

The Struggle Is Real
Genesis 32:3–13, 22–31
Sunday, July 26, 2026

Let us pray: Lord, may your word *bless* us and *transform* us, in Christ. Amen.

This is probably my favorite story in all of scripture. I have always been drawn to it and fascinated by it since I first heard it back in Sunday School. The first sermon I ever preached was on this story, and I have preached on it so many times since then. It is the most pivotal moment in Jacob's story, the turning point in his life, and I think it speaks to us in so many different ways. It is a story of *transformation*; Jacob is not the same *after* this as he was *before*. It is a story of *reconciliation*. If we kept reading, we would see that when Jacob finally faces his brother Esau, he is terrified, but Esau runs to him, embraces him, and they cry on each other's necks. And it is a story that is shrouded in *mystery*, as Jacob wrestles with *someone* in the night.

Who is Jacob wrestling with? The traditional answer is God. The stranger says, "You have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed," and then Jacob says, "I have seen God face to face." So that's the answer that we *infer* from this; that Jacob is wrestling with God. But it never *explicitly* tells us that. A lot of classical artwork depicts this stranger as an *angel*, a representative or messenger of God, like the ones who have appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob many times throughout these stories. Some say that it is *Esau*, sneaking over to fight his brother under the cover of night to get his revenge. Some say that it is a member of Esau's army. Some have even suggested that it is Laban, Jacob's father-in-law, who secretly follows him to get his revenge on Jacob.

Ultimately, it does not matter who this stranger really is. Because all throughout Jacob's life, he has been struggling with *someone*. His brother. His father. His father-in-law. His wives. God. But in all of those struggles, the person he was *really* struggling with was *himself*. His inadequacies as the second-born son.

His fear of not being good enough. His need to prove himself. His need to be blessed. He has struggled with the consequences of his own actions. All of the conflict that Jacob has faced in his life is the result of this internal conflict within him; his own fears and doubts about himself. He is always acting from that place of inner conflict. Maybe the person that Jacob is struggling with in the night is just some reflection or representation of himself.

What are *you* struggling with? *Who* are you struggling with? We *all* have some form of conflict in our lives that we struggle with, whether we are struggling with another person, a situation in the world or in our lives, a broken relationship, something at work or in school. Plenty of people struggle with an addiction, depression or some kind of mental health problem, changing physical or mental ability. We can struggle with something about ourselves that we do not like and want to change, or a change that we are not ready to face yet. We struggle with loneliness. Stress. Doubts about ourselves. Doubts about *God*. All of us brought some kind of struggle here with us today.

So often, when we think we are struggling with a situation or a person or with God, we are really struggling with *ourselves*. Our own fears and inadequacies. The consequences of our own actions. Our theologies or *understandings* of God. Many times, when we are struggling with another person, we are really struggling with our inability to accept them as they are, and that can come from our inability to accept *ourselves* as *we* are. Psychologist Carl Jung famously said that we hate in others what we do not allow in ourselves, and everything that irritates us about others can lead us to a deeper understanding of ourselves. Sometimes we struggle with others because we fear a loss of *control* in our lives. Many times our need for control can also lead us to struggle with addiction, because while you may not be able to control what is happening around you or within you, you can control *this thing*...until you can't. And when we struggle with *God* – how God could *do* or *allow* something that happens in the world or in my life – what we are really struggling with is our limited or flawed *understanding* of God.

Whatever or whoever it is that we are struggling with, the struggle is usually not *out there*...it is *in here*. And if we can process the *inner* struggle, that can help us to be at peace in the *outer* struggles.

I think that the reason I love this story so much is because I can see *my own* story in it; my own struggles and transformation.

When I was 16, almost 17, I was arrested for something that I did not do. I was *stupid* and made some bad choices, but I didn't do what I was accused of doing. I gave some friends a ride to school each morning, and for some dumb reason this particular morning, I decided to bring a cap gun with me as a prank to scare my friend when he got in the car. Well, on the drive to school, my friend took the cap gun, pointed it out the window at a jogger, and yelled something. The jogger got my license plate and called it in. He said I slowed the car down and moved over closer to him. I didn't, but it didn't matter. I was arrested and charged with being an accomplice to aggravated assault. I was taken out of school in handcuffs, in front of my teachers and friends. I was put in the back of a police car, taken to the police station, fingerprinted and photographed; had to go before a judge.

