

September 27, 2020

“Altar-ed Living: Jacob”

[Genesis 32:22-32](#)

We continue our series “Altar-ed Living”. And in this series, we are looking at how:

God's ultimate goal for His children and His world is total transformation; that we would be changed . . . altared. Our transformation happens in many ways and in many places, but some of His most transformative work takes place as we encounter Him in personal and powerful ways. He will ALTER us as we encounter Him at the ALTAR.

Last week we looked at Abraham’s life and the altering that happens in the space between God’s promises and God’s provision.

This week we are moving down the family tree to Abraham’s grandson, Jacob. The one who wrestled with God.

Which honestly doesn’t come as a surprise as Jacob’s life and story is one characterized by wrestling.

Even before he was born, he was wrestling with his brother Esau clinging to his heel. Later he easily wrestles away Esau’s birthright through a bowl of soup. Not long after that, Jacob wrestles away his father’s blessing that was meant for Esau by tricking his elderly dad into thinking he was Esau. Obviously, Esau was furious at this and vowed to kill him, so Jacob fled.

We find Jacob many years and many wrestling moments later, probably weary of a life of running, deceiving, and wrestling. Prompted by God, he decides to return to his homeland with hopes of making peace with his brother.

What will he find? Will Esau still be angry and wanting to kill him? Will there ever be reconciliation?

And here is where we pick up in this week’s passage. Jacob has just sent everything he has- his family, flocks, all his possessions, across the river and is now alone.

Alone with his fear, alone with his worry and doubts, alone with his thoughts. Alone and unknowingly about to encounter the life-altering presence of God in a wrestling match for the ages.

Personally, I have always found this passage very interesting and intriguing, often raising a lot of questions. For one how did Jacob wrestle all night? I know what it is like to run through the night, but wrestling? That is another level of endurance.

Having an older brother, we used to wrestle all the time, but we would only last 15 minutes tops, because it was exhausting. In college I remember we used to have these “underground” boxing matches in our dorm rooms. We would blast the Rocky soundtrack, throw on some gloves, pray because we were in bible college, and then go at it. It was a considered a long match for anyone lasting more than a few minutes.

But in this passage, it’s not just that Jacob wrestled all night, but also who he wrestled. In verse 30, he acknowledges it was God he was wrestling.

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.”

Many of us have found ourselves at times, like Jacob, wrestling with God.

We have been there. Or maybe you are there now. Restless nights, difficult seasons, big decisions, crises, loss, grief.

A situation where you didn’t know where to turn, which way to go, or what decision to make? Weighing the options, seeking wisdom, wrestling back and forth and yet unable to move forward.

Or you find yourself tired and exhausted. Weary and waiting. You’ve asked God. Pleaded with God. Cried out to God. And all you feel in that moment in return is silence.

God are you listening? Are you there?

Perhaps it has been a nudge, or prompting, or a gentle whisper of God calling you to do something or go somewhere.

But it’s not exactly how you thought or the way you imagined. Who me? Do that? I don’t feel qualified. It’s not really what I had in mind God.

Or maybe it’s obvious, God is clearly asking you to do something. To make a change. Go there. Do that. Take action.

But you’re afraid or it doesn’t fit all that conveniently in your schedule, or you’re just not all that interested.

If any of these situations or moments, sound familiar – you’re in good company and chances are you’ve been wrestling with God!

At times it can be difficult to see how God is working and moving in our lives and in our world, or it’s not what we expected and so it often leaves us feeling like Jacob caught up in a wrestling match. Wrestling with our self, and wrestling with God.

As I wrestled with this passage and where I thought I was going to go with it, I initially was going to talk about how wrestling is an important part of our faith. How it's ok for us to wrestle and to struggle with God. How God invites and embraces us, to come to Him as we are. With all our doubts and fears and struggles.

That in the process of wrestling with God, and encountering His presence, like Jacob, we end up being transformed. Our lives are altered because you can't wrestle with God and walk away unchanged.

I was going to talk about how up until this point Jacob didn't really have a personal relationship with God. We see that until Jacob wrestled with God he had only prayed and referred to God as "O God of my grandfather Abraham, and God of my father, Isaac"

But then after wrestling with God we see evidence of a God-altered life. A faith made real and personal. We see this in Genesis 33:20-

*And he (Jacob now Israel) set up an altar there and called it "God, the God of Israel".
No longer just the God of his ancestors, but his God. The God of Israel.*

Then I was going to conclude with elaborating on how just as Jacob's encounter and wrestling with God, strengthened and deepened his faith, and altered his life forever, it can also strengthen and deepen our faith and will alter our lives for God's glory and kingdom. Amen. Go in grace and peace. Boom 11-minute sermon. A new record 😊

But.... As I continued to wrestle with this passage, I was struck by something I hadn't thought of or noticed before. That is... it takes two to wrestle. As Jacob wrestled with God. God wrestled with Jacob.

