

Wrestling with God!

By Al Felder

“³He took his brother by the heel in the womb, and by his strength he had power with God: ⁴Yea, he had power over the angel, and prevailed: he wept, and made supplication unto him: he found him in Bethel, and there he spake with us; ⁵Even the Lord God of hosts; the Lord is his memorial.” (Hosea 12:3-5)

This passage makes reference to a fascinating event that occurred during the life of Jacob. It can be found in Genesis 32. There we find in the Bible where Jacob wrestled with God. There are important lessons that can be learned from this story.

First of all, I would like to give you an idea of the time period we are dealing with in Biblical history. We will use the Flood as our starting point. According to the genealogies in Genesis 5, it took place somewhere around 2549 BC. According to Genesis 9:28, Noah lived 350 years after the flood. He died two years before the birth of Abraham in 2197 BC (Genesis 11:32; 12:4; Acts 7:4). Abraham lived to be 175 years old (Genesis 25:7). It was after his death that Isaac had his sons, therefore, the majority of the events we will be talking about occurred in the 1900's BC.

In order to understand the significance of this event, we must first learn about Jacob's life. In Genesis 25:23-26 we read where Isaac and his wife Rebekah had two sons. The boys were named Esau and Jacob. While in their mother's womb the two boys struggled with one another, and when they were born Jacob was holding on to the heel of Esau. The Lord informed Rebekah that this signified that two nations would arise from her sons, and they would struggle with one another.

Jacob's life was one of a never-ending struggle. It was characterized by many deep-seated family hostilities. Jacob would be considered by many to be ruthless when it came to getting what he wanted. He was a con artist, a liar, and a manipulator. In fact, his name means deceiver, or schemer.

We first read of these traits in Jacob in Genesis 25:29-34 where he got Esau to sell him his birthright. Esau was born first, therefore, he was going to receive the blessing of the firstborn. Jacob desired this blessing for himself.

As Isaac started approaching the end of his life, it was time for him to bestow his blessing upon his first born son. By this time both Esau and Jacob were in their forties according to Genesis 26:34. Isaac sent Esau to kill an animal for him to eat, and after he had eaten he would bestow his blessing upon Esau.

While Esau was absent, Jacob quickly prepared a meal for his father to eat. Esau was a hairy man, but Jacob was not. Jacob took hair from the animal and placed it upon him so Isaac

would not be able to tell that he was not really Esau. As I said before, this was near the end of Isaac's life, and his vision had become poor in his old age.

Jacob came before Isaac with the meal he had prepared. He was successful in deceiving his father and getting the blessing of the firstborn. When Esau returned he was furious to learn what Jacob had done. In Genesis 27:41, Esau vowed that he would kill Jacob for what he had done. As a result, Jacob fled for his life to the land of his mother.

While on this journey Jacob had a vision and made a vow to God. This can be found in Genesis 28. Jacob's vision consisted of a ladder connecting heaven and earth. On this ladder angels were descending and ascending. At the top of this ladder was God. God blessed Jacob and told him that he was going to make a great nation out of him. This vision was a glimpse of God's redemptive plan through Christ.

When Jacob awoke he was afraid. He set up a memorial in that place and called it Bethel. He made a vow to serve God, but like so many people Jacob just went on with his life. He continued on his journey, and for a number of years he did not think about the vow he made to God.

Jacob finally made it to the land of his mother. While there, he stayed with his uncle Laban. He fell in love with Rachel, his uncle's daughter. Jacob entered into an agreement with Laban to work seven years for Rachel's hand in marriage (Genesis 29:18). After his years of service, Jacob was deceived by his uncle and given Leah (his other daughter) to marry instead of Rachel.

Jacob, however, was determined to make Rachel his wife. He entered into a second agreement with his uncle. He worked another seven years in order to make Rachel his wife. Jacob remained with Laban for a few more years while he had children and his family grew.

Jacob was told by God to return to his homeland, so he gathered his family. He took from the livestock what he believed he was owed from serving his uncle, and Rachel took her father's idols. Then, Jacob left without saying a word. When Laban discovered what had happened he was mad. He gathered his men together and pursued Jacob. When Laban overtook Jacob, the two men made a covenant and agreed to part ways.

Once again, Jacob continued on his journey. He was met by angels. Then, he sent a peace offering to his brother Esau consisting of livestock and servants. Jacob's men returned to inform him that Esau was on his way with 400 men.

