

Jacob Wrestles with God
Genesis 32:22-32; I Corinthians 1:18-25
(Requested by Keith Garrett and Kelly Freeman)

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I grew up in a church tradition that valued surrender. We were frequently challenged to surrender our will to the will and way of God. In that tradition, surrender to God was regarded as a highest value. Not surprisingly we ended many worship services by singing the hymn, “I Surrender All.” Many of you know it. It’s No. 347 in the *Baptist Hymnal*. “All to thee, my blessed Savior, I surrender all,” we sang over and over as many of us inwardly surrendered our lives to the will of God.

My friend, Rabbi Jeffery Ballon, a few years ago helped me identify another biblical tradition, another way of relating to God. The rabbi and I were in an interfaith clergy study group. For four years, he and I and some others traveled the world and studied with some of today’s great theologians. At our first meeting, we each introduced our self to the group. The first couple of people to do the self-introduction spoke of learning new ways to surrender to God. I completely understood and appreciated their honesty.

When it came time for the rabbi to introduce himself, he said, “I don’t surrender. My name is Jacob, and I wrestle with God.” He went on to explain that surrender was not a part of his tradition. He and his people were challenged to contend with God, to wrestle, struggle, aware of the risk that they may come away with a limp and also aware of the potential blessing.

If your identity as a Christian comes exclusively from the surrender tradition, I’m warning you now. You may not like this text. Jacob does not surrender to God.

Behind the scenes of this fascinating text, another story is unfolding. Jacob, you may remember, had a twin brother named Esau. Esau was the older, and according to Jewish tradition he was entitled to receive the blessing of their father. It was his birthright. In Jewish thought, a father’s blessing meant good fortune, prosperity, security. Esau was entitled to the blessing, but Jacob, whose name means something like “supplanter” or

“trickster,” conspired with his mother against Esau and stole their aged father’s blessing. Esau was enraged. The text says that he hated his twin brother Jacob. And he made this pledge, “The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob.”

When we come to our text in chapter thirty-two, Jacob was expecting a violent confrontation with Esau. Instead Jacob met the one Walter Brueggemann calls “the dreaded stranger in the night” (*Interpretation*, Genesis, p. 266). Notice that the text emphasizes that Jacob was alone. His wives and children had been sent across the Jordan River. It also emphasizes that it was nighttime. Suddenly, alone in the dark, Jacob was assaulted by an unnamed opponent. The text gradually introduces us to this unnamed opponent. At first we are told that the assailant was simply “a man.” Perhaps it could have been Esau lurking in the shadows. We quickly become aware, though, that this opponent was no ordinary man. Finally we learn that this “man” was God in human form. Jacob was wrestling with God.

The text says that God and Jacob wrestled throughout the night. At daybreak, God apparently realized that he would not prevail against Jacob. So God struck Jacob’s hip socket and put his hip out of joint. With Jacob injured now, God said to him, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.”

But Jacob responded, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”

I don’t know about you, but I already have some pretty big questions about this story. Why on earth did God wrestle a man? What kind of God was it that cannot defeat a mere mortal? And what kind of man was Jacob that he could hold God to a draw? Why was daybreak so important to God? And why was this blessing so important to Jacob?

After Jacob refused to release God unless he received a blessing, God asked for Jacob’s name. Jacob gave it, and God told him that he would no longer be called Jacob, the “trickster.” From that point onward, Jacob would be called Israel, and here’s why: “for you have striven with God and with humans, and you have prevailed.”

Jacob then asked for God’s name. Notice, though, that he said “please.” To be given the name of God was to be given the mystery of who God was. God was God’s name. The divine name had not been given. It

would not be given until Moses heard it at the burning bush: I AM THAT I AM.

God refused to reveal the divine name, but God blessed Jacob. Jacob named that place where he wrestled with God Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.”

When the sun finally rose, God was gone, and the writer gives us a most poignant picture: Jacob limping toward the Promised Land.

What a story! It was nominated by two of our church members.

Esau didn't attack his twin brother Jacob, as Jacob feared. Jacob's God did. And God initiated it. God took Jacob seriously enough to engage him in struggle. God had the power to injure Jacob, though he did not finally defeat Jacob. Jacob held on, demanding a blessing. His name was changed from “trickster” to “God rules” (Brueggemann). His entire identity changed that day, and he became the father of a people, the people of Israel. His name came to mean “he who strives with God.” And his limp was a sign of his success, not his defeat.

That is who my friend Rabbi Ballon is, one who strives with God. I saw him Thursday. He has brain cancer now, and his days are filled with uncertainty. Yet he continues to wrestle with the dreaded stranger in the night.

Surrender would have been easier, wouldn't it? If Jacob had fallen to the ground, assumed the fetal position and cried, “I surrender all,” he would not have sustained a hip injury. He wouldn't have walked with a limp. But he wouldn't have received the blessing of God either. Frederick Buechner calls this wrestling match “the magnificent defeat.”

It represents another biblical tradition, where we refuse to surrender to God, where we choose instead to contend with God, to wrestle, struggle. Beware, though. It has its risks, even as it has its blessings.

I have found only one thing about which I cannot surrender, one issue where I cannot curl into the fetal position and say, “I surrender all.” My middle daughter turned twenty this month. Every day for twenty years—minus a few brief spells—she has had multiple seizures, sometimes into the

hundreds per day. Most seizure disorders are easily managed by medications and/or other treatments. Not Hannah's. She has been on so many medications we can't remember them all. Some were experimental. Some had awful side effects. She's had brain surgery, two vagus nerve stimulators, and has been on a highly restrictive and specialized diet twice. She's been in hospitals around the country. The end result of it all is that she enters her twenties in the cruel fog of mental retardation. Her cognitive level is estimated to be about 18 months.

While we love Hannah with a tender, special love, some days I want to fight somebody. Some days if I could get into a ring with God, I would take the risk. If God is who God says he is, I will not surrender this. Alone in the dark, I have to fight. I have to wrestle. I have to struggle. This is a wound to my soul that I will one day take to my grave. But I can honestly say that there is a reward to the struggle too, a "blessing" if you will. This wrestling match with God has made my thinking about life, my entire approach to life, deeper and richer. I tell people from time-to-time that of all the great teachers and theologians I've known my greatest teacher has been Hannah. And there is another blessing from this wrestling match with God. It is a bit of inner peace, a kind of Promised Land. It is not a peace that comes from having had all my questions answered because they have not all been answered. This peace, I've concluded, is a gift from that dreaded stranger in the night.

Surrender to God is a good thing. I'm grateful for the pastors and teachers who challenged me to surrender my will to the will and way of God. I am also grateful to have learned another way of relating to God. It is a theology of weakness and power that begins to turn our attention to the New Testament and the cross of our Lord. God became powerless, and in that powerlessness was born a power to save the world.

I don't know where you are in dealing with this text. The notion of wrestling with God may be so foreign to you that you just can't go there. I understand that. It may be, though, that this is the text you've been looking for. This text is your permission to say, "I cannot surrender. My name is Jacob, and I will wrestle with God."

Closing Prayer

Lord, we're not being arrogant. We're wounded, and we don't understand. We see in Jacob a model that for some of us is healthy. We cannot surrender, but we do say, "please." Please help us on our journey to the Promised Land. Amen.