

True Identity  
Genesis 32:22–31  
Sunday, October 16, 2022

Let us pray: You have already spoken, Lord. Help us to *hear* the word that you have spoken, that we might *know you*, and in knowing *you*, we might truly know *ourselves*, in Christ. Amen.

This is probably my favorite story in the Bible. The first sermon I ever preached was on this story. I think it's because, when I was a kid, I *loved* wrestling. Not the Olympic kind of wrestling, but *pro* wrestling, where they hit each other with chairs and all that. I watched it on TV every Saturday morning, Sunday evening, and Monday night. Any time a wrestling event came to town, I was there, just a few rows away from the ring. I once gave Hulk Hogan a high five, and it was just the greatest thing ever. And I knew it wasn't *real*, but I didn't care. It was like a soap opera for men.

My *favorite* wrestlers growing up were always the ones who wore face paint so that you couldn't see who they are. Not the ones who wore *masks* covering their heads. It had to be the face paint. I thought that was *so cool*. The Great Muta (a Japanese wrestler who *never talked*; he always had different styles and colors of paint covering his face so that you never knew what he looked like), Sting, The Road Warriors, The Ultimate Warrior – there was always something *mysterious* about them. All those other guys, you *knew* what they looked like. They could be just any old person. But these guys, it was like they had to *hide* something. There had to be a *reason* they didn't want you to know their true identity.

And it was different in the pre-Internet age. Now you can just go online and find out exactly who these guys are and see pictures of them without their face paint. But back then, it was a *total mystery*. And something about that just really captured my imagination.

So you can imagine, the first time I came across *this* story as a kid, I thought, “There’s *wrestling* in the *Bible*?! And one of them has a *secret identity*?!” I was hooked. And *because* of that, I read Jacob’s story until I knew it backwards and forwards. He was the youngest of two brothers, like me. He was a bit of a prankster, like me. Sometimes he took it too far and got himself into trouble, like me. And he apparently loved wrestling, like me. But before we get to this actual story, a little background for those of you who might not be as familiar with Jacob’s story.

\*\*\*

Jacob was the son of Isaac and Rebekah, the grandson of Abraham. He had a twin brother, Esau, who was just a big, hairy meathead. He was! It talks about how he was covered in hair, and he was a little dumb, and he smelled. Jacob and Esau were always fighting, like brothers do, always wrestling. When their mother Rebekah was pregnant with them, she talked about how it felt like they were wrestling in her womb. When they were born, Esau was coming out first, but Jacob had his hand on Esau’s heel, trying to pull him back in so *he* could be born first. The firstborn son was the primary heir and got special treatment. So *Jacob* wanted to be the eldest son, and he never stopped trying to become that, even *after* they were born.

One day Esau comes in from the field, and he’s starving. Jacob is cooking some stew, so Esau says, “Give me some of that!” Jacob says, “I’ll give you some...in exchange for your status as firstborn son.” Esau says, “Who cares about *that*? I’m so hungry I’m about to die!” So he trades Jacob his birthright for a bowl of stew.

Then one day, when their father Isaac was nearing death and could barely see anything, he said, “Let Esau come to me, so that I can bless him before I die.” Well, their mother Rebekah *heard* this, and *she* favored *Jacob*. So she said to Jacob, “Your father can’t see anything. If *you* dress

up like your brother, he will bless *you* before he dies. Then *you* will be the heir instead of *Esau*.” So she puts animal fur on his arms and neck, so that he *feels* hairy like Esau. She dresses Jacob in Esau’s clothes so that he *smells* like Esau. And Jacob goes to their father Isaac and steals the blessing of his older brother Esau.

Esau hears about this, and he is *furiosus*. And it’s not like Isaac could take the blessing back or give *Esau* his own blessing. That’s not how it worked. So Esau goes to *kill* Jacob. Jacob runs away from home, from his family, from the only life he has ever known, out into the wilderness. Doesn’t this sound like pro wrestling?

