

“JACOB AND THE WRESTLER.”

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Scripture Texts: Genesis 32:22-32

Introduction.

This Western culture we inhabit is increasingly referred to as post-modern and post-Christian. We are becoming a people of doubt, like Pilate questioning “What is truth?” We are wondering out loud, “Does God exist and if He does, where is He and how can we find Him?”

According to the Word of God, not only does God exist, but God has made Himself known and has come down to meet us, again and again. We live in an open universe and we live on a visited planet. Heaven and earth have met here.

In the OT there are many glimpses of God, when God came down from heaven to earth, when human beings experienced the invisible becoming visible. These glimpses of glory anticipate a day when a fuller revelation would come.

Scholars have given a fancy name to describe these visible appearances of God in the OT. They are called *theophanies*. It is a word made from two Greek words. You recognize *theo* or *theos* as the Greek word for God. *Phaino* is the Greek word for appearing, so *theophany* is an appearance of God.

This word is used sometimes broadly for any kind of divine human encounter like in a cloud, or for the more clear instances of God taking on the appearance of human form and flesh sometimes referred to as the angel of the Lord. They are not always angels, but sometimes Christ.

Jesus is not absent from the OT. He is not sitting on the bench waiting to come in in the fourth quarter to save the game and get the victory. He is the very much present player-coach-manager directing everything that’s happening on the field.

He is leading all things toward His incarnation which is the ultimate theophany when Christ becomes a permanent theophany of God, taking on our nature, our flesh. All the OT appearances are temporary theophanies, pointing to the ultimate theophany.

The theme for our advent series this year is, “When Heaven and Earth Meet, The Theophanies of God/Jesus in the OT.”

Jacob and the Wrestler.

So we begin our advent journey with one of the most unusual and strangest theophanies in the OT. And being one of the most unusual theophanies it raise a whole bunch of questions. Why does God get down and dirty in a wrestling match and how does Jacob prevail against God?

The context of the story, what's going on here?

Jacob's whole life has been a life of grabbing, scheming, deceiving, taking blessings. He comes out of the womb grasping his brother's heel. Later he bribes his brother out of his birthright. Then he joins his mother's scheme to get his father's blessing. He bargained for Rachel and later schemed to get a huge herd and flock before he left Laban to go back to the Promised Land.

Jacob is returning to the Promised Land, the land of his deception and sin. He is coming face to face with his past. The last time he saw his brother, Esau wanted to kill him. He is scared to death of meeting his brother. And now Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men, a small army.

So Jacob divides his camp into two groups, and then decides to spend the night alone, no doubt in some pretty desperate prayer. And Jacob was left alone.

And it was night and Jacob was left alone.

Feel the weight of that sentence. He is alone. There is no one with him. He is alone in his thoughts, he is alone in his fears. Genesis 32:7 says Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. He fears for his life. He fears the unknown, fears the future.

He is alone in his reflections on a life of sin, deception and being deceived, a life of wheeling and dealing and conniving to get what he wants, a life of manipulating. His past is littered with failure; his future feels like a day of reckoning, a day of facing up to the consequences. He has come to the end of his resources and resourcefulness.

But he is still trying everything he can thing on his own, in the flesh. Maybe he can buy his way out of trouble and appease his brother with earthly possessions.

Genesis 32:13-15 He selected a gift for his brother Esau: 14 two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, 15 thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys.

550 animals as a gift. But what if Esau doesn't accept it. What if he wants his birthright back and his father's blessing? What if these 400 men are coming to kill him?

And he was alone. But he wasn't alone. We are never alone. In our darkest nights and in our deepest fears, we are never alone. This is when things get interesting, a very strange man comes in the dark of the night. Imagine someone suddenly tackling you in the middle of the night and wrestling for hours.

At some point Jacob begins to realize this is no mere human, but a divine man. This is the Lord. This person just touches his hip and instantly his hip is dislocated. He is up against serious power.

This is a literal real fight. This is not a vision or a dream, this is not figurative or imaginary. This is down and dirty and the result is a real limp for the rest of his life.

At this point Jacob is rendered completely helpless. Ask any wrestler, your hips and legs are your power, what you drive from against your opponent. This has to be excruciating pain.

Notice this is not Jacob wrestled with a man, but a man wrestled with Jacob. Some people take this to be an analogy of wrestling with God in earnest prayer, which is a good thing, but this is God wrestling with a man to take something from Jacob and give something to Jacob.

He has come to take from Jacob his reliance on himself and his own strength. We think we are strong when we are strong, but the truth is we are only strong when we are weak. Paul learned this when he was given a thorn in the flesh to make him rely on the Spirit.

II Corinthians 12:8-10 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 10 That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

God touched Jacob in the place of his self-sufficiency and his independence, in the place he was trusting for himself. Jacob thinks the greatest enemy he is facing is Esau. God knows different. Jacob's greatest enemy is Jacob, his living from himself, relying on himself and his flesh.

Jacob's limp is his God-given thorn in the flesh to break his confidence in his flesh. Jacob will never walk normally again and that's a good thing. His limp is a sign of humility, weakness and dependence on God.

The resolve. The blessing. Vss. 26-29.

