

Chapter 12: The Struggle of Israel

Genesis 32:22–32

Philosophers have long wrestled with the so-called “problem of evil.” In a nutshell, the problem of evil raises a thorny dilemma: If God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and absolutely good, then how can evil still exist? Or, from the opposite perspective, if evil does exist, then how can we say that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and absolutely good? This is not a purely theoretical question that is relegated to the ivory towers of academia, but an intensely practical question that all of us intuitively feel throughout our lives. How do we reconcile the suffering we experience with what the Bible teaches about God’s goodness?

To be sure, the Bible does not give us simplistic answers to such a complicated question. Instead of offering tidy logical proofs to explain away the philosophical *problem of evil*, the Scriptures reframe the issue as a theological *paradox of suffering*. God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and absolutely good, and yet, suffering *does* exist. God is not the author of evil, nor does he tempt anyone to sin, but he is nevertheless sovereign over our suffering. The story of Jacob’s wrestling match with God in Genesis 32 takes this paradox one step further. In this narrative, we discover that our lifelong struggle to make sense of our suffering is not so much a philosophical question about the circumstances of our lives, but more so an intense, personal struggle to come to terms with God, face to face. The paradox of suffering jarringly sets our real, deep, vile pain right alongside God’s intimate, wise, and gracious purposes for our lives: *God wrestles with us to remake us*.

God Wrestles With Us (Gen. 32:22–25)

In the previous passage, Jacob sent ahead his servants with droves of animals as gifts for Esau (Gen. 32:13–20). Now, Jacob helps his wives and children cross the ford of Jabbok:

[22] The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. [23] He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. (Gen. 32:22–23)

Already, the approach of Esau has strained Jacob’s faith to a near-breaking point. Positively, Jacob has devoted himself to prayer (Gen. 32:9–12).¹ Negatively, Jacob has also fallen back into his old habits of scheming as he sends his servants to shield him from Esau in a crass attempt to purchase Esau’s favor. On the eve of Esau’s arrival, Jacob vacillates between the two ways of living that have guided his life up to this point. Jacob’s mind is as divided as his camp (cf. Gen. 32:7–8), and he must make several hard decisions.² Now, after an anguished night of worry, prayer, and frantic preparations, Jacob cannot sleep as he sends his family across the ford of Jabbok in preparation for the coming day ahead.³

A Familiar, Surprise Attacker

After all of Jacob's servants, his property, and his family have crossed the stream, Jacob alone remains, vulnerable to a surprise attack:

[24] And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.
[25] When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. (Gen. 32:24–25)

Seemingly out of nowhere, a strange man appears to wrestle with Jacob through the night. Jacob is not able to get a good look at his assailant since they wrestle entirely in the dark, “until the breaking of the day” (Gen. 32:24).⁴ We do not know much about this stranger, then, except that he is a “man.” Only eventually will Jacob will recognize that he wrestles with God (Gen. 32:30). In similar stories, both Abraham and Lot also encountered the presence of the Lord, manifested as “men” (Gen. 18:2; 19:12; cf. Judg. 6:11–24; 13:2–23). In all three cases, Abraham, Lot, and Jacob are unable to recognize that they are actually dealing with God until the *men* who manifest God's presence do something that demonstrates God's power.⁵

Jacob has encountered God in the past, but this time is different for two reasons. First, God does not identify himself to Jacob in this encounter (cf. Gen. 28:13; 31:13). Second, in the previous encounters, God did not appear in the form of a man. In spite of these differences, though, Fokkelman also observes one important point of similarity between all three of Jacob's encounters with God: “In hindsight...we also notice that God has always revealed himself to Jacob only in the night.”⁶ This story is very different from the way God has revealed himself to Jacob in the past; however, there is also a thread of continuity to show us that the same God engages Jacob in different ways at different points of Jacob's life.

