

Wrestling with God. Genesis 32:24-32:31 Acts 9:1-9

Adapted from: "Life Lessons Learned From a Wounded Wrestler" by Steven Dow.

Introduction from "Changed For The Better" by Tom Shepard. both @ SErmonCentral.com

What would you most like to change about yourself?

If you could change one thing – what would it be?

All of us do change over time; each one of us is getting older. But the great tragedy of life is that sometimes even as we get older, we don't change for the better. But surprisingly many people are interested in change. I looked up on the internet a few days ago some the top selling self-help books that are out there. One of them is titled: "Get Out Of Your Own Way – Overcoming Self-Defeating Behavior." Another one is titled: "Self Help – How To Change Your Life In The Next 15 Minutes." I am not endorsing these books – I haven't read either of them – but isn't interesting that so many people want to change – and want it quickly.

But the truth is that change takes **TIME**. It usually does not come instantaneously but only after a lot of effort over a lengthy period. And real change takes something more, which is the lesson from today's scripture text.

Jacob, has already been in God's reform program for over 20 years. Raised as a spoiled rich kid – whose very name meant "heel grabber" or "usurper" – Jacob spent his early years getting everything he wanted by scheming. Until his last scheme to steal Esau's blessing got much more than he wanted: banishment from his own home under a death threat from his brother. Fleeing for his life, Jacob now finds himself alone at night in the wilderness where in spite of his scheming ways God speaks to him, promising guide and bless him until such time as God can bring him back home. Little does Jacob know that God will be "blessing" him through 20 years of exile; while he learns the value of hard-work, honesty, and the painful sting of being deceived under the even more self-serving and dishonest tutelage of his greedy father-in-law Laban. Jacob also learns that in spite of such hard, unfair circumstances, God can still bless him.

Now that Jacob has 4 wives, 11 children, and sufficient hard earned wealth to care for his large family, God tells him to go back home. Interestingly, Jacob and family again have flee; this time for home because Laban's family want to keep Jacob's wealth for themselves. And unbeknownst to Jacob, his wife Rachel has stolen her father's idols (the family gold).

So after a 7 day of chase, Laban's clan catches up with Jacob. But being warned by God not to harm Jacob, Laban sets a stone marker between them and makes a pact with him which we now call the "mizpah blessing:" *May the Lord watch between you*

and me when we are absent from one another (31:49); which actually was more of a thief's agreement meaning: "if you don't cross this line to steal from me, I won't cross it to steal from you."

Thus Jacob crosses safely out of Laban's country and safely through no-man's-land, but he is about to cross another line: Crossing over the Jordan river will bring him back into the "promised land," which was now Esau's home turf, and messengers have returned to inform him that Esau is riding his way with a compliment of 400 men. Since the last thing Jacob heard from Esau was "I am going to kill you," this doesn't sound like a welcoming committee.

So Jacob does 4 things in hopes of protecting his family from possible death.

- First he divides his camp (workers and livestock), sending half of them a distance away so they at least might escape if the main camp is attacked.
- Then he prays, thanking God for His provision thus far, but also reminding Him of His promise to grow Jacob's heirs into a great nation and asking protection for himself and his family.
- Then Jacob puts together a peace offering which Jacob hopes will divert Esau from any murderous intent.
- And lastly he sends the remainder of his camp and his family across the river away from himself, so if Esau will not be placated, perhaps it can be limited to Jacob's singular death.

We can now see in Jacob's prayer and defense of his family, that the usurper has truly grown into an honorable man. He has learned gratitude and reliance upon God and a concern for the needs of others before his own. Now, once again it just Jacob, all alone at night in the wilderness, fearing his brother's wrath.... **When all of a sudden someone sneaks out of the darkness and attacks him!**

What ensues is a long painful wrestling match; this is God answering Jacob's prayer. Have you ever noticed that God does not always answer our prayers in the way we expect?

Jacob sees this shadowy figure sneaking up on him. He's not sure who it is: his brother Esau? A local thief? It doesn't matter. If he is going to die, Jacob will at least die fighting. Apparently, not even having a knife with which to defend himself, Jacob grapples with the stranger. For him, it is a desperate fight – possibly to the death.

Have you ever wrestled? It's a highly honored sport around these parts. Just ask John Blair who regularly coaches wrestlers as young as age six. And the rest of us guys have all wrestled, at least for fun with siblings, with the kids or grandkids (it's a guy thing). I

would wrestle with Forrester and Megan in the pool or on the living room rug; letting them knock me down, climb on top and roll around for a bit until someone's patience grows thin, or someone gets tired or hurt. Then as all fathers have done before me, I would reach over and pin my opponent to the ground with one hand saying, "*okay, that's enough, calm down now.*"

Can you imagine what it would be like to wrestle with God? Talk about being worn out! Yet, that's exactly what Jacob did. They fight all night long until daybreak, but Jacob will not give up the fight. So God pins him dislocating his hip: basically saying "that's enough." But Jacob still refuses to let go; still desperate for his life Jacob pleads for a blessing.

