

Wrestling With God
(sermon for January 1, 2011)
By Dr. David R. Mains

Text: Genesis 32:22-31.

Subject: Wrestling with God.

Desired Response: Say, "I'm not letting go until You bless me."

How To: Fast and pray.

How Long: Keep at the discipline until you know God has heard your cry for help.

Sermon in a Sentence: When wrestling with God, it's wise to say, "I'm not letting go until You bless me."

The approval rating of President Obama, a Democrat, is not all that high. What's interesting is that the Republicans are having trouble coming up with a candidate they feel can beat him in the next election.

Would you believe that the Senate and House of Representatives score even lower than the president in the opinion of most Americans? It's like everyone knows the country has serious problems, but nobody seems capable of fixing them.

My personal conviction is that what's wrong with this nation is an issue that's bigger than what politicians can solve. I'll explain what I mean, but first I want to look at an ancient Bible story.

Tradition has it that Jacob was a strong man.

A careful reading of Scripture implies that this was so.

True, Jacob wasn't an outdoorsman like his brother Esau. Instead, Genesis describes Jacob in his early years as "a quiet man staying among the tents."

We know that Jacob was also a crafty individual. Some would say devious. To get the family birthright, which always went to the firstborn son, Jacob took advantage of his twin. The Bible reads:

Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. He said to Jacob, "Quick, let me have some of that red stew."

Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright."

The birthright, which always went to the firstborn, included a double portion of the family inheritance PLUS the privilege of priesthood. Later, you recall, God set aside the tribe of Levi for the priesthood. But at this earlier time, this privilege and responsibility went to the firstborn.

“Look, I am about to die,” Esau said. “What good is the birthright to me?”

He wasn’t going to die. He was just what we would casually call “starved.”

But Jacob said, “Swear to me first. So Esau swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.

Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, then got up and left. I told you he wasn’t anywhere close to dying!

Genesis 21:29-34 ends with these words:

“So Esau despised his birthright.”

In other words, it didn’t mean all that much to him. To Jacob, however, it was important.

Hebrews 12:16 reads, *“See that no one is ... godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son.”*

In Genesis 27 we read the familiar story of how Jacob resorted to outright deception to also get his father’s blessing. In patriarchal times, godly men under inspiration often bestowed prophetic blessing on their progeny. This passage begins:

When Isaac was old and his eyes were so weak that he could no longer see, he called for Esau his older son and said to him, “My son.”

“Here I am,” he answered.

Isaac said, “I am now an old man and don’t know the day of my death. Now then, get your weapons—your quiver and bow—and go out to the open country to hunt some wild game for me. Prepare me the kind of tasty food I like and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my blessing before I die.”

Rebekah overhears these words and convinces Jacob, here favorite of the twins, to put on Esau’s clothes and to cover his neck and hands with goat’s hair to fool her almost-blind husband.

A meal is quickly prepared, but their chicanery is almost discovered when Jacob has to answer a question.

“Come near me so I can touch you, to know whether you really are my son Esau or not,” says Isaac.

Scripture reads: *“Jacob went close to his father Isaac, who touched him and said, ‘The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau.’”* After eating and having some wine, Isaac is still not convinced there’s no funny business going on. *“Come here, my son,” he says, “and kiss me.”*

(verse 22) *When Isaac caught the smell of his clothes, he blessed him and said,*

“Ah, the smell of my son

is like the smell of a field

*that the LORD has blessed.
May God give you of heaven's dew
and of earth's richness—
and abundance of grain and new wine.
May nations serve you
and people bow down to you.
Be lord over your brothers,
and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.
May those who curse you be cursed
and those who bless you be blessed."*

So, the mother/son plot worked!

Genesis 27, starting with verse 30:

Jacob had scarcely left his father's presence when his brother Esau came in from hunting, fixed a meal and took it to his father, only to be asked, "Who are you?"

"I am your son," he answered, "your firstborn."

Isaac trembled violently, "Who was it, then, that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it just before you came and I blessed him—and indeed he will be blessed."

In fact, it's interesting how accurate Isaac's prophecy was.

Esau's reaction to his brother's deception was so strong that Jacob had to flee for his life.

We pick up Jacob's story years later. He's spent a long time working for his uncle Laban in a far-off place. Jacob has become quite wealthy. He now has two wives (they're sisters) and at that point, eleven sons. Then God tells him it's time to return home. *"I will be with you,"* promises the Lord. But that's still a scary command.

On his way back, with this large train of people and animals and possessions, Jacob hears news that his older twin brother is coming to meet him with an army of 400. It's in this time of great anxiety that we come to the passage I have chosen to spotlight.

Genesis 32:22-32...

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

The man asked him, "What is your name?"

