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The Family of Abraham: Part 22—Wrestling With God

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Alastair Roberts

Today, I discuss Genesis 32, where Jacob prepares to encounter Esau and wrestles with God at the Jabbok.

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Transcript

Welcome back to this, the 22nd in my series on the story of the family of Abraham. Today we're looking at chapter 32 of the book of Genesis. Jacob, having departed from Laban, they've encountered each other at Gilead, made a covenant and gone their separate ways.

Now, meets with angels of God at a place called Mahanaim. Then he sends messengers to his brother Esau in the land of Seir. And having heard that Esau is coming to meet him with 400 fighting men, he divides his group into two companies, prays to God and then sends a succession of waves of gifts towards his brother.

He then stays in the camp that night and in the middle of the night gets up with his

wives and children and crosses over the brook Jabbok. And as he crosses over the ford of the Jabbok, he's left behind and he wrestles with an angel or with God for that night until the dawn rises. This is once again, a very important chapter against the backdrop of the larger story.

As we're reading this, once again, we need to pay attention to the overarching themes of the story, that this is not an isolated account. It picks up on a series of themes that we have already seen. There is a there and back again character to Jacob's period at Paddam Aram with his uncle Laban.

He sets out and when he sets out, he has an encounter with God at Bethel. He sees visions of the angels ascending and descending and God above this great ladder. Then he renames the place and he goes out.

Here we see a similar thing that he encounters with, has an encounter with angels of God at a place that he calls Mahanaim, which is twin camps. And he calls it God's camp. Now we saw this, that the previous place was called the house of God.

It was the gates of heaven. And here we have God's camp. So there's a symmetry between the event of Bethel and the event here of Mahanaim.

In both cases, there's an encounter with angels. In both cases, there's a name given to the recognition of the place. There's the gates of heaven, the house of God, the camp of God.

And here we also have a recognition that's given through renaming the place. So there's a symmetry there. And in that symmetry, we're seeing the there and back again character of the Jacob account in his period in the land of Padam Aram with his uncle Laban.

He sends messengers at this point to Seir to his brother Esau in the country of Edom. And he tells them that they're supposed to relay what has happened to him, that he has stayed with Laban until this point. And he has oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female servants.

And he is sent to tell his brother or his lord that he might find favour in his sight. He's declaring that God has blessed him. He has grown strong.

He's listed five things, five things like five fingers, the fist, the strength of a person is seen in this number five. And so he has these oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female servants. And now he relays this message to Esau in order to have an encounter with him.

It's important to recognise that Jacob is the one that initiates this encounter. He wants to meet with his brother face to face. To this point, he has been the one who's working in

by means of subterfuge, by means of deception, by means of indirect encounter.

And now he's going to meet with his brother face to face. It's a change. Maybe there's something similar going on with the angels, that he meets the angels face to face.

Whereas previously at Bethel, they appear perpendicular to him, ascending and descending upon the ladder to the heavens. Here he meets them face to face as he's going along the way. It's a change.

And maybe it suggests a greater maturity in Jacob as a character, that he's matured and is now able to encounter both the angels and his brother face to face. When he hears that his brother is coming with him with 400 men, he is deeply afraid and distressed. And he divides his group into two companies.

Again, we had twin camps in the context of Mahanaim, that God has a camp and Jacob has a camp. And here we have a similar thing, except that it's Jacob's camp that is divided into two. He wants to cut his losses.

So not all of his eggs will be in one basket. If Esau falls upon one of the camps, the other camp can survive if it's lucky. And so he's very much thinking in terms of this might be it.

He might have to give it all up. When we look at this story, we should also remember that he's only just got away from Laban. And it was only because of God's intervention that he was not destroyed by Laban, perhaps, or taken back into the house of Laban.

Laban came after him with the power to attack him. And it was only because God intervened that God prevented him from speaking good or evil against him. Laban had to acknowledge that God was with Jacob and let him go.

Whereas if God had not intervened, Laban might well have just taken him back. So what we're seeing here is he's faced with the devil on the one side and the deep blue sea on the other. What is he going to do? It's a rock and a hard place.