On the first night of his journey, Jacob stops to sleep, and he has a dream of a ladder that reached from earth up to heaven, and the angels of God were going up and down on this ladder. And God *speaks* to him in that dream and says, “I will give this land to you, and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, spreading from north to south, east to west. All the families of the earth shall be blessed in you. I am *with* you, wherever you go.”

He goes to stay with his uncle Laban and ends up falling in love with Laban’s daughter Rachel. He works for Laban for seven years in order to marry Rachel. But after seven years, Laban tricks Jacob into marrying his *other* daughter Leah instead. Then he makes Jacob work seven *more* years to marry Rachel, which he eventually does. But then *Jacob* tricks Laban and takes his best livestock and all his family and runs away *again* into the wilderness.

God tells Jacob to go back home, but Jacob knows that Esau is still there waiting for him. So he sends messengers ahead to kind of smooth things over, and the messengers come back and say, “Your brother Esau is coming to *you* with an army of four hundred men.” Even after more than

20 years, he is *sure* that Esau is going to kill him. So that night he sends his family and all his possessions over to the other side of the river to keep them safe. He is left alone, and it says that he *wrestles* with a man all night long, until daybreak.

He has no idea who the man is. Is it *Esau*? It is one of Esau's army? Is it just a random stranger? Is it an *angel*? Is it *God*? We never *exactly* find out. The inference is that it's God, but it's still not totally clear. His opponent's identity remains a mystery.

\*\*\*

I have *heard* and *preached* so many sermons on this story. There is so much that we could talk about here. But here's the question that caught my imagination this time: where is *Christ* in this story? On the surface, we might say that he's *not* in this story. But as Christians, we believe that all scripture points us to Jesus Christ; that he is *in this*, somewhere, somehow. Where is Christ in this story?

The *easy* thing to say is that Christ is the one he is wrestling with. It keeps saying *the man*. "The man wrestled with Jacob," "When the man saw that he did not prevail," "The man said..." But it also keeps saying *God*. "You have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed," "I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved." Is it God? Is it a man? Is it *both*, which is what we see in Christ? God becoming human so that we could see God face to face and not die.

Whoever it is that Jacob is wrestling with *loses*. Christ is not the one who dominates or conquers, but the one who is *defeated*, to the point of death. But it is in his defeat that blessing and new life are found.

So there are definitely parallels between Christ and this mysterious stranger. But I don't know. I don't know if this is Christ. A lot of biblical scholars stay away from interpreting the story that way and reading Christ into it. What I *do* know is that while *Jacob* might not have been wrestling with Christ, *we do*. So maybe it's more appropriate to ask, "Where is Christ *for us* in this story?" Christ is the one with whom we wrestle, and we do that in a couple of ways.

Jacob pinned the man down and said, "I will not let you go until you bless me! Bless me!" That's how a lot of people wrestle with Christ. "Bless me!" Like they're pinning him down, trying to wrestle a blessing out of him. They engage with Christ only as a means of getting what they want. "I will not let go of Christ until he blesses me!"

The other way that we wrestle with Christ is to say, "Who *are* you?" Jacob asks this man, "Please, tell me your name," but the man won't. In the gospels, people are constantly trying to figure out who Jesus is. After he calms a storm, his disciples say, "*Who is this*, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Some of us look at Christ and say, "Who *is* this? Is he *God*? Is he...something else? I don't *understand* Jesus. I don't understand how this all works. It doesn't make sense to me. Fully God, fully human? Risen from the dead? How can that be? Who *are* you?" We try to figure Christ out, to pin him down and make logical, rational sense out of all this.

