

# Wrestling With God

by Thaddeus Barnum

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*The sermon teaches that blessing only comes through breaking and surrendering control to God, and that this is a process of wrestling with God that requires faith and trust in His power and blessing.*

**Duration:** 26:34

**Scripture:** Exodus 3:14, Zechariah 4:6, Matthew 6:33, John 1:18, Romans 8:37, Philippians 4:13

**Topics:** "God"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the story of Jacob wrestling with a man at the Jabbok. Jacob, known for his striving and winning, experiences a pivotal moment of surrender in this encounter. The speaker reflects on how many people come to him broken and remorseful, yet struggle to fully surrender to God. Jacob's surrender occurs when he sees the face of the man in the morning light. The speaker emphasizes the importance of surrendering ourselves to God and the transformative power of blessing that comes through breaking and complete surrender.

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## Transcript

Good evening. Tonight is the setting aside of Ben to the order of Diaconate. It is a tradition and custom in the church to bless and to set aside the laying on of hands for the point and place of blessing.

Tonight I want to talk about blessing. And I want to take it from this text found in Genesis 32. I wonder why it's so hard for us to surrender ourselves to God.

Why we're always so in control. The story of Jacob here is a pivotal point in his life. He has been 20 years in exile.

20 years working diligently with everything he had. He was at the height of strength. And it was time to return to the promised land and face the reason he was in exile.

For 20 years prior, he and his brother, his twin brother, Esau. It was so bad that Esau said his last words to Jacob, I will kill my brother Jacob. And so he fled.

Now it's time to come back. And he's coming to that point where he's crossing into the promised land. The river Jabbok would feed into the Jordan, which would feed into the promised land.

And so he did what he normally would do. Send a messenger to Esau. I am coming back.

Things are great. I hope things are well with you. The very beginning of Genesis 32, it's reported that Esau is coming to visit his brother Jacob with 400 men with him.

400 men are coming to greet Jacob. All he has got are young ones, his family's servants. All he's got are his herds.

And what it says is that fear fell upon Jacob. Greatly afraid. And he lifted his prayer to God and he prayed as one would pray, asking all the promises.

Isn't it amazing how we live our lives in exile, always in control of our life, until we're in trouble, and even though we might not even believe in God, we pray. And after saying his great prayer, verses 9 to 12, he says, I fear Esau. And again, he sent off all kinds of gifts of appeasement so as to satiate the anger of his brother.

And late at night, he crossed the Jabbok with his family. The way it says it in the original language is he crisscrossed back and forth. Crisscrossed.

Getting his family across. But this is what happens when fear comes. When something greater than us comes.

When need is greater than we are. Back and forth on the river Jabbok. And out of nowhere, this man initiates the wrestle.

This man, in the dark, his face hidden, comes and tackles Jacob right down into the waters of the Jabbok. In the Hebrew, the words play with each other. Jabbok.

Jacob. And this word wrestle in Hebrew is Abak. Abak.

Jacob. Jabbok. Sounds all the same.

It's messy. No matter how you look at it, it's just plain messy. The word Abak means dirt.

Down in the dirt. It's physical. It's real.

It's wrestling. He doesn't even know who he's wrestling with. Or why.

But who cares? When you've got so much wrapped inside of you, there's nothing like a good fight. And down they go. Somebody clearly his equal because he can't do it in an hour.

He can't do it in a couple of hours. This is all night long wrestling. There's no little bell that goes off to your corners, gentlemen.

This is a battle. A wrestle at the Jabbok. This man, who is his equal, whose face he cannot see, is this my twin? Is this Esau I'm wrestling with? All my fears able to be completely released if I can just pin him down into the water.

And that's what the text says. Jacob prevailed the man until the man simply with his finger touched the hip socket of Jacob and dislocated him. Two things happened here.

The first thing, most significant, is Jacob knew the power in that touch. A touch as gentle as Eve saying in the garden, we are not allowed to eat of the fruit or touch it. Same touch.

Jacob knows because now Jacob realizes that this man has the strength and power to bless him. And yet, this man has touched the very center of Jacob's strength. Because that's what it is.

When you're dealing with the loins, have you ever heard the expression, gird up your loins? Is there anybody here who's heard the expression? It does work. You just fell asleep like, who is he? Yeah, well, it means be in readiness. It is somebody ready for the moment.

And now, the very centerpiece of strength has now been dislocated from Jacob, the man who has now got a face he saw in the 400. Now, he's got this dislocation of strength. And yet, he still with his upper body compensates.

The man cries out, let me go. And Jacob says back, I will not let you go until you bless me. Now, this is a fascinating moment because everybody who's anybody knows that blessing happens in a certain direction.

