

# “He Struggled With the Angel and Overcame Him; He Wept and Begged For His Favor”

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**August 3, 2008 | Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 13)**

## Lectionary citations

Gen 32:22-31

Rom 9:1-5

Matt 14:13-21

In the womb he grasped his brother's heel;  
as a man he struggled with God.

He struggled with the angel and overcame him;  
he wept and begged for his favor.  
He found him at Bethel  
and talked with him there—

the LORD God Almighty,  
the LORD is his name!

These lines are from the Prophet Hosea, a brilliant summary of Jacob’s life, which unfortunately is part of a reproach against Jacob’s descendants for their failure to follow God’s Law. Let me review Jacob’s life as we have seen it unfold in the Old Testament reading over the last few weeks. Jacob was a fraternal twin in constant struggle with his brother Esau. Before they were born, the babies jostled each other within their mother—Jacob was already wrestling—and Rebekah said, "Why is this happening to me?" The Lord answered, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.” When they were born, Esau came first, followed by Jacob. Jacob was grasping his brother’s heel. Their names describe the brothers at birth: Esau means “hairy,” he was covered with red hair and Jacob means, “He grasps the heel,” which was the Hebrew way of saying “he’s pulling your leg.”

Therefore, Esau was the first-born and under the custom of the Hebrews should have received the lion's share of his family's inheritance. He would also have been expected to receive and fulfill the blessing God gave to his grandfather Abraham, that Abraham's descendants would receive the whole land of Canaan as an everlasting possession. However, Rebekah had received that prophecy that Jacob would be the one to inherit the covenant with Abraham. "The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob."

As we have read, Esau sold his birthright—his position as first-born—to Jacob for a bowl of lentil stew. This revealed Esau's lack of character, "So Esau despised his birthright," and revealed Jacob's ambitions, we can assume encouraged by his mother, to take the place of firstborn son.

When Isaac was old and blind, he called Esau to him and asked him to go hunting and "Prepare me the kind of tasty food I like and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my blessing before I die." Rebekah overhears this and directs Jacob to disguise himself as Esau and receive the blessing in his place:

"Ah, the smell of my son  
is like the smell of a field  
that the LORD has blessed.  
May God give you of heaven's dew  
and of earth's richness—  
an abundance of grain and new wine.  
May nations serve you  
and peoples bow down to you.  
Be lord over your brothers,  
and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.  
May those who curse you be cursed  
and those who bless you be blessed."

This pushes Esau to the limit and he says, "Isn't he rightly named Jacob? This is the second time he has taken advantage of me: He took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!" Esau decides to kill his brother as soon as their father dies. Of course, Mom is looking out for Jacob and she sends him to her family to find a wife and live in safety.

Jacob leaves home, taking nothing with him, and on the way to Harran, lies down to sleep in the country. There he has his dream of Jacob's ladder and in the dream; God speaks to him and says, "I am

the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” It seems that Jacob and Rebekah has succeeded in their schemes. It will be Jacob, not Esau, who will carry forward God’s covenant with Abraham.

Jacob goes on to Harran, meets Rachel at the well, and falls in love. “Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was their shepherd. When Jacob saw Rachel daughter of Laban, his mother's brother, and Laban's sheep, he went over and rolled the stone away from the mouth of the well and watered his uncle's sheep. Then Jacob kissed Rachel and began to weep aloud.” Since Jacob is penniless, he has to work 7 years for Rachel’s father, Laban, to earn the bride price. However, Laban fools Jacob, the trickster, into marrying Leah, Rachel’s sister. He gets Rachel also, but has to work another 7 years for his father-in-law. Jacob works hard, but he works the angles and by the end of 20 years, he is rich at his father in law’s expense. Finally, without telling his father-in-law, “Jacob put his children and his wives on camels, and he drove all his livestock ahead of him, along with all the goods he had accumulated... to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan.” Laban comes after Jacob, but God protects Jacob and Laban agrees to let him go, saying, “May the LORD keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other. If you mistreat my daughters or if you take any wives besides my daughters, even though no one is with us, remember that God is a witness between you and me.”

Jacob is rich with wives, children, servants, and also much cattle, he is at peace with his father-in-law, has been blessed by God. He is going home. Yet, he is “in great fear and distress.” Why is he afraid? Because Jacob thinks that, when he goes home, his brother will kill him. He decides to pacify his brother by sending on ahead a gift of “two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys.” “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. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions.”

