

In this series, we're stopping at various places in the Old Testament to see a single, small story unfold. We get to observe a snapshot of the lives of various ancient fathers of our faith, and we get to ask what these moments can teach us. So last week, we met Abram, saw his first, life-changing encounter with God.

Today, we're going to meet Abram's grandson Jacob at the moment in his story that is the ultimate summer moment for many a young man.



So let's be honest for a minute: who in here has, at some point in your life, totally unironically and with great joy, watched professional wrestling?

I loved WWF (now WWE) when I was a kid. My best friend and I watched it all the time. Those were the days of Hulk Hogan vs. Sergeant Slaughter. Ultimate Warrior and Macho Man Randy Savage. Jake the Snake. The Undertaker. Ray Mysterio. Even after I found out the matches aren't quite totally... unscripted... I still had a lot of fun watching WWE.



I think it's because the characters, the wrestlers, are so much larger than life. They all have personalities, characters they inhabit and play all the way. They brag big, walk in with swagger. The matches seem larger than life. When I was a kid, some of the best matches were the Summer Slams, where the wrestlers were always promising big shakeups. Battles for belts. Titles on the line. That sort of stuff that for a 10-year-old were huge.

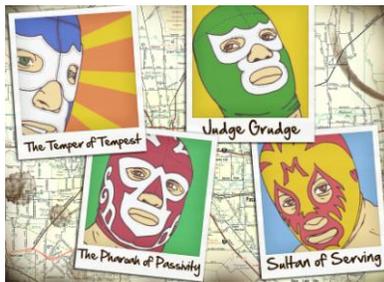
When I read this story from Jacob's life, about his wrestling match with God, I can't help but think of the WWE guys, of their large- than-life matches. Because this moment has that same sort of feel for Jacob. This is a world-changing night. This is one of those summer slams that actually lives up to the hype. So today, brace yourselves. Because there's gonna be *Pain at Peniel!*



Let's meet our contenders. First, Jacob. He's our everyman hero, the guy we can all relate to. See, Jacob's got a thing – call it a habit, maybe. Or a personality quirk. Jacob is a trickster; his name even means "Deceiver". Jacob is smarter than everyone around him, and he uses his wit to his advantage. In every relationship, he's always jockeying for position, doing whatever it takes to get the upper hand. If you know any of Jacob's story, you know he had to leave home after he stole his brother's birthright and lied to his dying father. He spent the next 14 years living abroad at the mercy of a guy named Laban who became his father-in-law and who was almost a match for Jacob when it came to lies and tricks. You can imagine how well that ended up: Jacob and his wives end up on the run from Laban, and Jacob has nowhere to run but back to his brother who - the last time he saw him - wanted to kill Jacob for his deception.

Jacob's thing – this way he has of manipulating the people around him – it's how he tried to control the world. How he tried to make sure he was comfortable, that he always comes out on top.

And like I said before, Jacob's our Everyman. He's you and me. We all have a thing. We all have something about ourselves that isn't... could we say isn't probably totally 100% the way we know we should be? A flaw in our character.



We don't call it that... we say it's a quirk. Or a habit. Or a personality trait. Jacob was a liar, a manipulator. I get that because I'm a lot like he is. But maybe that's not your thing. Maybe you have a temper. Or hold grudges. Maybe you're too passive - we let people walk all over us. Or we spend all our time serving other people instead of letting our relationships be mutual.

Whatever our thing is, it's how we interact with the world. Whenever Jacob felt unsure or uncomfortable, he manipulated people. Deception is how he regains a feeling of control. What's your thing? What's your natural response in an uncomfortable situation? How do you ensure that you feel good about life?

The thing is, deep down, we know it's not the best way to live. If you lie, you know it's not good – that's why we made up the term "white lie". If you have a temper, you know you should learn to control yourself better. If you're a doormat, you know you should stand up for yourself. But we're *comfortable* the way we are. We get *by*, and we're not *awful* people. So we think, Eh... good enough.

But the reality is, good enough isn't good enough. Those ways we are, our *things*, they're actually keeping us trapped in Sin and Death. They're keeping us from becoming the person God calls us to be in Jesus. And, as we'll see in Jacob's story, God will break into our lives, through the shell we put up, to save and transform us.

So let's set our lawn chairs up in Genesis 32 to see the match of the summer. Here's Jacob, having lied and tricked himself out of one dysfunctional home after another. He's on the run and he finds out that his brother Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men (which is an army!). So in his desperation, he sends a bunch of animals and property ahead of him to try to bribe Esau. He sends his wives and children away (so they'll be protected if Esau decides to destroy him). And Jacob prays. He asks the God of his fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac, to save him.