He can't go back the way he's come. They've had a division between Laban and Jacob, and they've made this pile of stones and this pillar and this covenant that says that they should not pass over, meaning ill towards each other. And now he's having to head back towards the land and he could try and get in secretly.

But no, he decides to go and have a direct encounter with his brother Esau. It's a very courageous thing to do, seeing what he has done before in the way that he tricked his brother out of his birthright and then later on disguised himself as his brother to get his blessing. And in this event, we will see replaying that story, that that story is at the background and it's being replayed in a subtle way.

And at this point he prays. And now I have become two companies. Deliver me, I pray,

from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him lest he come and attack me and the mother and with the children.

For you said, I will surely treat you well and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude. Reading this account, we should again think about the story of the Exodus. The story of the Exodus begins with them crossing over the Red Sea.

It begins with a pursuit by the person who they were in servitude to. And then it ends with crossing over the Jordan and entering into the Promised Land and conflict with the people of the land. Here we have similar motifs.

Israel or Jacob and his family have already departed from Laban's house. They fled. And it was, as I noted, there are a lot of Exodus themes within that story.

As he crosses, he crosses over the river and he heads towards the mountain of Gilead. And then there's a covenant made at the mountain. We see this is the story of Israel.

And now and the encounter with the father in law at the mountain, maybe it's a replayed in a positive sense in the story of Jethro. Jethro, who encounters Israel after they have crossed the Red Sea and meets with them and becomes an assistant, someone who helps Moses to organize the people well. And maybe that's a positive rendition of the Laban theme.

There are many ways in which Jethro could be seen as a Laban type figure, but in a positive sense. But here there's another aspect of the Exodus motif. They are now entering into the promised land, returning to the land.

And there is this opponent within the land that they have to face off against. And the emphasis upon faith, face is important here. There is a repetition throughout this story of the key term face, even more so in Hebrew, far more so in Hebrew.

And it's playing upon that term. We've had to this point Jacob associated with misdirection, with masks, with covering, with deceit, with trickery. But now he's going for the direct face to face encounter.

He's going to face off against Esau and meet with him directly man to man and having that direct and immediate encounter with his brother, who formerly he had outwitted. He lodges there that night and he sends over a series of presents. Now read this list of presents and you'll get a sense just this is a kingly gift.

He sends over 200 female goats, 20 male goats, 200 ewes and 20 rams, 30 male camels with their colts, 40 cows and 10 bulls, 20 female donkeys and 10 foals. And he delivered them by the hand of his servants, every drove by itself and said to his servants, pass over before me and put some distance between successive droves. And he sends over all

these droves of animals.

And when you think about this list of animals, this is an incredible gift. It's a huge gift. It's quite possible that this is the majority of Jacob's possessions.

He, how many sheep and goats and camels and donkeys and all these other things has he actually gained within the house of Laban? Presumably quite a lot. But this is a huge quantity that might suggest he's giving a significant amount of his property to seek peace from his brother. And maybe he's allowing himself to give up his possessions in order, the majority of his possessions, in order that he might find peace at this point.

There is, the things that he sends are not just animals for use. There is, you can see the difference between the male and female animals. These are animals for breeding.

These are animals that can build up a larger flock and herd. These are not just a few isolated animals that can be used for eating and for clothes, etc. They are animals that he has, for instance, 200 female goats and 20 male goats.

The female goats are for breeding more goats and the ewes and the rams, 200 ewes, 20 rams. Again, the differences in the numbers, this is breeding stock that he's giving to his brother. And so he's multiplied within the land of Laban.

His flocks have become great. And now he's giving this great gift to his brother. That suggests that he's recognised that there are more important things for him at this point.

He's wrestling with God at night, first of all in prayer and then more literally wrestling. And he's discovering that God is challenging him to give up what he has gained. And he has to be dispossessed in some sense.

This story is very similar to the story of Abraham in certain respects. Abraham who has to give up his son. And as he gives up his son, God blesses him.

In a similar way, Jacob by the end of this chapter is left alone. He is sent everything away and he is left alone. He's someone who has little left to him and he's not strong anymore.

He's not got the same strength that he had in possessions. He's vulnerable to the assault of his brother. And he's putting himself into a position of great weakness and vulnerability.