Jacob stays alone on the other side of the river. We can imagine Jacob sitting by himself wondering if he can buy off his brother this time, giving him much more than a bowl of lentil stew, or whether his brother will kill him and take his wives, children, livestock, and all the rest that he worked and tricked for 20 years to accumulate. Then, something strange happened. As Jacob is there alone, a man comes and “wrestled with him till daybreak.” This is no ordinary man, because when Jacob will not let go, this man dislocates Jacob’s hip with a touch. Yet Jacob still will not let go. It seems almost impossible that Jacob could cling to the man despite the pain, but he does. Jacob clings because the man has something Jacob wants more than anything, the man’s *blessing*. Jacob receives not just the blessing, but a new name: Israel, “he struggles with God.”

Who was the mighty man with whom Jacob wrestled? Some scholars believe this story started with an old tale of a hero wrestling with a river god. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, the hero Menelaus wrestles with Proteus, the “Old Man of the Sea,” who turns into a lion, a serpent, a leopard, a pig, water, and a tree.” Menelaus will not let go, and Proteus gives him news about his companions and instruction on how to secure the good will of the gods. The ancient Hebrews were not theologians and did not describe God in a consistent or systematic way. Remember how God appeared to Abraham under the tree at Moreh in the form of three strangers and he washed their feet and served them lunch? To Jacob, he wrestled with God and saw him face to face. Jacob names this place by the river, Peniel, “face of God.” Later thinkers could not envision God wrestling and made sense of this by calling the man an angel, God’s messenger.

Why did Jacob want the Angel’s blessing so badly? After all, Jacob had purchased his birthright from Esau, had gotten his father’s blessing by a trick, and had received God’s blessing in a dream at Bethel. He had a wife he loved, as well as her sister, plenty of sons, and also much cattle. He was his mother’s favorite, which should be evidence enough that he was God’s chosen. He had proven that he was fit to be the first-born son and would be the one to carry forward God’s covenant with Abraham. Yet he was still afraid that his brother would kill him.

Jacob was loved, he was successful, and he was clever. Yet something was missing in his life. He needed another blessing. To the Hebrews, words of blessing, as well as those of cursing, had a power of self-fulfillment. Once the words were uttered, they had a life of their own and had a power to make themselves come true. Jacob needed to hear the words of blessing straight from the mouth of God. Nothing else was good enough.

We can speculate that Jacob had a nagging feeling that all his success was not entirely legitimate, that his claim to be God's chosen had a shaky foundation on deceit. Yes, he had that dream at Bethel, but dreams were uncertain things. Maybe in his heart of hearts, he was not sure that he was the "real thing." Maybe he felt that the birthright, his father's blessing, all his success, really proved nothing. Real blessings always come from God, and Jacob was not sure that he deserved those blessings. By clinging to the angel, despite the pain, he finally earned the blessing he had already received. He received them not because of his cleverness, his ability to fool others, but from the other side of his character—his persistence and fortitude, the unwillingness to give up. It was this strength of character that led Jacob to work for 14 years for Laban to earn his bride, Rachel, the woman he truly loved. By his persistence, Jacob overcame, not God, but his too-clever, deceitful self. By this stubborn clinging to the angel, weeping and begging for his favor, as the prophet imagined it; Jacob finally grew up and came into his inheritance.

Many of us sometime have a feeling that they have not received a blessing that they have always wanted. This blessing will never come. The person we want to bless us refuses the blessing or is no longer able to give it. Without that blessing, we can feel incomplete, unreal, a phony who has tricked others into believing we are something that we really are not. This feeling of hollowness cannot be filled—even when we are outwardly successful in our career, family, in material abundance. The story of Jacob is a comfort to us all because it reminds us that God is the source of all blessings, they just sometimes come through other people. When those people do not deliver, and leave us hanging, unsure if we are the real thing, we can go straight to the source. Like Jacob, if we persist, we will receive the blessing we have always hoped to receive. Through our savior, Jesus Christ, we will be adopted as children of God the

Father, a Father who blesses all his children with an abundance of Love. Through this blessing, we will be changed—reborn in the spirit to conform to the nature of Jesus Christ.

Like Jacob, we received a new name through our baptism into Christ. Jacob's change was also marked outwardly by a limp. Inwardly he was also a new man. Someone very close to him could see that right away. And the next day, when Jacob went to meet his brother Esau, "Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept." Amen.

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