

# WRESTLING WITH GOD

## Genesis 32:22-31

<sup>22</sup>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. <sup>23</sup>After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. <sup>24</sup>So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. <sup>25</sup>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. <sup>26</sup>Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

<sup>27</sup>The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

<sup>28</sup>Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with human beings and have overcome."

<sup>29</sup>Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

<sup>30</sup>So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

<sup>31</sup>The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. [TNIV]

There are two ways of understanding this passage:

1. Jacob fights against God; and
2. Jacob fights with God.

Both understandings are possible; and both give us an insight into God and our relationship with him that I find wonderful.

I'll explain a bit more.

### **Fighting Against God**

Ever had a fight against God? Ever struggled against God to prevail against him?

It may seem strange to talk about fighting against God.

But Jacob did.

It wasn't a boxing match, though. It was world championship wrestling!

What I find wonderful about the story of Jacob fighting God is the sense of honesty that is expressed here.

True faith in God means honestly struggling with God's will.

God in his enormous love treats Jacob honestly – man to man; face to face – in an old fashioned wrestling match!

It seems to me a silly picture – this wrestling match – wrestling God. Yet it also seems to me to be full of grace: God willing to struggle with Jacob on a level playing field, and Jacob having that solid genuine faith in God which means struggling against God.

For isn't it so true that none of us can say our lives have gone exactly as we wanted? Somewhere along the line God has thrown some curly times at us, and we have fought against what God willed? Isn't it true?

I've come across people who constantly dwell on what could have been versus what really is.

Jacob probably did the same that night. He was about to meet his brother again – the brother who, the last time he saw him, wanted him dead!

And in the intervening twenty years all sorts of things had happened to Jacob – a lot of it involving conflict and conniving and trickery.

I wonder if Jacob fell asleep staring up at the stars thinking of all the 'could have beens' and 'what ifs' and 'if onlys' that had filled his life up until; then.

And when he was deep asleep, God himself had a go at him – a wrestling match!

Here is the Lord God, Creator of the universe; at his word all things come to be, and at whose word all things can cease to be. Yet he is willing to wrestle with this man who had been wrestling with people from the day he was born holding onto his brother's ankle.

Ultimately, I think the fight's rather pointless and silly.

That is, apart from one thing: that it reveals the God who squares off against us and takes us on when we want to fight him. And God doesn't use his enormous power. He fights us honestly, so that we have to struggle through to an honest solution.

And that's what I see happening in many people's lives.

God rarely gives perfect lives, and easy and quick fixes to all life's troubles and sudden changes.

But, as Jacob realized, he is there for us to throw our punches of anger and frustration, while he brings us through it all.

Mind you, Jacob walked away limping. And so do we – God knocks us into shape! Yet somehow Jacob was better for the fight – wiser, less belligerent, more accepting of God’s way.

And most of all, it means that fighting God must mean that God has not deserted him, but that God is there for him anyway.

Actually, this sounds a bit ‘blokey’. But what comes to mind is two blokes have a fair old fight, and afterwards are the best of mates having a drink together in the pub. It may seem warped, but there is sense of comfort in knowing that God meets us on the level when we are struggling against his will for us.

So I like the thought that when my life is not the way I want it I can fight God about it. I can rant and rage. And God will take me on, and bring me through it all, changed, knocked about a bit, but better for the experience.

### ***Fighting With God***

Another question: Ever had a fight *with* God? That is, God fighting with you against an enemy.

Jacob did!

This is another way of understanding this Bible passage.

Jacob was asleep when suddenly he was attacked by the demon or monster that lurked at the river crossing.

There is an ancient story about a demon at the River Jabbok crossing. The story goes back into ancient times, long before the time of the nation of Israel. It probably came about because this river was known for flash floods, and undoubtedly many people over the years had been swept away to their deaths. So the superstition developed that there must be a demon inhabiting the crossing.

It’s similar to the story behind the Three Billy Goats Gruff, or bunyips inhabiting waterholes in Australia.

Anyway, Jacob is attacked. And God comes to his help. Just as God had been doing all through Jacob’s life. But here God gives Jacob extraordinary strength to fight the demon.

Mind you, Jacob didn’t come out of it unharmed. With the injury to his leg, he limped for the rest of his life.

And so Jacob is renamed Israel, which literally means “God fights”.

God fights with us to help us overcome our demons and anything that attacks us!

So again we have the assurance of God with us through all sorts of situations in life – especially when we feel under attack. And not only is God with us, but he gives us special strength to endure.

It's like what St Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians:  
*No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.* [1 Corinthians 10:13, NIV]

Dale Evans Rogers (1912-2001), wife of Roy Rogers, expressed what I'm getting at very well. She experienced many tragedies in life. She wrote:

*When our young son, who was in the service in Germany, died only a year after our Debbie was killed in a bus accident, people were sceptical about our faith. They were sceptical about the adequacy of God to meet real, deep human needs and crises that hurt in this life. Some of them wrote and asked, 'Now, what do you think about your God?'*

*Well, the summation of my faith is the fact that I am not bitter toward God. But because He has allowed me to experience trouble, tragedy, and crises, He has made himself so close and near to me and so aware of His Presence. He has given me strength to come through these things and I am able to use them in a constructive manner. I know that God loves me and I know that I am His child.*

From "Angel Unaware: A Touching Story of Love and Loss"

God knows what he's doing. Whether it seems we're fighting against God, or God fighting with us. God knows what he is doing.

After all, he changed a selfish, spoilt, mummy's boy, grabber and sneak like Jacob into the father a nation.

And he changes and shapes us to his will too.

Amen.