God shows Jacob who He is both in exercising power over Jacob, and in graciously giving Him an undeserved blessing. The man touches Jacob's hip as if to say, "I will not consume you, but never think for a minute that I can't."

Jacob hangs on for dear life, in much pain, and asks for a blessing, realizing that this person with this much power also has the authority to give a blessing. Jacob has gone from resisting and fighting, to clinging. No longer able to fight, all he could do was hold on and ask.

This is grace, Jacob gets a blessing, but it is not because he proved stronger or smarter. I like John Calvin's observation that God fights *against* us with His left hand, and fights *for* us with His right hand. God brings trials, and then He gives grace and victory. God cripples us in order to bless us.

Why does the man ask his name? If this is the Lord, doesn't he know already who He is wrestling with? As is often the case, when God asks us a questions it isn't so we can inform Him, it is for our sake, so we can hear the answer, so we can confess the truth.

"I am Jacob, I am the heel grabber, the grasper, the taker, cheater, the deceiver. I am my name." God waits to hear us say, "I have taken the fruit. I am a man of unclean lips, unclean heart. I am a sinner, I am chief among sinners."

Jacob has to confess his old nature, he had to see his sin and need before receiving his blessing.

Don't shrink back from being honest about your sinful character and heart. Swallow pride.

We must know our sin before we can know God's grace. When we come to acknowledge the truth about ourselves, then is when the blessings can begin, then is when the grace comes.

Chief among the blessings he receives is a new name. Those who wrestle with God get a new name. In Christ we get a new name that goes along with our new nature, the old man is gone. His character has changed so his name is changed. He is no longer a cheater, he has surrendered to God.

What's the Meaning? The response. Vss. 30-32.

And the sun rose.

What a change, Jacob is going to face Esau completely vulnerable, but now his fear is gone. He has a new limp, a new name and his life is changed. He is no longer one who gets his blessings by deceiving and depending on his wits. Now he gets his blessings from God by faith in God.

The limp increased his faith. Our weaknesses increase our faith.

Implications and application.

Is the limp a blessing or a curse? I have often said, “Don’t trust a man who doesn’t walk with a limp.” God wrestles with those He loves, don’t despise the limp God gives you.

Anyone who wants to follow God, must limp, must know they are dependent. The limp is the mark of the people of God. Are you afraid to limp? Are you afraid of weakness? Do you think you are strong, you are in control?

When God takes us down into a place of desperate dependence there is more going on than we realize. God is out to change us, bless us, and make us into something new. His sanctifying work can be like a wrestling match with our former self, our old sin nature, between our wills and His will.

God is looking for a fight. He is the one who started this one, God is the one actively pursuing us. What if God wants to bless you more than you want to be blessed, and the path involves pain, suffering, trial, trouble, coming to the end of our resources or your strength?

Did Jacob really prevail against God? Or is that not what God permits us to do for a time? He lets us devise our own plans, strive in our own will, do what we want the way we want for a season. Go ahead, do it your way. Go ahead, trust in your horses and chariots for a while, let’s see how all that works out for you. Go ahead, look to the wisdom of the world, the wisdom of the internet.

Our lives are a wrestling, a struggle with sin and self. When we are younger we have strength, we can make a go of it on our own. We think we are prevailing, when really God is just letting us for a while, until our strength wanes or we come up against fears or trials we can’t overcome.

We are a broken sinful people, lost in our fears and doubts, in the consequences of our sinful choices and actions. And God breaks into this dark world and into our own lives. God is intimate, interested, involved. God means to reveal Himself and He means to bless us.

This is a hard lesson to learn especially for us men. We are like Jacob, used to doing things in our strength, according to our way. Does this limp mean we are to be wimps, push overs? No, we are called to be men, to be defenders, protectors, providers, strong leaders, but we are to be those things dependent of God, submitted to God. God was preparing Jacob to be a great leader of his people, but the best leaders walk with a limp, are humble and aware of their sin and weaknesses.

God wants us to walk by faith not by sight or by strength, to live by the Spirit not in the flesh. God will take our self-sufficiency and show it to be insufficient.

There are blessings that only come through pain and wrestling and close encounters with God. God still moves in on our lives, He breaks down our defenses, gets past our filters and spins us around to return to Him, to repent of our own ways and depend on His ways, so that we can have His blessing.

God has been doing this for a very long time and He still is.

Who was this man, this wrestler? It is none other than a theophany, an appearing of Jesus, a temporary incarnation that anticipates a great and coming incarnation.

As the night progressed Jacob came to the clear realization this was no ordinary man. He had the power to dislocate Jacob's hip with a touch. He had the authority to bless Jacob. He gave Jacob a new name and tells him he has striven or wrestled with God. Finally, Jacob names the place Peniel, meaning, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered."

That's Advent, we have seen God and we have been delivered and blessed. Advent is that season when we anticipate and remember God's breaking into our dark, sinful world and bringing His light, His love, His power, His grace.

This theophany anticipates the ultimate theophany and why there is a need for it. God breaks into our dark work, confronts our sin, shows us our weakness and need, and then gives us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. God makes us weak and then makes us strong. God comes and takes away our fear. Out of the darkness the Son has come to shine.