

Press Through #1 // “Wrestling All Night” // Jacob, Genesis 32:9–30

Announcement

That really is something great our church has a chance to put on.

This Tuesday night at Brier Creek in our Equip Forum we’re going to cover an important topic crucial for us, and the American church in general right now: *racial diversity*.

This is something **our church is committed to** and wants to move forward in. A **panel of our very own pastors** from several different cultural and ethnic and church backgrounds will join me to discuss how we can **think well** about diversity in our church.

Just so you’re not disappointed, we **don’t have everything** on this issue figured out, but we want to take some steps forward as a church **family together**. **We know the gospel reconciles us to God and to one another, and that the** racial and social diversity in the church is supposed to be a demonstration of the reconciling power of God—a message that humanity has a common problem, sin, and a common Savior, Jesus. We also know **God displays his glory** through the multiplicity of cultures in the church.

But, as you know, that’s **easier said than done**. *So, join us for this EQUIP Forum on racial diversity this Tuesday night from 6:30-8:30 at Brier Creek*—it’s open to all, but it would help us if you would RSVP on *The City* today.

Introduction

We **just finished a series** through 1 John called *Assured* in which we looked at how we can know where we stand with God.

- **Easter** is just around the corner and we have some special things coming up. **John Piper** speaking...
- We have a **series on family and relationships** right after Easter called *First Love* that I am really looking forward to...
- But I had a couple of weeks in here, to kill (if you will) and I wanted to use them to talk about something I sense the Spirit of God really saying to our church. Something he wants to develop in us—and that is to teach us how to pray.

Prayer is the most undervalued resource in our lives and our families and our church. The Bible teaches us that **all the blessings** that God wants to bestow on us, he does so through prayer. Prayer is **the conduit** by which his power comes into your family; it’s the **way you lay hold** of the promises and blessings of God.

Most people, whether they are religious or not, pray at crucial points in their lives. You may not really believe in God at all but you get scared and start praying. ***Where does that impulse come from? And how can you pray effectively?***

Over the next two weeks we’re going to look at two Old Testament characters who had profoundly shaping encounters with God and got their prayers answered, to see what we can learn about how we should pray.

Theme: **PRESS THROUGH**

The first one is Jacob.

Jacob: Genesis 32:9–30

Genesis 32 if you have your Bible. **Genesis 32** is the story of Jacob wrestling all night with a strange, heavenly man of some kind. It’s supposed to be, among other things, a **picture of prayer**.

But before we get into that, let me set the background of this story

Jacob had cheated his older twin brother, Esau, out of his inheritance. In those days, **the oldest son got “the birthright,”** which meant up to 2/3 of his father’s wealth, and in the case of this family, it also meant he received the promises made to his grandfather Abraham that their family would bear the Messiah.

Esau and Jacob, **though twins**, were very different. Esau was **tough**; macho. We know he was **hairy** and he liked to **hunt**. He probably watched **Sports-Center** and drove an **F-150** with a big *Semper Fi* decal in the back-window and had season tickets to the local UFC fighting arena. Like a character off of **Duck Dynasty**. Jacob, however, was more of an indoors guy. We know he had smooth skin and liked to cook. He probably watched the **Bachelor** and drove a **Mini-Cooper** and had a **Pinterest** account.

Well, one day when Jacob and Esau were teenagers Esau had **been out hunting** and he came in and he was really, really hungry, and Jacob had just finished cooking a pot of stew, and Esau asked him for some. Well, Jacob, being the younger brother and always looking for a way to **get the upperhand** with his older, hairier twin, told him, “I’ll trade you something for it.” Esau said, **“Like what?”** And Jacob, thinking he needed to start somewhere high to get a good place to negotiate from, said, “how about your birthright (?),” probably thinking he’d never get that but he’d end up with something—a pair of Air Jordan’s or an Ipod or something. (Start high)

Well, Esau, being a teenager and **thinking impulsively**, like they do, concerned only with **short-term gratification** and not the **long-term effects** of their decisions, said, *“Well, what good is my birthright if I die of hunger this afternoon? Yes. Just give me the soup.”* So he traded.

