

Overcome: Wrestling with God

Genesis 32:22-32 NIV

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Candidacy Sermon: Old Testament (Assigned Text)

September 7, 2025

Shortly before leaving the Last Supper to get arrested, beaten, and crucified Jesus gave these words of encouragement to his disciples. *“I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”* (John 16:33 NIV). In this world we will have trouble, to that end we can say the only guarantees in life are death, taxes, and trouble. Thankfully, we have the greatest assurance also found within this verse, that Jesus has overcome the world. Yet this assurance does not side-step the reality that life is full of trials and tribulations which come at us from every angle. Over these next several weeks we will journey through the Scriptures as we discover and learn the various ways that we are challenged and through which we can overcome, by the grace of God.

One of the inherent tensions we face in our world is the desire to try and control. To try and control all the potential variables of life. As the old famous Scottish poet, Robert Burns once remarked, “The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry.” Whenever reflecting on this reality I am reminded of a story once told to me in my previous job. Before becoming a Pastor I served as a Sheriff in Alberta for ten years, and in that time one of the roles I had was on the out-of-province escort team. Effectively, if someone had a warrant for arrest out for them from Alberta and they got arrested in a different province I was part of the team to bring them back to the province within 6 days. We would fly out to where they were arrested, do the transfer of custody, and then fly them back. On those flights back I would often be the one to sit beside the newly-arrested individual, and would often talk to them and get to hear their stories.

This man was arrested on a 10 year old outstanding warrant for attempted murder, drug trafficking, and all the little extra flourishes that come with those charges. After committing the crimes that led to those charges he fled the province, changed his name, and started a new life in the GTA. While there we started up his own business as a dog walker.

Over the years he made new relationships and friendships, and one of those friendships that grew was with one of his clients, a blind man. After a while the realities of living a double life got to him and the blind man had become a close friend, and so he told him his true name, his past, and what he had done. The blind man was shocked, but also understanding of his now changed nature, and so they maintained their friendship. A couple years later the guilt again was wearing down the man, and so in the spring of 2019 he called his lawyer in Edmonton and said that he wanted to turn himself in that winter and plead guilty. The lawyer recommended he get letters of reference and support to attribute his changed nature since fleeing to help his case. (He wanted to turn himself in during the winter so he could enjoy one last summer, and to quote “winter sucks anyways so might as well spend it in jail.”) At his lawyer’s advice he got letters of reference, one of which was from his blind friend. His blind friend obliged and wrote him up a glowing character reference letter; however, in all the years of their friendship the blind man had neglected to tell his wife about his friend’s true name and history. This blind man left his laptop open, and his wife, curious, had read what her husband had written. She was utterly horrified. She googled the man’s name, saw the charges, recognized him from his mugshot, and called the police. When the man showed up the next day to walk their dog, the police were there waiting for him and arrested him, in June 2019. He had the plan, he had the right motive, but he tried to hold onto control of all aspects and then the reality of life settled in and swept those delusions away.

We see from Scripture that this desire for control is not something new, it’s almost as old as humanity itself, an aspect of sin and the fall. In fact, in Genesis, we follow the life of someone who always was working, planning, scheming, and deceiving to take matters into his own hands - Jacob. Our passage today serves as the catalyst for change in Jacob’s life; the famous passage of Jacob wrestling with God. However, before we get to the main portion of our passage we need to set the context. At this point in Genesis Jacob has already deceitfully

obtained the blessing from his father Isaac that was due to his older twin brother Esau. Then on Isaac's instruction he left to go north to Harran. He stayed there for the next 20 or so years, and during that time he married Leah and then her sister Rachel (it was a very different time) and had eleven sons and at least one daughter. He also had earned the ire of his father-in-law Laban, and so at God's command Jacob moves his family from Harran back to his homeland.

As part of the journey home, Jacob knew that he would have to confront his estranged and as-far-as-he-knew still murderously intent brother Esau. We see in the first half of Genesis 32 Jacob using his resources and plans to try and pacify his brother and his brother's 400 men accompanying him. Jacob sent messengers with promises of gifts, he split up his people and herds so as to preserve at least half of his stuff in case of an attack, and set his herds in front of him with the instructions to give gifts to Esau as they encounter him. However, amongst all of this preparation work Jacob goes to God in prayer, and prays the following:

*"Then Jacob prayed, 'O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, LORD, you who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives and I will make you prosper,' I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'" (Genesis 32:9-12 NIV)*

It is after this prayer that Jacob sends forward his herds with their gifts as the two camps, Jacob and Esau will meet. It is amongst this tension, this uncertainty, and all of this planning

and preparation from Jacob that our passage picks up. Please turn with me in your Bibles to Genesis 32:22-32 as we read from God's word.

*"That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all of his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go for it is daybreak."*

*But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."*

*The man asked him, "What is your name?"*

*"Jacob," he answered.*

*Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."*

*Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."*

*But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.*

*So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."*

*The sun rose above him as he passed Peneil, and he was limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon." (Genesis 32:22-32 NIV)*

This is the Word of the Lord.

I think we can all safely presume that what happened to Jacob that night, was not something that he could have planned for or anticipated. We don't know why Jacob left himself alone, and the wrestle that takes place was clearly not foreseen. What we can

confidently say, despite not being planned for Jacob was clearly prepared for and able to fight for a long while.

