“Wrestling with God” - Genesis 32:22-32
Messiah Bible Church - November 4, 2026 - Adam Casalino

Introduction: Jacob, the Patriarch

I have a fondness for studying the lives of the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They are the fathers of our faith, so we can learn a lot from them. But, while I long to be like Abraham (our father and friend of God), I find myself drawn to studying Jacob. I’m probably much more like him than his grandpa.

Recap Jacob’s life: all the patriarchs had their bad moments, but Jacob’s name literally means “heel grabber.” His life was marked by trickery and deceit. He tricked his father into giving him the family blessing instead of his older brother, Esau. God had planned on giving it to Jacob anyway (see Genesis 25:23), but *in a trend that became very common for him*, Job took matters into his own hands and made a mess of it. His brother was so mad he wanted to kill him, so Jacob fled to a foreign land.

He spent decades working for his crooked father-in-law, Laban. Once again, God planned to take care of Jacob and gave him a family and wealth; yet again Jacob tried to do things his own way and ended up fleeing Laban--resulting in more conflict and pain. Throughout his entire life, Jacob pursued his ambitions, his way. He neglected God’s way and it always ended poorly.

Yet, despite all this, Jacob is still a patriarch. He is God’s man. And God’s far from finished with him. Tonight, we are going to look at a pivotal moment in his life, where God finally gets ahold of his stubborn “scoundrel.” My message is *“Wrestling with God.”* We are going to learn what it means to wrestle with God; and who ends up winning.

Part 1: Genesis 32:22-23:

Genesis 32:22–23 (ESV) — 22 The same night [Jacob] arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. **23** He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had.

So, after fleeing his father-in-law, Jacob returns to his homeland. He will face his brother for the first time in decades. He sends word to Esau and finds out that his brother is on his way... with 400 men! Jacob fears Esau’s coming to wipe him out. He pleaded with God for help. He sent a gift of animals, hoping that it would win over his brother. He even split up his family into two camps, hoping desperately that if Esau attacks one camp, the other might survive. Everything he has he sends ahead of him toward his vengeful brother.

Why did he do this? Is Jacob deliberately putting his family in harm’s way? I don’t think so. I think this is Jacob’s very last scheme. He is sending the women and children first, thinking, “Esau won’t kill them, right?” Esau’s a man’s man; a hunter and warrior. But even he has a soft

spot! This is the most desperate of all desperate moves; because he might be wrong. And it illustrates our first point so vividly: **Jacob is at the <u>end of his rope</u>.**

Jacob was once a master deceiver. But now, he's come face-to-face with the realization that he can't scheme his way out of this mess. The irony is that everything Jacob has, God gave to him. From the very start of his life, God was taking care of Jacob. God promised Jacob that he would sire a great nation, that he'd inherit the promise land, that his family would be blessed (Genesis 28:13–14). And God was fulfilling those promises by giving him children and wealth. But he might lose everything, because of his foolish decisions.

That's pretty much how it is with all of us. God blesses us, and we mess it up. The Bible says in him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). He gave us our lives, blessed us with rain and sunshine, filled our hearts with food and gladness. He's good to every living thing, the Psalms say (Psalm 145:16). And what do we do with all these precious gifts? We squander them. We disregard some of them. We covet some of them. Worse still, we sometimes think we got all these blessings by ourselves!

But, for all of us, there comes of time when we reach the end of our rope. We hit these dead ends in life, that force us to take stock of everything we've done and everything we believe. Most people do everything they can to avoid such moments. But they come for all of us: a problem we can't solve, a need we can't fulfill, a sickness we can't beat. It could come in the form of a broken marriage, betrayal by a trusted friend, or a sudden disaster. Quite often, it's a problem created by our own bad decisions. Regardless, it's something we can't fix ourselves.

How are you going to respond when that time comes? Will you hatch a desperate plan like Jacob? Will you get angry with God, and blame him? Or are you going to turn to him... listen to him... and find out what his plan is?

We know what *Jacob* is doing. He's desperately trying to find a way out of this problem, even though he knows... there's nothing he can do. But, the problem he's face (and it's a big one) isn't the main issue at stake. God's been trying to get Jacob's attention for a long time. And this crisis will finally force him to come to terms with the Lord.

Part 2: Genesis 32:24-25:

Genesis 32:24–25 (ESV) — 24 And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. **25** When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

Here we come to one of the most significant--and most peculiar--encounters with God in the Bible. Jacob as we know, sent everyone away. He's all alone. Then, suddenly, he's not alone. A mystery man appears. Who is this man? What was he doing there? And why on earth is Jacob wrestling with him?