Well, a few years pass by and their dad, **Isaac, is about to die**. So Isaac, who probably **doesn’t know anything about the deal**, and prefers Esau to Jacob anyway, wants to formally confer the blessing onto Esau, so he asks Esau to go out and hunt him up

some venison and prepare it for him and then he’ll confer the blessing.

So **Esau leaves** and Jacob and his mom think, *“Here’s our chance”* and so they pull some venison out of the freezer and **microwave it** and they dress Jacob up like Esau. (**You see, Isaac is old**—his eyes are dull—and he can’t hear that well. So they put Jacob in Esau’s clothes; **strap goat hair** on the back of his arms and neck and **rub venison** all over him—**not sure what** that says about Esau, that to look and smell like him you tie pieces of a dead goat to you—) but they send Jacob back in to feed his dad and receive the blessing.

Well, **somehow they pull it off** and when Esau gets home he finds out the **blessing has already been bestowed and there is no renegeing** after a formal bestowal, because the last thing you do in a Hebrew bestowal is raise your pinky and say “no take backs” (*just kidding about that, but for whatever reason it could not be changed*) so the blessing and inheritance now belong to Jacob.

Well, as you can imagine, Esau is **pretty chapped** and he says, *“I’ll let my dad die and give the family a few days to mourn and then I’m going to kill my brother.”* Jacob hears about it and leaves.

He’s gone for upwards of 30 years, but because he is pretty ingenious and crafty he gets ahead and becomes really wealthy.

His name, Jacob, means “grasper,” because when the twins were coming out of the womb Esau came out first but Jacob’s little hand came out right after Esau and grabbed ahold of his heel, like, *“Come on back in here; I want to be first”*). But the name **“Jacob” can also mean, “deceiver,”** and those two meanings pretty well sum up Jacob’s life. (*BTW, I never have understood why you would give that name to a baby. “Oh, he’s cute! What’s his name?” Liar.*)

My name is JAMES, a derivative.

Well, somewhere during this time God has started to work in Jacob’s life and after 30 or so years he appears to him and tells him

to return to the land of his fathers and if he does, he (God) will be with him (Gen 31:3).

Jacob obeys but as he gets close to his home, where he hasn't been for 30 years, he starts to wonder what Esau is going to say—and then he gets word that Esau has come out to meet him with 400 armed men, which is never a good sign, and so Jacob, who is pretty wealthy but forgot to bring his army, is in despair.

So he prays: **Genesis 32:9**, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good,’ (hear what he’s doing? Holding up God’s words in front of him. ‘God, you said...’) [10] I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant...[11] Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of *Esau*, (in case you forgot who my brother was) for I fear him, that he may come and attack me... [12] But you said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’” (2ND TIME: He’s **holding God’s word** back up in front of him. “God, you promised!”)

But notice what’s he praying for? *Deliverance*. “God, get me out of this mess and don’t let Esau kill me.”

Well, later that night, **24**... a Man came and wrestled with Jacob until dawn. **25** When the Man saw that he couldn’t win the match, he struck Jacob’s hip and knocked it out of joint at the socket. (do you know how painful that would be? Ever had your finger pulled out of joint? Unbelievably painful. The largest joint in your body is your hip and **this guy just touches it** with his finger and it gets knocked out). This guy has some kind of power. **26** *Then the Man said, “Let me go, for it is dawn.” But Jacob panted, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”* (which, btw, **impresses** me about Jacob: all that stuff about Esau and UFC I said earlier... when you can hold onto an angel after your hip has been knocked out of joint? That’s what Jacob does. He is a grasper.)

27 “What is *your* name?” the Man asked. He replied, “Jacob.”

- Which to me, is kind of humorous... How do you wrestle with someone all night and not even know their name?
- This **guy is not asking his name** because he doesn’t know it; he wants Jacob to admit it. “My name is Jacob: liar and deceiver.”

28 “Your name will no longer be Jacob,” the man told him. “It is now *Israel* (which means, literally, you have prevailed with God), because you have struggled with both God and men and have won.”

29 “What is your name?” Jacob asked him. “Why do you ask?” the man replied.

- “I don’t know. You just tore my hip socket out of joint and changed my birth name to a different one and it would be helpful if when I’m telling this story later I could tell people who you were.”

It doesn’t tell us whether the Man told Jacob his name or not, but we do get this next phrase, which is extremely important:

29 *Then the Man blessed Jacob there.*

So, multiple questions: Who is this man?

- You know, some Jewish commentators around Jesus’ time thought this was Esau’s guardian angel who wrestled with Jacob to get the blessing back for Esau. But that’s kind of ridiculous.
- Some don’t go that far but they do say it was an angel. Maybe. **But why does the angel have to leave at daybreak?** He’s not a vampire. Angels love the light. Maybe **choir practice** starts at dawn? I don’t know.

Most theologians believe it is God. I think the strongest clue for that is in the next verse: **30** *Jacob named the place Peniel—“face of God”—for he said, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been spared.”*

So then the question becomes, “If Jacob is wrestling with God, how does God not win?” Great question. I’ll come back to it.

But first, let me finish the story: Jacob, with his new name, goes on to meet Esau. Somewhere as they approach **God changes Esau’s heart** and when Esau see his brother he **runs to embrace** him and they stand there weeping in each other’s arms for a long time. Jacob goes on not only to be **reconciled to his brother**, but also to **father the Jewish nation** and one of his descendants would be Jesus Christ.

Now what is God trying to teach us through this story? I’m going to identify **FIVE** things, and **tie them all to prayer**, because the context of this whole story is prayer. This whole wrestling match comes about in the midst of Jacob praying, and it’s a picture of prayer.

1. The blessings of God are released into our lives through prayer

- Think about that phrase I called your attention to in vs. 29 where it says “*the Man blessed him*” after Jacob held onto him and said, “I won’t let you go until you bless me.”
- If you go back and **read the beginning of this story** you find that God had already prophesied, at Jacob’s birth, that the blessing would be his. But it was not until Jacob took it in a prayer-wrestling match that it really became his. **He laid hold of the promise of God through a night of prayer.**
- **The Bible is a book full of promises.** 3000 of them. I know some of them apply to **specific and unique** situations, but I also know Paul says that that **all the promises of God** are yes in Christ Jesus... and every one of them is yes, in a Christ-centered way, for me.
- *At our prayer night last week I told you—don’t read through the Bible; pray through it.*
 - This is **our prayer book** to read through and lay hold of the promises of God! Every time I read the Bible I stop and go back through a pray...

- **Which blessings are unclaimed for you?**
- E.g. How I pray:
 - For **my kids: Psalm 127**, “*Children are* like arrows in the hand of a mighty warrior...” I say, “God, you gave me these kids for the purpose of bringing them up to love and serve you. You said they were to be like arrows in your army of blessing and salvation. God, I usually feel like I **don’t have the foggiest idea** what I’m doing as a parent and I’m pretty much scared out of your mind. God, give me and Veronica the ability to do with our kids what you said you gave them to us for!” **Psalm 127:1.**
 - For **me: Psalm 84:11**, “*No good thing does the Lord withhold from them who walk uprightly.*” “What if I **mess up** my life? Bigger church brings new challenges. What if I mess up as a pastor and mess up my family, and myself, and all of you?” *No good thing...*
 - When I pray for **you: Deut 33:16**, “The favor of the one who dwells in the burning bush” being with Joseph all of his life. “*We have experienced real blessing as a church. What if it runs out?*” **Is it possible to dwell in favor** all of your life? Joseph did. “**God, I am asking that we**, the Summit Church, dwell in that favor all of our days, too, the favor of the one who dwelt in the burning bush would be with us like it was with Moses.
- **Jacob in that first prayer** held up God’s promises to him **TWICE.** *God, you promised!*
- **What promises have been left unclaimed for your family?**
 - Saw a story that every year **\$5.8 BILLION** worth of **gift cards** go unclaimed. *5.8 billion!* **Benefits that have already** been purchased but **never get enjoyed.**¹
 - All the promises of God are **yes in Christ Jesus.** Surely **goodness and mercy** will follow you all the days of your life.

