

## Who is the Wrestler?

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Text: Genesis 32:22-30 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 30, [After an intense time of wrestling, Jacob says,] **“...I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.”**

### **Introduction**

⊗ Though I was actively recruited by our high school wrestling coach to join the wrestling team “...because”, he told me, after watching the way that I played football, “...you have the scrappiness and tenacity that it takes to be a good wrestler”, I never did join the team. Ironically, I think the main reason that I didn’t take him up on the invitation was because of a combination of two things: 1) my best friend, who was an all-state wrestler, when I saw how hard he had to work to be a good wrestler, and maintain his required weight, I just didn’t think it looked like any fun. And 2), after watching countless matches and seeing the many joint injuries that my friends endured, like separated shoulders, wrenched knees and numerous finger and thumb dislocations, I didn’t want to risk getting hurt so that I wouldn’t be able to compete in my two favorite sports of football and track.

➔ Yet, I really do love the sport of wrestling. And I did have countless hours of experience in the “amateur” arena of wrestling where my chief opponent was my older brother, much to my mother’s chagrin because the living room was our primary wrestling “mat”.

⊗ So I know enough about some of the basic wrestling holds and strategies. Of all the holds in wrestling, there is one that is considered the worst – the Full Nelson. A full nelson happens when one wrestler slips both arms under his opponent’s armpits from behind and then interlaces the fingers of his hands together behind the opponent’s neck.

➔ It’s actually an illegal hold because from that position, it is far too easy to break your opponent’s neck.

⊗ Jacob’s wrestling match in our Old Testament Reading today was by no means an even match. If He had wanted to, the Lord could have had Jacob in a full nelson, and even snapped his neck from the get-go. But He graciously invited Jacob to struggle with Him until Jacob had learned his dependence upon God – and the Lord could then bless him.

➔ Likewise, our sin has always had every one of us in a “full nelson” from the moment of our conception – both hands locked over our necks and ready to “snap our necks” in condemnation and drop us to the mat in despair and defeat; ending the “match” in this earthly life with an even worse defeat of eternity away from our Lord in hell.

⊗ So this text before us today in Genesis 32 is one that is of particular interest to me, because it’s all about wrestling. But it’s not the easiest text to understand – even for some of the more notorious theologians at times. Why? Because the one who came to Jacob during the night is unnamed. Even with a number of clues, many people come away from the text with one burning question, “Who is the Wrestler?”

### **I. Is it Jacob or the Lord?**

⊗ You see, identity is very important to our ability to understand the text’s message. Of course, as I read the text earlier, we made some immediate assumptions – the same assumptions that are always made. Jacob is the wrestler and the one with whom he wrestles – while a bit vague – appears to be God.

- I mean he does, after all name, the place where they grappled “Peniel”, which means, “the face of God” in Hebrew. And Jacob says in verse 30, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered”.
- ✘ Most theologians, who take the entire context of the Bible into consideration when translating a difficult text, conclude that the one whom Jacob faces in this intense, night-long contest, is in fact the pre-incarnate Son of God, Jesus.
  - But if we stop there with those two alone, thinking that the rest is just the play by play of an ancient wrestling contest, then we end up on a path that leads to confusion and even worse, to false theology.

## II. Is it I?

- ✘ What happens, you see, when we simply identify the wrestlers and after the match is completed we try to figure out how this Bible story “speaks to us”, is that we run into a few problems.
  - One of the most common moves we make in wrestling with this text is to try and simply insert ourselves into the story. We take the role of Jacob and then think of ourselves as wrestling with God in prayer so that we must, just like Jacob did, then receive “our blessing”; that is the answer “we desire”.
  - To take this approach means that we think this is all about us. And I hate to burst your bubble friends, but it is not! So, when you get home, that means you can go ahead and throw away all of those self-help books!
- ✘ Another way that this text is frequently understood is to interpret it as a battle cry. You start off with a true enough assumption, saying, “We know that we will be attacked by the soldiers of Satan and those who are wicked in this world. So fight the good fight like Jacob did! Do not give up, and in the end we will be blessed with great honor, power, and riches.
  - You see this steers us right into the deadly ditch of what is called the “Theology of Glory”, which is nothing more than a deadly form of works righteousness and a perverse expression of believing that we are “entitled” to things that none of us, as sinners will ever deserve.
  - This false teaching says, “Persevere people and prepare for the piles of plunder to come!” I trust that you caught the sarcastic tone of my voice, right? This approach to Scripture is so very popular today, but it is still the absolute wrong direction for us to try and take toward God’s Word.
- ✘ But still, don’t misunderstand me. I am not saying that we’re not in a battle, because we most certainly are. I am not denying the evil forces of sin, Satan, and our world that are constantly grabbing at our lives and twisting on our limbs in a never ending attempt to pin our faith to the mat.
  - This is our reality and condition as sinners; our heritage handed down to us all from our first parents, Adam and Eve. Evil and corruption prowl our streets and rule our institutions. Satan remains an active and dangerous foe that must be subdued, for if he is left to do his thing in our lives, we will not only die physically, but eternally as well.
  - On top of our sinful nature and Satan’s wicked influence, this world in which we live continues to shock us daily with its uncanny ability to conjure up ever-greater and more horrific examples of corruption. The devil is here; the world surrounds us with its corruption; sin is crouching within us, ready to take us down. We certainly are in a battle, the most serious battle of all. But the question still hangs in front of us unanswered ... who is the wrestler?