This whole interaction is a great reflection on life in some ways. How many times have you reflected, worried, and planned for some outcomes in life, like Jacob planning to pacify Esau, only to have something completely unexpected come out of seemingly nowhere? That although you've taken every contingency into account, God had a completely different lesson and plan in mind? These could be health concerns, financial troubles, a pandemic even. Yet, it is in these times of unexpected "attacks" that we need to hold on to God and struggle, and wrestle with him. Jacob, while not always a good role model, in this encounter demonstrated for us a resolve through the unexpected. In this instance, literally wrestling with God, and for us today it's not so much a physical wrestle but an emotional, spiritual, communal wrestle. John Calvin in his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion* observes, "What was once exhibited under a visible form to our father Jacob is daily fulfilled in the individual members of the church, namely in their temptations it is necessary for them to wrestle with God." As we see from this passage, God can handle it; and doesn't stop Jacob or us from wrestling with him. In fact, we see that God could've ended the struggle at any point. However, as the commentator Gordon Wenham notes on the ability displayed by the "man" wrestling with Jacob, "A touch that dislocates indicates an opponent with superhuman power. But that apparently gives Jacob yet more determination to fight on; indeed, he forces his opponent into speaking and disclosing something of his identity." The result of the wrestle was never in doubt, God would be victorious, but God also made it so that Jacob could still wrestle. In our wrestling with God we may get injured or experience setbacks, but as we see from Jacob's example that isn't a time to back down but the time to push-in and act with determination; but not the determination we often expect.

Interestingly, the passage never explicitly states how the fight ends from a physical standpoint. That's because the resolution was not a physical victory, but God is displayed to be victorious through his ability to give Jacob a new identity. Jacob wrestled with God, and it is God who makes him a new man. You see the meaning of Jacob's name literally means "he grasps the heel," a reference to how when he was born he came out holding onto his older twin brother's heel. However, that phrase is an idiom for "deceiver." Jacob throughout his life lived up to his namesake. He, on his own and with help from others, manipulated, planned, and deceived his way into his successes. He did this (with help from his mother) to steal Esau's blessing, and through manipulating the breeding practices of his Father In-Law Laban's herd to grow his own. Jacob and his namesake was an indicator of his reliance upon his plans and schemes. While that served Jacob for a time, it was now time to embrace the person God needed him to be, Israel. *"Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."* (Gen 32:28 NIV)

It's a powerful and meaningful name, but one that does raise a vital question; how in this wrestling and struggle with God did Jacob overcome? God dislocated his hip, renamed Jacob, blessed Israel, and did not divulge his name and then left. The only aspect that can be deemed a victory for Jacob was receiving the blessing he asked for. To ask for someone's blessing is to humble ourselves before that person or deity, to acknowledge that what we are asking for is something that we cannot provide ourselves. In fact in Hebrew the word for "bless" and for "kneel" sound almost identical. To endure and overcome, is not to conquer or vanquish but to be blessed and to kneel; to surrender. Jacob was blessed by man, through his father Isaac, and was blessed by God through the mysterious man he wrestled. Out of those surrenders and acknowledgement of provision that God gives him a completely new name and identity - Israel. A reminder that to overcome is to be blessed, to kneel before God, and to surrender to Him.

It is this posture, this surrendering to God and to his will that Jesus models for us as a way to overcome. In particular we see Jesus wrestling with God on the night he is betrayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. After the Last Supper, Jesus goes with his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. While there we read this exchange Jesus has with God the Father,

*“Then he [Jesus] said to them, ‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.’”*

*Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.’*

*Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. ‘Couldn’t you keep watch with me for one hour?’ he asked Peter. ‘Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.’*

*He went away a second time and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.’*

*When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.”*

(Matthew 26:38-44 NIV)

Not once, not twice, but three times Jesus went to his Father, and wrestled with him in prayer. Asking him to remove this cup, and each time surrendering to God by proclaiming *“Yet not as I will, but as you will.”* Jesus overcame the world through surrendering to God’s plan for the entire world, that He, God incarnate, may come down to earth to surrender to God’s good plan and die in our place for the forgiveness of sins. Through this death and then by his resurrection he has overcome the world.

In our lives we can often be like the prisoner on the plane and like Jacob. Planners and schemers. We try to hold on to and control so much of our lives and we have to work and work and work to ensure that the ends we seek come to pass. However, through this passage



and through the life of Jesus Christ we see that one of the ways to overcome, to endure, the world is to surrender. Remember, the prayer that Jacob gave to God before his wrestle? Well, we see in the next chapter that Esau meets with Jacob gladly. The brother he schemed and planned to pacify was already ready to welcome his brother. As the commentator John Sailhamer notes, “It is not Jacob’s plan that succeeds but his prayer . . . All of Jacob’s plans and schemes have come to naught. Apart from all of them God has prepared Jacob’s way.” God prepares our ways. He knows our trials, our struggles, our wrestling’s and how we can endure, how we too can overcome, is to approach God with those troubles and we have a greater assurance than Jacob. For while Jacob was alone by a river, we have Jesus Christ our Lord, Savior, and intercessor who is there with us as we wrestle with God. With that knowledge we can then boldly turn our eyes to Jesus, and humbly surrender our lives to him and to the will of God, not passively but actively following and during our times of struggle and pain, hurt and confusion. Amen.