

## When Strivings Cease

### Wrestling with God: The Stories of Isaac & Jacob, Part 6

Genesis 32

David Sunday

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Let's worship through the reading of God's Word, beginning at Genesis 32:22:

*<sup>22</sup> The same night [Jacob] arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup> He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. <sup>24</sup> And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. <sup>25</sup> When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. <sup>26</sup> Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." <sup>27</sup> And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." <sup>28</sup> Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." <sup>29</sup> Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. <sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered." <sup>31</sup> The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. <sup>32</sup> Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh.*

Heavenly Father, we bow in Your presence. May Your Spirit be our Teacher, Your Word our Guide, and Your greater glory our supreme concern. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen.

"Satan's masterpiece is not the prostitute or the bum. It is the self-sufficient person who has made life comfortable, who is adjusting well to the world and likes living here, who longs only to be a little better—and a little better off—than he already is." That's what Larry Crabb says, and I think he hits the nail on the head. The reason many of us can live in a religious atmosphere and never have our hearts penetrated with the gospel is that we are too smart, too clever, too capable,

too competent, too rich, too self-sufficient, too self-satisfied to feel our desperate need for Christ and to cleave to Him and Him alone.

In the Gospel of Luke, chapter 13, verse 24, Jesus arrests this mindset of self-sufficiency and comfortability with these words: “*Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.*” We strive for lots of things in this life, don’t we? We strive after relational peace, financial security, business success and many, many other things. But what if the main thing you’re striving for in life—the main thing you’re worried about and giving your time and attention to—is not really the main issue? What if what you’re striving for today isn’t your most desperate need?

### **Striving After Lesser Things**

Let’s talk about how we can strive after lesser things as we look at the story of Jacob in chapter 32. Jacob is about to confront what he believes is the greatest problem in his life, his greatest obstacle—his brother Esau. We read in verses one and two, “*Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. And when Jacob saw them he said, ‘This is God’s camp!’ So he called the name of that place Mahanaim,*” which means “two camps.”

Jacob is now leaving Laban in the land of Haran, going back toward the Promised Land after 20 years of working for his uncle—that schemer and manipulator, the man in whom Jacob had met his match. As he’s on his way back into the Promised Land, he meets God’s angels at the borderland. This was an army of angels guarding the Promised Land. God is showing Jacob that He will be with him and protect him, that He is the One with Whom Jacob most needs to be concerned. God is Jacob’s greatest concern.

D.L. Moody said it well: “One man plus God equals a majority.” If God is with us, who can be against us (Romans 8:31)? Jacob’s greatest concern should be his relationship with God, not his relationship with man. But right now, in Genesis 32, Jacob’s greatest concern is his brother Esau. All his life Jacob has been striving with men—and it started in the womb of his mother. He was grabbing at the heel of his twin brother Esau as he was emerging from the birth canal.

Then later on in his life he was striving with Esau for the birthright. Then he strived with his father Isaac for the blessing. Then he strived with his uncle Laban over his wives and work conditions, laboring for 20 years under a man who was very manipulative and cunning. Now it’s all catching up with Jacob in chapter 32. You can fight with men, and even win your battles here and there—you can get ahead by manipulating and scheming—but there is a cost to unreconciled relationships. There is a cost to cheating to get your own way. The closer the relationship, the

greater the cost will be. For all these years, Jacob has not been able to appease his own conscience. He has not been able to shake the haunting thought, “What’s going to happen if I run into Esau?” He knows his brother wants to kill him. It’s not a fun thing to have your twin brother wanting to kill you.

So Jacob does what Jesus says in Matthew 5:23-26 we should do. It took Jacob 20 years to do it. Jesus says:

*So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.*

This is what Jesus says we should do with unreconciled relationships in our lives: make them right quickly. Finally, after 20 years, Jacob is going to do that, the way he goes about it is a good illustration for us of how we should seek reconciliation when we’re in an adversarial relationship. In verses three through five, Jacob sends messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau to communicate that he is prepared to lavish gifts on his brother. He instructs them to speak respectfully to Esau, referring to himself as “your servant Jacob.”

In verse six, the messengers return with an ominous message. They say to Jacob, “*We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him.*” Understandably, Jacob is greatly afraid and distressed. So he divides his people and herds into two camps, thinking, “If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the camp that is left will escape.” What is Jacob most concerned about right now? His brother Esau. His flocks and herds. His family. His livelihood. His provisions. And he has reason to be concerned.

