

# *Down by the River*

*Genesis 32:22-32*

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We should have known, shouldn't we, that it would have come to this.

We should have known that we would find old Jacob out there, down by the river bank, fighting as usual. We should have known that we would find Jacob in the darkness, sweating, wrestling, and brawling as always. It was in his nature, in his DNA.

Sometimes you can tell from the very beginning how a person will develop, what character will emerge. Years ago when I was pastor of a church in Atlanta, I had in my congregation a family who had a troubled teenage daughter. She was having a hard time growing up. She is now, I'm happy to report, a grown woman and doing quite well. But in those days she was struggling, always in trouble. She was in trouble at home, in trouble with teachers at school, occasionally in trouble with the police. After one of her scrapes with the law — it wasn't her first and it wouldn't be her last — her mother said to me in the midst of the turmoil, "I knew it would turn out this way. She was different from the other children from the day she was born. I knew when she was an infant that she was going to demand a lot of attention, that she was always going to be trouble."

Well, so it was with Jacob. One could see trouble coming from the day he was born. As a matter of fact, he was trouble even *before* he was born. In his mother's womb, the child that was to be Jacob was already brawling, fighting, and wrestling with his twin brother. You may remember that his mother Rebekah was not even sure she was going to be able to become pregnant. For a long time she thought she was infertile. She and her husband Isaac prayed desperately that she would become pregnant. Well, as they say, be careful what you pray for, because the result of Rebekah's prayer was that she ended up carrying twins, and one of them was a wrestler. Rebekah knew he was trouble even from the beginning. In fact he wrestled so vigorously with his twin brother and created such distress for Rebekah that she cried out in lament to God, "If this is what it means to be pregnant, I don't want it. As a matter of fact, if this is what it means to be pregnant, I'm not even sure I want to live." To put it mildly, Jacob was what we would today call a "problem pregnancy," but Rebekah pushed her way through it, and finally the two boys were born.

The first boy was born with a red complexion and hairy. They took one look at him and named him Esau. There is a little bit of a play on words here in the Hebrew, but his name means something like "red stuff." The second born came out of the womb wrestling and fighting. In fact, he took hold of his brother Esau's foot and was trying to pull him back into the womb, to wrestle him back so that he could be born first, instead of Esau. His parents took one look at that act of aggression, ambition, and competition, and they named him Jacob, which means "the heel grabber," "the barroom brawler," the "wrestler," the "fighter."

P. T. Barnum once famously said that there is a sucker born every minute. Well Jacob already knew that. In fact there was a sucker born just the minute before he was,

his twin brother Esau, and Jacob spent most of his childhood mastering the art of conning his slightly older brother. “Take a card, Esau, any card.” By the time that they were young men, Jacob had managed to weasel his brother’s inheritance, to deceive their father Isaac, and to wrestle away from his brother the blessing rightfully due him because he was the oldest. Jacob was a con artist *extraordinaire*. Soon he moved from trifling with his family of origin and onto richer territory. He pretended to be a naïve innocent to his future father-in-law Laban and wound up at the end of the day with not only two of his daughters, but also with Laban’s best livestock and most of his money. By the time we catch up with him in our story, Jacob is on the lam running barely a step ahead of his creditors and his enemies.

In worship we sometimes have prayers that begin, “O God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Do we really have any idea what we are saying, invoking Jacob’s name over our prayers? This guy is a con artist, a flimflam man. He can steal the bullet out of your gun before you can shoot him. His whole life embodies what Woody Allen said to defend himself when he decided to have an affair with Mia Farrow’s adopted teenage daughter: “The heart wants what it wants.” And when it wants what it wants, it wrestles life and anything that gets in the way to the ground in order to get it. We should have known it would have come to this: old Jacob wrestling and fighting beside the river. It is in his DNA. It is in his nature. Do we really know what we are saying when we pray to the god of Jacob?

As a matter of fact, in the deepest part of our hearts, I think we *do* know what we are saying when he pray in Jacob’s name, because we recognize our own stories in his. Jacob is not just the man Jacob; he is Israel, the people of God. And he is not just Israel; he is all of us, all human beings. In our hearts, human beings are wrestlers and brawlers and fighters. That is essentially what God told Rebecca when she complained about her pregnancy. God said that it was not just two babies that were struggling in Rebekah’s womb. It was the divided human condition struggling there. It was not just two babies; it was two nations. It was Israel and Edom, hunters and gatherers, farmers and ranchers, red states and blue states, old light and new light, liberals and conservatives. It’s “Momma always liked you better.” “Yeah, but you were the apple of Daddy’s eye.” It is the human struggle at war, and Jacob epitomizes it. And all of us are Jacob because our hearts want what they want, and we will wrestle life to the ground to get it.

As biblical scholar Terry Fretheim once said of this story, “Well, there is Jacob. Take him or leave him, and the astonishing thing about this story is that God takes him.” What God does is take Jacob the con man and transform him into Jacob the human being. Jacob believes that he can seize what he wants by the dint of his own strength. We see him, swaggering toward the promised land, boasting of his own strength, his fists gnarled, ready to brawl his way forward. In fact, the only thing standing between him and the promised land is the river Jabok and a mysterious stranger. And this makes all the difference.

One day, after chapel at the seminary where I was teaching, I was walking across campus, and one of my students hailed me, “Dr. Long, I need a word with you.”

I said, “I’m going to get a cup of coffee; do you want to join me?” And she did.

