

The God Wrestler

Genesis 32:22-31

Matthew 14:13-21

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The story of Jacob wrestling with a divine incarnation in human form is actually a story about us. Don't we all wrestle with God? In Jacob's case, his problems were self-inflicted. Years earlier, he pulled off a scam that was so deceitful and dishonorable that he had to run for his life.

And now it was time to face the consequences.

Before I go on, a few things about Jacob you need to know. Jacob lived about four thousand years ago. He was the son Isaac, who was the son of Abraham. Jacob had an older twin brother named Esau. When they were born Jacob came out clutching onto his older brother's heel.

For that reason, his parents named him Jacob, which means, "a heel, a trickster or, an oyster." Today it would be like naming your son after Bernie Madoff.

Reading the narrative, something tells me Jacob grew up embracing his name. Unlike Esau, his reliable but dull witted older brother, Jacob was just too smarmy for his own good. Reading between the lines, you get the sense Jacob was always cutting corners, pushing the envelope and crossing over lines that should never be crossed. In short, he was a sneak.

Maybe that explains why Isaac favored Esau over Jacob. Maybe Esau was dense but he was honest and honorable. On the other hand, their mother, Rebekah favored Jacob over Esau, maybe in reaction to Isaac's rejection of Jacob. Or, maybe Rebekah favored Jacob because he took after her. As you will see, she could bluff and scheme with the best of them.

Whatever the case, what we have here is a portrait of a textbook dysfunctional family. If that surprises you, it shouldn't. What makes these Spirit inspired bible stories stand the test of time is their honesty. None of the characters are perfect, no one always makes the right decision. They're all flawed human beings in need of salvation, just like us. That explains why Jacob's story was passed down through the generations, so we can learn from his mistakes.

But the bigger lesson is learned from the story of Jacob wrestling with God, a story needed to be remembered.

First, the backstory. Jacob betrayed his father and older brother twenty years earlier, forcing him to run for his life when his scam backfired.

Isaac was blind and elderly. He knew his days were numbered. He summoned Esau to ritually prepare himself to receive his blessing to become the next patriarch.

Isaac instructed Esau to take his quiver and bow and go hunting. Then he was instructed to cook his prey into a savory meal, “so that I (Isaac) may bless you before I die.”

Unfortunately, Rebekah was eavesdropping. She found Jacob and said, ‘I heard your father say to Esau that he would bless him before the Lord.’”

To keep that from happening, Rebekah told Isaac to bring her two choice kids (baby goats, not little children) so she could prepare a savory meal for Jacob’s father. Jacob would then pretend to be Esau and receive Esau’s blessing.

Even though Isaac was blind, Jacob saw a hole in his mother’s plan. Jacob had smooth skin, unlike Esau who was a hairy man. “What if my father touches me and realizes I’m not Esau. Instead of blessing me, he will curse me.”

“Not to worry, Jacob,” she said. “I’ll fix it so your father thinks you’re Esau. When your father finds out he was fooled, I’ll take all the blame. You just do what I tell you.”

While Jacob went out to collect the two baby goats, Rebecca went to work. She sneaked into Esau’s tent and borrowed his finest clothes. After she skinned the kids Jacob brought her, she tied their furry pelts on Jacob’s arms and on the smooth part of his neck. Jacob then dressed in Esau’s clothes.

After Rebekah cooked Isaac’s meal, she handed Jacob the savory food she prepared and sent him off to do the deed.

Oddly enough, the scheme worked. Only after Esau returned with his savory meal did Isaac realized he was scammed. Esau begged his father to give him the blessing but it was too late. Esau’s younger brother, like it or not was now his lord.

Esau swore vengeance. Rebekah ran to warn Jacob Esau was out to kill him and sent him far away to live with her brother Laban, a con man in his own right, until Esau cooled down. But he didn’t.

Jacob stayed away for twenty years. In the meantime, he artfully scammed his uncle too. On Laban’s dime, Jacob became wealthy. When Laban realized Jacob conned him, Jacob realized he wore out his welcome, he decided to get out of town and go home, hoping he could appease Esau.

So, Jacob gathered up his possessions, his flocks and family (he married Rachel, Laban’s daughter) and nervously began the long trek home.

Just before getting there, Jacob sent messengers ahead to tell Esau he was back. He instructed his servants, to tell Esau, “Thus says your servant, Jacob, ‘I have lived with Laban as an alien and stayed until now; and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves; and I have sent them to my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight.’” (Genesis 32: 4-5)

Jacob was hoping to bribe Esau.

Well, when Jacob's servants returned, he learned Esau was coming out to meet him, with four hundred men. Jacob panicked. He wisely sent half his caravan away to escape. Then he stayed put to face the inevitable, convinced he wouldn't be alive much longer.

Not all of us are congenital schemers, but all of us have had moments when we were forced to face the consequences of our sins against God and our neighbors.

Like Jacob, we must decide to either come clean and take responsibility for what we've done or, try to wiggle our way out of it with explanations and excuses that only disappoint God and the people we hurt.

In other words, it's time to wrestle with God.

As most of you know, I'm a volunteer chaplain at the Baltimore County Jail. I mostly mentor juveniles who grew up in dysfunctional environments. Running the streets is all they know. Often I remind myself, "There but for the grace of God go I."

When these kids are finally caught doing something wrong, they learned from an early age to lie instead of telling the truth.

Please don't judge them, if you were in their shoes you'd probably do the same. When we get caught with our hands in the cookie jar, our first inclination is to try to talk our way out of it. It's human nature, or more to the point, it's our fallen human nature. Like Adam and Eve after eating the forbidden fruit, we try to hide from God.

But as we hide that still silent voice still pricks our conscience. "Tell the truth, face the music, accept the consequences, humble yourself, confess...."

This was the same inner conflict Jacob found himself in. When Esau showed up the next morning, would Jacob try to charm and bribe his way out with rationalizations and expensive presents or would Jacob finally acknowledge his guilt and face the consequences?

All through the night until first light, Jacob wrestled with God. It was a terribly fierce fight. Sometimes Jacob thought he had the upper hand but that Mysterious Presence kept pounding and wouldn't let Jacob go.

Finally, Jacob was broken. Knowing he was licked he begged God for a blessing. He got it, but he also received a strange gift that would forever remind him of this life-changing encounter.

He walked away with a limp. But he also received a blessing. He became a new man with a new name. He'd no longer be Jacob, the deceiver. Now he was Israel, which means he strived (or wrestled) with God.

Loosing to God in a wrestling match is the best outcome. We need to be beaten soundly and forever humbled for our on good. Only then can we honestly submit to God's will.

What happened to Jacob that morning? Esau showed up with four hundred men and embraced his long lost brother, just like the waiting father in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son.

Apparently God wrestled with Esau too. Surprisingly, Esau became an agent of God's grace. Instead of bloodshed, there was reconciliation.

Here's the Good News: When you wrestle with God and loose, you win. Maybe you still have to face the consequences but now you are free from your old crooked ways and can face your accusers with grace. Jesus wrestled with God on the cross for us. The innocent Lamb of God took our place. Through Christ, the totality of God suffered for us.

For God so loved the world he became one of us to die for us so we can be forgiven and redeemed.

The next time you find yourself in a tight spot of your own making, remember Jacob's life and death wrestling match with God. And then remember Jesus who said, "This is my body broken for you... This is my blood shed for you. Take and eat, take and drink..."

It's the most savory meal you'll ever eat and the most savory blessing you'll ever receive. Amen.