This story then, I think, should draw our minds back to the events of Mariah, where Abraham is called by God to act in sacrificing his son. What Jacob is called to do here is to give up his possessions. All these things that he's slaved for 20 years for, he's supposed to hold them out with an open hand.

His wives and his children, his flocks and his herds. All of these things are now being put in jeopardy as he faces his brother Esau coming towards him with 400 fighting men. It's

a position of great danger, but yet he trusts God within it.

And in the middle of the night, he gets up or in the night he gets up, takes his two wives, his two maidservants and his 11 sons and crosses over the ford of Jabbok. He took them, sent them over the brook and sent over what he had. And so he's left behind.

He's left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. And this story is one that goes through.

It's a chiasmic story. It's a story that begins with him being left alone, ends with him being left alone. There's the wrestling until the break of day and then the sun coming up at the other end.

There's the not prevailing and the socket of the hip and then limping on his hip. And the reference of the breaking of the dawn and insisting upon blessing. And then receiving the blessing at the other end.

Then there's the naming of him as Jacob and then the renaming of him in the very centre as Israel. So there's a chiasmic bookended structure here. And reading that, I think we should see that this is a very significant event.

And with the very heart of it is the renaming of Jacob. This takes place at a significant place. It's the ford of the Jabbok.

The Jabbok is the letters of Jacob's name mixed up. His name is going to be mixed up in this place. He's going to receive a new name.

But Jabbok is also associated with the word Abak for wrestling. So it's the wrestling that occurs at this place of the ford of the Jabbok, which is associated with the word for wrestling. It's a similar word.

And often this is something that we'll see within Genesis. The words are similar and they're playing upon words. It's not a direct etymology.

And we see that in the story of the giving of the name of Joseph, for instance, or in the naming of the woman in the man and the woman in Chapter 2 of Genesis. The names aren't actually cognate in the way that you might think, but they're playing upon the same sounds. They're related in the sounds that they have and they're playing upon the same.

They're playing upon the same sounds, the same consonants at certain points. But yet the meanings are also significant. We see the same thing in the story of Esau and Laban, where we have themes in the story of Laban bricks, brick kilns.

We have themes of white, of the white tree, of the poplar. And then we also have similar things in the story of Esau, Esau and Seir, Seir associated with hairy and goat and the

place where Esau lives. We have Edom and Adam, Edom and Red, Edom and the place where Esau lives.

Red as Esau, white as Laban. All these word plays are important parts of what's taking place within these stories. And again, the name of the place where this wrestling occurs is called Peniel, face of God.

And once again, that theme of face playing through this narrative. There is something about this narrative that foregrounds the face, that Jacob is seeking a face to face encounter with his brother and he will have a direct face to face encounter with God. Now, this account here also reaches a point where, as you see this wrestling between these two figures, it's not always easy to tell who is doing what.

It's one of those blurry camera shots, for instance, in the struggle in some film where you can't see who's striking who. You just know that there's a struggle. And within the Hebrew, many points, it's not entirely clear who's doing what.

I mean, we know we can work out who's doing what, but it takes a bit of figuring out. It's not always obvious. And the angel or the man touches the socket of his hip and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of joint as he wrestled with him.

This is a significant place to strike or to touch. It's not necessarily a strike. It's a strategic touch.

Why would you touch that particular spot? Very intimate spot. It's inside of the thigh next to the hip. Why would you touch that particular spot? It's associated with the loins, with fertility, with bearing children, with virility, all these sorts of things.

It's where that very intimate vow was sworn by Eleazar of Damascus or whoever the servant of Abraham was in chapter 24, where he touched the inside of Abraham's thigh and swore an oath to him that he put his hand up right against his testes, quite probably, and swore to find a bride for his son Isaac. Here, I think you have something very similar, that there's a touching of this very intimate spot. And in this intimate spot, he's made to limp, that this part is changed by that touch.

And in that touch, that touch is a significant touch. And later on, he'll limp and he goes on limping. He's not, it doesn't seem as if this ever fully heals.

He limps, presumably for the rest of his life. But something has changed within this encounter. We'll get back to that in a moment.

What exactly changes? There's repeated references to the breaking of the day. There's in verse 24, a man wrestled with him until the dawn of the day or the breaking of the day. And in verse 26, let me go for the day breaks and I will not let you go unless you bless me.