¹ <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2011/12/27/144308234/lost-money-41-billion-in-gift-cards-havent-been-redeemed-since-2005>

- It's all been purchased by Jesus' blood! **3000 gift cards in your Bible purchased by Jesus for you!** Go get them.

2. Sometimes the blessings of God are released in our lives through *persistent prayer*

Martin Luther (the Reformer, lived 500 or so years ago) said that this story of Jacob wrestling with God gives us a picture of wrestling with a *seemingly hostile* God in prayer.

Luther points out this is a common image in Scripture.

- Syro-Phoenician woman came to Jesus to get healing for her daughter. Jesus said, "Woman, it's not right I take the children's bread and give it to the dogs." He called the woman a dog. I've heard commentators say that, "Oh, the word he used means 'small dog,' but yeah, it still means dog. **He's going to end up healing her but he appears hostile and indifferent to her at first.**
- Jesus once said that prayer is like an old, poor widow who needed justice on something but couldn't get the judge to pay attention to her because she's poor and couldn't afford a lawyer or bribe him. So she goes to his house day and night and wears him down through her complaining. Whenever he's trying to sleep, she's like, "Knock x3... Judge." Every time he goes in or out she's like, "Hey, have you had a chance to look at that thing..." And **finally he says** to himself, (these are **Jesus' words**, not mine), "*I don't care a thing about this woman or justice, but this woman has flat worn me down, so I'll give her what she asks.*"
 - Then Jesus says, "That's what prayer is like sometimes."
 - You know, that's one of those stories I'm glad Jesus told, not me.
 - What's he trying to say? I mean God is clearly not someone who doesn't love us or care about justice? The **cross shows** you he does!
 - He's trying to say that praying often *feels* like that...
- God often appears hostile and indifferent and uncaring to us.

- **Have you had this experience? If not, LIAR**
- **Why**, Luther says, is God like this? Listen, this is the **GOLD**: *He does so, Luther says, to see the strength of our faith in his goodness.*
- Will we **press through**, Luther says, what looks like hostility to see the **rushing river** of God's goodness that runs underneath: "*Like a child trying to push against the hand of a parent, the parent gives only enough resistance to test the resolve of the child, so God resists us in prayer, to see our resolve in his goodness.*"²
- (Luther, pointing to the story of Jacob, says we should try to 'catch Christ in his own words.' God, why aren't you doing this? You promised!)³
- God being **distant or uncaring** is just an illusion. **So press through.**
- Some answers are **only given after a night of wrestling. So press through.**
- *This is the God who went through the darkness of Gethsemane and the pain of Golgotha for you. Press through.*
 - *Do you feel like he doesn't care about your broken marriage, your unsaved husband, your wayward child, your lost friends? **PRESS THROUGH***
- If you push with **persistence**, and get past the **resistance**, what you'll find is not **indifference**, what you'll find is the **benevolence** of his **immanence**.
- Never doubt God's goodness. There's **so much grace** that flows off of his table that even if you have only the worthiness of a dog, there's enough for you. (That's what the Syro-Phoenician woman said, and Jesus said, "That's the kind of faith that gets my attention.")

² David Steinmetz, prof of OT at Duke Divinity School, sermon given at Beeson Divinity School in 1996, "Calving and Luther on Interpreting Genesis." Beeson Divinity School podcast, 10/9/12.

³ Ibid.

