

Jacob Wrestles With God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 January 2026

Preacher: Rev. David Macleod

[0 : 00] I expect most of us, probably even in the room just now, will have one of these, hopefully on airplane mode or on quiet or something like that.

! Almost all of us now, you can't escape having these devices. And the thing about an iPad and an iPhone or a mobile phone is that they always have to be updated.

You buy them and they're up to date when you buy them, but within a matter of a few weeks, you're getting messages saying there's a software update required and you have to go through the process of making sure that the phone is updated.

So they're constantly being updated. And if we're Christians, that's like our testimonies. What's a testimony?

Well, a testimony is the story of how God meets with us personally. A testimony is the story of how we came to believe in Jesus.

[1 : 09] But a testimony doesn't end when we start to believe in Jesus. It begins there. It begins at the point where God meets with us and we trust him.

But a testimony is always being updated. It's always being refreshed. So sometimes Thomas will ask you, I expect, you know, when you give your testimony and you'll say, oh, well, five years ago, I gave my testimony.

I've done it before. Well, I would be inclined to say, well, do it again. Because five years is a long time. Five days is a long time, spiritually speaking.

And so we should always be able to speak more about how the Lord is working in our lives.

A testimony is always being refreshed because the Lord doesn't meet with us just once. And then just tell us to get on with being a Christian. He continues to meet with us day by day and work day by day in our lives.

[2 : 22] And today or this morning, I want to look at how the Lord met with Jacob at this place called Peniel. Peniel means face of God. This isn't Jacob's conversion story.

This isn't the story of how he came to trust God in the first place. I think we have to go back to Genesis chapter 28 in this dream that Jacob has in the second half of the chapter.

That's where we have the account of the conversion story. That's when Jacob commits himself to God and begins to believe. That's when the work of God begins.

But that work continues. So if 28, the second half is testimony, and most of the commentators would agree that it is, we can glance at Genesis 29 through to 32.

And what we see is that God's work continues in Jacob's life. And through some difficult circumstances, God is sanctifying.

[3 : 39] He's working in Jacob to make him less like the old Jacob and more ultimately like Jesus. And that's a long work.

So now, as we come to the second half of Genesis 32, what we see here is that God meets with Jacob in a powerful way to arrest him and to bring him on in his walk with God, to bring him nearer to God.

And as we read of how God met with Jacob all these years ago, we can be praying in the quietness of our own hearts that the same God, when we sang, remember, just a moment ago, the God of Jacob is our refuge.

So as we read about what God was doing in the life of Jacob, we can be praying that that same God will meet with us, that he will work in us. In a way that brings us to himself or closer to himself today.

First point. We'll look at this under five headings, I think, if I'm able to speak quickly enough.

[5 : 10] And the first point is we see here that Jacob is alone with God. Jacob is alone with God.

Look at verses 22 to 24. The same night, Jacob arose and took his two wives. He shouldn't have had two wives.

That's not a license there to have two wives. He shouldn't have had two wives, but the Bible here is just reporting what he did. It was disobedient. It shouldn't have happened, but it's what happened.

So that same night, Jacob arose. He took his two wives, his two female servants, his 11 children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream and everything else that he had.

And Jacob was left alone. And I want to just underline these last four words there.

[6 : 13] Jacob was left alone. And back then, being alone was being totally alone.

Jacob wasn't in a hotel room or a luxury tent with an iPad and some AirPods in his ears.

There were no screens and sounds to fill the time and to chase away the silence. To be alone was to be utterly alone.

Jacob, in terms of the terrain, he's out in this arid desert region. There's no houses. There's no streetlights.

There's no traffic. He's just alone. His two wives, his two female servants, his 11 children.

[7 : 16] We can imagine they would have a fair bit of noise when they would all gather together. Well, they're all now on the other side of the river. And Jacob is alone.

No family to attend to or to entertain at this point. He's no stuff, no possessions to distract him.

