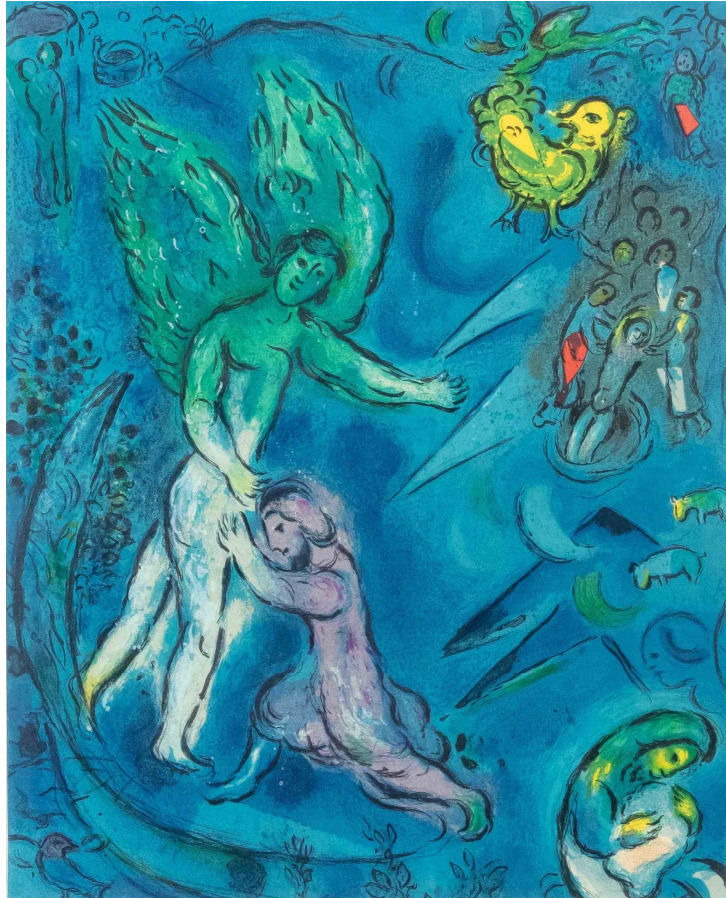


Angel Wrestling

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

God, source of all light, by your Word,
you lighten our darkness and calm our fears.
As we wrestle with your Word, impart to us
a spirit of wisdom and understanding, that our hearts
might be encouraged and our minds opened
to know your truth and walk in your ways.
Amen.

Background

This morning, we find Jacob in the middle of the night. It's a dark night of the soul. He's agitated, afraid, and on the run. He finally (and barely) escaped his uncle/father-in-law Laban. Once again, he's a fugitive on the run with his family and all his earthly belongings.

Now another menacing challenge awaits him—his brother Esau, heading Jacob’s way with 400 men, who appear to be ready for battle. Jacob’s not only fearful, but frantic, even though the angels of God had just met him at his camp. So Jacob makes desperate and elaborate plans to appease his brother’s wrath. He sends a diplomatic envoy ahead of him to begin peace talks.

Jacob divides up his family into two companies so they can make a quick escape if necessary, without losing everything. Covering all his bases, Jacob then offers a desperate prayer to God, for deliverance from Esau, that he wouldn’t massacre his family.



Jacob’s now about to make one last plan. In the middle of the night, he leads his entire family and animals down into a deep gorge and, stone by stone, they cross the Jabbok River that flows into the Jordan River. He returns to camp all alone for the night. Or so he thought. This will be Jacob’s greatest test yet, one that will forever mark him.

Scripture: Genesis 32:22-31 (NRSVue)

²² The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴ Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” ²⁷ So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” ²⁸ Then the man^[a] said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,^[b] for you have striven with God and with humans^[c] and have prevailed.”

²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel,^[d] saying, “For I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved.” ³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – “Angel Wrestling”

Jacob’s all-night wrestling match with the mysterious man is one of the most unusual and fascinating scenes in Scripture. Who was this stranger that appears at night and leaves at daybreak? Apparently, he can be overcome, yet with a mere tap of the finger knocks Jacob’s hip out of joint. He seems to be holding back some of his strength.



Why didn’t he give Jacob his name?
*Was he Esau? An angel? The devil?
God?* We’ll have more of a clue at
the end of the story.

Jacob is wiped out, worn down, and on his last leg. Still holding on, Jacob defiantly chokes out the words, “I... will not... let you go... until you bless me.”

Blessings are a matter of life and death to Jacob. Jacob’s struggle forever marked him, teaching him how to:

- *Forge his own identity.*
- *Survive a crisis.*
- *and Face God and his relationships in new ways.*

Like Jacob, we too are changed when we wrestle with God.

First, wrestling with God forges our identity.

- From Abraham, we learn about faith—how to step out and stand out from the culture.
- From Isaac, we learn about sacrifice and facing it with courage.
- And now from Jacob, we learn to wrestle with the truth, and how this struggle shapes who we are and how we relate with others.

Jacob always wanted to be somebody else, namely his older twin brother Esau. He struggled with Esau in their mother’s womb. He entered this world grasping his brother’s heel. He bartered for Esau’s birthright. He dressed in Esau’s clothes. Stole Esau’s blessing. And he longed for his father’s love that Esau had.

