



Jacob Wrestles with God

Genesis 32:24-32 Phil 4:4-7 Luke 18:1-8

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Abraham and Sarah had miracle baby in their old age and his name was Isaac. Isaac grew up and married Rebecca, and they had twins named Esau and **Jacob**. Esau was born first, but Jacob was born *immediately after*, as he held on to his brother's heel. The name **Jacob** means "**heel grabber**" in Hebrew. "**Heel grabber**" would describe his antagonistic personality. Jacob and his brother Esau had a contentious relationship that culminated in Jacob stealing the birthright from their elderly and blind father Isaac. After stealing the birthright, Jacob fled for his life in fear of retribution from his brother Esau¹.

It is now many years later.

By grace alone, God had chosen Jacob to be an ancestor of the Messiah, and to inherit the promises first given to Abraham². Jacob was prosperous; he had many flocks and herds and a large family. His sons would later become the Twelve Tribes of Israel³. One day Jacob heard that his brother Esau had found him, and was coming with 400 men⁴.

¹ Jacob seems to have had an antagonistic personality. Many stories are told of him beginning in Genesis 25:19. The story of tricking his blind father for the birthright is told in Genesis 27. Jacob's contentiousness and deceitfulness made him unlikeable → all the more highlighting God's amazing grace in his life!

² Jacob was one of the "Patriarchs" of Israel: "*Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.*"

³ The 12 sons of Jacob were born to four different mothers, Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah. Deuteronomy 27:12–13 lists the twelve sons/tribes: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Joseph, and Benjamin. The Messianic line went through Judah. Jacob elevated Joseph's two sons Ephraim and Manasseh to the status of full tribes in their own right due to Joseph receiving the firstborn's "double portion" after Reuben lost his firstborn birthright because of his adultery with his father's wife, Bilhah. [NOTE that God Himself changed Jacob's name to "Israel" in the story we are studying today!]

⁴ It turns out that Esau did not come to seek revenge, *but to reconcile* with his estranged brother Jacob! The story is told in Genesis 33 (note v.4). The Lord has graciously worked through the years in both brothers' lives, and richly blessed both of them. They would meet again at their father Isaac's funeral (Genesis 35:29).

Jacob is fearful of Esau's anger, and it is here where God appears to him. Jacob is given a **Theophany**; a “*God appearance*”. Specifically, it is the Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, who appears on earth before His birth in Bethlehem⁵. But this theophany is mysterious!

It was at night; Jacob was all alone; and all of a sudden God appears as a Man and starts *wrestling* with Jacob!

Can you imagine wrestling with God?! It was a hand to hand struggle all night long! Of course, this was not a

wrestling match to see who was stronger! *God does not prove His power by wrestling with people!* ☺ This was about something else – this was about

trusting God and **holding on to His Promises**.

Martin Luther said,
“This text is one of
the most obscure in
the Old Testament!”

Then the Man said, "Let Me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me." 27 And He said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 28 Then He said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but **Israel**, for you have **wrestled with God** and with men, and have prevailed." Genesis 32:26-28

God changes Jacob's name to *Israel* to reflect his faith in God and His promises. This mysterious theophany is about persistent **prayer**, about **strong faith**, and about **holding God to His Word and Promises**.

Jesus taught the same thing in the Parable of the “Persistent Widow” that we heard today from Luke 18. Jesus taught us to be like the persistent widow who “wrestled” with that unrighteous judge day after day. She ended up getting justice. Jesus used this parable to teach us to “**keep praying and do not lose heart**” Luke 18:1” It was a study in contrasts and opposites: the unrighteous judge was reluctant to help the widow; whereas God the Father is **eager** to help you!

And will not God give justice to His Elect, who cry to Him day and night? Will He delay long over them? I tell you, **He will give justice to them SPEEDILY**. Luke 18:7-8

⁵ The Son of God is the “speaking God” – the *logos* – The “Word” of God who interacts with His People to save them. *Theophanies* are the *pre-incarnate* Son at work on behalf of His People. God the Father is never seen, only heard, as at Jesus' Baptism and Transfiguration; and God the Holy Spirit is only seen in the form of a dove at Jesus' Baptism; and tongues of fire at Pentecost. But the Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, interacts with His People to save them! In the Old Testament, those times are called “theophanies”.

Persistent prayer tenaciously holds onto God's Promises! That is what **Jacob's theophany** was all about; and that is what **Jesus' parable** teaches us. *Persistent prayer tenaciously holds onto God's Word and Promises.*

Prayer is a gift of salvation that comes to you through the work of Christ. When Jesus died with your sins, He reconciled you with God the Father. That means that you have peace with God, that your sins are no longer held against you, nor do they separate you from the Father in Heaven. You now have **direct** and **unhindered access** to the Father in Heaven. You now *draw near* to God with confidence and boldness, trusting in His promises to hear and to help you. Because of Jesus's death and resurrection, you have this **unlimited access** to God.

Both the **Theophany of Jacob**, and **the Parable of Jesus**, teach us to pray and not give up. We are to be persistent in our prayers; we are to take advantage of our unrestricted access to God; we are to use God's promises in our prayers; and we are to be bold and confident.

Don't misunderstand this! This is not an arrogance nor an entitlement attitude on our part! Far from it, the power prayer is not in us at all → but in God who answers our prayers! It is in humility that we approach God the Father, in the Name of Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our prayers echo God's Word. Our prayers are motivated by the Holy Spirit. We pray in the Name of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

In fact, Jesus has even given us words and ideas to use in our prayers. That's why He gave us the **Lord's Prayer**. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, or use words and ideas from it, we are holding firm to God and holding onto His Word and Promises. Think about the Lord's Prayer with me . . .

- † We pray to **Our Father in Heaven**, because we have unrestricted access to Him through His Son Jesus Christ; He is the source of our life. He is our Heavenly Father: we know and believe that He cares about us, is watching over us, and invites us to pray. He promises that He will hear and answer our prayers.

- † We **Hallow His Name** because God's Name is His Presence and Power in our lives. We pray that God's Holy Name will be glorified in our lives and sanctified in those for whom we pray.
- † We pray for God's **Kingdom to Come** in our prayers. We want people to know Christ and grow in faith. We pray for the eternal well-being of others; and ask God to work through His Word and Sacraments as He has promised to do.
- † We pray **Thy Will Be Done** in all things. We ask the Lord to hinder the devil and his demons; and to disrupt the plans of evil people. We ask that His loving care will be seen in our lives and in those we pray for. We are confident that God's Will is always better than our own will.
- † As we pray for **Daily Bread**, we acknowledge that God is the supplier of our needs. We are completely dependent on Him. We look to Him for all good things; and we pray for those good things for ourselves and for others.
- † As we pray for **Forgiveness**, we confess that Jesus is the Savior Who has done 100% of the work of salvation for 100% of the people. Grace and mercy fill our prayers; as well as our lives. We are forgiving people because God has first forgiven us!
- † We pray for help in **Temptation** knowing that Jesus was tempted but never sinned. He promises to help us and so we persistently ask Him to help us in prayer. We pray also for others, that they will not be overtaken with the temptations they face.
- † We pray that the Lord will **Deliver us from evil** — that He would protect us from the many dangers we face; and finally, when our last hour comes, that He will grant us a blessed end and graciously take us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in Heaven.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, or use words and ideas from it, we are holding firm to God and holding onto His Word and Promises.

Both the **theophany of Jacob**, and **the parable of Jesus**, teach us to pray and not give up. The Lord's Prayer is the best example of a prayer that has been given to you to use as you hold God to His Word and Promises!

*May you be persistent in your prayers
as you "wrestle with God"!*

AMEN!