- ***The compassion of God is measured by the cross and his power for your situation is measured by his resurrection. He can help you and he will help you!***
- ***PRESS THROUGH!***
- Listen to this: I read some interesting things recently in a **book about persistence**:
 - About 10 years ago the very elite Berlin Academy of Music did a study with musicians. They divided accomplished violinists into three groups: world-class soloists; high-level performers; and those who were good but unlikely to play professionally. They found that all of them started playing at roughly the same age and practiced about the same amount of time until the age of 8, but that is when their practice habits diverged. The researchers found that by the age of twenty, the average players had logged about four thousand hours of practice time; the good violinists totaled about eight thousand hours; the elite performers... ten thousand hours. While there is no denying that innate ability dictates some of your upside potential, your potential is only tapped via persistent effort. Persistence is the magic bullet; not aptitude...
 - **Neurologist Daniel Levitin notes:** The emerging picture from such studies is that ten thousand hours of practice is required to achieve the level of mastery associated with being a world-class expert—in anything. In study after study, of composers, basketball players, fiction writers, ice skaters, concert pianists, chess players, master criminals, or what have you, this number comes up again and again... No one has yet found a case in which true world-class expertise was accomplished in less time.⁴
- ***To get the victory you have to be willing to press through!*** Prayer is no different. There are some things God gives only through persistence. *“Like a child trying to push against the hand of a parent, the parent gives only enough resistance to test*

the resolve of the child, so God resists us in prayer, to see our resolve in his goodness.”

- **So here is my question:** Does **the Judge** know about *you*? If the Judge who cares nothing about justice or poor widows would be moved by your incessant asking, surely the Judge who loved you so much that he paid your debt of justice himself will hear you when you pray. *So, don't give up. Press through. He might be ready to give what you're asking. So don't give up.*

3. The blessings of God are not obtained by our contriving

- I pointed out that when the guy asks Jacob what his name is, the point is not that he doesn't know Jacob's name. Of course he does. He wants Jacob to admit it. “My name is Jacob. Liar.”
 - When Jacob had taken the venison to his daddy, his daddy had asked him what his name was, and he lied and said, “My name is Esau.” Now he tells the truth. “My name is Jacob. I'm a deceiver. I've **tried all my life to obtain** these blessings for myself by my own manipulative means. Now I am repenting.”
- And so God gave him a new name, Israel, which speaks of **God** giving the blessing, not Jacob wresting it for himself.
 - And this blessing God gives is going to be **so far beyond anything** Jacob had sought for himself.
 - Jacob's new name, Israel, is going to appear **nearly 1800 times** in the Bible and is going to include blessings beyond anything his mind could fathom, **not just for him** but for the whole world.
- Some of you have been spent all your life striving; deceiving; wrestling; worrying to get some “blessing.” The blessing you are searching is not going to come from those things; **it's going to come by submitting. Winning the blessing comes by losing to God. THIS IS WHAT THIS STORY IS IN THERE TO TEACH US.**
 - **(Why you are tired)**
 - For the rest of Jacob's life, he's going to **limp on his torn hip socket**, reminding him that winning the blessing came from losing with God.

⁴ Ibid.

- Are you ready for your life to be turned upside down? Are you ready to lose? Has God had to **tear your hip socket apart** to show you that?
- **James 4:2, You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. Yet you do not have, because you do not ask.**

4. God is himself the blessing that we seek.

- Notice that at the end of this encounter, God does not say to Jacob, “Ok, everything will be fine. Go meet Esau.” God simply says, “Go. I am with you.” There is no promise Jacob will live through the encounter with Esau.
 - In fact, **God has made him limp** now, so now it’s even impossible to run away!
 - What God assured to Jacob in this wrestling encounter is his **personal presence**.
- Jacob got the **restoration of relationship**; a blessing that was greater than earthly blessing.
- Whatever you are searching for—do you know it can’t replace God?
 - God sometimes withholds that blessing that you seek from you to teach you that.
 - **A relationship with God is better than any of his blessings.** That’s what emerges from this night of wrestling.
- Or, let me say it this way: **Jacob, in this wrestling match, did not get resolution of his problem. What he got was relationship.**
- You’re going to have to choose between those. **Do you demand resolution or will you get up with the assurance of relationship?**
 - Paul **asked 3 times** for God to give a certain blessing, and finally God said, “Paul. No. But my grace; my presence will be with you.”
 - God **may not promise** you he’ll get you the **job** or the **boyfriend** or **heal the person** you desire. But he promises himself.

