

## I. Introduction

- A. Of all the sermon series I've ever preached at our church, I think this one has the most awesome title.
- B. Welcome to Part 1 of Simply Said Super Satisfying Soulful Summertime Scripture Stories!
- C. There will be a test to see if you can say all that.
- D. It's a beach theme, a Beach Boys kind of summer here. All summer long you can bring the family and get a fresh look at some of the Bible's greatest stories.
- E. It's going to be awesome. It's going to be fun. It's also going to be highly meaningful. Because these just aren't Bible stories — they are the stories of our lives. They show us ourselves. They show us our God. They show us in relationship to him.
- F. God has woven some of his deepest truths into his simplest stories.
- G. The story I picked for today is weird and cool and largely misunderstood.
- H. It is the only day on record when a man wrestled God and lived to tell the story.
- I. So let's look at the Scripture story where Jacob Wrestles God.

J. *Jacob Wrestles God*

## 1. The Setting

- a) In Bible stories, the setting of the story tells you a lot about what the story means.
- b) So here's the setting.
- c) There are two brothers named Jacob and Esau. Jacob and Esau are twins. Many years earlier, Jacob did something bad.
- d) Jacob cheated Esau.
- e) Jacob was the younger twin by a few minutes. Because he was the younger twin, by legal rights the bulk of his family's inheritance belonged to Esau.
- f) But Jacob connived his brother and swindled his father so Jacob ended up with the firstborn's rights.
- g) Later Jacob would go on to build a financial empire. He would claw his way to the top. He would con his relatives just like he cheated his brother.
- h) His brother, Esau was so mad, he swore in his heart if he ever had the chance, he would kill Jacob (Genesis 27:41).
- i) Jacob and Esau haven't seen each other for years. No letters. No text messages. No FaceTime. No email. No nothing for decades.
- j) So years have passed. Jacob is super rich. He has a huge family. He has herds and flocks of animals.
- k) Now, Jacob is migrating to a new region. He has to pass by the area where Esau lives. He sends Esau a message. Jacob wants to patch things up. Esau sends back a message. I'm coming to meet you, and, here's a heads up: I'm bringing along 400 elite fighting men with me.
- l) Have a nice day.
- (1) *The messengers returned with the news that Esau was on his way to meet Jacob — with an army of four hundred men! Jacob was terrified at the news. He divided his household, along with the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps. He thought, "If Esau attacks one group, perhaps the other can escape."* (Genesis 32:6-8, NLT)
- m) Okay, let's pause here and think about Jacob.
- n) Have you ever had something bad from your past catch up to you?
- (1) Or have you ever worried that something from your past *will* catch up to you?
- o) Here's Jacob. He's been a cheater all his life. Even his name, Jacob, is the Hebrew word for Cheater. Conniver. Swindler. Liar.
- (1) Later it becomes a noble name, but at first it isn't.
- p) He's a fighter. It's in his name. It's also his psychology. His whole life, he's been fighting. Scrapping. Scrounging. Cheating. Doing whatever it takes to push a boulder uphill. Always pushing. Always straining. Always looking for an angle.
- q) But the core of his life is one word: STRUGGLE.
- r) He has spent a lifetime struggling. He fights his family. He fights his own desires. He fights his God.
- s) He even fights himself. In reality, he was the second born. You can't change your birth order, right?
- t) Well, that didn't stop Jacob. God, you got it wrong. I'm supposed to get the firstborn's rights.
- (1) And he scrambled to make it happen.
- (a) And it worked, for a while at least.
- i) But now, it's about to come crashing down.
- u) And Jacob the Cheater is about to learn a big lesson: *The biggest mistake a person can make is to waste a lifetime fighting God.*
- v) So that's the setting. Jacob is in trouble. Esau is coming. His guilty past is staring him in the face.
- w) Now what?
- x) Now, Jacob goes to God and weaves one of the most beautiful prayers in the Bible.
- y) Too bad a minute later he unravels the whole thing by his actions.
- z) Here's the prayer.