“Jacob,” he answered. [Ironically, “Jacob” means “he grasps the heel,” or figuratively, “he deceives”—“liar.”]

Then the man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.”

Jacob said, “Please tell me your name.”

But he replied, “Why do you ask my name?” Then he blessed him there.

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.”

The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.

I don't know when it was that Jacob first realized he was wrestling with God. Certainly it had to have been an “aha!” moment. Again, tradition has it that he was wrestling with an angel. So maybe it was when Jacob got his arms around his opponent in a bear hug and felt ... wings?

Then again, it could be it was the pre-existent Christ, whose supernatural strength Jacob soon realized was more than that of any human opponent he had ever taken on.

Whenever or whatever this was, strong Jacob knew intuitively that he was in a match with God that he wasn't going to win. I'm sure he had been told about times his grandfather Abraham had experienced supernatural encounters. Such revelations weren't entirely foreign to Jacob either. Knowing that the Lord had told him to return home, and that Esau was still out there somewhere with 400 men, Jacob wasn't about to let go without first receiving God's blessing.

This he received in two ways. The first was his new name, and second was a wound that robbed him of any personal strength he personally had, and now made him totally dependent on God. This would be true not only when meeting his brother, but also in terms of the entire rest of his life.

So what does this account have to do with where my sermon began? As you recall, I was talking about America and the current problems she is facing.

I believe with all my heart that America—maybe not the whole country, not the irreligious Esau part, but certainly his twin that got the birthright and blessing, strong Jacob, the church—is unknowingly wrestling with God. The Lord Himself has once again taken to the mat and has His present opponent of choice in a spiritual hammerlock. Starting to feel the pain, we're foolishly still crying for help to people who are incapable of doing anything for us. Now it's time for our “aha” moment when we realize that the one attempting to get our attention is none other than God Himself.

Don't think me weird. This won't be the first time the Lord has said to a nation, “I'm totally capable of bringing you to your knees if you continue to ignore me.” On numerous occasions Jehovah made life miserable for Israel in a loving attempt to bring the country back to Himself.

I don't think for a moment that He wouldn't do the same thing for a backslidden nation like America. What I'm asking you to do is to think about what I have just said. If I'm right, it makes no sense to assume that the president, or the Congress, or even future leaders are going to be all that effective in coming up with solutions to our present problems.

So people are hurting. Many don't know where their next meal is coming from. The unemployment issue hasn't been solved. Older people are concerned about retirement and healthcare. European money problems are affecting us. Congress is deadlocked. The "Super Committee" failed. One party says "raise taxes on the rich," but most people believe that more taxes will just mean more government spending and more debt, and no one seems to know the way out of the mess we have gotten ourselves into. And lots of people are mad.

I wouldn't go so far as to say that God is mad too. But in His love for this unique land, He may be tightening the screws just like He did regarding another nation he had a special relationship with back in Old Testament times.

It's not fun wrestling with God. Strong or not, I'm sure Jacob was exhausted after going at it all night. If I'm right in my assumption, I would predict that the longer our national wrestling-match with the Almighty continues, the more exhausting it will be for everyone involved.

When wrestling with God, it's wise to say, "I'm not letting go until You bless me." That's my key sentence, so allow me to repeat it. *When wrestling with God, it's wise to say, "I'm not letting go until You bless me."*

Here's how I think that statement can be said in a meaningful way.

When those words, "We're not letting You go, God, until You bless us," are voiced by enough church people through prayer and fasting, I believe the Lord will respond. Resaid, when enough Christians who understand what's going on resort to prayer and fasting on behalf of the nation, God will extend His blessing. Do you believe that?

In a very real sense, the future of America rests in the hands of the people of God. As strange as that sounds, little folk like us, who know the Lord and His ways, hold in our hands the future of this powerful nation. Am I right or not? Is this a prophetic word?

When Judah was surrounded by the barbaric Assyrians in the 14th year of King Hezekiah's reign, it probably seemed a stupid move to many shut up behind Jerusalem's walls, to fight back by praying with fasting. But the Bible reads in Isaiah 37:36—

Then the angel of the Lord went out and put to death 185,000 men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning—they were all dead bodies!

Fasting and praying can be exhausting too. I know that. But it's a proven way of getting God's attention ... of showing Him that we're aware of what's happening and that we recognize His sovereignty, and "we're not letting go until He blesses us."

Are you a believer who will fast and pray for America?

If you have already been doing it, will you continue strong in the practice?

It has always been thought that few people have the privilege of seeing God face-to-face and still living to tell about it.

Jacob did!

On top of that, he got a great change of name.

He saw his dad's blessing come true.

Yes, he was lame from the encounter with God, but in reality it was a gift, an ever-present reminder that his strength was in the Lord.

I'd opt for such a privilege. How about you?