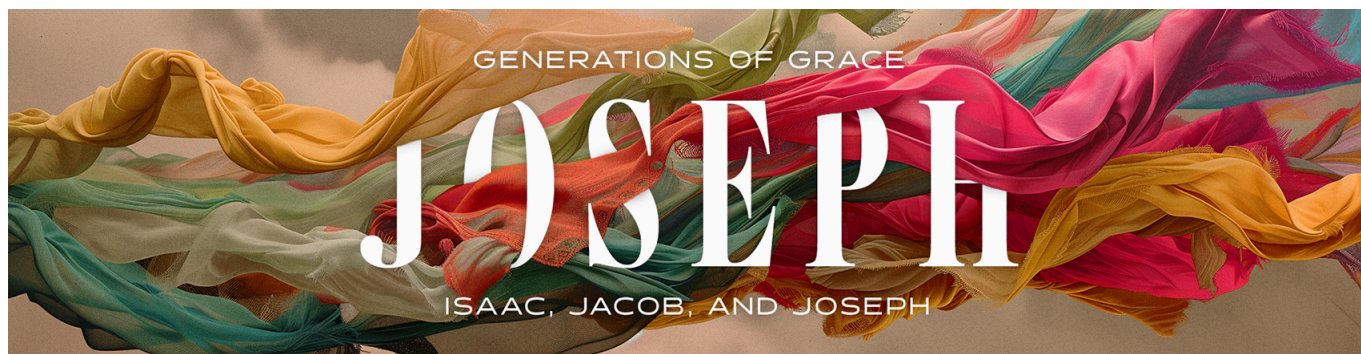




Genesis Part III (Week 3/8) The Wrestling God

Small Group Discussion Questions

Connect *When are you most likely to forget the Lord's presence? What would most help?*

Warm-Up

1. In Genesis 32, two strands of Jacob's past have the potential to come crashing together! Thinking about the two family lines (i.e, Jacob and Rachel/Leah) what has led up to this point?

Read Genesis 32:6-21

2. With Esau fast approaching, how is Jacob feeling? Why might he have reasons to be afraid?
3. What are the *three* different ways that Jacob prepares for Esau's arrival? What might this suggest about Jacob's trust in God? Can you relate to using any — or all — of these?
4. Why did Jacob actually have nothing at all to fear? Why do those in Christ (in an ultimate sense) have nothing to fear? What reminds you of this truth day-by-day through the good and the bad?
5. Zooming in on the content of Jacob's prayer, what does he actually pray? What is Jacob trying to remind God of? What do you think are the most redeeming parts of his prayer *and why*?
6. Do you ever hesitate to cry out to God in prayer? What stops you from crying out to him?

Read Genesis 32:22-33

7. Who is left with Jacob after he sent his wives, servants, and sons across the river? Who appears?
8. What are the clues that the wrestling with God was physical and not a metaphorical wrestling?
9. What do you find most surprising about this incident? If Jacob wrestled God, how could it be possible that God was not strong enough to 'overpower him'? What must have been happening?
10. What happens to Jacob's hip? What condition did this put him in for his meeting with Esau?
11. Why would God ask Jacob to tell his name? *By saying his name, what was Jacob coming to terms with?*
12. As soon as Jacob shares his name, what does God do? What is the meaning of this new name?
13. Does Jacob walk away from this incident puffed up or humbled? Other than his limping, how is it clear to Jacob that God is stronger than him? (Clue: look at the name he calls the place.)
14. Why do you think a tradition emerged for the Israelites to not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip? How might this have been a reminder of God's faithfulness and our need for him?
15. What are the types of things that Jacob may have been fearful of, wrestling for, his entire life? Who should he have actually been fearful of?

Apply *What are the areas of weakness in your life that can help you to push into and rely on God's grace?*

Pray *Gracious God, thank you that you became weak for us so that we could grasp what we truly need. Help us to depend on you and rest that it's in Christ we're truly saved. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

GOING DEEPER

Genesis Part III (Week 3/8) The Wrestling God

Small Group Discussion Questions

On Your Frontline this Week

What work are you finding tiring at the moment? How can you invite God to give you strength at this time?