Sometime during the night, Jacob must have realized that this was not a fight to his death, but some other kind of test from God. And so he fights until there is no fight left, even then he hangs on declaring "*I will not let go of you until you bless me.*" These are words God had waited twenty years, perhaps all of Jacob's lifetime, to hear!

God had told Rebekah before his birth that her son Jacob would receive the Abrahamic blessing, but until now Jacob has schemed and fought for it, instead of relying on God to provide. In Old Testament culture, there was nothing more important than securing the blessing of God. It was crucial. Life without God's blessing was a nightmare.

Jacob has met his match and he knows it. He doesn't feel so resourceful or so conniving anymore. His arrogance is gone. So he desperately grabs one last time. He grabs hold of God begging for a blessing and he won't let go until he gets one from the God of promises kept.

God, who once had been unimportant to Jacob, not needed by Jacob to get by in life, suddenly becomes indispensable. Jacob realizes he is nothing without God. He realizes that no matter how big he is, no matter how strong he might be, no matter how sneaky he might be, there is One greater than he is, which he will be reminded of this the rest of his life by the pain shooting up and down his leg.

Jacob is a broken man, physically and in spirit. Which finally puts him exactly where God can use him. It's when we are spiritually broken that we are right where God can use us. "*The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*" (Psa 51:17) "

Thus Jacob's wrestling match with God becomes a lesson for us. All of us have wrestled with God at times - both spiritually and emotionally - as we struggle to do our things in our way. We've wrestled with God over problems we don't understand, over

lives we want spared: other's or our own. We've wrestled with God over the things he has asked us to give up for Him or His call on our lives.

We can think of nights when sleep eluded us and we tossed and turned, struggling over decisions to be made. We can remember being physically exhausted in the morning from the struggle we've endured the night before. Although we may not enjoy these times, we NEED these times, because God wants us to engage with Him, even if it means wrestling with Him for blessings that He wants to give us – If we'll just learn how to receive them.

Since we've all struggled with God's desire to change us, to remake our lives, in order to receive the blessings that He would give us, we all can learn some valuable lessons from Jacob's wrestling match with God.

Before God can change us, we first need to ADMIT THAT OUR WAY DOESN'T WORK.

By crossing the Jordan, Jacob was entering back into Esau's territory, but more importantly he would be entering into the land that God has sworn to give to Abraham's descendants -- the promised land. God wasn't about to allow Jacob to enter the promised land -- the land of His blessing or favor -- on his own terms or in his own strength. And so God appears in the form of a man and wrestles with Jacob, not for sport, but in order to teach him an important truth. The God-man said to Jacob, "***...you have struggled with God...and have overcome***" (v. 28). And yet from the text it is clear that **Jacob didn't "overcome" in the wrestling match in the sense of defeating God, but only in the sense of refusing to give up – even though apparently defeated.** It was as if God allowed Jacob to give Him his best shot and then God showed his complete superiority with a single touch. All Jacob could now do was admit that his way of wrestling with God had not worked – all that he had left was to beg for God's blessing.

In 1849 wagon trains had to cross through Death Valley in order to get to the California gold rush. Traveling through the hottest place in California, they could look ahead and see a sheet of water they all believed was Owen's Lake, the marker that they had come to the end of the valley and were about to cross over into the land of their dreams. But Owens lake was still over 100 miles away, what they saw was just a mirage created by the intense heat, and the harder they pressed on to make it to the water, the more frustrated they became. If we try to accomplish things in our own way and in our own strength we will be just as successful as those wagon trains pursuing that mirage. We will never be successful because our way simply doesn't work.

Is there anything that you have been trying to do in your own strength?

- Have you been trying to build your own success?
- Maybe you have been trying to manufacture a holy life?
- Or, maybe you are trying to give up a bad habit by sheer will power.

Whatever, it is time for you to admit that you can't do it. It is time for you to admit that your way doesn't work. The first lesson learned in the Anonymous programs is that God is God and you are not. It is time to stop doing things your way and start doing them God's way. It is only by God's grace that you are enabled to establish a relationship with Him and empowered to live a holy life. And it is only through His deliverance that you can be set free from your sinful habits.

So Before God can change us, we first need to admit that our way doesn't work ... we next need to BELIEVE that GOD is SUFFICIENT FOR OUR NEEDS.

God proved to Jacob that his way wasn't going to work when He disabled Jacob with a single touch. With his hip dislocated Jacob realized the real strength of the One with whom he wrestled and he all could do now was hold on and cry for a blessing from this God-man.

By crying out for a blessing Jacob was acknowledging that God was greater than him, He realized that only God could provide the blessing he so desperately needed. God told the apostle Paul, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*" (2 Corinthians 12:9). In his weakened condition Jacob was finally fully dependent upon God. Which is true for most of us, while we still feel capable of helping ourselves, we find it difficult to simply rely on God.

How easy it is for us to believe in God's sufficiency in church on Sunday morning or in a Bible study. But in the real world where our lives are on the line too many of us demonstrate that our belief was only theoretical.