Wait, what? Let's read, beginning in v9:

Jacob prayed, "O God of my grandfather Abraham, and God of my father, Isaac-- O LORD, you told me, 'Return to your own land and to your relatives.' And you promised me, 'I will treat you kindly'... O LORD, please rescue me from the hand of my brother, Esau. I am afraid that he is coming to attack me, along with my wives and children. But you promised me, 'I will surely treat you kindly, and I will multiply your descendants until they become as numerous as the sands along the seashore-- too many to count...' -- Genesis 32:9-12

The crazy wrestling match that's coming up next is plenty fascinating in its own right. But we have to remember that the fight is a direct response to this prayer for salvation. Jacob said, O

LORD, please rescue me from the hand of my brother, Esau. We can imagine what Jacob's expecting, right? Maybe a fireball destroying Esau's armies. Or a magic zombie army to fight for him or something.

This is the Trickster's signature move: manipulation. Jacob is treating the God of his fathers like any of the other gods around him. He's still trying to trick. To manipulate this seemingly-hopeless situation to his advantage. Jacob expects God to fight for him. To be on his side. It's in his prayer - hey God! You promised me you'd take care of me! You promised to be kind to me! So... I'm in trouble! Time to come through!

The problem is: Jacob doesn't understand the problem. If God intervenes the way Jacob wants him to, then Jacob goes on being the Liar, the Trickster. He's going to continue to create these situations where he manipulates and hurts other people to get his way. If God saves Jacob the way Jacob wants to be saved, then Jacob's only going to need saving again the next time he outsmarts himself and gets backed into a corner.

For God really to save Jacob, he's got to save Jacob from... Jacob.

But of course, Jacob doesn't know that yet. So he sends his bribes to Esau, then sends his family away. Now, finally, the scene is set for the most epic, significant wrestling match in human history. Skipping down to v24, we finally meet our other contender, who turns out to be none other than... some dude:

This left Jacob all alone in the camp, and a man came and wrestled with him until the dawn began to break. When the man saw that he would not win the match, he touched Jacob's hip and wrenched it out of its socket. Then the man said, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking!"

But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." "What is your name?" the man asked. He replied, "Jacob." "Your name will no longer be Jacob," the man told him. "From now on you will be called Israel, because you have fought with God and with men and have won."

"Please tell me your name," Jacob said. "Why do you want to know my name?" the man replied. Then he blessed Jacob there. Jacob named the place Peniel (which means "face of God"), for he said, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been spared." The sun was rising as Jacob left Peniel, and he was limping because of the injury to his hip. -- Genesis 32:24-31 (NLT)

Here is salvation for Jacob: none other than *God* busts into Jacob's camp in the middle of the night and literally wrestles Jacob to the ground.

Now, if we stop there for a moment, I'm willing to bet that this story about God makes us a little uncomfortable. It just doesn't really fit with the pictures of God we have. Mostly, we either think of God as a sort of cosmic grandparent who loves us and dotes on us and just sort of grins when we do something bad and says, Don't do that again, silly! OR we think of God as a cosmic judge waiting to smite us from a distance the moment we step out of line. Either way, God is removed from our day-to-day situations. Whether he dotes on us or damns us, God is distant.

But this God - the God of this story, the God of the Scriptures- this God gets all up in our business. God comes to Jacob and grabs hold of him. Forces him into a confrontation. Forces

Jacob to confront the truth about himself, the fact that the only one to blame for Jacob's situation is Jacob. That the person Jacob needs saving *from* is *Jacob*.

We don't like this God. We prefer our God to be at a distance. Someone who just gives us a set of rules to follow and doesn't bother us. Or, even better, a God who just passively approves of whatever we choose to do, who laughs at our quirks and doesn't demand anything from us.



What we actually want is a god we can control. A god who doesn't challenge us, who doesn't confront those Things we all have, those personality quirks that are actually bad, unhealthy, death-bringing ways we interact with the world. We want a god who fights on our side, who always agrees with us and who makes us feel good on Sunday and generally stays out of our way the rest of the week.

But that's not who this God is. As Jacob painfully learns.

We're not sure at what point during this multi-hour match Jacob realizes he's not just fighting some random attacker. But at some point, he realizes he's wrestling with God.

Can you imagine? To figure out that the guy you've been punching and head-butting and kicking and hitting with the metal folding chair is... God?!

As in... the guy who made the whole universe?

So Jacob is on the ground, clinging to this guy, and God says, Let me go.

If you're Jacob, you're thinking, Dude there is NO WAY I'm letting you go! I'm holding on as if my *life* depended on it! (which, of course, it does)

We have these moments, too. These moments in our lives when we are confronted with the mystery of God. Maybe it's in the death of a loved one, or a huge natural disaster. Maybe it's some other kind of personal crisis. Maybe - like Jacob - it's when you create a prison for yourself out of that thing you have. Often it's when our sins finally catch up to us and crush us, like Jacob.

There are times when we go from trying to control God, trying to wrestle God to the ground, to force God to work according to our agenda, our plans, and we get a bigger, clearer picture of who God is and suddenly we're just holding on for dear life, hoping and praying that God isn't about to destroy us. Just like Jacob.

