

Genesis (The Promise-Keeping God)

*Week 3/8 “Clinging to the Promise”
by the Rev’d Michael Marklew (18/10/2026)*

Bible Passage: Genesis 32:22-32

Lord, open our hearts and minds to you and your word. Amen.

As a family, we have just finished watching the TV series *Silo* and it was brilliant, from season to season, it kept us both in the dark and wanting more.

Time and time again, we felt the struggle of the main characters, not because we were told what was going on, but because we were forced to walk in their shoes and uncover the truth with them.

And is how it is with Jacob's wrestling, we are kept in the dark as Jacob is literally in the dark. We have to wrestle with the story, like him.

The lack of sleep, the irrational choices, the planning, the scheming, all of it coming together in a wrestling match, but with who?

His own mind? His own will? His faith? Or is it God himself?

The text clearly asserts that it is God - which it is, but then like the proverbial onion there are layers. Layers of wrestling and struggle brought to the surface through the narrative, layers that many of us may well share in our walk with the Lord.

For many of us this text is an encouragement, for others a reminder of what we have been through, but for some it may be a cause for concern, particularly if we are holding onto pride and self reliance in our walk with the Lord.

Three things, three layers.

1-A STRUGGLE OF MIND.

2-A STRUGGLE OF WILL.

3-A STRUGGLE OF FAITH.

Let us dive in and see where the word of God takes us.

1-A STRUGGLE OF MIND.

Trusting God's promises over our own scheming.

The struggle of mind goes back many chapters, but to keep it brief and on point, let me say that this story, this story comes on the back of Jacob's 20 years in the service of Laban, where he worked to the bone earning the right to marry his daughters and build up livestock and possessions for himself, that is until God said in a dream, recorded back in Genesis 31.

God said

"I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land." (Gen 31.13)

This dream he shares with his wives, and they agree to take what belongs to them, and go to the land of Canaan where Jacob has come from, where family lives.

And Jacob knows that God is in it, for he experienced not just the dream, but angels of God meeting with him at the camp on the way.

The gravity of this is huge, yet when we read it, the text, it is so underwhelming.

Whatever happened, clearly it mattered to Jacob, for he sent a, "I come in peace" message ahead to his brother Esau (the one he tricked, deceived out of his birthright, the same one whose blessing he stole) who responded by coming not alone to meet with Jacob, but with four hundred men in tow.

At this news, Jacob is filled with great fear and distress, and the struggle of mind takes hold.

Yes, he prays to God for help in what may well be his humblest moment thus far, yet his prayer, while genuine in that it appeals to God's promises and character, it feels a bit like a "you owe me God, then please help me", at any rate he does this after hedging his bets and splitting his family in two.

Not much faith here Jacob,

Yet clearly there is a struggle going, a struggle between trust in the promise and his own scheming. But whatever it is, Jacob, like his possessions, is divided, and a new layer of his wrestling is revealed.

And this is where we enter the story today, with Jacob taking his family across the river.

Genesis chapter 32 verse 22.

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 his possessions. (Gen 32.22-23)

The struggle of mind has now become a struggle of will, our second point.

2-A STRUGGLE OF WILL.

Will he go forward and face his brother, will he run away, or will he come up with a new scheme to tip the scales in his own favour, basically what he has done all of his life?

The tension is palpable, as the struggle becomes literal in Verse 24.

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. (Gen 32.24-25)

Yes, the details are slim for this is just “a man” and for the moment we too are in the dark, just as Jacob is literally in the dark, his situation bleak as a brother closes in and as God pushes him on, no wonder it becomes a physical wrestling.

He can't go forward, he can't go back, so something must break? His hip.

And the penny drops, for both Jacob and for us as we walk this story in his shoes. For this is not a struggle of mind or will so much, but a struggle of faith.
Our 3rd point.

Is God faithful?

3-A STRUGGLE OF FAITH.

And clinging to God when strength has run out.

Verse 26.

Then the man said, 'Let me go, for it is daybreak.' But Jacob replied, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' (Gen 32.26)

Jacob, unable to go forward, unable to go back, unable to keep fighting, clings to his assailant in desperation and asks for a blessing.

And verse 27

The man asked him, 'What is your name?' 'Jacob,' he answered. (Gen 32.27)

In the Old Testament and in the New, name is often linked to nature. And here our “heel-catcher”, for this is what his name means, for if you remember he was born clutching the heel of his twin brother Esau and named Jacob for this reason.