The remarkable insight of this passage, though, is that this wrestling match puts the true nature of Jacob's lifelong struggle into perspective. Jacob has been a fighter from the womb (Gen. 25:22), but this narrative clarifies that Jacob's struggle has not ultimately been against the flesh and blood of Esau and Laban; instead, Jacob has been wrestling throughout his life with God himself.⁷ Symbolically, this wrestling match is the culmination of a lifetime of Jacob's “battling and groping” for God.⁸ The text demonstrates the continuity between this wrestling match and the rest of Jacob's lifetime of fighting in the close wordplay between Jabbok (יַבְבֹּק; *yabbōq*), Jacob (יַעֲקֹב; *yaʿāqōb*), and wrestle (וַיַּאֲבֹק; *wayyēʾābēq*): at Jabbok, Jakob jabeks.⁹ In one sense, this moment symbolizes and encapsulates everything that Jacob has experienced over the course of his life.¹⁰ In another sense, everything in Jacob's life has been leading up to this great moment.

Crippling Success

To some measure, Jacob enjoys success in his wrestling match: “the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob” (Gen. 32:25). In part, Jacob's success against the man recalls the Samson-like strength that Jacob displayed by rolling away the stone from the well when he first met Rachel (Gen. 29:10).¹¹ At another level, however, Jacob's relative success symbolizes the spiritual reality of Jacob's lifelong tendency toward self-sufficiency.¹² Jacob has never encountered a challenge that he couldn't meet! This time, however, Jacob has now met his match in this man who possesses such

extraordinary power that he puts Jacob's hip out of joint with the blow of a single "touch" (Gen. 32:25).¹³ The word "touch" can describe a violent "strike" (Gen. 26:29; Ps. 105:15; Ezek. 17:10) or a much lighter touch (Gen. 3:3; Ex. 19:12).¹⁴ Here, the touch is sufficiently strong to dislocate Jacob's hip, while also sufficiently restrained to avoid doing further permanent damage to Jacob.

It is unclear at what point Jacob comes to realize the identity of his adversary. The force and damage of this strike upon Jacob's hip demonstrates both the strength and the restraint of Jacob's opponent. Clearly, this man could kill Jacob, but he only dislocates Jacob's hip. This is one of the most important clues that eventually helps Jacob to recognize that he has wrestled with God (Gen. 32:30); however, this action also tells us something important about God's intentions in this match with Jacob. At any moment, God could have destroyed not only Jacob's hip, but even Jacob's life. Even if God did not want to kill Jacob, God could have wrestled Jacob into submission with ease. Instead, God only disjoints Jacob's hip. What exactly does God intend here?

How God Wrestles with Us

In his commentary, John Calvin thoughtfully interprets God's actions here:

But the question now occurs, Who is able to stand against an Antagonist, at whose breath alone all flesh perishes and vanishes away, at whose look the mountains melt, at whose word or beck the whole world is shaken to pieces, and therefore to attempt the least contest with him would be insane temerity? But it is easy to untie the knot. For we do not fight against him, except by his own power, and with his own weapons; for he, having challenged us to this contest, at the same time furnishes us with means of resistance, so that he both fights *against* us and *for* us. In short, such is his apportioning of it is conflict, that, while he assails us with one hand, he defends us with the other; yea, inasmuch as he supplies us with more strength to resist than he employs in opposing us, we may truly and properly say, that he fights *against* us with his *left* hand, and *for* us with his *right* hand. For while he lightly opposes us, he supplies invincible strength whereby we overcome. It is true he remains at perfect unity with himself: but the double method in which he deals with us cannot be otherwise expressed, than that in striking us with a human rod, he does not put forth his full strength in the temptation; but that in granting the victory to our faith, he becomes in us stronger than the power by which he opposes us.¹⁵

God wrestles Jacob, but not as an opponent seeking to destroy Jacob. Instead, God wrestles Jacob as a trainer might take an athlete through drills designed to improve the performance of the athlete. Jacob does not need to grow to depend upon his own strength more, but to rely increasingly upon the strength of the Lord. God injures Jacob's hip to force Jacob to stop trusting in his own strength and to devote all of his energy toward seeking his blessing by faith alone.¹⁶

God wrestles with us in the same way. He seeks us out when we are at our most vulnerable to pick a fight with us. In this, God's goal is not to punish us or to put us in our place. Instead, God wants to gain our undivided, face to face attention. In these moments of wrestling with God, the darkness of night illuminates our eyes to see how feebly and foolishly we have struggled against God's gracious plans in our lives at every turn. Through every bit of pain, discouragement, and disillusionment in our lives, God has been wrestling against us by his left hand in order to teach us to

trust his power for us by his right hand. The circumstances of our lives have never been the real issue—far from it! Rather, God has been steadily stripping us of our strength in order to teach us to rely upon his. Paradoxically, God wrestles with us not to harm us, but to help us.