Granted it was a fixed match and God could've ended it at anytime, but in this case God waited. God was patient. And at the right moment, at the right time, God brought Jacob to a place of repentance and clinging to the only thing that truly mattered. God's blessing!

So why didn't God do it sooner? Why did He allow this wrestling to go on all night long? Perhaps that is another question for another time, or perhaps it give us some insight to another truth about who God is. The God who loves us so much and is not willing to passively standby, but instead steps into our world, willing to go toe-to-toe and wrestle with us.

What does it mean to say, "God wrestles with us"?

For one, it means that we do not struggle and wrestle alone in our lives. When we go through difficult circumstances and times of struggle, God is with us and will never leave us. Whatever comes our way, God promises us that He is with us and will never forsake us and we can know with certainty that we are not alone. This is an important truth we all need to hear and be

reminded of over and over again, especially with everything that is presently going on around us.

The other side of that though is to also say God actually wrestles with us. Remember, "God's ultimate goal for His children and His world is total transformation; that we would be changed . . . altered." That we will turn from our sin and stubbornness and accept His gift of salvation and enter into the fullness of life He has for us in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

And sometimes that looks like God wrestling with us because there is no limit to God's love and what He is willing to do to draw us to Himself.

Which raises another humbling question? Why does God make so much of an effort in this struggle between humanity and Himself? Why doesn't God just let Jacob go and leave him to his own destruction? God could easily walk away and say, "I'm done!"

But praise God He doesn't do that. God wrestles with Jacob and does not let go. And the same holds true for us. God continues to wrestle with us. To transform us and alter our lives. God doesn't let go of us.

God calls us to Himself through Jesus as His beloved children and is willing to invade our lives and wrestle with us. Embracing us and holding on tight helping us become the people He created us to be, and the people He calls us to be. What an amazing, patient, and loving God we have.

And as we see in Jacob's life and all those who have wrestled with God throughout the Bible from Noah to Moses, David, all the prophets, the disciples, Paul and countless others we begin to see and understand that you can't wrestle with God and walk away unchanged.

Consider how Jacob's life was altered. Jacob was given a new name. A new identity.

After asking for God's blessing Jacob is asked what his name is. Of course, God already knew it. But this was for Jacob's sake and benefit. The last time Jacob asked for a blessing, he was lying about his name and tricking his father. He had lived into his name and deceitfully wrestling with people his whole life. This would become a life-altering moment of confession for Jacob.

"I have been a deceiver. I deceived my brother, my father, my family. Forgive me and please bless me."

Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

Jacob was given a new name. A new identity, and a new, altered way of living. Just like when we encounter God's grace and accept Jesus, we are given a new identity. We are a new creation and called to live in a new way.

2 Corinthians 5:17 reminds us of this truth:

Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

Jacob was given a new name and also a new direction- to walk with God. For Jacob, this new walk involves a humble limp as he has to depend and lean on God in his weakness.

The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.

When we encounter and wrestle with God, our walk and our life changes. There should be a new walk and new direction as we lean into and cling to God for His strength, guidance and blessing.

God blesses us as we cling to Him in our brokenness. When all we can do is cling and hold on, God holds us, blesses us and reminds us of our identity and calling as the beloved children of the One who strives with us.

If you find yourself wrestling with God. Hang in there. Cling to Him. Receive His blessings and allow His life-altering grace to transform your life for His kingdom and glory. No one wrestles with God and walks away unchanged.

Sometimes it can help to hear familiar passages of scripture with some biblical imagination which can help us find our way easier into the story. God's redemptive, life-altering story. So I would like to close by reading Frederick Buechner's creative account of Jacob's wrestling with God, from his book- *The Son of Laughter*. Perhaps close your eyes. Put yourselves in Jacob's sandals and brace yourselves for the wrestling match of your life.