## 2. The Prayer

- a) *Then Jacob prayed, "O God of my grandfather Abraham and my father, Isaac — O LORD, you told me to return to my land and to my relatives, and you promised to treat me kindly. I am not worthy of all the faithfulness and **unfailing love** you have shown to me, your servant. When I left home, I owned nothing except a walking stick, and now my household fills two camps! O LORD, please rescue me from my brother, Esau. I am afraid that he is coming to kill me, along with my wives and children.*

*But you promised to treat me kindly and to multiply my descendants until they become as numerous as the sands along the seashore — too many to count.” (Genesis 32:9-12, NLT)*

- b) Like I said, it's an awesome prayer.
  - (1) Jacob says that he is thankful for all he has.
  - (2) He says that everything good in his life has come from God.
  - (3) He says that he deserves none of this.
  - (4) He says he unworthy of God's grace (**hesed**, “unfailing love”).
  - (5) He says that he is counting on God to keep his promises.
    - (a) He says all the spiritually true things.
- c) Like I said, it's an awesome prayer...
- d) And I think he believes it. At least a part of him believes it.
- e) But a bigger part of him doesn't believe a word he just prayed. How do we know?
- f) We know because the moment he got up from his knees, Jacob did everything he could to manipulate and scheme the situation he faced.
- g) Right back to the same old trips.
- h) Do you know anybody like that, maybe?
- i) He was after all, Jacob, the Cheater. His parents named him that.
- j) A label like that is hard to shake.
  - (1) *Just because you can pray an awesome prayer doesn't mean you're not living an awful life.*
  - (2) It's a kind of spiritual schizophrenia.
    - (a) God, I love you.
    - (b) God, leave me alone.
    - (c) God, I trust you, but not really.
- k) Jacob, the cheater, is Jacob, the double-minded man. He is going to show us what a person looks like who switches back and forth between trusting God and not trusting God.
- l) So what does Jacob do to unravel his prayer?
- 3. The Unraveling
  - a) Jacob plans a complicated scheme to buy his way out of another jam.
    - (1) *Jacob stayed where he was for the night and prepared a present for Esau: two hundred female goats, twenty male goats, two hundred ewes, twenty rams, thirty female camels with their young, forty cows, ten bulls, twenty female donkeys, and ten male donkeys. (Genesis 32:13-15, NLT)*
  - b) We won't go through the whole thing. Jacob is going to send Esau a boatload of money. He sends the money in the form of livestock. Jacob splits up his livestock into several groups. He puts a servant in front of each group, and sends them ahead.
  - c) He's trying to buy off Esau. He's trying to soften him up. He's the same old schemer.
  - d) Then he sends his family and children ahead, across the stream.
  - e) But Jacob stays behind. There he was all alone filled with distress and doubt.
  - f) Totally at a low point.
  - g) And that's when one of the coolest, weirdest events in the whole Bible takes place.
- 4. Jacob Wrestles God
  - a) *This left Jacob all alone in the camp, and a man came and wrestled with him until dawn. (Genesis 32:24)*
    - (1) Later on, we're going to find out that this isn't a man, it's God.
    - (2) Jacob knows he's fighting. He's used to that. His whole life feels like one big fight, one struggle after another.
    - (3) He knows he's fighting. He just doesn't know yet that the one he's fighting is God.
    - (4) So let that sink in.
      - (a) *It is possible to be fighting God and not know you're fighting God.*
    - (5) You think you're fighting a family member, or a creepy person at school, or a crook at work. You think you're fighting all the unfair stuff that the world has thrown your way.
    - (6) But really, you're fighting God.
      - (a) You're blaming him for the bad stuff in your life.
      - (b) Or you're ticked off that he didn't answer your prayer, the way you wanted him to.
      - (c) Or you're always trying to prove yourself, or claw your way to the top.
      - (d) I don't know what that might look like for you. We're all different.
    - (7) Jacob fought the mysterious man all night long, all the way until the sun came up.
    - (8) Because if your life feels like one, big, long struggle after struggle after struggle, you might be more like Jacob than you realize.
    - (9) And you just might be fighting God. Like Jacob was fighting God.
    - (10) So what happened?
  - b) *When the man saw that he couldn't win the match... (Genesis 32:25)*
    - (1) This doesn't mean the mystery man was having a tough time beating Jacob. He's going to prove that in a minute.
    - (2) This just means that Jacob wouldn't quit. He's too stubborn.
    - (3) He'd rather get a joint dislocated than to tap out.

