

## Wrestling With God Genesis 32:22-30

I suppose there are many in the world of Biblical interpretation who would choose to interpret this story metaphorically – as something that didn't really happened, but was told to make a point or teach lesson.

One of the things I love about the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod is that we don't make those kinds of decisions about the Biblical text. Unless there is clear indication, that is, unless the text specifically tells us that it is not to be taken literally, we take it literally. For example, a story might begin, "Then Jesus told them a parable". Obviously, what follows is a teaching story which didn't necessarily actually happen.

Or if we reading the Psalms or Revelation, we would not read them in the same way we would read the Gospel of Mark. Psalms is a collection of poems and hymns, which are literary forms which use analogy, simile, and metaphor extensively. Revelation is apocalyptic – visionary literature, again, filled with symbols and analogies. Mark, on the other hand, is a straightforward historical account of the life of Jesus.

The first two we do not interpret literally. To do so would do violence to their intent. The opposite is true of Mark; if we did not take that literally we would be going directly against the author's purpose.

There is nothing in this text about Jacob that indicates it is to be taken anyway but literally.

So, we have the situation of a man who literally “wrestled with God.” I’m kind of surprised that Vince McMann hasn’t tried to turn that into some kind of event for the World Wrestling Federation. Can you see the advertisement? “John Cena takes on God” That would catch some viewers, wouldn’t it?

This really happened, though. God really appeared in the form of an angel and actually wrestled with Jacob.

Why? Sometimes one can only guess at the mind of God. Sometimes the outcome holds the answer. In this case, Jacob became a committed follower of God. In his early life, I doubt he was. Whenever he talks about God in the chapters before he ran away from home to escape the anger of his brother, Esau, he refers to God and his father’s God, not his own.

But God would not let him alone. God had plans for him. In fact, even though he came by it illegitimately, Jacob was inheritor of the covenant God had made with Abraham, his grandfather. So Jacob was a critical part of God’s plan of salvation. He was the father of twelve sons. These twelve sons would become the heads of twelve tribes. Those tribes would be the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Out of one of those tribes, many years later would come Jesus, the Savior of the world.

How do we get from the Twelve Sons of Jacob to the Twelve Tribes of Israel? The text tells us. As God often does when he makes a covenant with someone, he changes Jacob’s name. As a

direct result of this incident we're looking at today, God renames him "Israel", which means "wrestles with God."

So, Jacob wrestles with God. In point of fact, he had been wrestling with God all his life. It is impossible to imagine that he could have grown up in the house of his father Isaac and not been brought up to worship the one true God, the God of his father, Isaac, and of his grandfather, Abraham.

Yet Jacob was not a godly child or teenager or young man. His very name means "cheat". The younger of twins, he emerged from the womb clutching his brother, Esau's heel. He never referred in his early life to God as his God, only his father's God.

He cheated his brother out of his birthright as the firstborn son, and later, with the help of his mother, Rebecca, he cheated Esau out of the blessing of his father.

Throughout his life he wrestled with God. He tried to live life on his own terms, concerned only about himself. He cared nothing about respect for his father, or his brother. He cared nothing about what God had declared to be right. He only cared about Numero Uno, which in his mind was himself.

Jacob's had 3 commandments:

"Look out for #1."

"The easy way is better than the right way."

Right is determined by what's good for Jacob.

So he wrestled with God all his life, rejecting God's way for his own.

We've all known people like that. Maybe we've been a person like that. Maybe we're a person like that in some way. Plenty of people wrestle with God every day of their lives.

There are those who deny His existence. Despite the clear evidence of God all around them, in the beauty and complexity and interdependency of this marvelous world in which we are privileged to live, they deny not only that He made it, but that He even exists. Paul talks about them in Romans, chapter 1:

*“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”*

*Romans 1:18-20 (NIV)*

We call them atheists. They wrestle with God by denying the truth of His existence that God has placed all around them.

Then there are those who won't come right out and deny His existence, but will hedge their bets. They'll say they'll believe He exists if it can be proved to them. We call them agnostics.

In a separate class are those who will admit there is a God, but deny He has any claim on their lives. They'll say, "Oh, I believe there's a God", as if God should be grateful for the crumb they're throwing Him.

James talks about them in James 2:19:

*You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.*

*James 2:19 (NIV)*

And, since God is the perfect Gentleman, who never forces anyone to believe, they interpret His courtesy as proof of their correctness.

Some wrestle with God at the point of His offer of salvation. They can't or won't believe that God could possibly offer eternal life and forgiveness of sins as a free gift through faith in His Son. They can't or won't believe that Jesus' took the punishment for all the sins of mankind in His own body and spirit on the cross and paid the debt for all of us. They won't or can't believe in His resurrection. They trust their own reason over the revealed Word and promise of God. They want salvation, they want heaven, but they want it on their own terms. They want to contribute their own good works, so that they can claim some part of it for themselves. Scripture says this about them:

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*“There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.” Proverbs 16:25 (NIV)*

But you and I are not in any of those groups, or we probably wouldn't be here.