### III. The One wrestling for you!

- ⊗ So, the wrestler is not Jacob. Neither is the wrestler us. When Jacob receives his new name, Israel, and when God explains this particular name in verse 28, He identifies the Wrestler.
  - ➔ He's the same One who has wrestled from the beginning; the same One who wrestles with Jacob; the same One who wrestles with Satan on a cross; and my dear friends ... the same One who wrestles for you and me every day of our lives.
- ⊗ Yes, even here in the Old Testament book of Genesis, This Wrestler is Christ Jesus. Part of what throws so many translators off is that Jacob's new name can, on the surface, have two meanings in the original Hebrew. It can mean "You have wrestled with God," or it can mean, "God has wrestled *for* you". Regardless, in verse 28 this is what God says directly to Jacob: "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have wrestled with God and with men, and have prevailed".
  - ➔ But the entire context of Scripture is clear that the only way that any of us has any chance of "prevailing" in the epic battle we face against sin, Satan, and the world is because God says here with Israel, that "now, I will wrestle for you." Not with you, not by your side, not if you need a little extra help, not when you're flat on your back. *No!* "I will wrestle for you, just as I have wrestled for you in the past. So I wrestle for you now, and I will continue to wrestle for you until the day you stand in the courts of heaven before My throne."
  - ➔ Any faithful Bible reader cannot just read this text by itself and ignore that it is God who rescues the Israelites from the hand of Pharaoh with the parting of the waters – *no mere man* could ever have done that. Likewise it's God – not man, who drives the Canaanites out before Israel so that they can possess the Promised Land. It's God, and only God, who takes the burden of our sin to the cross at Calvary and engages in a battle as well.
  - ➔ Only Jesus, The Christ, carries our sins to the cross; it's Jesus who suffers and sheds His holy blood on our behalf in the deadliest of all matches; it's the Lamb of God who takes away your sin and mine as He dies in our place. And, though it looks, at the time, as if He has been defeated while He hangs limp on the tree, the greatest victory of all takes place three days later as the same Son of God rises from the dead, having conquered sin, death, and Satan.
- ⊗ Yes, this lesson for us today from Scripture is that God is the one who is our Wrestler. He's the One who fights in our place; on our behalf, and He has claimed a great victory which He gives to us, full and free!
  - ➔ Not only is God the Wrestler, God is our Wrestler. And that reality is not something brand new when Jacob was rolling in the dirt by the ford of Jabbok. It began all the way back at the time when Adam and Eve were driven from the garden.
  - ➔ And on the other end of the timeline, this reality did not end when Jesus pinned the evil adversary of sin, Satan and the world upon the cross. No, it ends only when you and I and every last believer is safely through the gates of everlasting life.
- ⊗ I don't have to tell you that we still face the battle; that the fight is ongoing. Although Satan has been fully conquered, he has not quit. Each day we are all challenged by evil's last-ditch effort to take us down. Many of us know too well the chokehold of this world that still threatens our faith.
  - ➔ But fear not my friends! There is the Wrestler, the Champion, the Strong Deliverer, the Christ who daily - daily fights for you and me. He made you His own in Baptism when your old Adam was killed and the new Adam rose up. But as Luther tells us, the old Adam is a good swimmer who must daily be pushed back under those holy – sin-drowning and life-giving waters. But it's not you pushing him down. It's Christ's strong arm that does the pushing for you!

## Conclusion

⌘ Fight that strong arm, if you will – try to win the battle by yourself. Go ahead and rely upon your own reason and strength. Try to be your own wrestler! And when you've had your face rubbed in the dirt and the wind pummeled from your body, it's then that you will be grateful; that you will be thankful to know that the true Wrestler, Jesus has got your back!

➔ There's truth to the old saying, "Let go and let God!" He fights for you, and nothing can stand against Him. In Jesus' powerful and saving name, Amen.