Jacob was afraid of his brother. He divided his company into two camps and sent them forward. Jacob hoped that if Esau descended upon one camp, the other one would be able to escape. Jacob stayed behind while his family, along with all his possessions went forward.

At this time, Jacob was all alone. He had sent all that he had before him. All of his family, servants, and possessions. He faced the reality that he was about to lose it all as well as

his own life. Jacob was physically and emotionally exhausted. During this time of exhaustion, Jacob began to pray to God.

Even the least faithful person will turn to God in prayer when facing difficult situations. We can fall into a routine of living for ourselves Monday through Saturday. We may only think of God on Sunday when we assemble for worship. When all is well and life is good, we can become guilty of neglecting our service to God. When life gets tough, however, we often turn to God for help.

After Jacob prayed, a man appeared. This event is recorded starting at Genesis 32:24 and goes to the end of the chapter. This man began to wrestle with Jacob. According to the scriptures they wrestled all night.

I can only imagine what Jacob thought at this time. Here he is, facing certain death. His entire world is crashing down around him, and now he has the added burden of wrestling this man. I imagine that Jacob was at the point that many of us get to in our life. That point where we feel that if just one more thing happens we're going to have a break-down. I imagine that Jacob was at that point in his life.

Jacob held his own as he and the man wrestled through the night. As the day began to break, the man touched Jacob on the hip and crippled him. The man then demanded that Jacob let him go, but Jacob refused until the man blessed him. Jacob realized that this was no man. Jacob had been wrestling with God.

God blessed Jacob. He even gave him a new name. No longer was he to be called Jacob (deceiver), from this moment forward he would be called Israel (prevailed with God). Jacob was a changed man.

Jacob realized that he could no longer use his schemes to get what he wanted out of life. His physical strength had even been taken from him. Jacob was forced to face his fears, darkness, loneliness, vulnerabilities, empty feelings of powerlessness, exhaustion, and relentless pain. He faced his failures, his weaknesses, and his sins, everything that was hurting him – and faced God.

Do you recall the vow Jacob made to God while on his way to his mother's homeland? He continued on with his life after making that vow. Now, however, Jacob realized his own insufficiencies and his need for God. From this point in his life forward, he was going to make good on that now and serve God.

Israel went forward to meet his brother Esau. He had no clever schemes to use against his brother, and his physical strength was gone. Israel faced his brother with confidence in God. When the two brothers met, the Bible says that they embraced each other and wept.

I believe that there are elements of this story to which each one of us can relate. We all have struggles. We all have challenges in our life that we must face. Like Jacob, we may try to use our own abilities or possessions to get us through these times.

As Christians, we are engaged in an on-going battle. *“For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh.”* (2 Corinthians 10:3) We are involved in a spiritual battle. It is a conflict for our souls. In this battle we will face many struggles.

We will struggle with self-indulgence. *“¹⁵Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. ¹⁷And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever.”* (1 John 2:15-17) Like Jacob, we can be focused on the things that we want. We can devote all of our time and talents to acquiring all that our heart desires. Once we have accumulated everything that we want, we are left with the sad reality that none of it is lasting. Every single thing this world has to offer will perish someday.

We struggle with self-sufficiency. *“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.”* (Proverbs 3:5) Like Jacob, we may face life’s problems depending on our own abilities. We take matters into our own hands, we seek revenge against those who have wronged us, and we believe that we can do everything ourselves. That is, until everything comes crashing down around us. Then we realize that without God we can do nothing.

We struggle with self-preservation. *“²⁴Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art a hard man, reaping where thou hast no sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed: ²⁵And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine.”* (Matthew 25:24, 25) Like the unprofitable servant, we may be afraid to live our life for God. What will other people think? We fear the ridicule of others, or the loss of our possessions. Then we realize that only by losing our life can we gain it.

Like Jacob, we must realize our own inadequacies and come to realize our need to place our dependence wholly upon God. We must commit ourselves to God’s will. We must place our trust in Him. We must yield our will to His. Then, like Jacob, we must be willing to persevere with God.

In closing, I leave you with one final passage of scripture that perfectly sums up everything taught to us in this account of Jacob’s life.

“⁶But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. ⁷Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded. ⁹Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to

mourning, and your joy to heaviness. ¹⁰Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.” (James 4:6-10)