

Jacob's Wrestle with God

Our First Reading today tells of Jacob and his caravan had reached the Jabbok, a stream that flows into the Jordan from the east just about midway between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. After leading family and flocks south across the Jabbok under cover of darkness, Jacob himself went back across the stream, apparently to spend some time alone with the Lord in prayer. As he began once again to pour out his heart to God, he suddenly became aware that out of the darkness someone had grabbed hold of him and was wrestling him to the ground. The mysterious struggle continued - for hours - until the first streaks of dawn appeared in the eastern sky.

In commenting on this passage, Martin Luther said, "This text is one of the most obscure in the Old Testament." Although there are elements of this wrestling match that are difficult to understand and to explain, there are some basic truths that are immediately clear.

Jacob was struggling with God in earnest prayer. This struggle involved a *spiritual striving* with God for His blessing, but it involved a *physical struggle* as well. Jacob's opponent, referred to as "the Man," later identified himself as God.

But why should God appear to one of His children as an opponent, as an enemy fighting against him? Surely not to crush the life out of him. If God had been minded to crush Jacob, the wrestling match would have been over in half a second. In the heat of the struggle, Jacob may have been tempted to think of God as his enemy; in that case God would not have *wanted* to bless Jacob. But God had *promised* to bless, and Jacob knew that God cannot lie.

The struggle continued until Jacob's divine opponent, by merely touching Jacob's hip, threw the entire hip socket out of joint. Now Jacob couldn't continue the painful struggle any longer, so he threw his arms around his opponent and held on to Him. His opponent said, "Let me go! For it is daybreak." He was delighted to hear Jacob answer, "I shall not let You go unless You bless me." God didn't want Jacob (and He doesn't want us) to be timid with Him. He delights to let us win victories over Him on the basis of humble, believing prayer. Jacob clung in faith to God and to God's promise, and he received the blessing he desired.

"What is your name?" the Lord asked him, not because He had forgotten but because He wanted to remind Jacob that he had been a "heel-grabber," one who took unfair advantage of a rival. That old name no longer fit this man, and so God gave him a new one. "Your name will no longer be "Jacob," but "Israel," because you have struggled with God and with men, and you have overcome." Bible names often serve as more than convenient labels for people. Here Jacob's new name describes the new nature and character the Spirit of God had patiently and painstakingly created in him. No longer would he rely on his own cleverness to overcome anyone who opposed him. The heel-grabber had become the persistent fighter who clung to God's promise and won God's blessing legitimately. He had learned to lean on God.

God apparently felt that Jacob needed a memento of his victory, as a warning against relapsing into his old nature. So as Jacob left the scene of the wrestling match, he was limping. All of God's children need to learn that in and of ourselves we have no strength, no power with God or man. Our only strength, like Jacob's, lies in holding firmly to what God has promised.

For Jacob another blessed fruit of the mysterious struggle was that he was free from the terror that had gripped his heart when he learned Esau was coming for him with four hundred men. With the Saviour's promise ringing in his ears, he was now ready to meet Esau, ready for whatever surprises that new day might bring.

God still appears to His people on occasion as though He were an opponent. Each of us has known dark hours when we were unable to see God's mercy and saw only a face that looked angry. Jacob held on to God even when He appeared as his opponent, and he won a blessing. We will have that same experience when in faith we learn to say, "My Saviour, I will not let You go unless You bless me."