

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ **After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions.** ²⁴ **So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.** ²⁵ **When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.** ²⁶ **Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."**

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

²⁷ **The man asked him, "What is your name?"**

"Jacob," he answered.

²⁸ **Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."**

²⁹ **Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."**

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

³⁰ **So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." (NIV84)**

Theme: Wrestle with God in Prayer

1. Pray in all circumstances
2. Hold God to his promises

I'm not a wrestler—I've never been one. I had friends who wrestled. It's a lot of hard work. All the training—running, lifting weights, practicing different moves and holds. You often have to go all day without food or drink simply so you can make weight.

Having a long and deep conversation with someone is kind of like wrestling with your mind. It doesn't really matter the topic—maybe it's about personal issues, politics, or religion. They could go on and on for hours. And by the time it is done, with all the thinking and emotions, you are physically exhausted.

Jacob and God got into wrestling match once. But it wasn't just physical wrestling. Jacob also wrestled with God spiritually. And we are to do the same—we are to wrestle with God in prayer. We pray in all circumstances and we hold God to his promises.

This story is a hard one to completely understand. Martin Luther said about it, "This passage is regarded by all as among the most obscure passages of the whole Old Testament." This side of heaven our weak human reason will never be able to completely grasp what happened. But this much we know: Jacob was by himself at night. He had sent his family and his possession across the Jabbok—a tributary to the Jordan. He stayed on the other side himself—presumably to pray to God. But then a man came, in the darkness and began to wrestle with him.

But this was no ordinary man. First off, all this man had to do was touch Jacob's hip, and he dislocated it. No ordinary man could have done this. Jacob also wouldn't have asked an ordinary man to bless him. Not only did this man call himself God, but Jacob also said he wrestled with God. Hosea says about Jacob, **In the womb he grasped his brother's heel; as a man he struggled with God. He struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favor.** So this man came was an angel. But this was no ordinary man or angel—this was God. We could say that this was the angel of the Lord—the pre-incarnate Christ. We could say it was God's Son, himself.

We may not be able to comprehend everything. We don't completely understand what happened. Yet there are some truths that are immediately clear. Jacob wrestled with a man, who was an angel, who was God. Jacob physically wrestled with God. And it wasn't just physical wrestling going on. By asking for a blessing and by God blessing him, it seems that Jacob wrestled with God spiritually. To understand why God would Jacob, it is necessary to review Jacob's life up to this point.

Jacob had a twin brother named Esau. Jacob was born grabbing on to his older brother's foot. So he was given the name, Jacob, which means heal-grabber. Throughout his life Jacob would struggle to get his way. He would turn to deception to get what he wanted. He made Esau to trade him his birthright for some stew. Later he tricked his Father Isaac into thinking he was Esau. This way Isaac would give Jacob the blessing of the firstborn instead of Esau. So Jacob deceived his way into obtaining both the birthright and the blessings.

Esau was angry at Jacob. When he found out what Jacob did he was going to kill him. So Jacob fled to Mesopotamia. There he stayed for many years working for his uncle Laban. God blessed his time in Mesopotamia—giving him many children and multiple wives—plus numerous flocks and other possessions. But eventually God told Jacob to head back to Canaan, the land God promised to give his descendants. That meant he had to meet up with Esau. The last he saw of his brother, he was trying to kill him. Jacob didn't know what the future would hold. He had no idea how his brother was going to act—would he hold a grudge, would he try to kill Jacob? So that night, alone, Jacob turned to God in prayer. He wasn't sure what was going to happen. He was afraid. He was uncertain about his future. So that night he wrestled with God. Both physically and spiritually, Jacob wrestled with the Lord.

I'm sure you have felt the same way. Like Jacob, we are often unsure of the future. Maybe we brought it upon ourselves like Jacob. We have been deceitful, not trustworthy. And we hurt the people we love. Or it could be a family issue. Something happened recently and you aren't sure how things are going to turn out. Maybe it's the fact that your life is ebbing away. You aren't getting any younger, your best days are behind you. You know it's only a matter of time before you breath your last.

