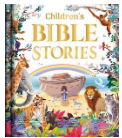


Journey to Reconciliation: God Wrestles with Us
October 4, 2026

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All Saints ABQ

*Grace and peace to you in God who has chosen and redeemed us,
who forgives all our sins and holds us in everlasting love.*



In my study this week, I came across an article by Kathryn Shifferdecker, professor at Luther Seminary, which begins with this illustration:

Several years ago, I ran across a post on a website called “Parenting Beyond Belief.” This website (and a book of the same name) was dedicated to helping parents raise ethical children without relying on religion. The post was written by a mother seeking advice:

“We have been looking for nice, benign Bible story books to use for our kids and in our kids’ program at the humanist society. My husband complains that he can’t seem to find any that don’t make the assumption that god is real. They seem written for believers.”

Though not intended to be amusing, that last line makes me laugh. Imagine a children’s Bible story book written for believers! But the other line that strikes me as humorous is the one about “nice, benign Bible story books,” because anyone who has read even the first three or four chapters of the Bible knows that this book is anything but “nice” and “benign.”

Take the book of Genesis. Three chapters in, we find Adam and Eve cast out of the Garden of Eden, Adam blaming Eve and Eve blaming the serpent. Four chapters in, we have an account of the first murder, brother killing brother. And the family dynamics do not get any better in the rest of the book. Ishmael and Isaac are rivals, as are their mothers. Jacob steals from Esau and then runs away to escape his brother’s murderous rage. Rachel and Leah compete with each other for Jacob’s love. And, at the end of the book, Joseph brags to his brothers about his favored status and so they throw him into a pit and sell him into slavery—that’s our story for next week.



Today we focus on one transformational moment
in the story of Jacob.

Jacob, if you remember, is a scoundrel.

He is a twin, born second but clasping the heel of his brother Esau –
his name means “heel,”

and his early life is spent trying to take what is Esau’s

One time he meets his brother when he is coming in from hunting and very
hungry, gives Esau lunch in exchange for Esau’s birthright.

Later, he and his mother, Rebekah, trick his father Isaac into giving Jacob
the blessing of a firstborn which rightfully belongs to Esau.

He has the blessing and the birthright – but Esau is murderous with rage
so Jacob has to flee.

He flees to the land of his uncle, Laban, where he falls in love with Laban’s
youngest daughter, Rachel.

He works seven years to marry Rachel, but Laban tricks him,
and sends the older daughter, Leah, to Jacob’s bed in Rachel’s place.

Jacob remains with Leah, and marries his beloved Rachel as well.

He has many children with Rachel, Leah and their slaves,
and he become wealthy working with Laban –
in part because he cheats Laban.

His cheating is discovered and he is sent away.

So once again he flees – this time back to his home,
to see if perhaps Esau will be ready to forgive him.

He is full of fear as he returns to his brother and his home.

He hears that Esau is coming on the road to meet him with 400 men,
so he sends ahead messengers with gifts for his brother.

He has not heard from the messengers when night falls.

He sends his household ahead across the river Jabbok.



Jacob is alone as the sun sets by the river Jabbok, and here
is where today’s story really begins.

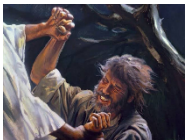
“Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.”

At first, Jacob’s opponent appears to be a human.

But they wrestle through the night, and as daybreak approaches,
the wrestling man says, “you must let me go.”
He doesn’t want to be seen by daylight,
and he refuses to reveal his name to Jacob.
But it seems that Jacob has figured out what is happening, because
his next demand is that his opponent bless him.
And the opponent says, “You shall no longer be called Jacob – heel – but Israel,
which means “one who wrestles with God;” because, he says,
“you have striven with God and humans and have prevailed.”
God gives Jacob the blessing he has asked for, and then he is gone.

Jacob realizes that he has seen God’s face –
if only for a moment – and yet he lives.
And he gets up and goes to join his household,
and they go on to meet his brother.
His fear hasn’t left him, but the time has come to face the one he harmed,
to face the consequences of his deceitful actions so long ago.
When he comes face to face with Esau, Esau says, why have you sent ahead so
many gifts?

*“I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.”
And Jacob says, “No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my
present from my hand, for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of
God, since you have received me with such favor. ¹¹ Please accept my gift
that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me and
because I have everything I want.” So he urged him, and Esau took it.*



Today we focus on the journey to reconciliation –
but instead of the moment of reconciliation between the
brothers,

the story assigned is the time before, the time of fear and doubt,
the time of wrestling with oneself and with God,
We meet Jacob near the culmination of a long journey –
indeed, a journey that includes most of his life.
Very often, stories of journeys (biblical or otherwise)
are also stories about character transformation.

Faced with the prospect of meeting Esau, Jacob can choose to continue on –
or to turn and run, as he has done in the past.

And it is at this moment that God finds him at his most vulnerable,
alone and afraid.

God comes to him, disguised as a stranger,
and God wrestles him through the night.

I've often thought of this passage as "Jacob wrestles with God,"
but this week I noticed that it says, "a man wrestled with Jacob."

The man – who is God – initiates the wrestling,
but Jacob too holds on through the night.

Even when God says it is time to stop, you cannot see me in the daylight,
Jacob will not let go.

He holds on until he receives the blessing he demands from God.

But perhaps the blessing was not Jacob's idea at all,
but the reason for God's coming to Jacob in the first place?



Many of know know what it feels like to wrestle with God –
with questions and doubts, with hurt and hope.

And I realized that perhaps sometimes our wrestling is God wrestling
with us.

God seeking to offer transformation,
to soften what is hardened in our hearts, to heal what is closed and afraid;
and then, when we have been loved and transformed,
God can give the blessing we need.

Really, God's whole struggling, questioning, name-changing encounter
with Jacob can be read as a blessing, albeit a bruising one.

And that can be true for us as well.

Whether we struggle with reconciliation or grief,
with disappointment or fear, God is waiting to meet us,
to wrestle with what is stuck and hard within us,
and to give us a blessing of life and hope.

In a commentary on this story, Matthew Schlimm writes,

*Jacob's blessing from God doesn't come when he's achieved superstar
status as a saint. It comes when he's made a mess of his life, feels*

trapped, is all alone, and has nowhere to go. He's in the middle of a wrestling match. But there amid darkness and confusion, God gives him goodness.

Some of us have come to points in our lives where we imagine that we are beyond redemption; yet from this narrative and from others in the Bible, it is clear that one does not seek redemption when one is whole; rather redemption comes most notably in a state of brokenness—often surrounded by a quality of fear and uncertainty. Such stories tell us to cling to God no matter the struggle, for our God is on the side of life, the side of the lost and the broken.

Jacob is one of those people we might be tempted to write out of the nice and benign children's Bible.

But the story tells us that God chooses Jacob, God calls and blesses Jacob, God wrestles with Jacob to make him the father of the tribes of Israel. And if God can use Jacob the heel for God's purposes – well, maybe God can use our sometimes selfish, sometimes dishonest, wholly imperfect selves.

God can wrestle us as well –
wrestle us right into a blessing.

If we are wrestling with God,
that means we are clinging to God,
and even more, God is clinging to us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen