

WRESTLE LIKE AN ISRAELITE

Pastor Colin Rieke ~ October 25, 2015



²² That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. ²⁴ So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. ²⁶ Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." ²⁷ The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. ²⁸ Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." ²⁹ Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he

replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. ³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." (Genesis 32:22-30)

This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

In 480 BC, King Xerxes of the Persian Empire amassed a colossal army with the intention of conquering the Greek city states, avenging the defeat of his father Darius a generation earlier. The endeavor was made difficult by a pesky group of Greek soldiers, mostly Spartans at the famous battle of Thermopylae. It was a famous battle where a small band of Spartans held off the mass of Persian troops at the pass of Thermopylae, which was in some places only 30 yards wide. Hollywood has glorified this battle with the recent movie *300* with Gerard Butler. But this was only a minor inconvenience to the mighty Xerxes, who eventually due to a traitor's information was able to defeat the Greeks.

Who knows if the battle would have turned out differently had more Greeks been there to fight? But alas there were not. In fact, one of the reasons there were less Greeks to help King Leonidas of Sparta, was due to the ancient Olympic Games going on, and in particular a wrestling match. Wrestling, as you can imagine, was a popular event in the games, and Xerxes may well have not achieved his victory without it.

Turn back the clock now some 1,500 years to another wrestling match. This wrestling match was viewed by far less spectators, but was no less important in the course of history - not only for one man, but for the whole world. The wrestling match I'm talking about is one that took place on the borders of the Promised Land. But at that time there was not even a nation of Israel to inherit the Promised Land. Only a middle aged man named Jacob. And Jacob was afraid, not by the wrestling match, but from who he considered much more dangerous, his brother Esau.

But this wrestling match turned everything upside-down in Jacob's life. We even see how God used a name change to signify this shift in priorities and trust. In this match Jacob learned to **WRESTLE LIKE AN ISRAELITE**. This account can be a great example for us too in our growth as Christians, especially in the area of prayer. We can pray, we can **WRESTLE** with God **LIKE AN ISRAELITE**.

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This account from Genesis doesn't take place in a vacuum. Like the rest of Scripture, it is all intertwined together. We hear the story from God's point of view as we see the admirable qualities along with the scoundrel qualities of the main characters. Jacob was the son of Isaac, who was the son of Abraham. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were considered the founding fathers of the Jewish nation. But before the nation of Israel could be born, something had to change in Jacob's life.

You see, Jacob had an elder twin brother, a brother by the name of Esau. He was born grasping his brother's heel. That's where his name came from - "heel-grasper." It also had the connection with being a "deceiver." The most serious of his deceptions was wrestling the birth-rite and blessing from his elder brother. While we may not consider a birth-rite or blessing a big deal, it was to these people. It extended beyond who would get more money when mom and dad passed away. Esau was understandably angry causing Jacob to flee to another land. It was in that other land that Jacob met a relative, married his two daughters (not God pleasing, but it happened), and was blessed by God with many possessions. All in all, Jacob was gone for 20 years.

And now he is coming back. Back to where his dad and brother lived, in the land that we now call today Israel. As he gets closer, he hears that his brother is on his way out to meet him. Not so bad, right? Well, he has 400 men with him. "What?!?" The only thought going through Jacob's mind, is that Esau is still upset with him, and is planning to slaughter him, after all, why would he bring along 400 men?

That's why, as it explains in the first verse of our lesson, Jacob divided up his party into two camps. This is why (previous to our verses), he sends ahead gifts to his brother Esau as a token of good will. In essence, Jacob does everything he can to be prepared for the situation. And still, he is troubled. The book of Genesis says, "**Jacob was left alone.**" Have you ever been there? Where you just need to get away, on your own, just to have time to think, a time to ponder before the impending storm hits? Well this is what Jacob had on the one side of the Jabbok River.

But it's then that Jacob gets into a wrestling match. In one of the strangest, most obscure parts of Scripture, we hear "**a man wrestled with him until daybreak.**" At first we don't know who this man is, we don't know where he came from, we don't know if he surprised Jacob. And yet, based on the plain and clear words of Scripture, we would understand this to be an actual, physical wrestling match. You probably have to imagine that Jacob, as he was wrestling this guy, had a hunch of who it might be. When it was almost daybreak and all of a sudden this man touches Jacob's hip dislocating it, Jacob is rendered helpless, and so he does everything he can just to hang on to the man with his bare arms, he's not giving up.

“Let me go, for it is day break” the man said, **“Not until you bless me!”** Jacob responded. The man then asks for and subsequently changes Jacob’s name to Israel. This might not seem like an important point in the story, but it really is the focal point. Remember what Jacob’s name meant? It meant “heel-grabber,” “deceiver.” This man, whom the prophet Hosea also calls an angel, was not merely looking for information when he asked for a name, but he was reminding Jacob of who he was, and how he often conducted himself.