Earlier in the chapter, Jacob had cried out to God for help (vs. 9-12). He asked him to save his family from the wrath of Esau. He doesn't get an immediate response from God, but

now, someone arrives at Jacob's hour of need. And instead of pleading with this man, asking him for help, striking up a conversation, he tries to pin him to the ground!

I have a lot of questions about this moment. The Bible doesn't give many details. But perhaps the most important question is: Who is this man? I will do away with the suspense and tell you who the man is. It's our second point: **Jacob wrestles <u>the Son of God</u>**. Not a shocker, since I called this message "Wresting with God!" Hosea 12:3–4 tells us the same, that this was God. Jacob also says that later. But this certainly would have been a problem for OT Jews and modern Jewish scholars: how can Jacob wrestle with God Almighty?

But consider these details: this is God appearing as a man; in a physical form that Jacob was able to touch. That's not out of our theological wheelhouse. We call this a "pre-Incarnate appearance" of our Lord Jesus Christ. Meaning, before he was born into the human race (virgin birth), the Second Person of the Godhead, the Son of God, often made appearances as God (Yahweh) to the people of Israel. Sometimes in a physical form like this. This is how God himself can appear to Jacob, and even wrestle with him, without Jacob being killed for seeing God.

It's no small thing for God to appear to a man. So, we should be pretty surprised that, this time, the man in question wrestles with him. Jacob doesn't pray. He doesn't bow down. He doesn't worship. No, he grabs God and tries to pin him. That's wild to me.

The text doesn't say who initiated this wrestling match, but I can make an educated guess and say it was Jacob. Keep in mind, he's encountered God before in his dreams. This, as far as I see it, is the first time God appears to him in a physical way--and Jacob tackles him!

It's baffling, but we have to remember who we're talking about, Jacob. He's a desperate man. Truth be told, he's been striving against people his whole life. He fought his brother in their momma's womb. He grabbed Esau's foot when they were born. He tousled with his father and his father-in-law. *Why wouldn't he fight God when he finally gets a chance to meet him?*

Wrestling is one of the oldest forms of human combat. Unlike silly "pro wrestling," real wrestling is a strenuous contest where one fighter tries to subdue the other by grabbing their arms, legs, and torso and pinning them to the ground. It's tiring, brutal, and painful. It requires a tremendous amount of strength and stamina. Imagine trying to do this with God!

This was intense. This was out of the ordinary. But there's even more to this moment than you might realize. As I said, God blessed Jacob with life, a family, wealth, and a glorious future nation. Jacob jeopardized all that with his foolishness. And this wrestling match is the culmination of a lifelong fight with the Lord.

As appalling as it might be to think that a man would wrestle God, Jacob is do what we all have done. Like him, we all have a similar conflict inside of us. We are filled with hopes, dreams, desires; some of them good, some of them sinful. And as human beings we are faced with obstacles that we are told we have to overcome to achieve our dreams. It creates this urgency, this desperation, this obsession with doing things our way; otherwise, we won't get what we want! And we devote our entire lives to getting it.

Then, there's God. And, while we have our longings and wishes, he also has a plan for our lives. And it is a better plan than what we can dream up on our own. But in our sin, in our self-centeredness, we struggle to heed him and embrace his plans. So, we fight him. We resist him. We, as Jesus once said, kick against goads: his prodding's to get us to follow his ways.

We can't stay in this tension forever: fighting God's plans and clinging to our own. Eventually, it all comes to a head; we have to come to terms with God. Usually, a crisis forces us to do this, because it arrests our attention. We can't do anything else but deal with the problem; and we don't have the ability to solve the problem ourselves. So, we are compelled to turn to God for his help, and deal with this conflict.

Jacob desperately wanted God to save his life and his family. But, yet again, he was trying to do it his own way. It seems he is trying to force God to give him what he wants, instead of just listening and obeying him.

But verse 25 says something peculiar. What did it meant that the man did not "prevail" against Jacob? That's a tough one, huh? Was Jacob truly stronger than God? Was he actually winning over God? Of course not. I think the Scriptures are not saying Jacob was overpowering God physically. Instead, God wanted to communicate with Jacob, trying to reason with him, discuss things with him. But Jacob, wasn't interested in listening, he just wanted to fight.