In verses 9-12 he does something very good that we haven’t seen him do a whole lot in his life. He prays. It’s the longest recorded prayer in the book of Genesis. It’s a remarkable prayer, calling on the name of the Lord, reminding Him of His covenant promises and His goodness, expressing his fear and praying for deliverance. It’s a marvelous example of how we should pray. Let’s read it, beginning at verse nine: “*And Jacob said, ‘O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good.’”*”

And here’s a beautiful verse that you should underline in your Bible and repeat often in your prayers. Verse ten: “*I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all*

*the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant.*” Is there any Christian for whom that prayer is not true? “Lord, I’m not worthy of the least of all of Your deeds of mercy to me. I am not worthy, Lord.”

Jacob continues:

*For with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children. But you said, “I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.”*

He takes his burden and casts it upon the Lord. Many people say, then, that what he does in verses 13-21 is a contradiction of his prayer, because now he’s strategizing: how is he going to handle the situation? I’m not ready to accuse Jacob of any wrongdoing in these verses, because prayer and activity in the Bible often go hand in hand. We cast our burden on the Lord, but we also need to do what we can according to the wisdom God gives us.

I believe Jacob is exercising that wisdom in seeking to be reconciled to his brother and by sending this huge entourage ahead of him—drove by drove, hundreds of animals from his flock, a gift fit for a king. He’s sending all this ahead of him, so when Esau meets the entourage, Esau will be appeased by Jacob’s generosity. That’s what Jacob is thinking in verse 20: *“For he thought, ‘I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterward I shall see his face. Perhaps he will accept me.’”*

I can picture Jacob, as verse 21 comes to a close. The presents pass on ahead of him, and he himself stayed that night in the camp. I can picture him with a tent and a campfire, trying to sleep in his tent. But he can’t sleep. He gets outside his tent and paces in front of that campfire as it burns into the wee hours of the morning. His heart is racing with anxious foreboding. He’s preparing himself for the fateful encounter with Esau.

There’s one face in Jacob’s mind that he cannot erase. There’s one name he cannot get out of his thoughts. There’s one great concern that captures his heart: Esau. “How will Esau respond to me? What if Esau kills my wives and children taking all my flocks and possessions? What if Esau will not be reconciled to me?” This is what concerns Jacob more than anything this night: Esau. You know what it’s like when you’re so sick with worry you can’t sleep. You can’t get it off your mind. You’re so anxious about what might happen the next day.

The thing is, friends, even though Esau is a big problem for Jacob, Esau is not Jacob’s biggest problem. Esau is not Jacob’s most formidable adversary. Esau is not the one with whom

Jacob most needs to be reconciled this night. There is One greater than Esau with whom Jacob must come to terms and until Jacob comes face to face with Him, he will not have confronted the most consequential issue of his life.

I want to ask you, friends: what if the thing you're most worried about today is not really your greatest, most vital concern? What if you're striving after something that seems so great that nothing else really matters to you, but it's actually not the issue of greatest significance in your life? What if there's an even greater issue than the issue that's keeping you up at night these days? It's more important than any human relationship. It's more vital than your marital status, more pressing than your rebellious child, more significant than your financial security, more important than your failing health. It's actually more important than a hundred issues you could list—all of which are enough to keep you up at night.

What if you've never given sufficient attention to this most vital of issues? What if you've never come face to face with your most important relationship and your greatest need? What if all this time you've been missing the one thing most needful? What is that thing? Jesus said, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33). Strive to enter through the narrow gate, because many will seek to enter and will not be able in the end (Matthew 7:13-14).

### **This Must Become Personal!**

Friends, this must become personal for you. Look at verse 22: "*The same night [Jacob] arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. And Jacob was left alone.*" Moses, the author of Genesis, has taken great pains to build up to this point where Jacob is isolated and all alone. He has no one else to rely on; no one else to protect him. He has nothing in his hands. Everything he has has been relinquished, sent on ahead of him. You see in verse 23 that he has left everything.

I think we're in great danger of missing the importance of this phrase: "*Jacob was left alone.*" Because you see, there's an encounter that you need to have that is between you and Another, and no one else can have this encounter for you. It's really easy to go along with the crowd when it comes to religion. It's easy to get swept up into the experience of the group. I'm all for gatherings like we have on Sunday mornings, or conferences, or small groups, because the Bible makes it clear that we cannot grow as disciples of Christ unless we're deeply connected to a community of believers.

But, friends, remember this. Jesus calls His disciples one by one. He calls you individually. Christianity begins with a personal encounter with God through faith in Jesus Christ. The danger is you can go to church and live off of other people's spiritual experiences. You can get a certain feeling from singing with others, or hearing other people pray, or listening to others talk about what they're encountering in Scripture—and you can mistake their experience of God for your own. You can avoid dealing with God yourself.