Why God Wrestles With Us

Additionally, although all of Jacob's life has been moving toward this moment, we should recognize that Jacob has not been ready for this encounter until now. First, Jacob needed God's promises to call forth his faith at Bethel (Gen. 28:10–22). Then, Jacob needed humbling by the deception of Laban (Gen. 29). After that, Jacob needed to learn faithfulness and perseverance through twenty years of long, hot days, and long, cold nights of shepherding Laban's flocks (Gen. 31:36–40). Through it all, Jacob needed to see God's hand working to deliver him, even in spite of Laban's deceptions (Gen. 31:41–42). Finally, Jacob needed the immediate pressure of Esau's approaching army to force him to faith-driven prayer (Gen. 32:9–12). Calvin continues, noting the timing of God's work in Jacob's life:

That this disclosure was not sooner made to the holy man, I understand to be for this reason, because God had resolved to call him, as a soldier, robust and skillful in war, to more severe contests. For as raw recruits are spared, and young oxen are not immediately yoked to the plough; so the Lord more gently exercises his own people, until, having gathered strength, they become more inured to toil. Jacob, therefore, having been accustomed to bear sufferings, is now led forth to real war. Perhaps also, the Lord had reference to the conflict which was then approaching. But I think Jacob was admonished, at his very entrance on the promised land, that he was not there to expect a tranquil life for himself.¹⁷

All of Jacob's trials have prepared him for this moment; however, this moment is now preparing Jacob for what is coming ahead. Jacob *has* wrestled his whole lifetime with God, and he *now* wrestles with God directly as God prepares Jacob for all his *future* wrestling.

God does not waste a single moment of our lives. God weaves together every minor annoyance and every major challenge to prepare us for the good he ultimately plans to bestow upon us (Rom. 8:28). Sometimes, God gives us glimpses into how he has prepared us, such as how Jacob's lifetime of wrestling comes into focus here as he wrestles for a night with God himself. Other times, we may never see in this life what any particular trial contributes to God's sanctification. In those cases it becomes more important than ever to remember God's promises that he is using our light, momentary suffering to prepare us for something greater—not only additional challenges in this life, but preparing us to bear an eternal weight of glory that is beyond all comparison (2 Cor. 4:17).

God Renames Us (Gen. 32:26–29)

As the long night draws to a close, with the dawn breaking, the man asks Jacob to release him:

[26] Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." [27] And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said,

“Jacob.” [28] Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” (Gen. 32:26–28)

This entire wrestling match has taken place under the cover of the night’s darkness. By asking to leave before the day becomes light, the man is preserving the secrecy of his identity.¹⁸ Even so, Jacob seems to begin understanding the identity of his adversary. At the very least, Jacob is acknowledging the superiority of this man when he asks him to bless him, since the inferior is blessed by the greater (Heb. 7:7).¹⁹ As Melchizedek demonstrated his superiority over Abraham by blessing the patriarch (Gen. 14:19–20), so Jacob acknowledges his inferiority by asking this man to bless him.

Struggling for God’s Blessing

More than distinguishing between the superior and the inferior, Jacob’s request brings the larger purpose of this entire narrative into focus. We have already noted that Jacob has spent a lifetime wrestling with God, but this reminds us *why* Jacob has been wrestling with God: to gain God’s blessing. To gain the blessing, Jacob wrestled against his brother (Gen. 25, 27), his father (Gen. 27), and his father-in-law (Ch. 29–31), and now Jacob seeks God’s blessing directly.²⁰ Even from the womb, Jacob has struggled, striven, and scrapped to gain the blessing for himself. For the most part, Jacob believes that he has been able to rely upon his own strength. Jacob knows that God has been involved in his life (e.g., Gen. 31:42), but, when the chips are down, Jacob still tends ultimately to trust in his own strength. This is clear from the previous passage, where Jacob did pray, but where he also devised a strategic plan to buy Esau’s favor (and slow Esau’s advance) with several gifts (Gen. 32:9–21).