For Families

- Download: some of the family resources to use at home: stbartskids.org

Listen, Watch, and Read

- Listen (sermon): "In the Grip of His Grace" by Pete Wilkinson:
<https://stebbes.org/sermons/close-encounters/#sermons>
- Listen (sermon): "Seeking the Blessing of God" by Hugh Palmer:
https://allsouls.org/Media/AllMedia.aspx?show_media=227028&show_file=240747
- Listen (sermon): "The Fight of Your Life" by Tim Keller:
<https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/the-fight-of-your-life/>
- Read (article): "Jacob's Limp" by Leonard J. Joenig:
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0049017297800042>

Series Resources

- Read: "Genesis" by Derek Kidner. 
- Read: "Genesis for Everyone: Part 2" by John Goldingay. 
- Read: "How to Read Genesis" by Tremper Longman III
- Read: "Genesis: Story of God Bible Commentary" by Tremper Longman III
- Watch: "Genesis 12-50" by the Bible Project:
<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/genesis-12-50>
- Watch: "How should we read the Old Testament?" by Dan Paterson:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJtba-IyPVg>

 Available to borrow from the St Bart's Library (Toowoomba): stbarts.com.au/library

PERPLEXING PASSAGES

Week 3/8 “The Wrestling God”

by the Rev'd Adam Lowe (18/10/2026, Toowoomba)

씨름하시는 하나님 | Yuür dë Jacob këne Nhialic | 摔跤的神 | போராடும் தேவன்

Bible Passage: Genesis 32

The heart of the sermon: Jacob has been wrestling his whole life to get what he wants, but as his past catches up with him, he finally wrestles the one who he should truly fear and in whom his true identity is found.

Gracious God, thank you that you changed Jacob and made him Israel.

Thank you that you have changed us by your grace and made us your children. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Jacob is in a pinch.

Two separate strands, of his *very dysfunctional* past, are finally catching up with him:

On one side: Laban — his father-in-law has doggedly tracked him down; and

On the other side: Esau — his brother is on his way to confront him.

- A few weeks ago, I saw a video of someone riding on the Brisbane Valley Rail Trail. *They had filmed their riding buddy being relentlessly pummeled not just by one magpie, but two!* It's bad enough when one magpie swoops and strikes, but in this instance, there was a pair! They were in hot pursuit, taking turns: squawking, divebombing, clipping the cyclist, without any indication that they were going to give up anytime soon!
- Jacob has had a pair of pursuers on his tail. / One of them — Laban — has just caught up with him. This was a meeting with a two-decade backstory. / Remember: Jacob wanted to marry Laban's daughter, Rachel. He was tricked into marrying Laban's other daughter, Leah. He ends up marrying them both. Works for Laban for 20 years. Outwits Laban to get all the streaked, speckled, and spotted flock. *Receives the Lord's command to go back to the land of his fathers. Is assured of the Lord's presence.* Takes off with the family and flocks, without speaking to their father, whilst Rachel pilfers a stash of the family gods before they fled. / It's a mess. BUT, when: Jacob finally comes face-to-face with Laban, he discovers that it is remarkably resolved,

because the Lord had intervened. The Lord told Laban in a dream to not say anything to Jacob.

- Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.
Laban was ready to rip Jacob to shreds: but he's basically told to talk less and smile more.
- The theft of the family gods is covered up.
Jacob and Laban make a covenant to not harm each other.
Laban kisses them goodbye and blesses them as he leaves!
- Phew! But don't celebrate yet, because:
that's only one strand of Jacob's dysfunctional past catching up.
- Esau — the other pursuer — is on the way.

Chapter 32 is actually sandwiched between Esau setting out for Jacob (that's chapter 31), and Jacob coming face-to-face with his brother — that's chapter 33.