There is a final category of those who wrestle with God. It is us – those who believe in Jesus as their only Savior from sin; those who believe that His sacrifice did pay the price for us and cancel our debt; those who truly believe that we are going to heaven purely by God's grace through faith in Jesus.

But we still wrestle with God.

Some of us wrestle with God's desire that we be fully committed to Him. We look at our commitment to God as an installment plan:

We'll commit some of our life to Him in our early years when we're really busy building a career, raising a family, making our mark, and then as we get closer to retirement, and, oh, yes, death, we'll up the commitment in preparation for actually meeting Him, kind of like taking smaller payments on a mortgage and making a big balloon payment at the end.

So we read His Word *when we have time*.

And we attend church *when there's not something else going on*.

And we receive Holy Communion *if it happens to be offered on one of the Sundays when there's not something else going on*.

And we go to a Bible study *if it's convenient and not too long.*

And we offer our offering *whenever we're in church.*

And we let others take church offices and come to Work Days *because we're too busy or too committed to other things.*

And, we effectively give God the crumbs that fall from the table of our life.

Rather, than making Him and our relationship to Him the main course of our life.

And we wrestle with God and His righteous claim on us, a claim purchased with the blood of His Son, Jesus.

Or maybe we're in a different category of believers who wrestle with God. Maybe we wrestle with Him over what's appropriate for our lives as His people.

So, we pick and choose which commandments we obey.

Thou shalt not kill. No problem there. I can do that one.

Honor your father and mother. No problem there; they've been dead for years,

Thou shalt have no other gods before Me. Not a problem: no idols in my house.

But, Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain. Well, you know, everyone I work with uses, uh, shall we say, colorful language and I've kind of gotten used to it, and, hey, it's only words.

Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy. OK, but every Sunday?!!!!

Honor your father and mother. Okay, as long as they let me do what I want and go where I want with whomever I want. Oh, and buy me a Droid; oh, and pay the bill.

Thou shalt not commit adultery. Even Jimmy Carter got himself in trouble with that one.

Because, you see, every one of the Ten Commandments has a literal and a spiritual application. So, even if you don't have any idols in your house, if you put anything before God in your life, you've broken that one.

And even if you never actually commit adultery with someone else's spouse, if you've even thought about it, that one falls, too.

And you don't actually have to end someone's life to break the Fifth Commandment. According to Jesus, simply hating someone will do it.

And, besides, you can't just pick and choose which ones you'll incorporate into your life. If we're going to be faithful to God, if we're going to really try to live a life that shows our love and gratitude to Him for all He's done for us, it's all or nothing.

And we haven't touched on the two big ones, the ones that summarize all the commandments:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength.

And, love you neighbor as yourself.

You can't pick just one or the other.

There's another way committed Christians wrestle with God. I've often said that Christians are harder on themselves than God is. God sends His Son to be our Savior; Jesus dies on the cross to take the full punishment for our sins and cancels our debt; the Father raises Him from death as the sign that He accepts His Son's sacrifice as full payment to free us from sin and guilt; and yet we Christians have trouble forgiving ourselves. So many of us seem to want to drag around the bag of guilt with us.

I often picture God looking down on us, His children, from heaven, tapping His foot impatiently, and saying to us, "Let it go! For Pete's sake, let it go! I don't look at those sins! I've put them behind me. I will never bring them up to you. Let go of the bag!"

But we stubbornly cling to our guilt, and we wrestle with God, even at this point of His grace.

So, what are you wrestling with God over? Which of His commandments, which of His demands do you find hardest to deal with?

The bad news is that we're all wrestling with Him. Every time we give in to temptation, we're wrestling with Him. Every time we try to renegotiate the Covenant of Grace to suit our lifestyle or our time commitment or what we want to do versus what we know He wants us to do, we're wrestling with Him.

The good news is that He forgives us, even for our wrestling with Him. The good news is that He gives us an ally to help us in our inner struggle, His Holy Spirit. For in our wrestling with God, we are wrestling also with that sinful nature that still lives within each of us.

The good news is that God cannot be beaten. The good news is that our sinful nature can be, with the Spirit's help.

So, first let us turn our attention to the real enemy: Satan, who works through our sinful nature, and let our wrestling be with Him.

Second, let us use all the power, all the tools, that God gives us to prevail over the devil and his evil plans for us.

As Paul says, let us fight the good fight of faith. Let us not wrestle with God, who loves us; but with the devil and our own sinful nature which would destroy us.

Let us focus on those things that are our own particular temptations, those points in our life where that sinful nature within us wants to wrestle with God, and let us use all the power God makes available to us to defeat them.

And let us be absolutely certain, that with the help of the Spirit, we will prevail.