God says, Let me go! And Jacob says, No way, Jose. Not until you bless me. Jacob wants assurance that God's not going to kill him once Jacob lets go.

And God does bless Jacob. God transforms him. He says, **"Your name will no longer be Jacob," the man told him. "From now on you will be called Israel, because you have fought with God and with men and have won."**

This is God saying, Jacob, you asked to be saved, to be rescued. You wanted me to play your game, to prop up your brokenness.

But I've got bigger plans than that. I want to be the God not just of Abraham and Isaac. I want to be the God of Abraham, Isaac and *Jacob*. So that means it's time to get your act together.

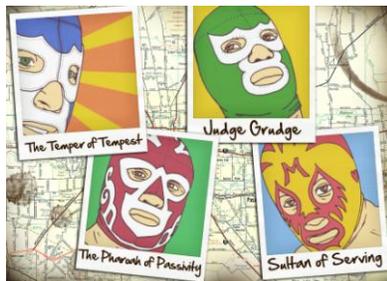
You wanted to be saved? You wanted to be rescued? You've got it. I'm saving you from yourself. I'm rescuing you from your thing - this poison that's killed every relationship you've had in your life.

So, from now on, you're not Jacob anymore. You're not Liar, Manipulator, Deceiver anymore. That's not how you're going to go through life from now on Jacob. Now, you're called Israel (it means "Wrestles with God"). You're going to remember from today forward that you were the Liar but you're not anymore. You're going to remember that I busted into your life and changed you. I saved you from yourself.

Now that you've been made into a new person, you're going to be able to repair the relationships you've broken. You're going to begin the process of healing. Now, instead of your life slowly falling apart, you're a part of my rescue mission.

From this day forward, I'm the God of Abraham and Isaac and *Jacob*. Now, I'm the God of Israel. Now, your people will be the people I use to heal the world.

That's not the rescue Jacob expected when he prayed. But it's the rescue he needed. It's the rescue we need.



God is not content to let us continue in our thing. In fact, truth be told, God hates our things, our personality quirks. Because God knows they bring death. They lead us not to life, but to those places like Peniel where we're all alone, everyone has left us and we face the naked consequences of "that's just who I am."

God *will* deliver us from those places. God isn't content to let us continue in our brokenness. And when we come to those places, those dark nights of the soul, where we're confronted with the truth of who we are, it can be very painful.

Jacob walked with a limp for the rest of his life. A constant reminder of what his deceptions cost him. A constant reminder of how far God had to go to save him. But that's better than death! It's better to limp and live than die healthy! Better to limp away with the reminder of your salvation than continue walking headlong into Death! Better to limp towards healing than continue to destroy yourself and everyone around you!

It's better to limp and live.

It's *better* to limp and live.

[pause]

So here we are. Watching this wrestling match. Knowing how Jacob got here and what it cost him.

And we're thinking about our "things". Those unhealthy ways we live. And we *know* that we need to change. We *know* that God is calling us to be more like Jesus and less like our sins.

But it's scary to be that new person. We're really good at living this way. We know how to get by with our tempers or tricks, our passivity or productivity. We're comfortable in these habits that will destroy us. Just like Jacob was at Peniel.

Let me tell you: your Peniel is coming. God will not passively sit by and let you waste your life. God will come to you. God will wrestle with you. That's the deal you make when you choose to follow Christ.

So the question is not, Will we step in the ring or not?

The question is, Do you want to wait for that dark night at Peniel? Do you want to wait until God comes crashing into your world to save you?

Because you don't have to wait for God to Stone Cold Stun you. Instead, you could learn from your ancestor, Jacob. You could let *this* be the moment you put down your old name, your thing, the "way you just are" and embrace who God is calling you to be.

You could today, right now, follow Jacob's example and become part of God's people. You could become Israel.

What's stopping you? Your comfort? Let today be the day you quit being content with "who you are" and start striving to become the person God is calling you to be. Begin the journey of reigning in your temper. Learn to be honest instead of deceitful. Learn to stand up for yourself and others. Whatever your thing is, the thing you know isn't truly the Way God created you to live (we just spent a loooong time talking about the Character God calls us to with the Fruit of the Spirit - if you really need a starting place, start there!)

God is calling you away from your Jacob-ness. Away from those patterns of living you have that bring pain and death to you and the people around you.

God wants to set you free from those things. So will you embrace that freedom? Will you wrestle with those bad habits and quirks, learn to be the person you were created to be. Learn to be a person who brings healing instead of pain.

It will hurt. It won't be comfortable. But it's better to limp and live.

Examine

1. What's my 'thing'? What unhealthy habit or quirk do I have that I know I need to change?
2. How has my thing shown up in my life in the past week?
4. Instead of giving into my thing, what is one way I can choose to be the person God is calling me to be this week?