

Jacob is an unlikely hero. In fact, we could look at many aspects of his story and say that he is not a hero. He tricked his father, cheated his brother, profited at his father-in-law's expense, and demanded a blessing. Yet, here we find him in Genesis, one of the Patriarchs. In some ways, Jacob's life is a reminder that God can use anyone. God moves, speaks, and acts according to God's purposes. Sometimes those purposes can confound our minds.

Jacob was the second son of Isaac and Abraham's grandson. Jacob is the first of the Patriarchs to have a bunch of children and we start to see God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 15:5 fulfilled. This promise is repeated several times; God says to Abraham, "I will make you a great nation." Up to this point, fulfillment seemed a bit unlikely. Abraham only had Isaac and Ishmael (and he sent Ishmael away). Isaac had Esau and Jacob. Esau was the first born and a rugged individual. Jacob, it seems, liked to cook (ch. 25). He used his prowess in the kitchen to cheat Esau and get Isaac to bless him. We can learn a lot from an unlikely source, and that is often the way it is with God.

God speaks, whether we are ready to listen or not. Perhaps the message in Jacob's life is to see God present and at work in the world. Gerhard von Rad warns against trying to find *the* meaning of this story.¹ Perhaps *the* meaning is keep looking, keep seeking, keep trusting—because God is here, active, and a participant in the stories of our lives. Jacob is no worse or better than any of us. If he can engage with God, then we can engage with God. When he dreams of a conversation with the Lord in Genesis 28, he bolts upright and proclaims, "Surely the Lord is in this place."

God still speaks; we just need to listen. Instead of hearing God, we become distracted. We fixate on issues—political, social, economic. Our responses to issues are the product of hearing and experiencing God, not the focus. We need to keep God primary and the issues secondary. What happens when we engage with God? God engages with us. Can we take it further? What happens when we grab ahold of God? Does God grab ahold of us? Maybe the onus is on us. In Genesis 32, Jacob is getting ready to reconcile with Esau. During this process, he engages with God; he grabs ahold of God.

We can be like Jacob and want power and success. Instead, God offers peace, joy, and love. This division between human desires and what God offers is the source of many of the problems in our world today. We think we have the answers, and our hubris knows no bounds. Many people view humility and contentment as weakness. In the movie *Wall Street*, Gordon Gekko says, "Greed...is good."² But, it is not. Love, joy, and peace are good.

Jacob is set to make peace with Esau. It the night before their encounter. Jacob is terrified of his brother. He sends his wives, maids, eleven children, and all of his things ahead across a ford in the Jabbok Stream. When he was left alone, the Bible says "a human" shows up and wrestles with him until daybreak. It uses the Hebrew word *en-oshe'*, which is different from the more dignified *aw-dam*. Both mean *person* or *mortal*.

Genesis 32:24 is a bit tricky because the passage goes on to say that Jacob wrestled with God, and the implication seems to be God showed up in human form and physically wrestled with Jacob, leaving him with a hip injury. When the prophet Hosea references this event (12:4), it refers to Jacob having wrestled with a messenger or angel. The encounter could have several different meanings, but the devious Jacob, the one who tricked his brother and worked for fourteen years to get his bride has come a long way. He engages with God; He reaches out and grabs the Lord. Whether his grappling was physical or he was in a deep state of prayer or he was dreaming, he is not unscathed by his encounter with the divine. He is a changed person.

In this passage, the human or angel or whatever saw that victory was impossible, so it knocked Jacob's hip, knocking it out of socket—but the two continued wrestling. Jacob was fully engaged. When the human saw the sun was about to come up, it said, "Let me go." But Jacob the trickster, who just a few chapters ago was willing to go to any lengths, including dressing up like his twin brother Esau, to get his father's blessing, insists that the human or mortal bless him. It renames Jacob, *Israel*, in Hebrew, *one who strives with God*.

Do we strive with God? Are we so gripped by God that we cannot let go? Or, are we distracted by squirrels like dogs? We cannot keep our focus on God and keep looking for squirrels to chase up the nearest tree. Politics, social issues, economic and environmental injustice—these are important issues of our times. As we consider them, we shall not let go of God. God is here, as we gather next to the Jabbok Stream.

We can grab ahold of God. We can strive with God. When we do, we do not enter a physical contest with the divine. We engage. We can wrestle with God in the depths of our souls and demand answers. The same book that talks about God creating the world does not show God incapable of defeating Jacob in a wrestling match. This passage does not say Jacob was winning. The two were locked up with no place to go. Jacob could not get what he wanted and the man, or *en-oshe'*, could not get what it wanted.

Frederick Buechner writes:

God is the enemy who Jacob fought there by the river...and whom in one way or another we all of us fight—God, the beloved enemy. Our enemy because, before giving us everything, [God] demands of us everything; before giving us life, [God] demands our lives—our selves, our wills, our treasure.

Will we give them, you and I? I do not know. Only remember the last glimpse we have of Jacob, limping home against the great conflagration of the dawn. Remember Jesus of Nazareth, staggering on broken feet out of the tomb toward the resurrection, bearing...the proud insignia of the defeat that is victory...³

God is here. Let us listen.

¹ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary, Old Testament Library* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 314.

² *Wall Street*, directed by Oliver Stone (1987).

³ Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons* (HarperCollins, 2007), 7-8.