Out of the dark someone leaped at me with such force that it knocked me onto my back. It was a man. I could not see his face. His naked shoulder was pressed so hard against my jaw I thought he would break it. His flesh was chill and wet as the river. He was the god of the river. My bulls abused him. My flocks had fouled him. He would not let me cross without a battle. I got my elbow into the pit of his throat and forced him off. I threw him over onto his back. His breath was hot in my face as I straddled him. My breath came in gasps. Quick as a serpent he twisted loose, and I was caught between his thighs. The grip was so tight I could not move. He had both hands pressed to my cheek. He was pushing my face into the mud, grunting with the effort. Then he got me on my belly with his knee in the small of my back. He was tugging my head up toward him. He was breaking my neck.

He was not the god of the river. He was Esau. He had slain all my sons. He had forded the river to slay me. Just as my neck was about to snap, I butted my head upward with the last of my strength and caught him square. For an instant his grip loosened and I was free. Over and over we rolled together into the reeds at the water's edge. We struggled in each other's arms. He was on top. Then I was on top. I knew that they were not Esau's arms. It was not Esau. I did not

know who it was. I did not know who I was. I knew only my terror and that it was dark as death. I knew only that what the stranger wanted was my life.

For the rest of the night we battled in the reeds with the Jabbok roaring down through the gorge above us. Each time I thought I was lost, I escaped somehow. There were moments when I seemed to be prevailing. It was as if he was letting me prevail. Then he was at me with new fury. But he did not prevail. For hours it went on that way. Our bodies were slippery with mud. We were panting like beasts. We could not see each other. We spoke no words. I did not know why we were fighting. It was like fighting in a dream.

He outweighed me, he out-wrestled me, but he did not overpower me. He did not overpower me until the moment came to overpower me. When the moment came, I knew that he could have made it come whenever he wanted. I knew that all through the night he had been waiting for that moment. He had his knee under my hip. The rest of his weight was on top of my hip. Then the moment came, and he gave a fierce downward thrust. I felt a fierce pain.

It was less a pain I felt than a pain I saw. I saw it as light. I saw the pain as a dazzling bird-shape of light. The pain's beak impaled me with light. It blinded me with the light of its wings. I knew I was crippled and done for. I could do nothing but cling now. I clung for dear life. I clung for dear death. My arms trussed him. My legs locked him. For the first time he spoke.

He said, "'Let me go:'

The words were more breath than sound. They scalded my neck where his mouth was touching.

He said, "'Let me go, for the day is breaking.'"

Only then did I see it, the first faint shudder of light behind the farthest hills.

I said, "'I will not let you go.

I would not let him go for fear that the day would take him as the dark had given him. It was my life I clung to. My enemy was my life. My life was my enemy.

I said, "'I will not let you go unless you bless me.'" Even if his blessing meant death, I wanted it more than life.

"'Bless me, I said. "'I will not let you go unless you bless me.'"

He said, "'Who are you?'"

There was mud in my eyes, my ears and nostrils, my hair.

My name tasted of mud when I spoke it.

"'Jacob, I said. "'My name is Jacob:'"'It is Jacob no longer;' he said. "'Now you are Israel. You have wrestled with God and with men. You have prevailed. That is the meaning of the name Israel:'

I was no longer Jacob. I was no longer myself. Israel was who I was. The stranger had said it. I tried to say it the way he had said it: Yees-rah-ail. I tried to say the new name I was to the new self I was. I could not see him. He was too close to me to see. I could see only the curve of his shoulders above me. I saw the first glimmer of dawn on his shoulders like a wound.

I said, "'What is your name?'" I could only whisper it.

""Why do you ask me my name?""

We were both of us whispering. He did not wait for my answer. He blessed me as I had asked him. I do not remember the words of his blessing or even if there were words. I remember the blessing of his arms holding me and the blessing of his arms letting me go. I remember as blessing the black shape of him against the rose-colored sky.

I remember as blessing the one glimpse I had of his face. It was more terrible than the face of dark, or of pain, or of terror. It was the face of light. No words can tell of it. Silence cannot tell of it. Sometimes I cannot believe that I saw it and lived but that I only dreamed I saw it. Sometimes I believe I saw it and that I only dream I live.

Questions for Personal Reflection and Small Group Discussion

1. What do you think it means to wrestle with God? What does it mean for God to wrestle with us?
2. Jacob's life was altered from his encounter with God How has your life been altered through prayer/encountering/wrestling with God?
3. What does it mean for Jacob to have a new name? What new names have you been called in the course of your life? Where might God have been in the struggle or process for gaining that new name?
4. Why do you think Jacob would not let go of this "man" until he blessed him? How would you define God's blessing?
5. What "limps" do you have in your own life and journey of faith? Do they help you trust in God, or do you often find yourself continuing to wrestle?