

# Genesis 32:22-30

Pentecost 22, Supplement Series C, October 16, 2016

Theme: Wrestle with God and win  
I. Recognizing that you are weak, but he is strong  
II. Rejoicing that he makes himself weak so you are strong

INJ When two athletes enter the wrestling ring, they engage in a battle of strength, of wits, of speed and technique. Who will force the other to the ground? Who will pin the other to the mat? Who will win the match? The winner makes the opponent yield to his superior power.

In our lesson today we see Jacob wrestle with a man through the night until daybreak. It was an unusual encounter, though. This man was God, who grappled with Jacob. And if that is not surprising enough, Moses writes that Jacob prevailed! What are we to learn from this divine revelation? Not that humans can impose their will on God and force him to yield to our power. But that we wrestle with God and win when we recognize that we are weak, but he is strong. We wrestle with God and win when we rejoice that he makes himself weak so we are strong.

We should recall the Bible History of Jacob. He was a twin, the younger of the two. He was called Jacob because the name means “heel grabber.” He was hanging on to his brother Esau at birth. The name aptly described the personality. Jacob manipulated his brother’s need and acquired the birthright from him. Jacob masqueraded as his brother to steal the blessing his father was about to give. Jacob was forced to flee his home because of the fallout from that deception!

Jacob found shelter with a relative, and for nearly two decades he gained wealth and prestige through dubious practices. He wanted to marry Rachel, but he was tricked into actually marrying her sister Leah. Jacob made a deal to marry both women. The wives were also competitive in their childbearing, so Jacob ended up with not only two wives, but two servants who also bore him children. Eleven boys, at this time. Can you imagine the chaos in that household?

Now Jacob was headed home to his father. He had become wealthy. Large herds of cattle. Many people working for him. The entourage was huge as they slowly made their way toward the Promised Land again. Then the scouts alerted Jacob that Esau, the angry brother, was heading towards them with a small army. Jacob used his wits to devise a plan. Half the family and half the supplies would be placed over here. The

other half would be over there. If disaster would come on one group, the other could flee for safety. And, a generous peace offering was sent to Esau, to placate his anger. It was a solid plan from sneaky Jacob.

But was it such a great plan? Look at the mess Jacob had to manage: four wives, eleven sons, an angry brother. He was homeless, defenseless and powerless. The best he could hope for was the loss of half his family and possessions. All the creative designs of the heel-grabber didn’t avert danger or secure the future.

What was missing from Jacob is also often missing from us: trust in God’s promises. The LORD had promised Jacob his blessing. No crafty manipulations were needed. God said he would be with Jacob in every danger. God would give the blessing of family. One of Jacob’s descendants would be the promised Messiah! God has promised us blessings just as astounding: Jesus says he is with us always. In him we have the forgiveness of sin. Even death cannot hold us, for we will rise to live forever.

Yet we anguish over our plans. We fear the disasters that loom over us. We resort to dubious practices and sneaky schemes hoping that we can make things happen according to our will. But we are just as powerless as Jacob who sits alone by the river in the mess he has made with his life.

“ And a man wrestled with [Jacob] till daybreak.” A physical wrestling match and a spiritual one are all wrapped into one contest here. I would have you consider that Jacob was not wrestling with God to make God succumb to Jacob’s plans. Jacob was wrestling to hold God to his promises. Jacob was weak. The circumstance made that painfully obvious. But God the LORD is strong.

God Almighty had promised to protect Jacob. Wrestle with God that he do what he promised! “ Lord, I don’t know how you can do it, but you have to. You cannot fail to keep your word. So keep me safe, Lord. To me it looks like only disaster, but in you I am confident of rescue.” Can you picture the wrestling? “ This is what I see – but you said!” “ I don’t understand, yet I do trust.” “ Lord, you are strong, and I am weak.”

God Almighty had promised to give Jacob descendants. The Savior would come from them! What a mess Jacob had made of his family, but now they were threatened. Wrestle with it: “ Lord, keep them safe. Preserve the line of the promise. But Esau is coming with an army and we don’t stand a chance! I can’t make soldiers out of children and women and animals! Lord, you are strong. You keep your promises. Help us. I know you will. I don’t see how you can. But you must, for you said you would! Lord, you are strong, but I am weak.”

When daybreak drew near, God was going to take his leave from

Jacob, but Jacob would not let him go. “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” God cannot withhold his blessing when he has promised to bless. Jacob’s strength was not his muscles, but his reliance on God’s Word. “You must bless me, for you are strong to do it. You said so!”