It felt like my life was completely falling apart. All the plans I had for the future, college, it just felt like I was losing it all. Everything was so out of my control. I was terrified. And no one (except my mom) believed me when I said I didn't do this, so I felt very alone. I was absolutely lost.

One night as I was trying to go to sleep, I was just overwhelmed by the fear and the weight of it all, I turned to God and said, "God, I don't know what to *do*. I'm so scared. I need your help." And that was *never* me. I grew up going to church on Sundays and saying my prayers at bedtime, but I never had *that* kind of relationship with God. God was like an *idea* that I believed in, but that was about it. But as I was

praying, I had this overwhelming sense that God was *with* me – like physically present in that room with me; the way that when you’re standing near someone, you can *feel* their body close to yours. That was how I felt. And I heard somewhere deep within me what I can only describe as the voice of God saying, “I am with you. I love you. And you are going to be okay.” Eventually, the truth came out, and everything *was* okay. But that moment obviously marked a turning point in my life. I wasn’t wrestling with God or anyone else. I was wrestling with my own fear and the consequences of my actions. And God *came to me* in the night and blessed me and transformed me.

Twenty years ago, Jen and I lost our first child, our daughter Madelyn. After a totally normal, healthy pregnancy, she was born with a severe chromosomal abnormality that we didn’t know anything about, and she lived for 14 hours in the hospital before she died in our arms. A year later, we lost our second. All of this was in my first couple of years as a pastor, when I was still trying to figure everything out, and I felt so *lost*. It was like everything I had been taught or believed about God and life and faith fell apart. I had this understanding that if you try to be a good person and do good things, then good things will happen to you. And even though deep down I *knew* that isn’t the way God or the world works, there is still a part of you that holds on to that.

I remember one day sitting in the sanctuary of the church I was pastoring, just pouring my heart out to God. “God, you told me that night that you were *with* me and that everything was going to be okay. How could you let this *happen*? I’m a pastor, I’ve given my life in service to you. How could you *do this* to us?” I *thought* that I was wrestling with God. But eventually I realized that I was really wrestling with a *flawed understanding* of God; the way I *wanted* God and life and faith to be, but not the way God actually *is*. Nowhere are we promised that if we follow Jesus and try to live a life of faith everything will be okay and life will be free from suffering or pain. God *blessed* Jacob, and Jacob still walked away limping.

A few years later, I felt like it was time to leave that church and go somewhere new. I had grown frustrated that the church wasn't where I thought it should be, and they weren't doing what I thought they should do. I was having conflict with some people in the church. So I started looking around, trying to find a new church. I would find a church that I thought was perfect and send them my information, but it didn't work out. Then I would find *another* church that seemed like a perfect fit, and it would be the same thing. Over a year passed, and nothing was working out. I *thought* that I was struggling with other people; that *they* were the problem. But eventually I came to see that *they* weren't the problem, *I* was; *my* expectations and *my* inadequacies. I stopped trying to change *them* and just started *loving* them as they were, while I changed *myself*.

All these different moments in my life when I *thought* I was wrestling with *someone* or something *else* – God or other people – I was really just wrestling with myself and my own stuff. But it was *through* that wrestling and struggling that I was able to grow into the person that God was calling me to be. It was through the wrestling and the struggling that *Jacob* was able to become the person God was calling him to be. And it is through the wrestling and the struggling that we can *all* become the people that God is calling us to be. When we stop trying to wrestle and struggle with *other people* and start looking at, “What about *me* needs to change? What expectations or attitudes or beliefs or fears am *I* holding onto that are making my life so much harder than it needs to be? Do I have a problem with this person because of who *they actually are*, or is it because of who *I* am?”

The struggles that we face are *real*. They're just not always with who we *think* they are.

So many of Jacob's problems were the result of his own actions. And at the *root* of his actions were his fears and inadequacies, and until he faced *that*, nothing was going to get better. He didn't *want* to face Esau, but when he *did*, he was met with grace. We don't necessarily *want* to wrestle with our fears and

the consequences of *our* actions, but when we *do*, God *meets* us there with *blessing* and helps us become the people that God is calling us to be. And it is through that wrestling that we can ultimately come to a place of peace, with each other, with ourselves, and with God. Amen.