

“You Have Striven with God and with Humans...”

Genesis 32:22-31 • Psalm 17:1-7, 15 • Romans 9:1-5 • Matthew 14:13-21

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I want to begin this morning in the ninth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome. This is probably not a passage that is familiar to most of you. It is, however, a very important passage; it is the opening paragraph in a three-chapter-long discourse on a topic that was very important to the apostle himself, and continues to be a point of contention among Christians today. The fundamental issue: what, ultimately, will God do about the Jews who do not accept Jesus? What will be their fate?

Now it’s important to remember that Christianity was born within Judaism. Jesus was a Jew; the apostles were Jews; most of the people in the earliest couple generations of Christians were all Jews. Jesus was the fulfillment of all the promises God had made to the Jewish people. Paul was also a Jew, a member of the tribe of Benjamin, educated in Jerusalem at the feet of Rabbi Gamaliel, who was a great teacher of the Jewish law and a member of the Jewish Council. The ultimate fate of the Jews was not just an academic question for Paul; these were his *people*, his *heritage*, his “brothers and sisters,” his “own flesh and blood.” It brought him much distress to see so many of his own people reject Jesus, and reject the message about Jesus. You can hear the heartache in his voice: “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.” “They are Israelites,” he affirms, “and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises” – that is, God had adopted them as beloved children; God had revealed God’s glory to them at Mount Sinai and beyond; God had made a unique covenant with them and them alone, out of all the people on the earth; God had given to them God’s holy law; God had given them meticulous instructions regarding the proper worship of God; and God had given them a whole series of promises concerning what God would do for them. Moreover, “to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Christ, who is over all.” To the Israelites belonged the great ancestors of the Jewish faith – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – and from the Israelites came forth Jesus Christ himself. God has invested a *tremendous* amount in the Jewish people, over *two whole millennia*. And now, at this critical juncture in history, Paul was a living witness to the massive rejection by the Jewish people of what he had come to believe was the ultimate fulfillment of all that history and all those promises: Jesus Christ.

So if God had given *all of that* to the Jewish people, and most of them were now turning their back on Christ, what did that mean for their ongoing relationship with God? What did that mean for their ultimate *fate* at the hands of Almighty God? That is the central issue in Romans 9-11. This remains an important issue today, as it directly impacts Christianity’s ongoing relationship with Judaism, and our individual relationships with Jews whom we know – neighbors, co-workers, and friends. The passage you heard this morning is just the opening paragraph in this lengthy discourse. You’re going to hear a portion from Romans 10 next week, and, two weeks from now, Paul’s grand

conclusion in Romans 11. I would encourage you to take the time, on your own, to read all three chapters in their entirety, slowly and carefully, sometime over the course of the next two weeks.

But for now, let's return to the third Jewish patriarch: Jacob, the grandson of Abraham. When we left Jacob last week, he was off in his family's ancestral homeland in Mesopotamia, working for his uncle Laban, who had tricked Jacob by having him marry Laban's elder daughter Leah, when Jacob *thought* he was marrying Laban's younger daughter Rachel. A week later Laban allowed Jacob to marry Rachel as well, in exchange for Jacob working for Laban another seven years. Over the course of the succeeding years, Jacob fathers *twelve* children, eleven boys and one girl. First come Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah – sons of Jacob and Leah. Rachel, who is barren, is immensely jealous of Leah, and gives Jacob her maid Bilhah as a wife, and Bilhah gives birth to Dan and Naphtali. Then Leah gives Jacob her maid Ziplah as a wife, and Zilpah gives birth to Gad and Asher. After that, Leah gives birth to three more children: Issachar, Zebulun, and (finally) a girl, Dinah. Then, after all of that, “God remembered Rachel.” She conceives, and gives birth to Joseph. Four wives, twelve children, all in about seven years. I said last week that this feels like a soap opera! One more son will be born to Jacob and Rachel later on – Benjamin, bringing the total to twelve sons and one daughter. Those twelve sons will become the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel, and ultimately the land of Israel will be divided between eleven of those tribes – all of them except Levi, which becomes a tribe of priests.

There's some more drama during Jacob's extended sojourn in Mesopotamia, as he and Laban continue to engage in a rivalry that involves deception, cheating, and swindling on both sides. Jacob's wife Rachel even steals Laban's household idols, little figurines that depicted the family's ancestral gods. (This was before God forbade the worship of idols.) Ultimately Jacob ends up spending twenty years of his life working for his uncle, and things are about to end very bitterly between them, when they finally have a heated exchange, reconcile, make a covenant with each other, and depart in peace.

So Jacob is finally on his way back home – a home that he had run away from twenty years earlier, because his brother Esau wanted to kill him. Jacob, remember, had tricked Esau out of both his birthright and their father's blessing. Jacob has not exactly been living a model life, has he? Now, finally, he heads home – but he doesn't know if he will be welcome. Does Esau still want to kill him?