It's all going over the river. He's alone. He's alone. And it was there in that quiet place at that quiet time in the stillness of the night that Jacob suddenly realizes that he's not actually alone.

But God is with him. So he is alone with God. Point number one, he's alone with God.

And I want to ask you the question as I ask myself the question, how often are you and I alone with God?

[8 : 33] you know, no crowds around us, no screens and stuff distracting us.

How often are you just on your own, alone with God? I mean, it sounds like such a simple thing.

And we know how important it is to have our quiet time, our daily time alone with God. But the reality is it's a struggle.

And I'm not speaking to you as somebody who's got this sorted and encouraging you to be people who sort this out. I know this is a struggle. I know life is busy.

And very often it's easiest to neglect our time alone with God. And we know how it can be.

[9 : 41] You know, we miss reading the Bible and praying one day because we're having a hectic time. And work is furious and the family are all in the house and we miss reading and praying that day.

And then one day turns into two and two day turns into three. And before we know it, a week has passed. Maybe some of you are sitting here and thinking, well, I've gone from Sunday to Sunday.

And actually, I haven't really spent any quality time alone with God. God. And when that is the case, sometimes God will do for us what he did for Jacob.

And in his kindness, although we may not see it at the time, sometimes God will bring us to a place, sometimes a difficult place, a place we would never have chosen so that he can meet with us and so that we can be alone with God.

Think of the disciples. Remember when Jesus said, we're going to the other side and they're on the boat and the wind and the waves start and the sea is boiling up and they're fearing for their life.

[11 : 27] And yet, it was in that awkward, difficult, scary place that when they were alone with Jesus, they saw his power and they understood more of his love for them.

Alone with God, that's the first point. the second point is assaulted by God because that's the next thing we see as we track through the reading here at verse 24.

And Jacob was left alone, he's alone with God and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

So just try and picture this. It's the middle of the night and Jacob is completely alone and likely he's troubled and he's wrapped with anxiety about what the future holds for him.

Now for those who aren't overly familiar with the Jacob story, what we need to know at this point is that 20 years previous to this, Jacob was thrown out of the family home.

[12 : 59] He deceived his father Isaac, he stole from his brother Esau and his brother Esau is so mad about this that he determines he's going to kill him.

And so Jacob's mother, who he had a much closer relationship with than his father, she says to him, Jacob, you have to flee.

You have to get out of here because if your brother gets his hands on you, he will kill you. So Jacob is driven out of the family home. That was 20 years ago.

Jacob is home. And now at this point, God is calling Jacob to return home. So he's en route back to the family home.

and he doesn't know how Esau is going to be with him. There's no text messages, there's no WhatsApps, there's no Facebook messenger.

[14 : 08] He doesn't know how Esau is. He doesn't know what's going through his mind. He doesn't know he's still furious. But God has said, go home.

And so in obedience, but fearfully, he's stepped out in accordance with God's will. And he's just received a message. If you read back in the earlier piece part of the chapter, later this afternoon, you can see that Esau, he just has received a message from some of his team that Esau is coming to meet him.

And that sounds good in the first instance, but he's also told Esau is coming to meet you. And by the way, he has 400 men with him. 400 men was the number that indicated this was an army, a battalion.

So Jacob, as he heads in the direction of home, as he heads on this route that is taking him closer to his brother Esau and the 400 men, we can just imagine him.

As he goes to sleep at night, we can imagine him not expecting to get anything like a sound night's sleep, because what on earth is he going to face when he actually comes to the point of contact with Esau?

[15 : 33] So that's bad, as he wrestles with the worry of all this. and then suddenly things get worse, because suddenly Jacob, in the thick darkness, he's assaulted.

A man, we are told, takes hold of him and begins to wrestle him and to grapple with him, and this is a physical attack, and it isn't like a two-minute flare-up, like we see on the streets.

This is an all-night wrestle. And we know from verse 28 and verse 30 that the man that was wrestling with Jacob was the God-man.