- Jacob has heard that Esau is en route to meet him with 400 of his closest friends.
- But this isn't a sweet family reunion for two slightly estranged brothers.
These twins have struggled even before being born.
Esau sold his birthright for some stew.
Jacob stole Esau's blessing by deceiving his father.
Another day of reckoning for Jacob is about to dawn. //
Jacob is in the grip of fear and that's the encounter he's preparing for. /
Jacob prays. Jacob wrestles. Jacob limps.

JACOB PRAYS | VERSES 1-21

기도하는 야곱 | Lōj dē Jacob | 雅各的祷告 | யாக்கோபு ஜெபிக்கிறார்

First, as he prepares to meet his brother, **JACOB PRAYS**. *Verse 7:*

⁷ In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and herds and camels as well. ⁸ He thought, "If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape." ⁹ 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,' ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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.' "¹³ He spent the night there, and from what he had with him he selected a gift for his brother Esau:

In the face of fear, Jacob does three things.

- **He BRACES** himself for the worst: he basically makes a hedge and tries to limit the potential damage *by splitting his family, flocks, and possessions into two and sending them away*.
- **He BEGS** God to save him — he cries out to God in desperate yet dependent prayer.
- **He tries to BUY** his way out of the situation by choosing gifts to appease his brother.
- We're mixed bags *like Jacob*.
In the face of fear we go on the defensive, express dependence, and take things into our own hands.

- All at the same time! Do you relate to that? Have you ever done that?
- Of course, this is not saying it is bad to pray and act. God calls us to be wise!
- Like when a hail storm is coming you rush out to cover your car, quickly pray, and then give thanks that you sent the last insurance payment in.
- But this muddled response from Jacob is reflective of his whole life. He's seemingly always been in the grip of self-reliance and fear.

The Lord had commanded him to go.

The Lord had promised to be with him.

The Lord had sent angels to meet him.

The Lord had intervened with Laban so that there would be peace.

- And now — as he's left alone, waiting — it's the first time recorded that he prays.
- Notice that Jacob's entire prayer is bookended — it begins and ends, with him reminding God of the promises that the Lord had made to him.
- It's easy to think that Jacob is kind of saying, God — remember, you owe me! And maybe, there is a bit of that going on. We probably all can find ourselves doing that.
- The problem — *of course* — *is not that God has forgotten or will renege the promises he's made, of course he won't*. The problem is that Jacob, in light of the reality with which he is surrounded, can't fathom or even begin to see how those promises could be made real.

- *We don't have specific promises that God will deliver us from specific challenges that we face.*
- But we do have extraordinary promises from God that are assured.
- Yet sometimes, as the weight of our lives come to bear, we can struggle to see how those promises will be realised. That's Jacob. *Praying those promises isn't about armtwisting God, but pressing our hearts to rest into that which we know to be true. / Come, Lord Jesus.*
- *Jacob is used to doing almost everything and anything to get what he wants. But now, despite him continuing to try, the gig is up and he knows who he needs is God.*
- Sandwiched between his reminders to God is the real meat of Jacob's prayer: He confesses that he is unworthy of God's kindness. He acknowledges that God is the source of his blessing. He prays that God will save him from imminent danger.
- Jacob the deceiver — in all his imperfection — is expressing dependence on God.

Jacob has braced himself for the worst. / Jacob has begged God to save him.

- Yet, no sooner than he prays, Jacob considers how he can buy his way out.
- 200 female goats, 20 male goats, 200 ewes, 20 rams, 30 female camels with young, 40 cows, 10 bulls, 20 female donkeys, 10 male donkeys. / Would that be enough?
- It's hard to pick gifts for the person who has everything; but how about the person who you think is trying to hunt you down and kill you?! /
- Offering gifts as a peace treaty was of course a really common cultural move.

- But it's really interesting that in verse 20 when it says that, "*I will pacify him with these gifts*", the word used for *pacify*, is from the same root as the word for atonement.
- Can you see what is happening here?
- Jacob wants Esau to see his gifts, not his shortcomings.
- Jacob has asked the Lord to save him, but he's still trying to save himself.
- His past sins are catching up with him.
and he still doesn't understand who he truly needs to give an account to
and who can truly save.
- Jacob is trying to take hold and control of everything in his life,
but he needs to realise who truly has a grip on him.