- Sometimes the greatest effect of the night of wrestling with God is not a change of your situation; it’s a **change of your identity**. You go from being Jacob (one who manipulates to Israel (one who trusts).
- **Jacob thought Esau was his primary problem** and what **he needed God** to do was change Esau. In actuality, Jacob was Jacob’s biggest problem and it’s Jacob that needs to change.
- **Sometimes in prayer God changes the situation; sometimes he changes your “identity.”**
- **Psalm 23; goodness and mercy will follow; even in the valley of the shadow... Psalm 139**—where shall I go from your presence? Heaven, hell, you are there.
- Even if Esau stabs with a spear
- God says in **Jeremiah**, “If you search for *me* with all your heart... (in other words, if you will desire me more than any of my blessings)... you will find me.” That is the greatest blessing.
- So **Do you want resolution or relationship?**
- **Sometimes the result of a night of prayer is the restoration of relationship, not the resolution of your problem.**

5. We know that God hears us because he became weak for us

- If you’re wrestling someone a lot smaller than you, **like me with my kids (Adon: I have to hold myself off of him when we dogpile)**, and you don’t want to crush them, you have to pull yourself back—restrain yourself.
 - How much does omnipotence weigh? What weight class is that?
- Jacob **should have been crushed**, which means God **voluntarily held** himself back. In this wrestling match, God became voluntarily weak.
- In that moment **God feigned weakness** to bring Jacob salvation, but **centuries later, the full weight** that Jacob deserved came down on Christ. **Tim Keller** says, “*Jacob held on*

*at the risk of his life to get the blessing for him; but Jesus held on at the cost of his life to get the blessing for us.*⁵

- Thus, we can be sure he hears us.
 - **So, press in. and never give up.**
- Sometimes it seems like God is not listening. He is. The cross assures you he is.
 - **Press in and press through.**
- **John Owen:** the greatest insult to God is to doubt his love for you.
- God **cared enough to come down** to Jacob and wrestle with him. God **cared enough for us** that he **came down** and took on our flesh and wrestled with our sin until it **squeezed** the life out of him. And **now he has united himself** to us forever and said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."
- **Do ever feel like your prayers are bouncing off the ceiling**, like you have steel reinforced ceilings in your house? It's ok if your prayers bounce off the ceiling, because God is not a God way up there, distant from you, he's with you, and in you.
 - So when your prayers feel like they are bouncing off the ceiling that's ok because they are **bouncing back down** to the God who is **beside you in the room** you are praying from.

Conclusion:

MUSIC HERE.

Chris Green:

- The African American pastor I referenced earlier.
- Dad was not a Christian. Alcohol abuse. "How much better it will be if my dad got saved."
- Wrote a letter his freshman year of college.
- Pray for your family.

Raudel: From Cuba.

- Dad was a pastor trying to reach a small village. Raudel said when he was about 13 there was a situation in which there was no food on the table and they sat down to thank God one night for dinner with literally nothing on the table... Raudel said I felt so weird, and mad... there was literally nothing on the table as we prayed...
- He said, about 20 minutes later, there was a knock at the door and another believer was standing there, saying, "I had this sense..."
- Raudel: "***I was so hungry, but I can't even remember what we ate that night... the reward was not the food; it was learning that we could depend on God.***"

God knows. He hears.

GUIDED PRAYER TIME: Prayer counselors; you pray; pray with someone

⁵ These insights come from a sermon Tim Keller preached on this passage (Genesis 32) at Redeemer Presbyterian in NYC.