Again, you have in verse 31, just as he crossed over Penuel, the sun rose on him and he limped on his hip. Significant references to the breaking of the day. Where have we seen earlier references to the breaking of the day? In the story of Sodom, for instance, the story of the judgment of Sodom, as the sun is coming up, they have to hurry.

And if they're not ready, then they will be destroyed with the city. We see it also within the inverse, the reference to the sun going down in Bethel. He leaves and he ends up in this place of Bethel and the sun goes down on him.

And as the sun goes down, he sleeps and it's a nighttime experience. And as I've commented before, the story of Jacob in the land of Paddan-Moran with his uncle Laban is a story that occurs symbolically, as it were, in darkness. The sun has not risen.

And so he's waiting in this darkness, waiting to be delivered from the darkness. And here at this transitional point, the sun rises and he crosses over and he goes and he encounters his brother face to face in the sunlight. Maybe there are similar things going on in the story of the crossing of the Red Sea.

Once again, it's the significance of the sun rising. And when the sun rises, the waters descend upon the Egyptians. Deliverance at sunrise.

So then there is a transition at this point. The water is also a liminal realm. When we cross over water, we are crossing over a threshold.

It's between two places. It's like the door. We've commented upon the door at various points within the discussion of various chapters to this stage.

We've talked about it in the context of the story of Sodom and the threat at the doorway. We've talked about it in the context of the announcement of the birth of Isaac. And again, the doorway in that context.

Doorways are the transition. They're the liminal realms between inside and out. And they're the liminal realms that represent the body as well.

The body has doors. The doors of the womb, for instance. And when those doors are open, the firstborn comes out.

And in this story here, we see the water crossing as a liminal realm. Israel's life was defined by water crossings and identities received at these liminal places. So it's the identity received as they crossed over the river Euphrates and left behind the land of Ur of the Chaldees.

So they served foreign gods on the other side of the river. On the other hand, the Jordan is the place where they enter into the land. And here, the Jabbok is a tributary of the Jordan.

And so crossing over that is a crossing of the Jordan into the land. Then you have the crossing of the Red Sea, leaving Egypt behind. Another transitional moment.

Associated, I would argue, in the book of Exodus with birth. This is the opening of the womb and there is a birth event here. Hold that thought in mind.

Then there's the crossing of the Jordan to enter into the Promised Land. And bringing all these things together, what you see is Israel's life is defined by these liminal moments where they enter in, where they leave behind. And as they look at these various bodies of water, they can see their own spiritual identity bound between all of these realms.

So they are people that exist on the other side of the Euphrates from their forefathers who served foreign gods on the other side of the Great River. They are people who live no longer on the far side of the Red Sea, but now they live away from Egypt. They've been separated from Egypt.

They've crossed over the river so they're no longer in the land of Haran and Paddam Haram and the land of Laban. They've crossed over the river Jabbok and now they've entered into the Promised Land, received a new name. And in each one of these occasions, what we see is Israel is defined by these crossings.

To some degree or other or in some way or other, Israel's identity is forged at these liminal locations. The crossing of the river and birth brings us to another theme. As we look at this, where else has Jacob been caught in wrestling in darkness? Where else might we think about? What other occasion is there this time of darkness and he's wrestling in that context? And wrestling towards the breaking of the dawn, wrestling and associated with receiving a name and a blessing.

Two previous occasions. We see it in the events of his birth where he and his brother wrestle in the womb and he comes out clutching his brother's heel like a wrestler trying to get the best over his brother. He's been wrestling from the womb and now he's wrestling again.

Once again in the darkness, in this watery realm, he's wrestling with this other person who very much mirrors him in different respects. They're struggling. They're very equally matched.

And the man can't overcome him. He doesn't know who he is. Who are you? Are you Laban who's come after me and trying to bring me down? Are you, could you even be Isaac my father, trying to beat me on my own, on better terms? Or more likely, are you Esau, my brother, struggling with me, trying to destroy me at this point in the darkness? Who are you? And yet at this point, we don't know exactly who it is until it becomes more clearly apparent that it's God or an angel that he's wrestling with.