Have you ever found yourself alone with God, face to face, so to speak, dealing with the Lord? Martyn Lloyd-Jones stressed this point in some of his sermons on Jacob. He stressed the point that each one of us as individuals. You come into this world as an individual. You were born alone. You will die alone. The time will come when you will be brought to the verge of this river called death and you're going to have to cross over that river. You're going to have to stand before your Maker, and there's not going to be a worship band. There's not going to be a Care Group or a Bible study or a pastor who can give you faith at that moment.

The God Who created you as a unique individual with a soul that will never die is going to summon you into His presence. He Who made you is going to call you to Himself, and at that moment, nothing else will matter except this: is your soul right with God? Will you stand before God as one who has been reconciled—made right—with Him? Will you know Him then as the God Who has forgiven you and saved you by His grace? Or will you stand before Him as an enemy combatant, caught captive in the act of treachery against His royal dominion, having to answer to a holy God?

This, my friend, should keep you up at night. This should make you restless until you resolve the matter of your relationship to God, because sin has made you an adversary to Him. Until you first personally face this adversarial relationship because of your sin, nothing else matters. This has to become personal.

So please don't mistake the fact that you come to church with the feeling, "I have a right relationship with God because I come here." Don't think that just because sometimes you pray to God when you are in a rough spot that you've been made right with God. Don't think that because you have certain feelings once in a while that you've actually encountered God and put your faith and trust in Him. This has got to be very personal.

Jesus says, "Strive to enter through the narrow door," and you can only get through that narrow door one by one. You've got to bend low. You've got to humble yourself. You've got to come through Jesus to enter the Kingdom of heaven. This must become personal. And until you've had personal dealings with Him, one on one, you're not ready to die.

## God Initiates the Encounter

The second thing I want you to see is that God is the One Who initiates this personal encounter. He is the God Who comes to us. He's not waiting for us to find Him. He initiates this relationship with us. It's not what we do that brings us into this relationship; it's what He does to us. Do you see that in Jacob's story? Look at verse 24 again: *"Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day."*

Wow! God has been pursuing Jacob with goodness and mercy all the days of his life, but this kind of encounter was not what Jacob was expecting. Can you imagine what it was like to be alone that night, in that dark, cold, foreboding atmosphere, knowing Esau's out there somewhere with his 400 men? Everyone else is gone and all of a sudden Jacob sees a Figure approaching him. The Man lays hold of him—and brings him to the ground!

They start wrestling. God gets ahold of Jacob. Dare I say God? He assaults Jacob in the middle of the night. Suddenly he's arrested by this Man Who won't let him be. This is not a nice, tame, easy-going God Whom Jacob is running into this night. This is not the God of The Shack, in case you were thinking about seeing that movie. This is a different kind of God altogether. Tim Chester says it like this: "This story reveals an important dimension to our relationship with God that our sentimental age often fails to see: God is dangerous. He is the aggressor in the narrative. He is not comfortable to have around." This is our holy God.

What Jacob experienced that night, I believe, is something every Christian gets a taste of in this life. We don't all have the same experience Jacob had to the same degree that Jacob had it. God deals with us as individuals. But this remains constant: God deals with us. You don't just kind of passively slip into the Christian life. You get dealt with by God. You get laid hold of by God. You don't just wake up one day and decide, "You know, I think I'm going to make a decision to follow Jesus," and kind of add Him on to your already comfortable life.

It's deeper than that. It's more disruptive than that. When God gets ahold of your life, He arrests you. He captures your attention. He brings you low. He shows you who you really are. He shows you that you cannot win the ultimate battle of your life—the battle between your sin and His holiness—in your own strength. He brings you to a place of submission before His majesty. He wrestles you.

Verse 25: *"When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him."* This is proof that this was not a battle of physical strength. If this was about physical strength, the Man wrestling with Jacob could have ended that battle in the first round. All He had to do was touch his hip and it

was broken. What Jacob is facing here is a battle he cannot win in his own strength. He's met more than his match. All he can do is cling to the One Who is stronger than himself.

### **Nothing Else Matters**

That brings us to the next point: Nothing else matters than clinging to God. Verse 26: *"Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day has broken.'" This was not because the Man was tired of wrestling with Jacob and He couldn't take it any longer. It was because if Jacob was to see this Man's face in the broad daylight, Jacob would have perished. For we know from verse 28 that Jacob was not striving with a mere man, but with God. We know from verse 30 that the One Whom Jacob wrestled with that night was God. He was seeing God face to face, but shrouded in darkness—and that was a mercy to Jacob. Had Jacob looked upon Him in the broad daylight, Jacob would have perished. The Man says, "Let Me go." Jacob says, "No, I can't. You've broken me of my strength. You've disabled my hip, but I'm going to cling to You. I will not let You go unless You bless me. Nothing else matters than this."*

Here's a question that tests whether or not you've really been converted to Jesus, whether or not you've really become a Christian. If you had to let go of everything else dear to you, and you could only hang on to one thing—who would you hang on to? What would you hold on to? Would you hold on to Jesus Christ if it meant you had to lose everything else? A Christian says, "Absolutely."

