

By Faith: Struggling with God. Genesis 32:3 – 32

Struggle implies that there is some obstacle or opponent to overcome. Therefore, it sounds strange to talk about Jacob struggling with God. But it is God who said to Jacob, "*Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel¹, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.*" (Genesis 32:28). However the question of what Jacob's struggle with God was all about is not easily discerned. But lest we might think that Jacob somehow managed to wrestle a blessing from God's stubborn hand, the following passages remind us of God's promised blessing and the divine help Jacob received prior to the wrestling match at Peniel (Genesis 25:21 – 26; 28:10 – 15; 31:36 – 42).

Jacob's history of struggling with men is easier to trace. Remember that Jacob's mother, Rebekah, had to send him to her brother Laban because Esau was planning to murder Jacob for stealing his blessing. But before he departed Rebekah told Jacob that she would get a message to him just as soon as it was safe for Jacob to return home. Perhaps what kept Jacob from fleeing Uncle Laban's 20 years of tyranny is that during that entire time he never received those long overdue words of reassurance (Genesis 27:41 – 45). But having finally burned his bridge with Laban, Jacob decided to return home anyway. It was on this return journey that Jacob learned brother Esau was riding toward him with 400 men (Genesis 32:6). Sandwiched between a rock and a hard place, Jacob initially prayed (Genesis 32:9 – 12). Then he instinctively began to send ahead to Esau a series of valuable peace presents (Genesis 32:13 – 21). Finally, having sent his family away from him, Jacob was left alone to wrestle with God all night on the eve of his showdown with Esau at sunrise.

1. We are told that 'a man' wrestled with Jacob. But later Jacob says, 'I saw God face to face...' How do we make sense of these two statements? (Genesis 32:24 and 32:30).
2. In what sense could this man not overpower Jacob? (32:25 - 28)
3. Why did the man ask for Jacob's name and yet refuse to give his own? (32:27 and 29)
4. How does this man demonstrate his authority over Jacob by renaming him 'Israel'? (32:28)
5. Read the conclusion of this account (Genesis 32:31 – 32). In what sense are we to understand that Jacob has overcome as he limps away from his struggle with God?
6. Think of a struggle with God that you now consider resolved. What attitudes, actions and understanding were required to overcome this struggle?

¹ Israel means 'He struggles with God.'