It's the greater that blesses the weaker. The stronger, the older bless the younger. Jacob knows this.

Jacob knows all about blessing. It's what got him in trouble 20 years ago. But now, this is an amazing moment.

He has got the man pinned. He, the lesser Jacob, has got the greater pinned. I will not let you go until you pin, you who I've got pinned, bless me.

And that's the story of Jacob right there. Jacob is the one who years ago, 20 years back, had stolen the blessing from Esau. Jacob knows all about blessing and how to get blessing.

We get blessing by forcing our way into the story. That's what we do. Because we've got to get what we've got to get.

Especially when we're afraid. Especially when need presides. Especially when we're a people who have got to have things done our way, in control, always.

You will bless me. You who are stronger, you will bless me. And the man says, rather than blessing, under the pinning strength of Jacob, he says, tell me your name.

Great question. Because this is the thing that got him in trouble 20 years back. Because he went to his father for the blessing.

Jacob, who is the younger Esau, the twin brother, the older. Jacob's name has come because he's always fought with his brother. They were born fighting.

When they came out of the womb, mothers think of this. When they came out of the womb, Esau came first, but on his heel, Jacob had in his hand the heel of his brother. And so they named him, supplanter.

The word Jacob means supplanter. And he became this. He stole Esau's birthright, and then he stole his blessing.

He came into his father disguised. His father was blind. And so what he did is he disguised himself to be the twin Esau.

And when Isaac said, who are you? Jacob lifted up his voice and said, I am Esau. Yes, because he's a deceiver. He's a liar.

He's a supplanter. Excuse me, what is your name? Very poignant question here. My name is Jacob.

I'm the one that steals blessings. I'm the one that cheats and lies and does what I want to get what I want. That's my name, and I know it.

Now, this is an amazing thing, this, because we've already gone through it in the service today. We've actually made confession. The thing that's amazing about confession is that when we actually confess, we actually can come to a point of saying, I know what I've done wrong before God.

I know. I know exactly what's going on in this story. I know what I've done wrong, and I confess it.

And everything about it is right. I have done wrong, and I'm a wrongdoer. And I make my confession.

But do you realize that you can confess all day long and never surrender? A person rises up and says, I've made my confession, but please understand that tomorrow I will fix this. Tomorrow I'm going to be a better person. Tomorrow I'm going to make a change.

Tomorrow I'm going to resolve not to be what I was. Which means that you are still in control of your life. You may confess, but you haven't surrendered.

You still have got that thing of pinning the man down. I want blessing my way. And that's always been our story.

It is always our story. I can't figure it out, but I know it's true. When we come into this relationship with God, the bottom line is, He is to bless me.

And when I say the word bless, I mean it just like that. I want my needs met. I want the fears gone.

I want my prayers answered. Where I'm broken of heart, I want to be healed of heart. Where I'm broken of body, I want to be healed of body.

Where I'm dealing with tough issues, I want the issues resolved. Your job is to be God and to bless me. Resolve the story that I'm in, so I can wake up tomorrow and be better and happy and have favor.

Just bless me. And yet the Lord does not do things that way. His path of blessing is always through breaking.

Always. He breaks before He blesses. Always.

Always. Always. The touch to the idol of our strength, whether it's our physical strength, whether it's the strength of our mind, whatever we place our trust in, that idol has got to come down before we know the blessing of God in our life.

Tell me, what is your name? Under the strength and brute force of Jacob. The man being pinned under the strength that Jacob's trying to force this blessing. The man lifts up his voice and says two things.

Today, you shall no longer be called Jacob. No longer named deceiver and liar, supplanter. Nobody shall call you that again.

But your new name, your new identity, will be Israel. Here in this text, the name Israel, Israel is born. This man's name will be changed and every generation from that point on, this people would be called the people of Israel.

Israel means to fight. It means to contend, to strive and to struggle. And that was Jacob's story.

He struggled, he strove, and he always won. Except here in the Jabbok. Here in the Jabbok, the most amazing thing happened.

Jacob went from wrestling to breaking and breaking to surrender. How I long for this for us. I cannot tell you how many times I'm in pastoral work with people who come to me broken and weeping and crying over their addictions and over their issues and they're so sorry for the mess they've made in people's lives.

But they will not surrender. In this story with Jacob, it is the morning light that causes him to surrender. This text is unimaginable.

It is beyond understanding. It is inconceivable, this text. Because at morning light, he begins to see the face of the man.

The man he didn't know who or why he was fighting, but now as the morning light begins to come up the horizon and Jacob begins to see the face of the man, the surrender happens. Because Jacob knows this face. Twenty years prior, when he was running from his brother Esau, he had a dream.