- (4) God wrestled him the way a father wrestles his five-year old. The five year old thinks he's winning, but it's only because his Dad is being nice.
- (5) And that's the only reason Jacob isn't toast.
- (6) God is patient. If you want to fight him, he lets you do it. Have at it. Hopefully, you'll give up early. Because there's a really important truth at play.
  - (a) You can't fight God and win.
  - (b) You can't fight God without hurting your own life.
  - (c) You can't fight God and then find a better king than him.
    - i) You will never find a better king than God.
      - (1) *Even you on your very best day could never rule your life in a better way than God.*
- (7) The reason is simple: God is the only conceivable Lord who doesn't need anything from you. God is a giving God. And the only thing he really wants from you is your friendship and trust.
- (8) Why are you holding out on him? Why fight this?
- (9) A lot of people have a script running through their heads. It says, *God's not going to bless me, so I have to scramble to bless myself.*
  - (a) That is the most frustrating life you could live.
  - (b) It is the most lonely life you could live.
  - (c) It is the most exhausting life you could live.
- (10) And that is Jacob. God is not going to bless me — he made me second born, he made me not as tough as my twin brother, I can't count on him.
- (11) So he wrestles God.
- (12) I have to think that as time went on, it started dawning on Jacob what was going on.
- (13) Am I actually fighting God? Seriously? Hey... maybe I could win this thing! I wonder what would happen...
- (14) It's at this point that God says *Enough!*
- c) *When the man saw that he couldn't win the match, he [touched] Jacob's hip and knocked it out of joint at the socket. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is dawn." But Jacob panted, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." (Genesis 32:25-26)*
  - (1) After hours of wrestling, the Unnamed Grappler dislocated Jacob's thigh just by touching it — proof that all his winning-ness was a figment of Jacob's self-promoting imagination.
  - (2) No muscle-power needed at all. Just a touch, and POP! goes the socket.
  - (3) It was at this point that Jacob finally flipped a spiritual switch—the same switch that God has been wrestling us to flip all our days.
  - (4) He switched from wrestling to clinging.
  - (5) He stopped fighting, stopped demanding, stopped conniving, cheating, swindling, and scheming.
  - (6) Only a fool would wrestle God, and only a bigger fool would think he could win. The moral of this story is not the victory of wrestling; it is the victory of clinging.
  - (7) Here's the best advice anybody in your life is ever going to tell you.
    - (a) *When it comes to God, quit wrestling and start clinging.*
  - (8) Jacob switched the whole orientation from his life. He went from earning a paycheck to asking for a blessing.
  - (9) He switched from legalism to grace. And what made the difference?
  - (10) God dislocated his thigh. His permanent outer limp became a perpetual reminder of the very real inner limp he'd been denying all his life.
    - (a) He wasn't a moral winner. He wasn't a religious champion.
      - i) He was spiritually broken, he needed grace, and suddenly the lights came on.
  - (11) He clamped a death grip on God and said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Gen. 32:26).
  - (12) That's not a claim of victory; it's an admission of defeat. It's a tap out with a plea for mercy.
  - (13) The verb "barak" (bless) means to grant a favor to someone who doesn't deserve it and hasn't earned it. Blessing is the opposite of a paycheck; it is grace in action.
  - (14) In that moment, Jacob died to his self-deserving ways. He died to his self-reliance. He died to "getting what I deserve" and became alive to "getting what I don't deserve."
  - (15) Clinging is a metaphor for faith. Trust. Believing.
  - (16) When you switch from fighting to faith, God makes you a new person.
  - (17) Far from suggesting that we should somehow wrestle with God in prayer until he relents and blesses us, Jacob's life teaches the opposite.
    - (a) This is not about the virtue of wrestling.
    - (b) It's the virtue of clinging.
  - (18) God is showing us that we've been crippled all along, and that apart from his amazing grace, we'd deserve nothing but divine retribution. Even so, his heart has been inclined to bless us all along, but our stupid schemes get in the way.
  - (19) Flipping the switch from legalism to grace is the real victory.
    - (a) God loves you too much to let you keep hurting yourself again and again.
  - (20) God had to dislocate his hip to make Jacob realize it.
  - (21) And now the best thing that ever happened to Jacob is about to take place.