So Jacob won the wrestling match with God – not by forcing God into submission, but by submitting to the LORD his God. By clinging to the powerful promises, Jacob received the blessing. God is able to accomplish everything he intends. He will do it. Don’t you trust him?

Sure, we have to wrestle with ourselves, too. Doubt and fear get in the way. Our reliance on reason and ingenuity interfere. If I cannot see it, I don’t want to trust it. But God says ... and then we are not just grappling with ourselves, but with the LORD. Jacob’s name was changed at this momentous incident. From Jacob the heel grabber, the self-reliant lowlife – to Israel, the one who struggled with God and received mercy. Who wrestled God and won. Who received blessing from the God who promised it. Israel had victory, recognizing his weakness and the LORD’s strength.

Your wrestling with God, my wrestling with him, is tiring. It exposes our weaknesses. It lays our fears open. I am weak. So terribly weak and stubborn and rebellious and reliably selfish. I deserve no protection, no salvation, no forgiveness. But the LORD my God has promised it. I don’t know the details of how it will happen, but he will bless. I trust him. Wrestle with it. You win by being confident in God’s powerful Word.

Names mean a lot in this account. The names we like to use for ourselves are likewise descriptive. Honor comes to the victor, the MVP, the champion. We respect the Doctor, the Soldier, the Pastor. We need the barber, the farmer, the officer. In our reading, self-reliant Jacob becomes trusting-wrestling Israel. The place is called Peniel, the face of God, because there Jacob came face to face with God, and he lived. The LORD confronts us in his word, so we are also Israel: trusting; wrestlers. We win in this encounter with God because he makes himself weak to give us the victory.

When a parent tussles with their young child in a fun game of wrestling, there is no way that the grade schooler can come out on top. The size and strength difference is too great. But how many fathers end up “pinned” by their offspring? They make themselves weak because they love the child. God made himself weak because he loved us so much. The Second Person of the Trinity entered humanity, humbled himself to be born of a virgin. Jesus placed himself under the law to obey it in our place. Jesus was tempted, and despised, and beaten. The Almighty God does not have to take this mistreatment! Yet he did. For you. He let the enemy arrest him and pound nails through his hands and feet and he let them crucify him to

death. God became weak to pay the price for your rebellion. God stood under the curse of sin to remove the curse from you. God “lost” by breathing his last and being buried in the tomb. He was weak. For you.

But the weakness did not end in loss. Jesus rose from the dead. Your sins are forgiven. You have peace with God guaranteed by the ascended Jesus. God has returned to strength and proclaims the victory to all who trust him. We are strong because he was weak. We win with Jesus.

But we still wrestle with God over his promises, because what we see doesn’t seem to line up with what God has said. Don’t you wrestle to understand how God can promise to work for our good? To stand with us every moment? How can it be true when cancer savages my body? How can God be true when conflict fills my life? How is it good to have to endure this? “Lord, I don’t know how, but you have promised to be my safety. Keep me safe, Lord.”

Do you wrestle with this, too? I know God says my sins are forgiven. But I feel guilty still. I see the damage I have done, and it bothers me. I am still tempted, and sometimes I fall. I can never make up for all the bad things I have done. “Lord, you say that I have peace with you. Give me peace! I can’t see it or sense it, but you say it. I won’t let go until you bless me!” He does. In the Sacrament he gives you the body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of your sin. God became weak to give you his strength. Go in peace.

As daybreak brightened the sky, Jacob relaxed under the blessing of the LORD. The meeting with Esau was a glad reunion of brothers. The family was safe and well cared for. The land was home, and the Savior came. You have God’s blessing. Even in the middle of hardship, the faithful Lord is your refuge and strength. Turn to him and trust his word. When sin presses you hard, struggle against it not merely with your own determination, but with the word of God. He turns you away from the evil. He comforts you with peace. He even moves you to forgive those who have sinned against you! It is a struggle, but you give thanks for the promises of God. They are sure and certain. Trusting them, you win. Because God has made himself weak, you are strong. Wrestle with God and win!

In wrestling, letting up for a moment can turn the tables and give advantage to the opponent. Wrestling takes focus and determination. Persistence. So does our struggle with God. Not part time. Not only on Sunday. Not just when it gets really bad. We are like trusting Israel. We wrestle with God, not to force him to submit, but we wrestle to cling to his promises. In his great mercy, the LORD gives us the victory through Christ Jesus our Lord. SDG Amen.