JACOB WRESTLES | VERSES 22-30

씨름하는 야곱 | Yuür dë Jacob | 雅各的摔跤 | யாக்கோபு போராடுகிறார்

And he's about to find out! Jacob **WRESTLES**: Verse 22.

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. ²³ After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. ²⁴ So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. ²⁵ 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.

This definitely meets the criteria for a *perplexing passage*.

- Jacob wrestling God is pretty strange,
but then it's even stranger that despite Jacob hobbling away with a limp,
that God could not overpower him! What on earth is happening here!?
- Is God so weak, so puny, that he can't overpower one guy who was close to 100 years old?
- Clearly that can't be the case.
Clearly that is inconsistent with everything that we've seen and witnessed so far.
- No. It cannot mean that God was not strong enough to overpower Jacob,
but that God did not let his full weight come to bear on Jacob.

Sometimes, people say: well, the text doesn't mean that Jacob physically wrestled God.

- It's figurative! That Jacob was simply wrestling God in *prayer*!
- But the text doesn't leave space for that interpretation. Look at the clues.
- Jacob ends up with a limp!
Maybe you've got a far more robust and physically intense prayer life than me,
but short of struggling to stand up after I've been praying on my knees,
I've never walked away from a prayer time with an injury!
- Just look at what Jacob calls the place in verse 30: Peniel which means *the face of God*.
Why did he call it that? Because: I saw God face to face, and yet my life was **spared**!
- Jacob — with all of his capacity to deceive others and probably himself, is under no delusion of what has just happened. He hasn't seen God completely unveiled.
When he says face-to-face, but he has had a personal encounter with God and lived!
- Jacob doesn't walk away with hubris: puffed up like a triumphant heavy-weight champion.
He limps away humbled because he knows that God spared him!

It's really interesting that in the original language, *the word for 'wrestle' sounds a lot like Jacob*.

- Jacob has been wrestling people, jacobing people *his whole life*. But now God jacob'd Jacob!
- He's been wrestling ever since he was in the womb. For a birthright. For blessing.
- He's been driven by fear time-and-time again. But now it's all coming to a head.

- Everything has finally caught up with Jacob. /
- Saying your name isn't very difficult, but Jacob has struggled with that in the past!
So when God asks Jacob what is your name, it's not because he doesn't know,
or because God's exhausted from the wrestle and having a momentary lapse in memory.
- He wants Jacob to say his own name outloud.
- Remember what *Jacob* means: he's the heel grabber! I'm the deceiver. /
- It is a day of reckoning for Jacob but not the day of reckoning he anticipated.
- And notice that the moment that Jacob confesses who he is to God,
God gives him a new name — a whole new identity — Israel.
- That name can mean: The one who strives with God.
Or more simply, grammatically: God strives. //
- Jacob has been fighting his whole life; *grasping, scheming, wrestling for everything he's got*.
But he only prevails because God engaged him, God held back, God blessed him.
- Israel isn't the man who beat God... he's the man God wouldn't let go of by his grace.
- Jacob thought that he had a God in a grip, but as he confesses his sin,
he's left without a doubt of who graciously has a grip on him.
- Maybe you've been wrestling with God — or avoiding that wrestle — your whole life.
But here's the thing: when we confess our sin, trusting in our Lord Jesus, God's grace takes
a grip on us. We're changed. We're caught up in God's promises and made children of God.

JACOB LIMPS | VERSES 31-32

절뚝거리는 야곱 | Däär dë Kul dë Jacob | 雅各的跛行 | யாக்கோபு நொண்டுகிறார்

As the sun rises above Jacob, a whole new day has dawned.

Jacob *prays*. Jacob *wrestles*. And finally, **JACOB LIMPS**. Verse 31...

³¹ The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. ³² 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.

This is definitely one of the perplexing parts of this passage!