This time, however, Jacob can no longer rely on his own strength to finish the wrestling match, since the man has injured his hip. As we observed earlier, the pain of this injury does not destroy Jacob. Instead, Jacob’s disjointed hip reorients *how* he applies his strength. Allen Ross explains this well:

What he had surmised for the past twenty years now dawned on him—he was in the hands of one against whom it was useless to struggle. With the crippling touch, Jacob’s struggle took a new direction. With the same scrappy persistence he clung to his opponent for a blessing. His goal was now different. Now crippled in his natural strength he became bold in faith.²¹

Jacob recognizes that he has been wrestling—not just for a few hours, but for his whole life—against the One who holds the power to bless and to curse. Armed with this realization, Jacob refuses to let the opportunity slip away for gaining God’s elusive blessing. Jacob insists that he will not let the man go unless he first blesses Jacob.

Is this just one more example of Jacob’s opportunism? Importantly, we must remember that *God* initiated this encounter with Jacob, not the other way around. Earlier, we wondered why God would attack Jacob when Jacob was weak and vulnerable, and now we find the answer. God initiated this fight with Jacob not to harm Jacob, but to bless Jacob. Jacob is not grasping at something that God is unwilling to give, but laying hold, by faith, of the blessing that God came to give.

Confessing Jacob's Name

God does not, however, bless Jacob immediately. In response to Jacob's request for a blessing, the attacker asks, "What is your name?", prompting the response, "Jacob" (Gen. 32:27). This verse raises an important question: Why does God ask Jacob to reveal his name? Doesn't God already know Jacob's name? In fact, we have seen God ask questions before at several points (Gen. 3:9, 11, 13; 4:6–7, 9; 16:8; 18:13–14). In all of these instances, God is never really seeking to gain information for himself, as though he were confused, uninformed, or forgetful. Rather, God asks questions in order to invite people to reveal their heart, motives, and character.

This observation grows more important when we observe the fact that God here asks Jacob specifically for his *name*. Some pagan religions believed that knowing a man's *name* gives power over that person, but in contrast, "the Bible regards the name as potentially a pointer to his character."²² Here, God is not trying to gain mastery over Jacob, since God already has it! Furthermore, God is not seeking to learn merely what Jacob is *called*. Instead, God is asking Jacob to disclose his character, and thereby to confess his guilt. Remember, the word *Jacob* means *supplanter* or *usurper*, someone who trips up someone from behind: "as Jeremiah puts it, 'Every brother Jacob [RSV, is a supplanter]' (Jer 9:3[4]). In uttering his name, Jacob admits he has cheated his brother; cf. 'Is he not rightly called Jacob? He has tricked me these two times' (27:36)."²³ At Jabbok, Jacob fully confesses his sin by acknowledging his *name*.

Becoming Israel

Now that Jacob has made a full confession, God grants Jacob a new name: "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:28). In addition to the meaning of *supplanter*, the name *Jacob* also has a more positive meaning, referring to God's defense of Jacob's backside: "May God be your rearguard."²⁴ Similarly, the name *Israel* will also have a double-meaning. Technically, *Israel* means "God fights" (i.e., God fights *for Jacob and Jacob's offspring*); however, God explains that Jacob will gain his name not because *God* has fought (although *God has fought*, and *God will continue* to fight), but because *Jacob* has "striven with God and with men, and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:28).²⁵ Jacob's old name captured the ongoing tension between God's grace and a sinner's scheming. Israel's new name, however, captures God's grace toward a sinner with whom God will continue to wrestle.