James Montgomery Boyce, the scholar, says, most scholars consider this figure, it's wrestling Jacob, a pre-incarnate manifestation of the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ.

As we step back from this, it's logical for us to ask the question, what was God doing in this encounter?

[17 : 04] And the answer is, he was teaching Jacob that he must submit. Because Jacob's track record, if you go back through his life story, was not good in the area of submission.

So God was teaching Jacob that he must submit. That's how you win a wrestling contest. You keep on going until your opponent submits. And so God wrestles Jacob, teaching him the hard way that he must submit, that he must surrender his life, he must surrender his will to God.

Weerspe, the commentator, says, during that dark night of the soul, Jacob discovered that he spent his life fighting God and resisting his will and that the only way to victory was through surrender.

And if we think a little further and ask the question, what was the plan of God in and through this? God's life?

What was God wanting to do in putting Jacob through this difficult, painful experience where his hip is dislocated and he actually walks with a limp for the rest of his days?

[18 : 38] What was God's plan and design in all this? Well, God's plan was to do what he had promised to do for Abraham and Isaac and now Jacob.

God's plan was to bless him. A.W. Tozer says, the Lord cannot fully bless a man until he has first conquered him.

So the wrestling comes before the blessing and that's the picture that we see. And this is a picture that is given to us in this passage so that we will spend time looking at it.

Because sometimes this is how God works. Sometimes God will allow us to go through difficult experiences.

Sometimes painful experiences. Sometimes it feels like we're being assaulted. That we're being wrestled through the circumstances of this life.

[20 : 04] And with the psalmist we might want to cry out why is this happening? So why does God sometimes seem to wrestle with us through difficult times?

Is it because he wants to hurt us? Well the answer clearly is no. It's because he loves us.

God and he wants to bless us. But for that blessing to flow we must learn to trust him through hard times sometimes and to submit to him as Jacob eventually did.

so Jacob is alone with God point number one. He's assaulted by God point number two. The third thing we hear from Jacob is that he's asking for blessing.

Then Jacob said verse 26 let me go for the day has broken. But Jacob said I will not let you go unless you bless me.

[21 : 31] And again if we just try and think ourselves into this picture. Try to think ourselves into the experience of Jacob all night. There has been this wrestling contest all night.

There has been this struggle. But in the darkness of the night and the pain of the struggle at some point in the midst of all this Jacob has realized that God is in the midst of it.

Jacob has come to realize that this man that has a hold of him is not simply a man but he's the God man.

So what does Jacob do when he realizes God is there with him? Well what he does is he holds on to God and he asks for the Lord to bless him?

to bless him. And there's a teaching point there because through this picture we're taught to do what Jacob did especially when things are tough.

[22 : 40] What are we to do? We're to hold on to the Lord. We're to hold on to the promises of God. when things are tough we should do far less scrolling and far more searching for and holding on to the promises of God.

Through this picture we're taught as we look in on Jacob to ask God for blessing. To ask God for grace.

And we might say well you know I'm not sure I deserve blessing. I don't think I deserve grace. When we look at Jacob we have an example of somebody who clearly did not deserve blessing.

If blessing was related to merit Jacob didn't deserve it. You can read back through the life of Jacob and his life was not the holiest of lives so often he forgets God.

So often he wanders from God. He fails to trust God. Dale Ralph Davis has written a great little book on Jacob's life and he's entitled the book God's Rascal.

[24 : 20] Because that's what Jacob was. And he wasn't a lovable rascal either. He was the kind of guy that's really hard to like. The sneaky snidey kind of guy.

He's not deserving of blessing. He's not deserving of grace. But then grace wouldn't be grace if we deserved it. And yet the gift of grace is promised.

The blessing of God is promised to all who ask for it in faith. So we hear Jacob almost with such audacity asking God for blessing.

And let me just ask the question, have we asked God for blessing? Have we asked God for grace? We're told that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved, will be shown grace.