Imagine Superman was trying to stop a bank robber. He's standing in his way and is like, "Hey guy, why don't you put down the gun and just surrender to the police? I don't want to hurt you." But the robber is just kicking and punching Superman. And... Superman's just standing there shrugging his shoulders. He's trying to "prevail" against the robber, talk some sense into him. But the robber thinks he can outlast Superman. All Superman has to do is knock him on the head and he's dead!

It's simply absurd for anyone to think they can pin God to the ground and make him do what they want! God's come down to meet with Jacob. He's there to help him. Yet, true to form, tries to do things his way. As always, he's assuming that he has to rely on his own strength and scheming to win the day.

We're just like him. Even Christians can foolishly think their way is better than God's. That's true for those of us who are stubbornly clinging to old sin habits. But it's also true for the many, many Christians who trust in their self-effort: their ability to do things to please God. The Bible calls that self-righteousness. The word of God says we are justified by faith, not by our works. Yet many believers fall into the trap of thinking they maintain God's acceptance through their own efforts, in their own strength, their way. Instead of abiding in Christ by faith, depending on his grace, they look to themselves. It's just as foolish as trying to wrestle a pre-incarnate Jesus to the ground.

But here is the good news. The hero of the story is not Jacob! It's the Lord. In this passage we see God's character shining so brightly. He is kind, loving, and patient with Jacob. He came down to help and Jacob attacks him. But despite that, God doesn't leave him. Jacob is stubbornly fighting God, but God doesn't crush him. He just touches Jacob's hip and the fight's over.

Long ago, God promised Jacob he'd never leave him. Even as Jacob fights him, the Lord refuses to leave. God does not go back on his word and he does not abandon his children. Even the stubborn ones.

In our human nature, we buck at God. Even Christians can be tempted to do things they want to do, their way. We can easily lose sight of God's plan for our lives. In our frustration we sin, we lash out at God, we kick back at him. But God never leaves us. He patiently stays by our side, ready to provide the wisdom and guidance we so desperately need. Instead of wrestling him, he wants us to embrace him. Heed his word. Continue to trust him. Abandon the silly notion that we have to do things our way.

As I said, this passage isn't about Esau and Jacob's family. God is finally reckoning with Jacob, force him to come to terms with his plan for his life. This wrestling match results in a major change in Jacob, more than just a dislocated hip. Let's keep reading:

Part 3: Genesis 32:26-29:

Genesis 32:26–28 (ESV) — 26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." **27** And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." **28** Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed."

Again, another unexpected twist. So, God finally speaks and tells Jacob to let him go. He's basically saying, "Alright calm down, Jacob. Time's almost up. Esau's on his way. Let's get down to business." Jacob demands a blessing. The gall of this guy, right? Maybe he wanted an army of soldiers to protect him? Maybe wanted fire to come down and roast Esau and his men? Maybe a whirlwind to pick up and his family up and place them miles away? Something tells me he wasn't expecting a *name change*.

This, of course, is a pivotal moment in the Bible. This is the first time we hear the name "Israel." And wouldn't you know, it's not as flattering of a name as you might think! It literally means, "he who strives with God." Now, I'm sure some people will spin that to sound positive or impressive. "We *strive* alongside God as his great servants!" No, that's not what this means. It means Israel constantly bucks at God's plans. Just keep reading the OT and you'll see exactly what that means.

But this name is pretty important. It's the name God gives him, as well as the name of his descendants. They are not named after Abraham or Isaac, but Israel. Why is that? Is God mocking his chosen people? No. He is illustrating something very important, and it applies even to us.

Point 3: **Jacob receives <u>his true identity</u>.** Why rename Jacob, the "scoundrel" to "he who strives with God?" Notice the full background for the name in verse 28: he strove with God and men and prevailed. Is God saying it was *good* for Jacob to be a stubborn son-of-a-gun who constantly fought people? Is God saying that we have to fight him to get what we want? Absolutely not.

What God is saying is that *despite* Jacob's foolish fighting and conniving, **God will cause him to prevail.** Not because Jacob can earn it, not because he deserves it, but because God is using Jacob to demonstrate to the rest of the world his abundant patience and grace.

Later on, God says he didn't choose Israel because they were mighty, but because they were weak (Deuteronomy 7:7)! Paul says the same thing about us in the NT (1 Corinthians 1:26–29). The reason God renamed Jacob to Israel was to remind him and his descendants that although they naturally want to fight with God, he will not leave them nor abandon them. He does not love them or care for them because they always do the right thing. He loves them, takes care of them, because he always does the right thing. It's because of his goodness, not theirs.