- *What does it mean?! Wrestle with God and you'll walk away with a limp?*
- I mean, we are to be left without a doubt that Jacob was injured by a light touch of God!
- **We don't know if it was permanent.** *Some people have tried to make that case.*
There's even a medical paper suggesting that Jacob likely suffered neurapraxia of the sciatic nerve along with musculoskeletal damage to the hip (cf. Hoenig, 1997).
- **But we do know that just as Jacob is about to meet Esau he's a changed man.**
He's been a person of his own resources and strength,
but now he limps out in front of Esau and bows before him seven times.
- It's really interesting that the area where Jacob was injured is associated with strength.

- You would place your hand under your thigh when you made an oath.
- Jacob's offspring are described as those who come out of his thigh.
- *Not because they didn't understand basic biology — Jacob wasn't bearing any babies,*
but symbolically this is the spot associated with strength and your future line.
- So as Jacob limps in front of Esau, he's left without a doubt that self-reliance won't cut it.
- Sometimes that's what weakness does. Jacob limped. Paul was blinded.
- *It's no wonder C S Lewis said, God whispers to us in our pleasures... but shouts to us in our pains.*

Many of you will know that a bit over two years ago, I slipped on some icy stairs at Mt Cook in New Zealand and gave my head a solid thwack on a wooden sleeper. Ever since then I've had constant head pain which I think has been slowly improving over time. People have been so faithful in prayer — and I have felt miraculously sustained over that period of time. But in a strange way, there has been blessing in the pain. Now I'm not saying that my trip was an encounter with God. But it's through the pain, I've had to learn to be less self-reliant on intellect and more God-reliant through prayer. // It's a really dumb way to have to learn it, but I'll take it because self-reliance — in an ultimate sense — is a more perilous path.

- Please don't mishear me: I'm not saying that anyone who has pain is being taught a lesson.
- But I am saying that sometimes what we experience as weakness is, in effect, strength.
- A limping Jacob who is reliant on the Lord,
is infinitely stronger than the self-reliant Jacob of old,
who is willing to do anything to get his way.

Just look at what happens. As Jacob approaches his brother and bows down seven times...

[chapter 33, verse 4] Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept.

- Jacob cannot believe what is happening.
He asked to be saved from Esau, and now he's experiencing the answer to his prayer.
- That's probably why he says to Esau: to see your face is like seeing the face of God.
Esau has become the face of grace to the brother who had encountered God.
- Why? Because God has intervened. / And that's what he has been doing all along. //
- Jacob has been in the grip of fear his whole life.
But he's finally grasped what he truly needs.
- And the reason that he can be certain of that,
is not because of how strong or rich or clever he is,
but by God's grace, the Lord was willing to become weak in the wrestle. //

As people encountered the resurrected Jesus, one of the most peculiar details recorded, even highlighted, is that Jesus still bore the wounds from crucifixion.

- *Why did he still have the wounds? If God could raise him from the dead, why not fix the wounds?*
- Have you ever wondered that? //

- As long as Jacob had the limp, he would have been reminded of his own sin and weakness.
- Paul's 'thorn in his flesh' *kept him from pride and reminded him of the sufficiency of God's grace.*
- But:
Jesus didn't have any sin that he needed to be reminded of.
Jesus had no skerrick of conceit that needed to be kept in check.
- He was without sin. He was perfectly humble.
- So why did he still have the wounds? /
- Because they're not there to remind him of his weakness.
they're there to remind us of ours. //
- Jacob's sin caught up with him.
And the only reason that he could stand was because the Lord intervened for him. //
The Lord had Jacob in the grip of his grace and Jacob limped away a changed man. /
- We all have a day of reckoning coming.
We can fear all sorts of things yet not face the ultimate thing.
- We can try to hedge our bets.
We can try to bargain with God. / But what we need is to rest in his grip of grace.
- The reason we can be confident in coming to God is because:
in Christ, the full weight of judgement does not come to bear on us,
but that on the cross, the full weight of judgement has already come to bear on him.