But we have to call, we have to ask. So be encouraged to ask if you haven't asked yet, or even if you haven't asked today for that grace that's sufficient to take you through until tomorrow.

[25 : 54] Asking for grace. Alone with God, assaulted by God, then he's asking for blessing, he's asking for grace. Fourth point, there's an admission of sin.

Verse 27, and he, that's God, says to him, Jacob, what is your name? And he says, Jacob.

Jacob. And that might seem like a very short, straightforward conversation, but there's actually more to this conversation than we first realize.

Because when this man, this man that we know to be the Lord, asks Jacob, what is your name? He's not asking because he doesn't know his name.

He's asking the question because he's giving Jacob the opportunity to admit his sin. The Lord is saying, who are you really? And Jacob responds by saying, I am Jacob.

[27 : 03] And his name reflected his character and his life. The name Jacob meant deceiver, cheat, liar.

So Jacob, in answering the Lord's question, is saying, I am a deceiver. I am a cheat, I am a liar, I am a sinner.

And when the Lord meets with us, he asks us the same question. When we hear the gospel, when we open the word of God, when it begins to have traction within our lives, we are faced with that same question, we are being asked that same question through the scripture, who are you?

The truth is, we are all with Jacob. We are all sinners. But will we admit it? I remember preaching quite a number of years ago now in a place and I wasn't too long in the congregation that I started with in the Church of Scotland.

And I don't remember what I preached, but I do remember that at the end of the sermon, this really nice, morally upright lady came charging at me and she said, listen laddie, we don't like black and white preaching around here.

[28 : 43] She said, if I was to listen to what you're saying, even I would be a sinner. And she just couldn't see her sin.

She wasn't prepared to accept or admit that she was a sinner. And if you can't see that you're a sinner, you have no interest in a saviour.

So the question is, will we openly, will we publicly admit that we are sinners? One of the things that sometimes we may overlook is that when we come to the Lord's table, we come to admit that we are sinners.

There are people who won't come to the Lord's table because they're fearful that they're trying to speak to the community and say, I'm a righteous person. I'm better than you because I'm going to sit at the table.

That's the opposite of what we're saying. When we come to the Lord's table, we are coming to admit that we are sinners. Yes, we are professing our faith in Christ as saviour, but we confess that we are sinners who are in need of a saviour.

[30 : 09] We are sinners who are depending on the amazing grace of Jesus. Admission sin.

It's what we hear from Jacob. The final point is the assurance of blessing. Verse 28, then he said, the Lord said, your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.

Then Jacob asked him, please tell me your name. But he said, why is it that you ask my name? And there he blessed them. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, for I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.

The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. So Jacob, as we finish, he comes through this difficult, painful experience.

He comes through this dark night of the soul. with the assurance, in verse 29, of the Lord's blessing, with the promise, verse 30, of the Lord's deliverance.

[31 : 27] And he comes through this experience, painful as it was, with a new name. He's no longer called Jacob. He's called Israel.

Jacob, remember, means liar, cheat, sinner, deceiver. Israel means a God mastered man. And I'll say a bit more about that this evening because he's not there yet, really.

But for us, as we conclude, we can draw these lessons to ourselves and we can know that if we admit our sin like Jacob did, if we ask for blessing, like Jacob did, we have the assurance of blessing, salvation, deliverance.

In the same way that Jacob was given that assurance of blessing. It's a blessing that he didn't deserve and it's a blessing that we don't deserve. to blessing that we do not pay for, but that Jesus paid for through his death on the cross.

He was, as we thought about with the children, our substitute. He was the one who hung to take our sin from us.

[32 : 56] And it says in 2 Corinthians 5, he, in that great exchange, not only took our sin from us, but he has given God's righteousness to us.

And if we are trusting in him, we have the assurance of blessing, we have the sure and certain hope of eternal life. And we'll sing of that to close.

I could say a little bit more about last verse, but I'll park it. You can ask me over coffee if you want to. We'll sing of that to close. In Christ alone, our hope is found.