We all have things in our lives that cause us to fret and worry about the future. We are afraid of what is going to happen to us. It seems as if your whole world is turning upside down. You feel helpless. You've tried to fix things yourself—but to no avail. You don't know what else to do. So you turn to God.

We turn to God in prayer. As Christians we pray often. For we know that only God has the power to take care of us. Only he knows what to do against everything that is afflicting our souls. We strive and we wrestle with God in prayer. The more we have going on in our lives, the more we pray to God. We don't give up after only praying once and they are not answered. But we keep on praying—more and more, again and again.

And we do this on all occasions. We often pray to God in times of need. After all Peter tells us to do this, **Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.** But we don't just pray to God in times of

need. We pray to him on all occasions. We pray to him in order to thank and praise him. For he has delivered us. He has sent his Son to suffer and die only to rise again so that we might live with him forever. So in every occasion—whether in need or out of rejoicing we can pray to God and know that he cares for us.

As Christians we wrestle with God in prayer on every occasion because we know his promises. And as wrestle with God in prayer we know that we can hold him to his promises.

The dawn was breaking. Jacob and God had been wrestling all night. God said, **Let me go, for it is daybreak. But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."** By this time it had become clear to Jacob that he wasn't wrestling an ordinary man. He was wrestling God himself. So he wouldn't let go—both physically and spiritually. And he asked for a blessing. So God changed his name. No longer would it be Jacob. No longer would he rely on himself or use deception to get what he wanted. God had molded and formed Jacob to rely on him. From now on Jacob would trust in God to take care of all things. He spiritually struggled with God, so his name was changed to Israel, which means "the one who struggles with God." Like he did with Abraham, his grandfather, God changed Jacob's name.

Perhaps you thought to yourself: How could Jacob be so bold? God told Jacob to let him go. But Jacob refused to listen to God. How could he get away with that? Because Jacob knew God's promise. He knew the promises he had given to Abraham and Isaac. He knew that he was to receive those same promises. Years before when Jacob was fleeing Esau God appeared to him in a dream—standing on top of a stairway. In that dream God gave Jacob the same promise he gave Abraham and Isaac.

And Jacob knew that God keeps his Word. He never tells a lie. He never backs off of his Word. There is not a single promise he is not able to keep. So Jacob held him to his promise. He refused to let God go—both physically and spiritually, until he was blessed. And so God blessed him. Jacob had prevailed. For he got what he wanted—a blessing from the Lord.

We too know God's promises. He promises to bless us. So we wrestle with God in prayer. And we hold God to his promises. Throughout his Word he promises to bless us in many different ways. **Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.** Or **We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.** He also promises to hear our prayers and to bless us through them. **Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me.** Or **My Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.** Or **The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer.** After teaching his disciples the Lord's Prayer Jesus asked them, **If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!**

We could go on and on listing all his promises to bless us. We know that God promises to hear our prayer. We know that God will answer our prayers. So we can pray to him persistently and we can pray to him boldly. So we can go before him with confidence. Like a child going up to his Father to ask him for something, we too can ask our heavenly Father, and we know that he will answer us. As we read in our second lessons for today, **If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.** We can hold him to his promises.

God would go on to bless Jacob. That day, after dawn broke, Jacob met his brother Esau. Esau was no longer angry. He wasn't looking to kill his brother. Rather he threw his arms around him and kissed him. God blessed Jacob. He had watched over him time and time again. Jacob didn't need to fear the future. He didn't have to wonder what was going to happen to him. For God was watching over him. God took care of him.

He does the same for us. He watches over us just as he watched over Jacob. He blesses us just as he blessed Jacob. So we don't have to fear. There is no reason to wonder what will happen to us. We might be unsure about the future, but God isn't. He knows what will happen and he will take care of us. So we pray to God knowing his promises. Knowing that we can hold him to his promise to bless us.

Jacob wrestled with God, not just physically, but spiritually. We will never wrestle with God physically, but we too are to wrestle with God—in prayer. God encourages us to do so. For he promises to bless us. So he wants us to prayer persistently and hold him to his promises. For he will bless us forever. Amen.