And in that dream, a ladder was set from heaven to earth. And angels ascended and descended upon a ladder. And at the very top of the ladder, there stood the Lord, who extended to Jacob the promise, I will be with you.

I will bring you back to the promised land. The blessings of Abraham, the blessings of Isaac will be the blessings upon you. And in the dream, Jacob beheld the face of God.

Here is the face of God at the river Jabbok. Jacob with his mighty strength still in the upper torso, being able to pin down this man who, as he sees with morning light, is the face of God. So much that the story, he erupts and says, I have seen El.

The name of God, Elohim, plural, singular, El. I have seen the face of El. This is not a dream.

This is not an apparition. This is an Old Testament historic piece where suddenly, out of nowhere, the God who has become man is found at the river Jabbok and allowed us to wrestle with Him. Allowed us to wrestle all night long.

Allowed us to wrestle, not knowing who He was, but wanting to get the fear inside out. This, the theologians would later call condescension, that the God Himself, He condescends, not as one speaking down to, He Himself in all His glory comes down and makes Himself like one of us. He makes Himself of no reputation.

He humbles Himself and allows Jacob, allows us to force God into the boxes of our own mind. Allows us to demand of Him, bless me, bless me, take the fear out. You are on my terms.

I am stronger than you because you're stronger than me. I'm pinning you because you're going to bless me. Does that make any sense? Until you've been under fear, until you've crisscrossed the Jabbok, until

you've been at nights when you don't know what's going to happen with yourself, when you've been under addictions or pains or hurts, when life is too big, too huge, too grand.

And all the days you were in exile, man, you had Bible classes and philosophy classes where you had God pegged. You actually went through your own wrestlings where you can actually argue with somebody that God doesn't even exist. Well done you! Just because you think you're bigger than He is.

And that's what we all think. Which is why He allows us to wrestle with Him as if He is our equal. Here in the river Jabbok, Jacob, Israel, would hear and see the God become man and see the face of El.

Tell me, what is your name? He said, why do you want to know my name? And the drumbeat of the Old Testament, you would never hear the name. Who is this God, man? What do we call Him? The prophets would rise up and they would say it's true. There's one coming who will be born among us, who will be one of us.

One day that will happen. His name, Emmanuel, God with us, Prince of Peace, wonderful counselor. But we don't know His name.

And it would not be until a young woman would stand in the days later, a young virgin, and an angel of God would appear by the name of Gabriel. And there, upon the dawn of that era, the first sound of His name would be heard in her ear. His name shall be called Jesus.

A name that will rise at the end of time. And every knee shall bow to that name. Those who did not and those who did believe will bow at the name of Jesus.

For such the Father has decreed that His beloved Son will be honored. And yet, His beloved Son has chosen to come among us as one of us and to deal with us equally. And allow us to pin Him down until He teaches us that through breaking, through breaking, we learn how to surrender our control unto the Lord.

And it's there that we find that He blesses us. Your name shall no longer be called Jacob. Your name shall be called Israel.

Because now you have struggled and persisted, always demanding to win. But now El, the name of El, is bound forever into your name. You shall struggle, but you shall only win through El who is bound into your name.

And so Christians would rise and people down to the centuries, and we would say, not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. Paul would say it this way, for we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

So now that I'm confident that nothing life can bring to me now, it doesn't matter that Esau's coming. It doesn't matter that there are 400 coming with him. It doesn't bless me to know it, but I don't care.

Because the bottom line is that fear might be huge, and the things that we have to go through, and the sicknesses and the deaths and the brokenness and relationships and fears and pains and the hardships of life, they may be ugly, and I don't know how to get through them, but my name is now bound with the name of El. And therefore, in El, I can do all things. I surrender all that I am unto the Lord Jesus Christ.

And Jacob stood at the morning's light and lifted up his voice and said, Here is the blessing. I have beheld Him. I have seen the face of El.

And to behold Him is enough. It doesn't matter whether my prayers are answered or my heart is healed or my body is fixed or my fears are taken away. I just know the valley of the shadow of death, His rod and His staff, I surrender.

I don't know what you're facing today, and I don't know how hard you're wrestling with God today, but He welcomes it. Just watch out, because He wrestles back until our idols are down, and we surrender all that we are and all that we have. Just like He surrendered at the cross and became a servant, His body, His blood, that you and I might rise at the morning light and have life, real life.

Let the Lord bless you today. And never forget, Mr. Ben, blessing only comes through breaking, and breaking to complete and full surrender to the Lord you serve, who has come to serve you. In Jesus' name, amen.

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