Parallel to this story, then, is God's renaming of Abram to Abraham, and Sarai to Sarah (Gen. 17:5, 15).²⁶ By renaming the man whose name meant "Exalted Father," God announced Abraham's new destiny as the "Exalted Father of a Multitude." Now, by renaming the man whose name means "Supplanter," God announces Israel's new destiny as a nation who will strive with God, and for whom "God fights." This new name does not suggest that God's relationship to Israel (both the man and the nation descended from him) will be free of conflict, but that the conflict will ultimately lead to blessing.²⁷ Throughout his lifetime, Jacob has sought God's blessing by any means possible; now, God has crippled Israel to force him to seek God's blessing by wrestling with God through faith.²⁸

Importantly, this event takes place just before Jacob returns to the land of Canaan and reconciles with his estranged brother. We find a similar, but more extreme, story in the book of Exodus, when God nearly puts Moses to death as Moses prepares to return to Egypt to confront cruel Pharaoh and to lead the Israelites back to Canaan (Ex. 4:24–26).²⁹ By failing to circumcise his sons, Moses does not

fully commit himself to the Lord. In the same way, until *Jacob* becomes *Israel*, he too does not fully commit himself to the Lord. Everything about this scene—the fight, the injury, and the new name—prepares Jacob for the work that remains for him to do in Canaan: “He would have all of Jacob’s will to win, to attain and obtain, yet purged of self-sufficiency and redirected to the proper object of man’s love, God himself.”³⁰ In a more immediate sense, this change of name also assures Jacob that God will fight for him when he goes to meet Esau.³¹

Blessing Israel

When Jacob asked God to bless him, God instead changed his name. Now, Jacob asks to know God’s name, but God instead blesses him: “Then Jacob asked him, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ And there he blessed him” (Gen. 32:29). In a similar way, the angel of the LORD will refuse to reveal his name to Samson’s parents: “Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?” (Judg. 13:18).³² In both cases, by declining to reveal his identity directly, the Lord reveals additional, critical clues that make his identity unmistakable, as though the Lord were saying, “Think and you will know the answer!”³³ Neither the darkness of night nor the wrestler’s refusal to disclose his name confuses Jacob about the identity of the man with whom he has been dealing.

This extraordinary story illustrates God’s purposes through the trials that he ordains for our loves. It is not that God’s desire is to inflict pain on us (cf. Lam. 3:33). Instead, God wrestles with us to remake us. Indeed, we have a greater privilege than Jacob, for we find the answer to Jacob’s unanswered question in the person of Jesus Christ: “for the fathers, in the beginning, were required to walk in the twilight of morning; and the Lord manifested himself to them, by degrees, until, at length, Christ the Sun of Righteousness arose, in whom perfect brightness shines forth.”³⁴ Still, God works in our lives in the same way that he worked in Jacob, even though he discloses more of what he is doing in the fuller revelation of Christ. First, God strips away the sources of our old strength, and he prompts us to confess our old identity. In this, God seeks to give us a new name—that is, a new identity—in Christ. Through Christ, we are adopted into God’s family as sons, fellow heirs to stand to inherit alongside our elder brother Jesus (Rom. 8:12–17). Toward this end, God puts his *own* name on us, as we are baptized in to the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). Jacob gains his new identity through the waters of Jabbok, but we gain our new identity through the waters of baptism.³⁵ Second, God gives us his blessing. Since God has crippled our old strength, we can no longer rely on that strength to lay hold of God’s blessing. Instead, God retrains us to seek his blessing by faith.

God Reveals His Face to Us (Gen. 32:30–32)

At this point, Jacob is confident that he has been in the presence of God: “So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.’” (Gen. 32:30). In the previous passage, we noticed that Jacob took great pains to attempt to appease the *face* of Esau: “Perhaps I may cover *his face* with the present that goes *before my face*, and afterward thus I will see *his face*; perhaps he will lift up my *my face*. And the present passed over before *his face*...” (Gen. 33:20–21; my translation). The one thing that Jacob does not do, however, is to “‘face up’ to Esau.”³⁶ He fears that he will not find favor and be accepted when he sees Esau’s face,

but that Esau will carry out his twenty-year-old plot to murder Jacob.

