

Those of us who enjoy watching sports may find ourselves connecting with today’s OT lesson in a special way, because in it we hear the story of Jacob wrestling with a heavenly being. So, what are some of the things that we know about the sport of wrestling in our day? 1. Wrestling matches are generally between two persons. 2. The wrestlers are matched by weight. 3. The goal in a wrestling match is to gain and maintain a superior position over your opponent. 4. Wrestling matches can last anywhere from a few seconds to a few minutes. 5. To be a good wrestler requires strength and endurance.

This brings us not only to today’s OT lesson, but to a review of the big picture of Jacob’s life. At the end of June we shifted our Sunday morning focus to the stories of the patriarchs— first of all, Abraham. We heard about his journey of faith with his wife Sarah to an unknown land, their many years awaiting the birth of Isaac, and the testing of Abraham’s faith in regard to sacrificing his only son. Then came the story of how the faithful action of many people helped Abraham find a wife for Isaac.

Then the third generation of Esau and Jacob came along and we discovered how their names reflected their character: how Esau seemed not to take seriously the privileges and responsibilities of being the first born, and how Jacob, whose name means “heal grabber,” starts expressing the behaviors of a trickster. And when Jacob and his mother fool Isaac into giving the patriarchal blessing to Jacob instead of Esau, Jacob flees his home because Esau has vowed to kill him. On his flight to his mother’s relatives in Haran, Jacob lies down to sleep after the first day’s journey. And during his sleep he has a vision in which God repeats to him the promises God made to his father and grandfather of land, many children, and the ability to be a blessing to others. And we realize that it was not because of Jacob’s character, but because of God’s that these promises are repeated to him. For even the next morning after Jacob’s vision, he makes a vow in which he sets up a bargain with God, amending God’s original promise of blessing, saying: **“God, if you will be with me and keep me safe and give me bread and food, so that I may return to my father’s house in peace, then you will be my God, and this stone shall be God’s house...”** *So in light of all of this, we may begin to wonder how God’s promises to Jacob are going to play out, given the type of person to whom they had been made.*

After arriving in Haran, Jacob locates his mother’s brother, Laban, and the bottom line of what follows is that Jacob comes face to face with someone who is more of a trickster than he is, for in two ways Jacob falls prey to the wiles of his uncle Laban. The first was when Jacob requested the hand of Laban’s younger daughter, Rachel, in marriage. On the wedding night, because the bride was veiled, Jacob didn’t know that Laban had actually given him his older daughter Leah in marriage for Jacob’s 7 years of working for Laban. Laban’s explanation for this last minute switch was that in their land it wasn’t the custom to give the younger daughter before the first-born. Later, Laban gives Rachel to Jacob for another 7 years of labor. And secondly, Laban proved to be unscrupulous in his business dealings with Jacob, changing his wages multiple times and after 20 years of Jacob working for him, claiming that everything that Jacob had –his family and flocks—didn’t belong to Jacob, but to himself. Finally, the two agree to set a boundary line between them, which they would not cross to do each other harm.

Jacob then departs from Haran, but he doesn’t get home before having another divine/human encounter which transforms his life. For the question that *we* may be wrestling with at this point is: ***Will Jacob ever be anything more than a trickster?*** And the

answer has as much to do with God, as it does with Jacob. --For as Jacob puts some distance between himself and Laban, he recognizes that he stands between experiences of being tricked and tricking others. And he also stands in the care of a God who seeks to bless him, yet a God whom he has also tried to bargain with to his own advantage.

On Jacob's first day of his journey home, he sends messengers to tell Esau of his return, but they come back with the word that: **"Esau is coming to meet you and he has 400 men with him."** Fearful, Jacob prays to God. And even though Jacob is still doing a bit of bargaining with God, the overall tone of his prayer is different now: **"O Lord, I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness which you have shone to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed the Jabbok River; and now I have become two companies."** Jacob recognizes God's faithfulness in the midst of his own unfaithfulness.

That evening at the Jabbok River, Jacob sends out multiple gifts of animals to Esau hoping to appease him. And later--which is where today's lesson begins--Jacob sends his family ahead of him across the river as well, along with all that he had. Now he is alone. That night, we are told that a man wrestled with Jacob, not just for a few seconds, or a few minutes, but till the break of day. And this "man," whom we usually think of as an angel of God, did not manage to gain a superior position over Jacob. It's a standoff, except that this angel has the ability to sprain Jacob's thigh--*permanently*. But Jacob will not let this being go until he has received a blessing. And when the angel asks Jacob his name, Jacob tells him, a choice that makes him open and even vulnerable to this angel. For in those days it was believed that a person's identity was concentrated in their name, so that if you knew someone's name, you had an inside track as to who they were, which gave you a measure of power over them. In response to Jacob's sharing his name, the angel, whom Jacob now recognizes as God himself, has access to the core of Jacob's character and takes it and reshapes it. No longer the "heal grabber," Jacob is given a new character with a new name: "Israel," meaning "one who strives with God." Notice, God does not respond in kind when Jacob asks him his name--a sign of God setting a saving boundary, making clear his sovereignty in regard to Jacob, even as God blesses him. Now, in humility and gratitude Jacob names that place "Peniel" saying: **"I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."** It's another gift of grace.

When Jacob finally meets Esau the change is evident, because he tells Esau that his gifts of animals are no longer an attempt to appease Esau in order to save his own life, but are a simple sharing with Esau of his own experience of God's blessings.

Living God's way is about transformation. It is about letting God change us every day to become more and more like him. Sometimes we can't see the need for change. Sometimes we can see the need, but we don't know how to be changed. At that point, if we just surrender ourselves to God, as Jacob ultimately did, God will do the rest through his transforming grace. Amen.