So we either wrestle with Christ as a way of trying to get what we want or as a way of trying to figure Christ out. *Neither* of those ways worked for Jacob. And, ultimately, neither of them work for us. Jacob tried wrestling a blessing out of him, but the man dislocated his hip. In the same way, when *we* try to wrestle a blessing out of God, we just end up hurt. Because *we* don't know what we need. We might *think* that we do, but we don't. We know what we *want*. And

sometimes we don't even really know *that*. God knows what we *really* need, and when we don't get the blessing we *wanted* or the blessing that we were *expecting*, or if something *bad* happens to us, we end up saying, "Why is God *punishing* me?" or, "What use is God?" When we view faith as transactional and God as a means to an end, we inevitably end up disappointed and hurt, because that's not who God is. So *that* doesn't work.

Jacob tried to figure out who the man was. "Tell me your name!" But the man never does. He just asks a question back. "Why is it that you ask *my* name?" Think about all the times in the gospels when someone asks Jesus a question, and he *responds* with a question. If all we are doing is trying to figure Christ out, understand Christ, make logical, rational sense out of Christ, then we're just going to be met with more questions, and we're never going to be satisfied. Christ is a part of the divine mystery. That's one of the things that Christians confess, "Great is the mystery of faith: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." I don't know *how* all of that works, but I trust that it does. It's a mystery that I will never understand this side of eternity.

\*\*\*

So neither of those ways of wrestling with Christ are where we find blessing. You know where we find blessing in our encounter with Christ? You know where Jacob did? The man says to him, "What is your name?" He says, "Jacob." The man says, "You shall no longer be called Jacob but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed." God gives Jacob a new *name*, a new *identity*, and *that* is where Jacob finds blessing.

Imagine Christ saying to you, "What is your name?" and you say, "Patrick," and Christ says, "No. You *were*. But I'm going to give you a *new* name and a *new* identity because I'm calling you to a new life." When Simon encounters Christ, Christ says, "You *were* Simon, but now you

are Peter, and you are the rock on which I am going to build my church.” When Saul encounters Christ, Christ says, “You *were* Saul the Pharisee, the persecutor of Christians, but now you are Paul. You have a new identity in Christ.”

Where we find blessing is by finding our identity – our *true* identity – in Christ. Christ says, “Take off the face paint that you’re wearing, trying to hide yourself from others and from me, and let’s see who you *really are*. Let’s *show the world* who you really are.” All of the identities we have for ourselves and others, they aren’t big enough. “I’m an American. I’m a conservative or liberal; a Republican or Democrat. I’m a mom. I’m a husband. I’m a teacher or a lawyer.” None of those really capture the fullness of who you are. Who are you? You are in Christ. You belong to Christ. You find your identity in Christ. You were in Christ before you were born, and you will be in Christ after you die. That is who you are. That is where you find *blessing*.

Following Christ is a journey from the old life to a new life, from death to resurrection. It is a journey of transformation and change, of letting go and taking hold. We cannot encounter Christ and walk away the same as we were before. If we are *not* being transformed and changed, if our lives *with* Christ look the same as they did *before* Christ, if our lives look the same as they did five, ten, twenty years ago, then we have to ask whether we are really seeking to be in Christ, or if we’re just more content and comfortable being in *ourselves*. We might be wrestling with Christ, but are we *in* Christ, finding our true identity not in the things of this world but in Christ?

Are we open to the life-changing, life-giving power of Jesus Christ? If we are, we might have to let go of some things. Our family and possessions, like Jacob did. Our grudges and prejudices. Our fear. Our addictions. Control. Perfection. The way things *were*. The way things have *always been*. If that’s all we want, Christ will let us stay there – in our addictions, in our fear, in

our petty political identities, or in the way things have always been. Christ will let us stay there. But there's no blessing there. There's no *life* there. To really be *in Christ* we have to let go of it. We have to be willing to be made new, again and again, continually coming to the new place that Christ is calling us to, becoming the new people Christ is calling us to be.

*That* is where we find the blessing of Christ. Not in fighting or conquering. Not in figuring out and intellectually understanding Christ. Not in all the petty identities that the world tries to put upon us and confine us to. But finding ourselves, finding our *true* identities *in Christ*. Journeying with Christ from the old life to the new, from death to resurrection. There is blessing there. There is *life* there. In Christ. Amen.