The same is true for us. All of us here, even the wisest among us, stumble again and again and again. Yet God has not once abandoned us. He will never leave us, nor forsake us. He will never break his promises to save us, forgive us, put his Spirit in our hearts, teach us, guide us, strengthen us, and bring us in the end, to his heavenly kingdom.

Why is that the case? Why can be confident God will never leave us? Because, many years after Genesis 32, the God-man came down again. He was born into the human race, this time fully God and fully man. This time he wrestled, not with a person, but with our sin. It clung to him as he hung on the cross. And it wasn't our hips that were dislocated, but his very body was crushed, beaten; every bone was dislocated as he died the death we deserved. On the third day, Jesus prevailed over our sin, over death itself, so that we can live forever. And everyone who puts their faith in Christ doesn't have to fight God, but is welcomed as his precious son or daughter.

This scene in Genesis 32 is so significant, because it illustrates just how awesome God is, not Jacob. God is finally getting Jacob where he wants him. He is realigning Jacob's destiny according to his plans. But what were God's plans for Jacob? We're going to explore that in just a moment.

Part 4: Genesis 32:30-32:

Genesis 32:29–32 (ESV) — 29 Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. **30** So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered." **31** The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. **32** Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh.

I love how God responds to Jacob. They say a good Jew always answers a question, with a question. This is who they got that from. God is basically saying, "How do you *not know* who I am, Jacob?" In this moment, Jacob is taking his focus off of himself: his plans, his desire, his ambitions and is putting it on God. He's finally clued in on what God is saying. And *that's* when God blesses him--funny how that tends to be the pattern. Final point: **Jacob puts <u>his eyes on God</u>**

Jacob renames the place Peniel or Penuel; both mean "The face of God." As the sun rose, Israel was forced to limp on his now busted hip. The mention of his descendants not eating the sinew of the thigh means they remembered this moment, as well they should. From this moment onward, Israel is a changed man. He's far from perfect, but he is very different from here on out. He can no longer scheme; he can't actually because if he does scheme--and screw things up--he can't run away! His entire way of life has to change. And that bears fruit in the coming years.

I explained Jacob had been set on doing things his own way. He cared more about his personal plans and desires instead of God's. He had to come to an end of himself before he could see God and be changed. If you're not careful, you can misinterpret what this passage is saying.

Let me clarify a few things: God is not mad when you ask him for material blessings. It wasn't sin that Jacob asked for his family to be safe. It is common to hear in the church world this idea that God's plans are lofty and spiritual--and things like family, possessions, earthly things are not important to him. And many times, Christians feel guilty for asking God for these things. But the truth is, God is the one who promised to bless Jacob and he is the one who promised to take care of you (Matthew 6:30–33). It's not wrong to ask God for good things in life: like to be married, or to have kids, or to ask for success in your job, or to be blessed other ways. Accept the fact that God is a *good Father.*

People also often think that God's plans for us aren't as good as the plans we make for ourselves. We assume that God's plan is painful, unpleasant, or too much for you to do. That's a lie. God's will is "good, pleasing, and perfect." His plans for you are better than what you can imagine yourself. Just think about what the Bible promises us after we leave this earth. Heaven is better than anything you can dream up: no pain, no sorrow, pleasures forevermore, endless joy, endless peace. If God has prepared such an amazing home for you--for all eternity--do you really think his plans for you now aren't wonderful? Yes, this life has sorrow and difficulties. That does not mean God's plan for you is bad. No, my friends, God is good; and his goodness is better than you realize.

God was the one who blessed Jacob with a family, children, and possessions. He wanted Jacob blessed. Jacob's desire to keep all those things wasn't sin. But this was the problem. This is what we need to remember, this was Jacob's mistake: He put those material things, his earthly desires, ahead of God's desires for him. He focused on those earthly desires *to the exclusion* of God's good plan for his life. In other words, he treasured the stuff more than he did God.

When God appeared physically to his grandpa Abraham (Genesis 18), they had lunch. They walked together and had a meaningful conversation. When God appeared physically to Jacob, he wrestled him. Big difference. God wanted to walk with Jacob the same way he walked with Abraham. But because Jacob was putting his earthly desires first, he couldn't see that a relationship with God must come first.

God's blessings are inextricably linked to his plans. God always has a purpose in blessing you. A big part of that is to show you how much he loves you. But with every good thing he gives us, there is a purpose, there is a plan. What was God's purpose for Jacob? Remember, the

promises God made to him were the same ones he made to Isaac and Abraham. We call it the "Abrahamic covenant."