And here this “heel-catcher” has been caught and in the giving of his name has finally confessed his true nature.

Finally confessing that all of the deceit and the bargains, all of it wasn't about trusting God, but really been about pride and trying to prove that he wasn't second best or in second place.

And at this confession, at his letting go of pride and self-reliance that is expressed in the literal hanging on, he finally gives over to God, confessing who he is,, and with the giving over, the letting go of pride and self reliance, comes a new identity and a fresh blessing.

Or let me put it this way, for his entire life, Jacob had been using God's blessing as a badge, something to drag out whenever he needed it. And up until this point he was too self-willed, too self-reliant and too proud to let the blessing be fully received.

So Verse 28.

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. (Gen 32:28-29)

Finally Jacob, after a fight that has lasted his entire life, a fight that was more with God than with people, he receives a new name.

Israel.

And with the new name comes his new identity, and a forever symbol of how God has changed him. Our ambitious deceiver has become Israel, the one who struggles with God and overcomes.

Verse 30.

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 Peniel, 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. (Gen 32:30-32)

Now before we wrap up, let's get a bit nerdy and talk quickly about Jacob's claim to have seen God face to face, as this appears to be a contradiction with 1 John 4:12 where John writes, "No one has ever seen God."

Or more specifically Exodus 33:20 and this is God speaking who says to Moses "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."

The resolution to the apparent contradiction is actually rather straightforward, as "face to face" does not mean literally seeing God fully unveiled, it means to have had a close encounter with God, and when this happens it is often interpreted as an Angel as is the case by the later prophet Hosea, who writes.

"In the womb he grasped his brother's heel; as a man he struggled with God. He struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favour. He found him at Bethel and talked with him there – the Lord God Almighty, the Lord is his name!" (Hosea 12:3-5)

But wait? Is the one that Jacob wrestles with a man? An Angel? Or is it the Lord?

Hosea, inspired by God, holds together this tension, and theologians use the word “theophany” to describe what we see here, to mean an interaction with God, but not to experience the fullness of his Glory, for no sinful human could behold such a sight.

Now We could even have some fun and talk about this as an encounter with the pre-incarnate Jesus. But that is a sermon for another day, and whatever is the case, the wrestle was with God and God did not let his weight come to fully bear on Jacob. He was spared.

Let's wrap up the struggle of mind, will and faith.

1-A STRUGGLE OF MIND.

Jacob knows God intimately. He knows what God has done in the past and what God has promised to do in the future, yet he continues to struggle.

Friends, we know God intimately by his Holy Spirit. We know what he has done in the past and what he has promised to do in the future, yet I am the first to admit that I struggle at times.

And what if you are not a believer? What are you struggle with? What are you wrestling with?

I remember sharing the faith with a Muslim who even said that he believed, but then explained that he can't make a commitment because he wouldn't be able to go home. He would never be able to see his family again.

We Christians talk about this as taking up your cross, for following Jesus is no easy task and there is a cost to bear, a struggle to be had. A struggle of mind and a struggle of will.

2-A STRUGGLE OF WILL.

Jacob literally wrestles with God, fighting until it breaks him. And out of this brokenness comes humility, and to quote Hosea, “he wept and begged for his favour” (Hosea 12:4).

So hang on friends, for “we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28).

In Christ is your future story, in fact the only way we can have a forever story, is to be in Christ. To know him, to receive his forgiveness and to do life with him.

For we are not alone in this, he struggles with us and he struggled more than any of us.

But such is faith.

3-A STRUGGLE OF FAITH.

Derek Kidner puts it this way, speaking to Jacobs encounter with God.

“It was defeat and victory in one. Hosea again illuminates it: ‘He strove with the angel and prevailed’ – this is the language of strength; ‘he wept and sought his favour’ – the language of weakness. After the maiming, combativeness had turned to a dogged dependence, and Jacob emerged broken, named and blessed. His limping would be a lasting proof of the reality of the struggle: it had been no dream, and there was sharp judgment in it.”

Brothers and sisters, your calling requires strength and persistence, but also weakness and humility. Your path is not an easy one, but it is a great blessing.

I pray a great blessing to others and to you as you get to witness the greatest miracle of all. Seeing people come to faith and trust in the Lord Jesus.

The struggle is real and the struggle is worth it.

Let's pray.

Lord, thank you for Jacob's story, for the encouragement that it is to know that others struggle like we do. Help us to lean into your promises, putting our trust firmly in your son, our king, Jesus. Amen.