When we got our coffee, she said, “Here is what I want to talk to you about. My supervising field education pastor is making me preach next Sunday.”

Preaching professor that I am, I said, “Good.”

"No, it is not good. He is making me preach the lectionary."

Again, I said, "Good."

She said, "It is not good. Have you read the lectionary passages for next week? They are about judgment. I don't believe in judgment. I believe in love. I believe in mercy. I believe in kindness. It took me three years of therapy to get over judgment. I am not going to preach judgment."

We talked about that for a while, to no avail, and then she changed the subject. She wanted to tell me about her family. She and her husband were having a problem. It was their youngest son, the last to be at home. He was in trouble. He was giving them trouble. She said, "We don't even know his whereabouts most of the time. For example, last night my husband and I were having supper. We didn't know where my son was. We think he's involved with drugs; we just don't know where he is or what we're up against. All of a sudden, in the middle of supper, the door swings open and there he is. I said, 'Would you like some supper?' He looked like he was going to spit, stalked down the hall to his room, and slammed the door. My husband got up and turned on ESPN. That is what he does always in this situation. It is the way he always responds. But something got into me," she said. "I got up from the table and walked trembling down the hall. I am afraid of my own son, physically afraid of my own son. When I got to his room, I pushed open the door, and I said to him, 'Now you listen to me. I love you so much I am not going to put up with this anymore.'"

I said to her, "I think you just preached a wonderful sermon on judgment."

That is what judgment is. It is not God punishing us; it is God setting things right. It is God saying to us, "I love you so much I am not going to put up with this anymore." The great theologian Karl Barth once said, "Do not fear the wrath of God; fear the love of God, for the love of God will strip away everything that stands between you and God."

There by the river Jabok, the love of God ambushed proud Jacob. We don't know everything that happened there, but we do know what came out of it at the end. Jacob, the old street brawler, the old wrestler, got up changed and walked away with a limp. He got up transformed; he got up with a new name; he got up with a blessing to carry with him into the promised land.

I had my own little brush with the law recently. After filling up my car with gas, I had to drive across four lanes of traffic to get into the left-hand turn lane. I darted across the lanes, but suddenly the light changed to red, the traffic stopped, and I found myself with the nose of my car in one lane and the tail of my car in another. I looked in the rearview mirror and there were police lights behind me. The policeman got out and said, "Do you know what you did wrong?"

"No, I don't," I answered.

He said, "You are impeding the flow of traffic." When you are a young man you get a ticket for speeding in a convertible. When you are my age, you get one for being in the way, impeding the flow of traffic. He wrote out the ticket and said to my question of what have I done wrong, "You have violated section 62.130 of the Georgia code."

"What is that?" I asked.

"Look it up in the library," he said, thrusting my citation through the window.

I am a Jacob-style wrestler. I was not going to take this sitting down. I went to the library, I looked it up, I read the language of the code, and I came to a firm conclusion: I did *not* impede the flow of traffic. Technically speaking, I was not impeding the flow

of traffic, not according to the exact language of the law. So I went to the law school library, and I did a Lexus Nexus on this section of the law. I got case law, I got background, I got definitions, and by the time my trial date came around, I had a file folder two inches thick that proved that I was innocent.

On the day of my trial, the judge called my name. "Would you please approach the bench." I picked up my file folder, flexing my Jacobean muscles, and walked up to the bench. The judge said, "The officer who arrested you is no longer employed by the county. There is no one here to bear witness against you. You are free to go."

Something in me wanted to say, "You can't dismiss my case like this! I have a file folder that says I'm innocent!" Suddenly I realized, Jacob that I am, I'd rather be right than free. I'd rather win the fight than be blessed by grace.

So down at the river Jabok, the mysterious stranger wrestles me and you to the ground. Who was the stranger? Was it divine? Was it human? Was it Jacob wrestling himself? Was it Esau? Was it Isaac? Old victims of his deceit returned in his imagination for revenge? Was it God? Was it all of the above? We don't know. All we do know is that when Jacob got through with the experience, he recognized that God was somewhere in it. "I have seen God face to face and I have lived and I have a blessing."

So look, if you are trying to find God. Don't just look in the Bethels, the shrines, and the sanctuaries. Look in the Jaboks, too. Don't just look in the mountain top experiences; look in the struggles as well. I think it is very important that the Christian life does not begin at Bethel. The Christian life does not begin with a magnificent anthem or an inspiring sermon or a moving worship service or fantastic buildings with stained glass. The Christian life begins with baptism, where God says to all of us, "OK Wrestler, I'll meet you down at the river." All we know is when we walk through the waters, we've got a limp, a new name, and a blessing.

I went to the grocery store the other day. I hate to grocery shop. It is one of my least favorite things to do. Causing me to be even more irritated was the fact that I ran into some people that were actually enjoying their grocery shopping. It was a mother and her young son, and they had learned how to make a game out of this. What they did was, she had a list and she would read the next item off the list, aluminum foil, paper towels. He knew exactly which brand she wanted. He would run around the store till he found it and came back bearing it like a trophy. She would applaud, smile, give him the next item off the list, and off he would go. You know how it is in the grocery store; you are going to meet people several times if you meet them once. About the fourth aisle over it dawned on me: the little boy was mentally disabled.

She caught me staring at them. "I was just admiring your relationship with your son," I said.

"Yes" she said. "He is a blessing from God."

I don't know how many river Jaboks she has been through. All I know is she is on the other side of the water, standing in the promised land with a blessing from God.