- d) *"What is your name?" the man asked. He replied, "Jacob." "Your name will no longer be Jacob," the man told him. "It is now Israel, because you have struggled with both God and men and have won." (Genesis 32:24-28, NLT)*
- (1) God gave him a new name.
  - (2) Jacob lays aside his former self. Jacob becomes a new person with a new identity and a new name.
  - (3) There's his victory.
    - (a) Jacob means cheater, that's the name his parents gave him.
    - (b) Israel means prince with God, that's the name God gave him.
  - (4) That's what faith gets you. Clinging to God in faith.
    - (a) God is the Creator.
    - (b) He made you. He loves you.
    - (c) But we've all run away from him. Like Jacob, we've been fighting him.
    - (d) Jesus came to bring us back to God. This is why he died on the Cross. This is why he rose again. He made it possible for us to come home to God... to quit fighting and start clinging to him.
    - (e) That ache you feel in your heart is God calling out to you.
    - (f) He is ready to bless you: to freely give you the life you were created for. And to freely give you the eternity only he could give.
    - (g) When it comes to God, quit wrestling and start clinging.
      - i) *That is why we have a great High Priest who has gone to heaven, Jesus the Son of God. Let us cling to him and never stop trusting him. (Hebrews 4:14, NLT)*
  - (5) This weekend we have some baptisms. Seventeen people have stepped forward to say God saved me and I want everybody to know it.
  - (6) So they are being baptized. We're so excited for each one.
  - (7) Baptism is a symbol that the old life is gone and the new life has come.
    - (a) In salvation, you become a new person.
    - (b) In salvation, you receive a new name: Christian.
    - (c) In salvation, your old labels are washed away: Cheater, sinner, loser, swindler.
    - (d) In salvation, you get all new labels: forgiven, saint, beloved, capable.
      - i) *Salvation is the new start God gives to every person who clings to him in faith.*
  - (8) And if you've already had a new start, it's a new new start.
  - (9) From that time on, his name is Israel. And he walked with a limp, as a permanent reminder of the superficially successful but intrinsically broken person he would be if he didn't have God in his life.
  - (10) Israel is a new person, but he has an old problem.
  - (11) Esau is coming to meet him, and he's bringing his thug army with him.
  - (12) What happens?
- e) *Then, in the distance, Jacob saw Esau coming with his four hundred men. . . . Then Jacob went on ahead. As he approached his brother, he bowed low seven times before him. Then Esau ran to meet him and embraced him affectionately and kissed him. Both of them were in tears. (Genesis 33:1,3,4, NLT)*
- (1) I'd call that problem solved.
  - (2) Not by scheming. Not by plotting. Not by manipulation, and striving, and scrapping, and wearing himself out.
  - (3) Problem solved by the grace and love of God.
  - (4) Grace wins.
  - (5) In words that presage the Prodigal Son, "Esau ran to meet him and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept" (Gen. 32:4).
    - (a) Jacob's bribe was irrelevant.
    - (b) Jacob's wrestling was irrelevant.
    - (c) Only God's gracious heart mattered.
  - (6) The God we worship—the God of the Bible—runs to those who are least deserving. He is better than you think.
  - (7) God's love is not for sale.
  - (8) God's love is not a prize given to moral winners.
  - (9) It is not a reward for great spiritual performances.
    - (a) *God's love flows eternally from his heart. You don't have to wrestle it out of him.*
  - (10) You don't need to be a moral winner.
  - (11) So cling to Christ, through faith asking God for the blessing you don't deserve but need anyway. Flip that switch from legalism to grace. And thank God that he only blesses us because of who and what he is, never because of who and what we are.
  - (12) Your past doesn't need to haunt you.
  - (13) Your failures don't need to dominate you.
  - (14) The cruel and demeaning labels don't need to define you.
  - (15) To all who believe in Jesus, God gives a new name, with a new identity, and new powers, and new privileges to go with it.