

**Wrestling With God, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 12050731**  
**Genesis 32:22-31 and Matthew 14:13-21**  
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Jacob paced in the middle of the night. He thought, "I can't go back to my father-in-law Laban. I'll be a slave there forever. Yet, I'm afraid to go back to Canaan. My brother Esau is there, he hates me and he'll kill me."

Jacob couldn't sleep because he was stuck between a rock and a hard place. There is so much to tell about Jacob and what has happened in the past twenty years at his uncle/father-in-law's! You will remember that Laban switched daughters so that Jacob married first Leah, the older sister. Then, Jacob married Rachel, the one he really loved. These two women each let Jacob sleep with their maids Bilhah and Zilpah. (So much for family values based on the Bible!) Jacob fathered twelve children by these four women. You will note that verse twenty-two of our scripture reading this morning said that Jacob sent his eleven children across the Jabbok river. His twelfth child, a daughter Dinah, apparently did not count as a child! The eleven sons, along with Benjamin who was born later, are the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Judah: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Benjamin, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher.

Jacob worked fourteen years to earn the right to be the husband of Laban's two daughters. Then, Laban kept Jacob another six years increasing his cattle herds. Jacob, perhaps because he worked with genetics, became quite rich in sheep and goats.

Jacob decided that twenty years were enough! It was time to get out of Paddan-aram and head back to Canaan where his father Isaac and brother Esau were. In true Jacobian fashion, he left in the middle of the night. In the process, Rachel stole religious idols from her father.

When he awoke the next morning, Laban was mad. He chased after his son-in-law, daughters, and grandchildren. After all, he wanted to at least be able to say "goodbye" to them. At Galeed, Laban caught up with Jacob. They had a long discussion after which both piled up a bunch of rocks. Laban said, "This heap is a witness between you and me today."<sup>1</sup> They called the pillar Mizpah, for he said, "The LORD watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other. If you ill-treat my daughters, or if you take wives in addition to my daughters, though no one else is with us, remember that God is witness between you and me."<sup>2</sup> This Mizpah was a covenant. Neither Jacob nor Laban trusted the other, but they knew that God was watching them in their absence from each other. They swore that neither would pass that pile of rocks with intent of doing harm to the other. It was a covenant not of love, but of an uneasy peace.

Here Jacob was, now, between those rocks of covenant and the hard place where his angry brother awaited him. He came up with a brilliant scheme: "I'll give my brother a huge present: I'll give him all of my herds of sheep and goats."<sup>3</sup> So, he sent his herds of sheep and goats ahead of him in droves across the Jabbok river, the border of Canaan, the promised land.

Jacob still couldn't sleep.

He sent his wives, their servants, and his 12 children ahead of him across the ford, the shallow spot in the river,  
and he went back to the camp, still not ready to face his brother.

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis 31:48

<sup>2</sup>Genesis 31:49-50

<sup>3</sup>Genesis 32:3

He still could not sleep. He paced back and forth. Everything was quiet, and Jacob was left alone with his thoughts, his worries, and his guilt over the past.

All of sudden, a creature jumped him and started wrestling with him. It must have been an evenly-matched and tough struggle. Jacob and the man wrestled until daybreak. When the man saw he couldn't prevail, he struck Jacob on his hip and put it out of joint. But Jacob would not let go. Jacob figured out that this was not a man at all, but rather, this was God—maybe not all of God, but a portion of God that was evenly-matched with Jacob. It was an early example of God's giving us only what we can handle.

Do not deny that Jacob gave his all in the struggle. Instead of saying "God, why are you doing this to me," Jacob put every ounce of his being into it. When it was all over, Jacob got three things out of the wrestling match. He got a blessing. He got a limp. He got a name change from Jacob to Israel. "Jacob" which means, "he who supplants" was changed to "Israel," which means, "The one who strives with God."

This is a very symbolic incident. Here was Jacob, all alone with his conscience. He was at a pivotal point in his life. His past had completely caught up with him. He was stuck between this rock and hard place. His conscience was bothering him. This was a good sign— we know now that the man had a conscience! He felt guilty about having cheated his brother out of his blessing. He realized that even though he was rich in wives, possessions, children, he was ultimately, all alone. So, he wrestled with God.

There comes a time in our lives, too, when we are all alone with our consciences: all alone with God. It is a time when we come to terms with our past, our present, and our future. It is a time to struggle, or wrestle with God. If we never really wrestle with God, then God never becomes "Our" God--never becomes "My God." God would otherwise remain "my parent's God," or "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," but not MY God!

Perhaps you have wrestled with God. Perhaps it was over a painful issue in your life. You asked yourself, "God, why did you let this happen?"

One of the greatest problems we have is that we don't wrestle hard enough or honestly enough with God. When you are struggling with God, in fact when you feel struck or hurt by God in your struggle, will you continue to hold on to God, and keep on wrestling, or will you let go?

Too many people let go after they're hurt. Just last week I talked with a man who doesn't go to church and has a difficult time believing in God. When he was still in high school, he lost a dear friend. He has blamed God ever since. He simply let go of God instead of struggling honestly with God over this loss.

When you let go of God in a struggle, you never receive the blessing! For Jacob, the great sign of victory, the badge of blessing, was to go walking on down the road with a limp.

Where is your limp?

That next day, Jacob, now named "Israel," met his brother Esau. Esau did not kill him. Instead, Esau questioned Jacob about why he had sent all these presents to him.

Jacob, who had struggled with God all night, confessed that seeing his brother Esau's face was like seeing the face of God. After all, what Jacob had expected from Esau was hostility. What he got was graciousness.

We may expect hostility from God, especially in our struggles of conscience. What we get, is graciousness! Thanks be to God!