the struggle is to surrender the bitterness and hostility toward that person. Because it will drown you, if you don’t find a way to let it go.

Years ago, at my church down in Macon, there was a little lady who sat in the back of her Sunday School class and never spoke a word. Then one fateful Sunday, the lesson was on the fifth commandment: “Honor your father and mother.”

After all the usual platitudes were offered, someone put words to the question hanging unspoken in the room: “How do you honor parents who aren't honorable?”

There was an awkward silence.

Then that usually silent lady in the back, shifted in her chair. “I know how you can honor them,” she said quietly. “You can honor them by forgiving them.”

It was no accident that Jesus taught us to pray, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” He knew how hard that work can be. So he gave us the gift of that holy conjunction, “As,” signaling the gritty, grueling work of wrestling with our enemies, with ourselves, and with God. Even if the only place we can come face-to-face with our brother or sister--and ask or extend forgiveness--is in our prayers.

The story of Jacob’s wrestling with God at the Jabbok is God’s gift to us this day. For it is the gracious, if frightening invitation to move past Sunday School answers that aren’t working anymore, to become honest and real and even demanding. Until it is our own cry that sounds in the night, “I won’t let *You* go until you bless me!”

Because what we want, what we need, is not a faith that is neat and packaged and non-threatening. What we need is a living faith that sometimes must break us before it can make us whole.

Such a faith can only be found in the dark, murky waters of your own doubt and despair as you wrestle with God. But if you rise to the challenge, in time you will clamber out of the water, limping as you go, toward the light of a whole new day.

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*O gritty God of the murky waters, meet us in the darkness and doubt of our own deepest need. Then out of our brokenness, bring forth your blessing. In the name of the crucified and risen one, we ask it. Amen.*

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