But here, Jacob learns he can’t buy, steal, or trick his way into getting the coveted blessing. He can only receive the blessing by being *himself*. It’s here, in the crucible of his external and internal struggle, that Jacob finds his own God-given identity. His given name, Jacob, involved struggle: “One who grasps the heel.” But now this divine being gives Jacob a new name, a new identity. A new struggle. He now is “Israel.” “One who strives with God and humans—and overcomes.”

It's a redemptive struggle he's called to. Not to be Esau or someone else, but to be his true self. Jacob learned to release Esau, and to grab ahold of God—and never let go. This is our faith heritage, too. We're a people who struggle with God; it's baked into the Scriptures and our spiritual DNA.

- Job struggled with God's justice.
- The psalmists struggled with waiting on God—*how long?*
- The prophets and people struggled with God and the exile.
- Jacob struggled with the angel.
- Israel would not let go of God.
- And God would not let go of Israel.

By God's grace, we hold on to God for dear life. And God won't let us out of his embrace. The passage in Hebrew ends with these words:

"And Jacob emerged complete."

Touched by an angel, we also can be whole—even in our brokenness.

Second, Jacob teaches us how to survive a crisis.

Like Jacob, we'll inevitably find ourselves in seasons of desperation, times where we feel utterly alone. It could be the loss of our job, our savings, good health we've previously enjoyed. It could be grief over a loved one lost, a falling out of a relationship, a divorce, a controversy, a conflict, criticism from others, or failure.

In these times we feel drained, despondent, and devoid of purpose. We can't sleep at night. We can't stay awake during the day. We want to throw in the towel. Stay down for the count.

- Can I get an *AMEN* if you've been there? I've been there.

This struggle isn't fun, or easy. We wouldn't choose it. Usually, we're accosted by it when we least expect it, like Jacob. And in these times, we follow Jacob's lead, who WOULD NOT let go or give up in the most desperate of circumstances.

"I will not let go of you until you bless me."

We don't give up the struggle. We're a people who struggle and overcome. We turn everything upside down until we find that blessing.

The good news is that faith isn't certainty. Faith is courage in times of uncertainty. Faith isn't in denial of our struggles and fears. We freely admit them to God. Our faith permits us, no, *calls* us to wrestle with God. In our dark night of the soul, when we're wrestling with ourselves and with God, God is teaching us how to struggle. Helping us to struggle and prevail. God's teaching us how to hold on tight, like Jacob. Paul puts it this way, *"when I am weak, he is strong."*

But this knowledge doesn't come easy. It's hard won in the school of hard knocks. Frederick Buechner calls it a "Magnificent Defeat." Walter Bruegemann calls it a "Crippling Victory."

Something meaningful happens in these seasons of wrestling. God comes to our level—almost letting us win, but not letting us lose. Christ is our older brother, but he's not our peer. We're not equals. It's in the wrestling that we stretch and flex our spiritual muscles. We get an up close and personal look at our mysterious Creator. And we realize, **God's blessing can only be received**. It cannot be bought or swindled. It's free, but costly. The gift that keeps on taking.

I like how Frederick Buechner puts it:

"God is our beloved enemy because, before giving us everything, he demands of us everything; before giving us life, he demands our lives—our selves, our wills, our treasure."

Paul's thorn in the flesh wasn't taken away. It's presence daily reminded him that God's grace really is sufficient. Jesus did this too. He wrestled with God, and himself, in the Garden of Gethsemane. He sweat drops of blood. Jesus, the Crucified One, gives us the victory through his defeat, because he entrusted himself into God's loving hands. God raised him from the dead, but he'll always have the nail scars on his hands and feet to remind us how much he loves us.

And so walking in his steps, we boldly deny self and take up our cross. We rely upon God, not ourselves. Bum hips, thorns in the flesh, and rugged crosses teach us to be God-reliant, not self-reliant. Like Christ, we're healed, but not unscathed. We're changed. Given a new name. We're a new creation...with a limp. Yet we're more scrappy, spiritually. Tenacious. The life lessons we learn from most are the ones that come from places of struggle and failure. In faith and hope, we won't give up until we take away something redemptive from the struggle and pain. We shall overcome.

Third and finally, spiritual struggle teaches us to face God and then face and embrace our brothers and sisters.

Our faith is never just "me and God." In going deep with God, we are pushed to go deeper in all our relationships. Jacob named the site of his wrestling match *Peniel*, which means *Face of God*. And here, the identity of this mysterious stranger is revealed. For Jacob, through this struggle, the living God became the *God of Jacob*.

"For I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved."

Wrestling is intimate and close—you can't be involved in a more hands on sport. The spared Jacob was now prepared to meet Esau face to face—and he didn't die there either. Esau just gave him one big bear hug. His worst fears didn't materialize. God helped Jacob to face his brother rather than avoiding him. Reconciliation was made possible.

It wasn't perfect, but the two got some resolution in their twenty-two-year rift. God gave Jacob new eyes: He now saw himself as God's servant and Esau's servant, too. The struggle and even the limp is a grace—it provides a healthy humility. Battle scars we live to tell about give us a better perspective.

Face to face encounters with God lead us to face *what* we need to face. *Who* we need to face. A brother, a sister, a friend, an enemy... We can even face ourselves. We no longer have to avoid. No more moving against or moving away. We can move toward the other. We can move forward, too. No longer haunted by the past.

Like Jacob, we don't give up. We don't stop. We continue journeying with God, wrestling with God and others, overcoming and embracing. We limp into the sunrise... with a spring in our step.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "*Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*," Marc Chagall, 1967

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