But in order for God to change us, our theory must become practice. We need to realize that we have no one else to turn to besides God. We need to trust in God to provide for our needs instead of trusting in ourselves. We need to believe that God works in the real world with real problems and not just in the pew on Sunday morning.

So Before God can change us we need to admit that our way doesn't work. We need to believe that God is sufficient for our needs. And Third to we need to CONFESS OUR OWN BROKENNESS.

Jacob admitted that his way wouldn't work when he gave up wrestling. And he demonstrated his belief in God's sufficiency by asking for a blessing.

In reply, God first insists that Jacob speak out loud his own name. Why?

Didn't God already know his name was Jacob? Of course.

Most of us have forgotten the power that a name has over our life (*especially some of those nick names lovingly or hatefully bestowed by another*). The name Jacob means "heel grabber" or "usurper" which is one who displaces another deceitfully. And that is exactly what Jacob had done up until now. So by now speaking his own name out loud Jacob was confessing his own brokenness to God. I am a heel grabber a usurper. By speaking his name Jacob was confessing to God that he had sinned against his brother.

Here is an important truth for us to learn. We cannot have a relationship with God unless we first confess our own sinfulness, our own brokenness and need. The Apostle John teaches us, *"that if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But, if we confess our sins, He who is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:9). A truth which the Psalmist personally experienced and would later write: *"While I kept silence, my body wasted away ... Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity ... and you forgave the guilt of my sin."* (Psalm 32:5). The greatest blessing that God can bestow on a man or woman is the forgiveness, cleansing, and blessing that can only be received when we first confess our sin to Him.

Prussian king Frederick the Great was once touring a Berlin prison. The prisoners fell on their knees before him to proclaim their innocence -- except for one man, who remained silent. Frederick called to him, "Why are you here?" *"Armed robbery, Your Majesty,"* was the reply. "And are you guilty?" *"Yes indeed, Your Majesty, I deserve my punishment."* Frederick then summoned the jailer and ordered him, "Release this guilty wretch at once. I will not have him kept in this prison where he will corrupt all the fine innocent people who occupy it" (Today in the Word, December 4, 1992).

You have sinned and God knows that you know you have sinned. He wants you to agree with him that what you have done is wrong because only then can he bless you with forgiveness and cleansing.

Your way doesn't work. Admit it.

God is sufficient for your needs. Believe it.

You're a sinner. Confess it.

And finally Before God can change us we need to DESIRE A CHANGE OF HEART.

As soon as Jacob spoke his name thereby confessing his sin, God changed his name. The Hebrews believed that your name spoke of your true character. And as we have seen with Jacob, his name certainly reflected the state of his heart. By changing Jacob's name God was showing that He had changed Jacob's heart.

Now we read that his name was changed to Israel *because he had struggled with God and with men and had overcome*. This overcoming came only when he confessed his sin and had his heart transformed. It wasn't that Jacob overcame God in the wrestling match so much as it was that he overcame his sin by confessing it and desiring to be changed. We must go beyond merely confessing our sinful heart we must also desire a changed heart -- a holy heart.

In the book of Ezekiel God promised to change our hearts when He said, *"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you;"* (36:26). But we must desire a change of heart the way David did when he prayed, *"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me"* (Psalm 51:10). Like David, like Jacob we must come to God with a genuine desire to be transformed.

Comedian Jerry Clower tells of country man who came to the city for the first time. In the lobby of a beautiful hotel he stared at these incredible machines which kept opening and closing. He was amazed at what took place right before his eyes. Two men entered the machine dressed in suits. When the doors opened, three men came out in shorts. One man got in with three suitcases and then was completely gone when the doors opened again. The excitement of this machine got the best of him when an old and wrinkled lady climbed into the machine and shut the doors. In just a few moments a gorgeous young lady exited from the machine. He couldn't contain himself any longer. He yelled across the lobby to his son, "Boy, go get your momma!" (*McHenry's Quips, Quotes, & Other Notes, p. 300*)

It is always easy to see the transformation that needs to take place in the lives of others, but we don't like to see or want to see the transformation that needs to take place in our lives.

But Your way doesn't work. Admit it.

God is sufficient. Believe it.

You are a sinner. Confess it.

You need a change of heart. Desire it.

Now humbled and weakened in his body, Jacob could finally enter the Promised Land because he was strong in faith. In this passage Jacob began in the darkness of night which was symbolic of his spiritual condition, but after his encounter with God the sun rose above him -- he had literally passed from darkness to light. 1 Peter 2:9 says, "[God] *has called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*" We, like Jacob, can pass from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light because the grace of God has opened to us the entrance into the promised land of forgiveness and cleansing. Will you enter in?

You can't enter your way. You can't enter in your power. You can't enter in your condition (sinful). You can only enter if you are willing to be changed.

Your way doesn't work. Admit it.

God is sufficient. Believe it.

You are a sinner. Confess it.

You need a change of heart. Desire it.

So if you're wrestling with God now, stop. Take it from me, take it from Jacob, the only way you can win is by losing. If you quit wrestling with God, you, too, will be blessed. And then you can say: "I may not be what I ought to be, but thank God I'm not what I used to be."