

## **Wrestling with Yahweh**

### **Genesis 32:22-32**

#### **Introduction**

The Christian life is one often described in terms of warfare and struggle, and rightly so. Since the beginning, we received the promise that there would be enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). We are told that, though our weapons are not carnal, we are at war and are to be engaged in it (2 Cor. 10:4-5). We are told to put on our armor (Rom. 13:12, Eph. 6:10ff), to gird up our loins (1 Peter 1:13), and to always be ready to give a defense for our hope (1 Peter 3:15). We're told to mortify our sin (Col. 3:5), resist the devil (James 4:7), and take every thought captive for Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). In short, Christians are a people born for struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. But behind all of this, Christians are born to wrestle with the Lord God Almighty.

#### **Context of the Text**

At the time of our text, Jacob is returning to the land of Canaan, his homeland, after sojourning for twenty years under the thumb of his uncle Laban. God had prospered Jacob, but it was twenty years of strife and conflict with Laban. Before that, Jacob had fled from his brother Esau who was ready to kill his twin. This was because Jacob had tricked his father Isaac into giving him the blessing that was due to him. Though God had identified Jacob as the one who would be blessed, and though Jacob and Esau had legally transferred the birthright to Jacob, Isaac still wanted to give it to Esau. Now, after twenty years, Jacob is about to face Esau once again, and he is afraid. He has made all the preparations he can to appease his brother, but still he is concerned. Jacob is not faithless, though. If we look just a little earlier in Gen. 32, we see Jacob praying for God's protection (vs. 9-12). Before we get to the wrestling match, we already see Jacob wrestling with Yahweh in His prayers. He does this by pleading with God to remember His promises to protect and prosper Jacob.

#### **The Wrestling Match**

At night, Jacob sends everyone apart from himself, presumably for their protection and possibly also so that he might be alone as he further seeks the Lord (vs. 22-24). A Man then appears and wrestles with Jacob through the rest of the night (v. 24), a Man that Jacob identifies as God Himself (v. 30). God sees that He does not prevail over Jacob, and then dislocates Jacob's hip with just a touch (v. 25). As day breaks, God tells Jacob to let Him go, but Jacob refuses to unless God blesses him (v. 26). God then renames Jacob as "Israel" because he wrestles and prevails with God and with men (v. 27-28). God refuses to fully reveal Himself to Jacob but does grant Jacob the blessing he sought (v. 29). Jacob calls the place Peniel, and we are told that he took the limp from his contest with God with him (vs. 30-32). Now, Jacob is ready to return home.

Why does the Lord wrestle with Jacob? Is it to put him in place or chastise him? Clearly not, for Jacob prevails, which he could only do with the Lord giving him that strength. Not only that, the Lord blesses him. Jacob with an upright heart had already been wrestling with the Lord in prayer, pleading with Him to keep His promises to Jacob. So why does the Lord wrestle with Jacob? "The message of Peniel is this: It was God who raised up Esau, Isaac, and Laban to wrestle with Jacob. All those years when Jacob wrestled with these three

enemies, it was really God with whom he had to do. And why? Not to punish Jacob, but to train him, to make him strong” (Jordan, *Primeval Saints*).

God wrestles with Jacob and allows him to prevail over the Almighty, so that He might bless Jacob. God also was showing Jacob that in all the adversities he had faced, God’s hand was behind it all. As Jacob strove with his enemies, it really was God that was behind these contests. It was God as a faithful Father, training His son and bringing him up into glory. Jacob realized this. Even in his victory, Jacob was submitting to his God. Jacob strove with God and sought to prevail not out of pride but so that he could receive the blessing His Father had for him. Jacob faithfully grappled with God in a desire to submit to His Lordship. He faithfully strove with Yahweh, calling on Him to keep His promises.

### **A Wrestling People**

Christians, the people of God, the new Israel, are a wrestling people. We are summoned by God to wrestle with our own flesh, with the effects of sin, with the lies of the unbelieving world, and with the devil and his tempters. We must recognize, though, that all of the struggles that we encounter are matches designed for us by the Lord. He has brought us to this place, He has brought these contests before us.

How can this be? How can I say that of God? And how can a good God bring us trials that truly are hard to bear? I can say this because it is the message of the cross. It is through the cross that we have been granted salvation. The Son of God, preparing to go to the cross, wrestled with His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, and yet was ready to submit to the contest God had set before Him: “yet not My will.” Then, hanging on the cross, quoting Ps. 22, Jesus cried out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” He refused to let go of His Father, pleading with Him to remember His promises. Jesus knew the second half of the psalm as well. “You have answered Me...[He has not] hidden His face from Him; but when He cried to Him, He heard” (vs. 21, 24). Through God’s answer, all the ends of the earth turn to the Lord (v. 27). Jesus wrestled with God on the cross, entering into death, clinging to God and His promises, looking ahead to the glory and the joy set before Him (Heb. 12:2). And at the other end of it, all authority over heaven and earth is given to Him (Matt. 28:18), and the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth like the waters cover the sea (Hab. 2:14). We are a wrestling people because we look unto Jesus, and we see Him crucified for our sins, paving the way for us to wrestle with the Father through whatever contests He sets in front of us. It is because of this that we count them all as joy (James 1:2-4).

### **Return and Wrestle**

Hosea uses the story of Jacob wrestling with God to call the people of Israel to repentance (Hos. 12:2-6). This is the call to you today. Do not let go of the Lord until He answers you. Know what He promises and plead those promises with Him. In whatever circumstance you find yourself in, large or small, know that ultimately it is God Almighty with whom you are dealing. He is training you for glory as a good Father. You might not see what He is doing now, how it all fits together for good (Rom. 8:28). So hold on. Wait on your God continually. You were born to wrestle with Yahweh because, having been born again in Christ, you were born for glory.