So with the name change, the angel is signifying so much more than just something different to be called, but a change of heart, a change of motivation. Up until this point, even though he had known the true God, even though he had believed the true God, he didn’t always trust in the true God. He trusted in his guile and cunning. He trusted in his intellect to get the job done. But now, he realizes with all the guile, cunning and intellect in the world, he could not help but be afraid. By giving him the name “Israel,” he was not to rely on himself but on God. That night he learned to **WRESTLE LIKE AN ISRAELITE** - he wrestled with persistence.

When we take a look at our lives, I think we could find many comparisons to Jacob’s. Sure, maybe we didn’t trick our siblings out of a fortune or toys, maybe we aren’t quite as much of an entrepreneur as Jacob was, but the attitude he displayed, is an attitude that is displayed in us also. An attitude that often looks after self first. It took me less than 24 hours after getting home from pastors’ conference last week before I spoke out in anger against my family because “I” needed to get work done. We so often make plans and schemes, not necessarily maliciously, but with the attitude that I am the only one who could make this work in my life.

If we find ourselves wrestling with anyone, usually it’s wrestling with the world to make it work for you. This is just as true for us as believers. Compare this kind of wrestling with the wrestling that Jacob did most of the night. He was **WRESTLING LIKE JACOB**. It appears that it was an even standoff. This was Jacob wrestling using his own strength, and it didn’t get him anywhere. It was only after the angel wrenched his hip out of joint that he realized how powerless he was and grasped on potentially the leg of his opponent. This was Jacob **WRESTLING LIKE AN ISRAELITE** with persistence insisting on a blessing. Compare that to the gospel for today and the persistent widow. She did not turn the judge to her side with her grace and beauty, but her persistence.

How persistent are we in our life of faith? Maybe some of us have persistent qualities - athletically, educationally, occupationally. But do we have that in our life of faith? Do we have that in our life of prayer? Rather, our sinful human nature will lead us to be persistent in resisting prayer - saying that it doesn’t matter, saying God knows our needs anyway, prayer is just a crutch. We tell someone we will pray for them, but to what extent does that happen? In our busy lives, prayer sometimes gets relegated to the back burner, as something we’ll do when we have time or as a last resort.

WRESTLING LIKE AN ISRAELITE means praying with persistence, just like Jacob wrestled with the angel. Praying with persistence means more than just praying before/after meals, before bed, or whenever anyone asks. Praying with persistence means clinging on like Jacob clung on to the leg of the angel, instead of just saying, “good enough.”

But all of the persistence in the world would do no good if it was just a man that Jacob was wrestling. All of the prayer in the world would do no good, if there was no God behind the prayers. **WRESTLING LIKE AN ISRAELITE** knows the source of power.

During Jacob's physical wrestling match, he must have come to the conclusion that this was more than just a physical being, but a divine being. He realized his own strength was not enough, and only by clinging to the angel and insisting upon a blessing was he strong. While this was bold of Jacob to do, it was also God-pleasing (otherwise the blessing wouldn't have come). It was God pleasing, because this was Jacob clinging on to the promises of God. Not only had he received the blessing that he would return once more to this land, but he would also have the Savior coming from his family. The power behind Jacob's prayers was that it was connected to God's promises.

There are many who are far more persistent than we are, thinking that by their many words, their God will hear them. But the only true God only hears the prayers of his believers - and not just because they pray persistently, but because of the power with which they pray. Did you realize how powerful you are when you pray? The only reason you can pray is because of God's promise. His promise which he fulfilled to Jacob to send a Savior. A Savior - Jesus Christ - who restored the connection between us and God. This is what gives you the power to pray, and to pray boldly, like Jacob.

We can pray holding God to his promises. Like we heard in the second lesson this morning, we can approach God in confidence and will hear us when we ask anything according to his will. One of the important things we can and must pray for is that he might keep our faith safe and secure in his powerful hand. It doesn't take us long to realize if left up to ourselves, things do not always end well. This can be said not only from a physical standpoint, but certainly from a spiritual one as well.

Because even though we have this powerful faith and this powerful tool available to us in prayer, that doesn't mean the powerful sinful nature will not just lie down. We see that in Jacob's life and we see that in our own. Throughout the rest of Jacob's life, Scripture refers to him interchangeably between Jacob and Israel picturing the constant struggle between the deception and the truth. So too with us there will be that constant struggle. But it is a struggle worth fighting.

For the 300 Spartan soldiers at the battle of Thermopylae, they knew their cause was hopeless, and yet they fought on, for that was the Spartan way, even though their cause ended in death. As believers, our fight is no less dire. The armies of the world come battering against us. But our cause is not hopeless, it's not even a probable chance of victory, it is guaranteed victory because of God's own son - Jesus. We channel this victory in our prayers, when we learn to **WRESTLE LIKE AN ISRAELITE**. Amen.