We know that from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob came the Jewish people and through them came the Messiah, Jesus our Savior. But would happen many years after Jacob. What was *Jacob's* role in the Abrahamic covenant? Was it just to have a bunch of children who could have more children and eventually become a nation? To learn this, we need to see what God said about his grandfather, Abraham:

Genesis 18:18–19 (ESV) — "...Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him... For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him."

Do you see the connection between the blessings God promised Abraham--and Abraham's role? God blessed Abraham and gave him a specific purpose: to teach his children and household to "keep the way of the Lord" and to "do righteousness and justice." Did Abraham follow through with this? Yes, he did. In fact, Abraham was alive for the first 15 years of Jacob's life; so he would have his grandsons the way of the Lord, too!

Jacob grew up learning about God from Abraham and Isaac. Yet he didn't put his faith in the Lord until after he was an adult. God always wanted to bless Jacob, so that he would continue what his grandfather started: teach his children to keep the way of the Lord. To do righteousness and justice. Instead, sadly, Jacob spent most of his early life scheming, trying to have things his own way. And because of this, he wasn't focused on teaching his family. The blessings served a purpose; to equip Jacob to raise a God-honoring family. Who would go on to be witnesses to the rest of the world of the true God. God's blessings are never detached from his kingdom plans.

If you're wondering, Esau doesn't kill Jacob or his family. He hugs him and weeps. This was never about that, as I said. This was about Jacob understanding who God really wanted him to be. Not a schemer, but someone who, despite his failures, knew and followed God. A man who would teach his children to follow after God. After this moment, we do see a change in Israel. He still has struggles, but his focus remains on the Lord.

Conclusion: The Choice

What God did for Jacob, he wants to do for us. Not hobble us, not really. As I said, Jesus took the hobbling in our place. Instead, because of Jesus, God wants to bless us. But any material blessings God gives us are just a part of his bigger plan. And that is for us to walk with him. Jacob ended up limping with God--that's better than nothing! We too can stop fighting God, committed to doing things our own way, and embrace his purposes as we fellowship with him.

There is possibly someone listening to this who has never put their faith in God. You've been wrestling and fighting him all your life. God loves you. His plans for you are better than your own but they require you believing in Jesus Christ as your savior. Instead of wrestling God,

doing things your own way, it is time to ask him to forgive you of your sin and welcome you into his eternal family.

Christians, don't think that's the end of it. As I said, many of us still hold onto doing things our own way. We want God's plan for our lives, but we still cling to self-righteousness, self-effort, self-centeredness. We fight God's grace, his unmerited favor, and try to earn his favor. Or, we refuse to let him do a deeper work of sanctification in our hearts, to root out the source of our old sin habits. Don't wait for a crisis to hit before you stop kicking against the goads and say, "God I want to do it your way."

I want to end tonight with a sober warning. What happens if you refuse to surrender? What happens if you decide, I'd rather fight God and have my own way? That's where most of the people of the world are. They dig in their heels and keep resisting God. The Bible says this results in a hardened heart and a seared conscious. The result is an ugly resentment against our loving Father which only leads to sorrow and death.

I once watched a movie called *The Poseidon Adventure*. A cruise ship is capsized at sea and a group of survivors struggle to reach the top and get rescued. Gene Hackman plays a man named Scott, a reverend who is struggling with his faith. When they finally reach the last hurdle, before rescue, they realize someone has to jump off a ledge and close off a valve that's spraying super-heated steam... but whoever does this won't survive. Worn out, frustrated, and more than a little angry, Scott decides to be the one to do it. But as he's hanging from this valve wheel, using the last bit of his strength to close it, he says this to God:

> **We've come all this way! No thanks to You! We did it on our own. No help from You! We didn't ask You to fight for us -- but don't fight against us. Leave us alone! What more do You want? How many more sacrifices? How much more blood? How many more lives? You want another life? Then take me!**

Then he lets go and falls to his death. Sadly, that's the attitude most people have in our world today. God is their enemy. He's fighting against their survival. The only thing they can do is fight him as much as they can before the curse him and die. It's a tragedy, because they're doing it to themselves.

You don't have to wrestle with God. You don't have to fight him. You can lay all your dreams, hopes, frustrations, and questions at his feet. You can embrace his beautiful plan for your life. You can see that plan fulfilled, as you walk closely with Jesus.