

Beautifully Flawed: Jacob and the Art of Wrestling With God

Genesis 32:22-31

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I often follow the lectionary for Sunday readings, and I have really enjoyed the Jacob stories in a way I did not expect. He is a fascinating figure. I would have loved to sit around a campfire with him on the banks of the Jabbok River – listening to his stories of adventure, feeling his heart beat fast with fear the night before encountering his brother Esau. Indiana Jones pales in comparison with Jacob.

But let's not forget Jacob was also a thief, a liar, a deceiver, a fugitive, and a general scoundrel. In short, he was beautifully flawed, yet redeemable by God. That's what makes him intriguing.

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As we heard several weeks ago, Jacob had a dream in which he saw angels ascending and descending a ladder to the heavens, and at one point, even God appeared. Now he would have another nocturnal adventure with the divine. It is one of the most famous human struggles with the divine— Jacob's encounter with God at the river Jabbok. The outcome of his struggle is not what we might expect. Listen to his story.

Deep-seated family hostilities characterized Jacob's life. Because Isaac and Rebekkah played favorites, he and his fraternal twin Esau hated each other. Jacob swindled Esau of his family birthright, which entitled him to a double share of the family inheritance. Later he lied to swindle the family blessing from his blind and dying father.

When Esau threatened to kill him, Jacob fled to his uncle Laban's house in Haran, the very place from where his grandfather Abraham used to live. Jacob married his cousins Rachel and Leah, and eventually fathered thirteen children. Sick of his father-in-law's manipulations, Jacob fled only to encounter his embittered brother Esau.

Afraid for his life, Jacob concocted a bribe and sent a caravan of gifts, along with the women and children, across the river Jabbok to do his bidding. Maybe that would pacify his brother's threats, he hoped. Physically exhausted and deeply anxious about his brother Esau, he was alone in the desert wilderness. Jacob collapsed into a deep sleep on the banks of the Jabbok River.

With Laban behind him and Esau before him, he was too spent to struggle any longer. Only then did his real struggle begin. Fleeing his family had been bad enough, but he was about to wrestle with a divine, shadowy figure. During that long night, an angelic stranger visited Jacob. It was a tumultuous night. He wrestled with a stranger through the night until daybreak, at which point the stranger crippled Jacob with a blow to his hip that made

him limp for the rest of his life. By then it suddenly dawned on Jacob: That was no stranger, that was God. "I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared" (Genesis 32:30).

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Some of you know my Jacob story. I spoke about it on Father's Day. For those of you who do not, I have a personal vested interest in Jacob. My wife and I had our own of divine struggle with God and Jacob.

In 1994, we were living in Wisconsin, and expecting our first child. The first "routine" ultrasound turned out to be routine. We were having twins, but one baby was very sick, and not expected to live. The only question was what would happen to the other baby. Each baby depended upon the other for life. Six weeks early, the first baby was born, and only lived a matter of minutes. Moments later, his identical twin brother Jackson was born healthy. We named Jackson's twin brother "Jacob," for he wrestled with God through the night—and many nights prior to his birth, so his brother could live.

Our Jacob struggled, and did not let go until God blessed his brother with life. It was the reverse of the biblical Jacob's story, who stole his brother's birthright. Our Jacob gave his brother life. Life is both a struggle and a blessing. You don't find one without the other. Just ask the biblical Jacob.

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In her book Scarred By Struggle, Transformed By Hope, Joan Chittister uses the Jacob story as a paradigm for a spirituality of struggle. In Jacob's story, she identifies various elements of our human struggle. But with each human struggle, there is a corresponding divine gift — wisdom on matters such as faith, courage, surrender, limitations, endurance, and transformation emerge.

"Jacob does what all of us must do," writes Chittister, "if, in the end, we too are to become true to God. He confronts in himself the things that are wounding him, admits his limitations, accepts his situation, rejoins the world, and moves on." The end result of Jacob's struggle through the night was God's blessing – wounded but blessed; scarred, but surrounded by God's grace. (32:29).

Our human struggles with God and the divine are never easy, and yet within the struggle we experience divine blessings. Like Jacob, we may struggle with God through the night, but daybreak reveals that God only intends to bless us. Could Jacob have escaped without the struggle? Could we? It is doubtful.

Reflecting on Jacob, the writer Frederick Buechner calls Jacob's divine encounter at Jabbok "the magnificent defeat of the human soul at the hands of God." In his book, The Magnificent Defeat, he reflects on how the blessing Jacob received from God was something that his own power could have never accomplished. He writes:

“The God whom Jacob fought there by the river is in one way or another the one all of us fight. We may view God as the adversary because, before giving us everything, God demands of us everything; before giving us life, God demands our lives—ourselves, our wills, our treasure.

Will we give them over, you and I? I do not know. But always remember the last glimpse we have of Jacob, limping home against the backdrop of the brilliant sunrise. Our own magnificent defeat of the human soul becomes a resounding victory in the hands of God.”

-- The Magnificent Defeat, Frederick Buechner

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Jacob did not let go of his worthy opponent. There they were, arms and legs locked as they struggled that night. Jacob held on for dear life. He had a strong grip on God, and never relinquished it. He would not let go until God blessed him, with all the promises that entailed. God recognized someone who engaged with boldness and his last ounce of strength.

Do we have that kind of endurance? Are we determined not to give up when we are feeling overwhelmed and discouraged? There is a lesson here for us all. Blessings do not come easy. It takes courage to confront God, and even more to confront ourselves.

Our spiritual ancestors were blessed by their struggles with the divine, and so are we. Daybreak comes and Jacob is no longer Jacob the deceiver and the supplanter. God gives Jacob a new name, a new identity, and a new life. He has been renamed and transformed. He is now called “Israel”, the one who struggles with and prevails against God. That is quite a turnaround. He becomes what God has always known him to be, but it could not have happened without the struggle.

Jacob came to terms with himself. He had to face his dark past – a thief, a deceiver, a liar. The struggle must have been cathartic in some sense. He is able to look upon God’s face and still live, which was unheard of in the Old Testament.

The radiance of God’s countenance must have done Jacob good. Despite the many dark elements in the biblical Jacob's story, God’s divine blessing prevails in the end. He is beautifully flawed, just like us. Later on in Genesis chapter 35, God renewed the covenant with Jacob and blessed him again. (35:9) Jacob reminisced, "God almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and there God blessed me." (48:3)

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I would not give much for a faith without the struggle with God. My guess is, neither would you – a relationship that is tried and tested by asking the hard questions and facing the challenging times when God seems absent or indifferent.

For all you know, we could have been traveling companions with Jacob as he crossed the Jabbok River. We might have more in common with Jacob than we realize – beautifully flawed. Don't shy away from the divine struggle. Don't give up. It will all be worth it in the end. AMEN

Genesis 32:22-31

22The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.

23He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

24Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

25When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

26Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

27So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."

28Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

29Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him.

30So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

31The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.