As Jacob approaches his home, he sends messengers ahead of him to announce that he is on his way, with many servants and many flocks. The messengers return with news that Esau is coming to meet him – with four hundred men. Jacob is terrified; he is afraid there will be war between them. He prays to God – a prayer of desperation! – then he sends Esau a present: 220 goats, 220 sheep, more than 30 camels, 50 cows, and 30 donkeys – more than *five hundred* large animals! – in the hope that the generous gift will appease his brother. Then he sends his wives and children and the rest of his possessions across a river to hopefully keep them safe, and he is left all alone. Alone, with his fears.

That night, *God* comes to him again. When Jacob was on his way to Mesopotamia – twenty years earlier – God came to him in the form of a dream of a ladder stretching up to heaven. This time, God comes to him in the form of a man. “Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.” The Hebrew text here consistently refers to Jacob's opponent as a “man,” but when Jacob's story is retold briefly in poetry in the book of Hosea, the “man” is now referred to as an “angel”: “In the womb he tried to supplant his brother, and in his manhood he strove with God. He strove with the angel and prevailed; he wept and sought his favor.” (Hosea 12:3-4) So the traditional understanding is that Jacob was wrestling with an angel of God. “When the man” – the angel – “saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he [the angel] said, ‘Let me go, for the day is breaking.’ But Jacob said, ‘I will

not let you go, unless you bless me.’ So he [the angel] said to him, ‘What is your name?’ And he said, ‘Jacob.’ Then the man – the angel – “said, ‘You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed.’ Then Jacob asked him, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ And there he [the angel] blessed him [Jacob].”

Now does it seem odd to you that Jacob – a mere human – would be able to win a wrestling contest against an *angel of God*? The angel injured Jacob – he put Jacob’s hip out of joint – but Jacob succeeded in pinning the angel, holding the angel so tightly that he could not break free. The angel even says that Jacob “prevailed.” Is Jacob really *that* powerful? Or is something *more* going on here?

There’s another interpretation of this story, a very old interpretation, stretching back all the way to the fourth century AD. Athanasius the Great and Hilary of Poitiers, two of the most important early Christian theologians, both thought that Jacob was wrestling with none other than the *Son of God*, Jesus Christ. Jesus, they said, came to Jacob in a weak human form, just as Jesus would come again centuries later, also in the form of human weakness. This would technically be called a “pre-incarnation appearance” of Christ, and would explain why Jacob would be able to defeat him. It would also explain why “Jacob called the place Peniel,” which means “the Face of God.” “For,” says Jacob, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved.” Jacob knew that he had come face-to-face with *God* in human form. The Genesis account says that “the sun rose upon him” as he left that place. Light is shining upon Jacob; he has been illumined with the Light that comes from above.

Jacob walked away from that encounter a changed man. No one can walk away from a face-to-face encounter with God and not come away changed. In Jacob’s case, he came away with a new name, a new identity: “Israel.” This is the very first time the word “Israel” occurs in the Bible. It begins not as the name of a *place*, but as the name of a *person*, Jacob, the third patriarch. The word “Israel” means “God persists” or “God rules.” Jacob’s new name reveals that he really *didn’t* win that wrestling match, even if it *seemed* like he did; *no one* can defeat God. *God* is the one who rules, and God is now the one who rules Jacob’s life. His days of trickery, deceit, and cheating are over. He is now a changed man. This change is evident in his peaceful reunion with his brother Esau later that same day, and as soon as Jacob owns a piece of property in the land of Canaan, he sets up an altar to God. He had never done that before. His grandfather Abraham had built several altars to God; his father Isaac had built at least one; but there’s no record of Jacob building any altars to God until *after* that all-night wrestling match with God. Jacob gives this altar a name: “El-Elohe-Israel” – “God, the God of Israel.” *His* God.

There come those times in our lives when we come face-to-face with God. Maybe not quite face-to-face in the same way Jacob did, maybe we don’t actually get to *see* God’s face, but the effect is pretty much the same. We’ve been living our life, making a lot of mistakes, engaging in some less-than-ethical behavior, mired in relationships that feel broken, and *God* comes crashing in. We wrestle, we fight, we try to beat God – as if that were possible! – and, ultimately, we walk away changed. If it’s been a real encounter, if we’ve really come face-to-face with God, we do not – we *can* not – walk away unchanged. Maybe we walk away with a limp, perhaps not literally but certainly metaphorically, spiritually. Maybe we walk away with a new sense of identity, of our place in the world, and of *God’s* place in our lives. Perhaps we even walk away with a newfound desire to truly *worship* God.

I think Jacob had pretty spent much of his whole life running away: running away from Esau, running away from responsibility, running away from God. Maybe some of you have been running away too. Maybe God is coming to you with a wrestling match. Maybe it’s time to *let God change you*.

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