And that wrestling is something that also recalls the event of the receiving of the

blessing. He's fighting, struggling to receive a blessing, wrestling with this other party. And as things in the darkness of his father's blindness, waiting to receive this blessing.

And as he wrestles, then the question, who are you again? What is your name? The same sorts of questions are taking place here. But what is your name? Jacob. More direct answer this time.

And so this might recall the wrestling with Esau in the womb, the wrestling with Jacob, perhaps, the wrestling with Isaac, perhaps. That Isaac would not give him the blessing. And then he asked the name of the angel and is not given it.

That particular wrestling then leads to a blessing. Jacob had struggled for the blessing from his father Isaac against his brother Esau, and he had received it. He had struggled in the womb with his brother and had come out late.

And the name that he had received there had been in many ways one with negative overtones. Jacob, supplanter, heel, the one who is associated with supplanting. And Esau reiterates this name and its meaning after the events of the blessing.

Jacob is not a positive name. And here he comes to this place where the letters of his name are mixed up in Javok. Jacob, Javok.

It's mixed up and now he's struggling, he's wrestling. He's this struggle which plays again after the name Javok and he's struggling with God. And he's asking the name and he's asked his own name and he's asking for a blessing.

And in each one of these respects, we are seeing a birth narrative played out again. And then he breaks forth into the light and he goes out limping with his foot, his hip. Again, it's a foot wound or leg wound similar to the grabbing of the heel.

Now there's a wound upon him, upon this intimate part. We'll get into this a bit more tomorrow. But the other thing we should notice here is the similarities with the story of Abraham.

If you look in the story of Abraham, you can see that Abraham has a similar series of events. Laban is like Lot in many respects. Lot and Laban are both associated with two daughters that outwit them.

Lot and Laban both part ways. Laban parts ways with Jacob and they go their separate ways, divide territory between them. Where have we seen that before? In the story of Lot and Abraham in chapter 13 of Genesis.

They leave the land of Egypt and at that point they divide the land between them. They say divide the land between us and Lot goes to the direction of land that looks like Egypt, looks like the Garden of Eden even in its fruitfulness. And having divided the way,

they depart from each other.

They go their separate directions. We see a similar thing with Laban and with Jacob in the previous chapter. There's a parting of the ways.

And then there is this event of wrestling, this event of wrestling with God. This is a similar thing perhaps to the events that we see later on in Abraham's life as he's called to sacrifice his son. But the wound upon the thigh, on the inside of the thigh, at the joint of the hip, it's a significant location as I suggested.

And it's connected with fertility, it's connected with the loins, with the seat of the seed. And that I believe is also associated with Abraham who is circumcised. And at that point he's circumcised and there's also a division that occurs after that with two brothers.

There's a division between Ishmael and Isaac. So a division first of all with Lot and Abraham and then there's a division between Ishmael and Isaac or between Abraham and Ishmael. Here we have the division later on that will occur between Esau and Jacob.

So I think there's some basic symmetry that is playing out here. The calling for Jacob to give up everything that he possesses at this point and to hold things with an open hand. Sometimes God comes as it were as an enemy.

God came to Abraham calling him to give up his son. God comes to Jacob telling him to go back to his land and he has to have a direct encounter with the brother who wants to kill him. And in that encounter he is thrown completely upon God's mercy.

He has to depend upon God to act on his behalf. And he puts over his wives and children over the river and he's over the ford of the Jabbok and he's left alone. And he has to wrestle.

And as he wrestles with God he succeeds. He is finally blessed. But this wrestling is something that draws our mind back to all these previous events of wrestling.

You have wrestled with man, God and with men and have prevailed. Who are the men that he has wrestled with? Well he's wrestled with Esau. From the very womb he's been wrestling with Esau.

He's been wrestling with his father Isaac who would not give him the blessing. He was wrestling with his father-in-law Laban who tricked him concerning his daughters and would not pay him fairly. Tried to withhold his payment and changed his payment ten different occasions.

Tried to pursue him and bring him back to the land. In every single one of these occasions Jacob is wrestling with man. And he has wrestled with God as well.

This does not just mean that he's been wrestling with God in this particular instance. It

means I think that he's been wrestling with God throughout. And as he's wrestled with God he's grown and he's become stronger.