Seeing God Face to Face

Now that Jacob has wrestled with God, however, these fears subside. Jacob has seen *God* face to face and has not died; why, then, should he fear seeing *Esau* face to face?³⁷ Indeed, Jacob prayed explicitly that God would *deliver* him from the hand of Esau (Gen. 32:11), and now he rejoices that his life “has been delivered” (Gen. 32:30) after seeing the face of God.³⁸ This encounter with God has not only changed Jacob’s body and his name, but Jacob’s faith: “Jacob emerged from the encounter an altered man.”³⁹ Indeed, the text is ambiguous about the connection between Jacob’s seeing the face of God and Jacob’s deliverance. The ESV adds a word to contrast those two elements: “and yet”; however, a more literal translation runs like this: “For I have seen God face to face, and my soul has been delivered” (Gen. 32:30). Certainly, human beings cannot see God’s face and live (Ex. 33:20), and Jacob has been delivered from *that* destruction after seeing the face of God. On the other hand, just as God delivers Jacob *from* the destruction of seeing the face of God, God also delivers Jacob *by* seeing the face of God. It is through this face-to-face encounter that Jacob gains his new identity and his new blessing.

The Glory of God

We will not, however, emerge from our encounters with God unscathed, any more than Jacob does:

[31] The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. [32] Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip on the sinew of the thigh. (Gen. 32:31–32)

At long last, the sun finally rises, dispelling the darkness of night (Gen. 32:31). Specifically, the text tells us that the sun rose *upon Jacob* as he passed *Penuel*—that is, the sun rose upon him as he passed the place named “Face of God.” The narrative weaves rich, spiritual meaning into this small detail about the time of day, as Fokkelman notes:

The sun...has received the lustre of God’s glory and is shining upon him. The cosmos has changed: it smiles at him, promises security and warmth after the almost sinister night, with its frightening setting. The sun symbolizes salvation, deliverance, as in Gen. 19. The nights of Bethel and Haran have been replaced by the glorious day of the “Face of God”, Penuel.⁴⁰

Jacob saw God only dimly in the night, and God withdrew during the daylight, when Jacob could see him more clearly.⁴¹ By meeting Jacob in the darkness and concealing his name, God protected Jacob from his overwhelming, unbearable glory (cf. Ex. 33:20).⁴² John Calvin makes this point well:

So Jacob confesses that, by the special indulgence of God, he had been rescued from destruction when he saw God. It may however be asked, “Why, when he had obtained so slight a taste only of God’s glory, he should boast that he had seen him, face to face?” I answer, it is in no way absurd that Jacob highly celebrates this vision above all others, in

which the Lord had not so plainly appeared unto him; and yet, if it be compared with the splendor of the gospel, or even of the law, it will appear like sparks, or obscure rays. The simple meaning then is, that he saw God in an unwonted and extraordinary manner. Now, if Jacob so greatly exults and congratulates himself in that slender measure of knowledge; what ought we to do at this day, to whom Christ, the living image of God, is evidently set before our eyes in the mirror of the gospel! Let us therefore learn to open our eyes, lest we be blind at noonday, as Paul exhorts us in 2 Corinthians 3:1–4:1.⁴³

Calvin demonstrated that, under the old covenant, God veiled his glory with shadowy figures and ceremonial elements of their worship; however, “the veil is also the very thing that *enables* the vision of God.”⁴⁴ The veil was never the ultimate purpose, even though the veil served an important purpose in salvation history. Specifically, God veiled his glory in order to slowly train and prepare his people to behold the fullness of his glory in the person of Jesus Christ. Here, God trains his people through Jacob’s shadowy vision of God’s face. Later, to a slightly greater degree, God trains his people through the ceremonies of the old covenant:

This is the reason why he rendered himself more conspicuous to Moses, who nevertheless was only permitted to behold his glory from behind: yet because he occupied an intermediate place between patriarchs and apostles, he is said, in comparison with them, to have seen, face to face, the God Who had been hidden from the fathers. But now, since God has approached more nearly unto us, our ingratitude is most impious and detestable, if we do not run to meet with ardent desire to obtain such great grace; as also Peter admonishes us in the first chapter of his first epistle. (1 Peter 1:12,13.)⁴⁵

Christ has come into the world that we might see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). In the next life, we will enjoy the unending vision of Christ’s glorious face. In this life, we are delivered from our sin and transformed from one degree of glory to another by gazing at the glory of Christ in his word (2 Cor. 3:18–4:6).