All I once held dear, built my life upon  
All this world reveres, and wars to own  
All I once thought gain I have counted loss  
Spent and worthless now, compared to this

Knowing you, Jesus  
Knowing you, there is no greater thing

[Knowing You by Graham Kendrick]

I must have Jesus. You can have all this world, but give me Jesus. You can take everything away from me, but don't take Jesus away. I will not let go of Him, because in Him is the blessing I cannot live without.

In order to get this blessing, Jacob has to admit what is true about himself. In verse 27, the Man said to him, "What is your name?" He said, "Jacob." Here's his confession: "I'm the liar. I'm the cheater. I'm the heel-grabber. I'm the manipulator. I'm the schemer. I'm the deceiver. God, be merciful to me, the sinner. That's who I am—guilty, vile and helpless. God be merciful to me."

Hosea the prophet describes how Jacob won the victory. Listen to Hosea 12:3-4 (NIV):  
*“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 favor.”* How did Jacob win? Not when he was strong, but when he was weak, when all his strength was broken. Edmund Clowney says, “He won when he was helpless; he had power with God when his power was gone.”

Friends, this is a picture of the gospel. The Son of God Who created the universe had all power, all authority, to make the world. What did He do to bring us God’s blessing? He became weak. What did we do to Him in His weakness? We whipped Him, scourged Him, mocked Him, spat upon Him and reviled Him. We nailed Him to a cross. We killed Him. But as we nailed Him to that cross, He won the greatest victory—the victory that secures our blessing. He was crucified in weakness. He now lives by the power of God. His weakness on the cross has become the source of our eternal blessing.

So cling to Christ. Lay hold of Him by faith. Do not let go of Jesus until you know that you have received the blessings that He died to secure for you:

- forgiveness of sins
- cleansing of your conscience
- newness of life that is full of new love, joy and affections for God
- hope that gives you an inheritance in heaven that transcends anything that you could have in this life
- power now to live in victory over sin and in the new life God calls you to live

You get these blessing from Jesus. Do not let Him go until He blesses you. Lay hold of Christ by faith. Humble yourself and crawl through that narrow gate. Do not let any sense of self-sufficiency or self-adequacy blind you to your desperate need for what Jesus died to give you.

### **Everything Else Changes**

When you encounter God through Jesus Christ, everything else changes. Anyone who has dealings with the holy God does not remain the same. As the sun rises upon Jacob in verse 31, this is the beginning of a new life for him. He’s going to walk with a limp from this day forward, but he’s going to live with a new trust, a new humility, a new brokenness, a new eagerness to bless, a new name—Israel—which means, “He strives with God and he’s prevailed.”

Look at what happens in the next chapter when he comes to his brother. He’s a new man and in Genesis 33:1-3 he decides he’s not going to hide behind his wives and children anymore but he’s going to go on before them. Look at what he does in verse three. He bows himself to the ground seven times until he comes near to his brother. Then Jacob was not expecting what

happens in verse four: *“Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.”* I think it’s a beautiful picture of how when we seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, God is able to take care of everything else we need. There’s no way that Jacob could have brought about a reconciliation like this. There is now peace between him and Esau because there is now peace between Jacob and God.

When we have been justified by faith in Jesus Christ, we too have peace with God—and it transforms everything about us, including our relationships with our fellow men, including our brokenness with our brothers. Look at how Jacob responds to Esau in verse ten, when Esau is saying, “I have enough. I don’t need your gifts.” Jacob says to him, *“No, please, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my present from my hand. For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me.”*

Jacob doesn’t just see Esau anymore. He sees God. He sees Esau through the lens of God. He has encountered God and it makes a world of difference in his relationship with his brother. I love how Dietrich Bonhoeffer summarizes this story:

For all of us, the way into the Promised Land passes through the night, that we too only enter it as those strangely marked with scars from the struggle with God, the struggle for God’s Kingdom and grace; that we enter into the land of God and of our brother as limping warriors.

That’s who we are after we’ve stood face to face with God, after we’ve been humbled by His grace and mercy. We walk with a limp. We’re not the same self-assured, cocky, arrogant, “I can handle everything” individual anymore. We’ve been broken—broken by grace, transformed, dependent, needy, weak. But when we’re weak, we’re strong (2 Corinthians 12:8-10).

Dear one, whatever it takes for God to strip you of your self-sufficiency, welcome it. It’s better to enter into the Kingdom of God as a limping warrior than to gain the whole world but lose your soul (Mark 8:34-37). Strive to enter by the narrow gate (Matthew 7:13-14). Come to Jesus.

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