He's someone who is now a God wrestler or someone who wrestles with God or who wrestles for God. They play on different terms. And again this is a play on words.

It can be read in a number of different ways. It could be read Prince with God. In these different ways in which Israel can be read it suggests once again this is a term that is playing upon words.

And words that are closely related in their sound or in their meanings and roots. Once again we do not have to just settle upon one meaning. We should see the word play because word plays throughout this book of Genesis.

But particularly in the story of Jacob it comes very much to the fore. We are dealing with word plays here and these word plays are meaningful. That these two different terms that are similar to each other.

So Jabbok associated with wrestling. Also associated with Jacob. And those things help us to see why this might be a significant ominous spot for Jacob to have wrestling.

Because his name has always been a big issue. His name is mixed up and now he's going to receive a new name. Earlier on we've seen changes of names.

Bethel, the place of Bethel was previously called Luz. There we see connections with themes of craftiness. And the changing of the name of Luz to Bethel is something that might suggest why his name is changed too.

It's a foreshadowing of the name of the person who changes the name of the place. From something that connotes craftiness to something that connotes, that relates to the house of God. As we read through this what else should we see? We should also notice that this is the moment where Jacob becomes a new person.

He's gone through a number of stages. He's become grown in each stage. And very often when we read these stories we're looking for when is Jacob's conversion.

And that's not the way that the Bible generally presents these things. In the New Testament it may be that we find more of that process, that way of looking at things. And even there we need to be careful at the emphasis, the weight that people put upon conversion.

What is spoken of as conversion in many cases is not coming from unbelief to belief. It's coming into a new stage of belief. Moving from a faith that is looking forward to the Messiah to a faith that is placed in the Messiah.

The Messiah who has come. And here I think as we're reading through the Old Testament

we need to be very wary of looking for distinct conversion events. Generally we don't find them.

What we find is periods of growth and transition. And I think it's the same in our lives. If we're focused so much upon one past conversion experience we never grow up.

And every single stage of our lives it's as if we have to go through new conversions. We have to become new people. Our faith has to grow to the new situations in life that we're facing.

The sort of faith that Jacob needed when he left his father's house and went to the house of Laban was a different sort of faith than he needs at this point where he's facing off in the darkness with his brother who's trying to kill him. There is a growth that has to occur to rise to this new situation. In the same way in the story of Abraham.

Abraham leaves his father and his father's house and goes out to a land that God is going to show him. And he undergoes a series of tests. And in each one of these tests he's growing up further and becoming more and more mature.

And as he becomes more mature finally he can face that great test. That test where he's called to sacrifice his son. This isn't a conversion experience in the way that we think about it in the modern sense.

But it is an experience of transition. He becomes a new person. He becomes a new person not in the sense of moving from unbelief to belief.

But from moving from belief to a greater form of belief. To a greater maturity. He stands up at a higher stature.

And here this is what we're seeing with the story of Jacob. He becomes a new sort of man. He receives a new name.

The crisis of his life which has been defined by the blessing and the name. The name that he was given at birth. Again I noted there that it's not entirely clear that Jacob was given his name by both his parents.

While Esau was given his name by both of his parents. Jacob's name it seems was just given to him by his father Isaac. And maybe Rebecca saw that it was not a positive name.

And she did not really think that that was the name that she wanted to have her son live with. Later on we'll see Esau stressing the negative content of that name. That he's supplanter.

He's the one who's the heel. He's the one who's the trickster. And here we see that he receives a new name.

Something about him has changed. He's matured. He's gone through this wrestling experience.

And with all this wrestling with men he's been wrestling with God as well. And now he faces as it were this final boss. And having overcome the final boss the sun rises.

As it were the testing is over. The great testing. And he becomes a person with a new name.

And with a new blessing. And this blessing again is a blessing that is given to him by God himself. This isn't the blessing that he has stolen from Jacob.

From Isaac and from Esau. Rather it's a blessing that is given to him directly by God. And at this point we can see that his relationship to that former blessing can change.

And we will see in the chapter that follows how that works out. If you have any questions on this or anything else please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you'd like to support this and videos like it please do so using my Patreon or PayPal accounts.

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