A Lasting Limp

In part, Jacob’s limp functions as a verification that he did indeed wrestle with God, rather than merely dreaming it.⁴⁶ More than that, Jacob’s limp also leaves an enduring reminder of the significance of his encounter with God: “it was both a mark of grace, wiping out an old reproach (27:36), and an accolade to live up to. The blessing, this time, was untarnished, both in the taking and in the giving: it was his own, uncontrived and unmediated.”⁴⁷ The strong, confident, proud *Jacob* stays behind on one side of the river, while the weakened, limping *Israel* moves forward to reconcile with his brother and enter into the land of Canaan.⁴⁸ Israel’s success comes at a dear cost, but, in the end, is worthwhile. What Israel (the man) learns extends to God’s people in general: “God must cripple the natural strength of his servants so that they might receive the blessings by faith.”⁴⁹

Even though the Law of Moses will not forbid eating the sinew of the thigh on the hip socket, the Israelites will avoid that meat anyway.⁵⁰ More importantly than the external ceremony, however, is the spiritual reality that this practice symbolized.⁵¹ God’s people must forever recognize that God wrestles with us—and even gives us limps—not to harm us, but for our good. That is, God wrestles with us to remake us.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe the weakness and vulnerability of Jacob's condition when God attacks him (Gen. 32:22–24). Why does God wrestle with us most when we are at our weakest? How has God prepared Jacob for this wrestling match? How does God supply strength to Jacob to endure the wrestling? How have you seen God give grace to you to endure wrestling with him?
2. How many ways has Jacob pursued God's blessing by his own strength during his life? How does Jacob's injured hip affect Jacob's ability to continue pursuing God's blessing by his own strength? How does Jacob now seek God's blessing by faith (Gen. 32:26)? How have you experienced suffering that has forced you to seek God's blessing through faith alone?
3. Why does God ask Jacob for Jacob's name (Gen. 32:27)? What has Jacob done as a *Jacob* (supplanter/usurper) over the course of his life? What does *Israel* mean regarding *God's* fighting? What does *Israel* mean regarding *Jacob's* fighting? Left to yourself, where does your character lead you? If God renamed you by giving you new character, how would that change your life?
4. What does it mean that Jacob has "seen God face to face" (Gen. 32:30)? Why does God choose to reveal his face to Jacob through this wrestling match? How has God revealed his face to us through Jesus Christ? What do the Scriptures mean by urging us to continue seeking the face of the Lord? How is the blessing of seeing God's face worth the price of a lifelong limp?

Notes

1. Kidner, *Genesis*, 179–80.
2. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 211.
3. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 328–29.
4. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 556.
5. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 330.
6. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 214.
7. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 195.
8. Kidner, *Genesis*, 180.
9. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 295.
10. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 198.
11. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 330.
12. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 552.
13. Kidner, *Genesis*, 180.
14. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 557.
15. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 196. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.x.i.html>>
16. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 557.
17. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 197. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.x.i.html>>
18. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 296.
19. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 199. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.x.i.html>>

20. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 198.
21. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 557.
22. Kidner, *Genesis*, 181.
23. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 296.
24. Kidner, *Genesis*, 161–62.
25. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 555–56.
26. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 296.
27. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 335.
28. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 216–17.
29. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 557.
30. Kidner, *Genesis*, 180.
31. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 297.
32. Kidner, *Genesis*, 180.
33. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 217.
34. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 201. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.x.i.html>>
35. “The old Adam has been shaken off, ‘Jakob’ stays behind on one bank of the river. A new man, steeled and marked, Israel, has developed and he continues the journey on the other bank. (Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 222.)
36. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 326.
37. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 220–21.
38. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 297.
39. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 557.
40. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 221–22.
41. Kidner, *Genesis*, 181.
42. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 221.
43. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 202. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.x.i.html>>
44. Hans Boersma, *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 264.
45. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 201. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.x.i.html>>
46. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 198. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.x.i.html>>
47. Kidner, *Genesis*, 180–81.
48. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 222.
49. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 558.
50. “The ban on eating this part of an animal does not reappear in the Old Testament, but is found in Rabbinic Judaism (e.g., *Pesahim* 22a, 83b). Together with the two names of Israel and Peniel it made a third lasting reminder of this decisive night.” (Kidner, *Genesis*, 181.)
51. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 203. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.x.i.html>>