

Wrestling through the night

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There's an unusual episode in the story of Jacob that appears out of nowhere and disappears almost as quickly. It's the scene at the Ford of Jabbok, where Jacob wrestles through the night with the Lord and, as a result, receives a new name. It reminds me of the other startling episode when the Lord tried to kill Moses; the poor fellow had just been commissioned by a voice at the burning bush to liberate the Israelites from Egypt, and no sooner than he has he started doing the job, the one who commissioned him is trying to kill him. Crazy, right? Except I think there's more to it than that.

Both incidents result in a change of identity.



For Jacob, his victory gave him the name of a victor; Israel means something like he who struggles with God. For Moses, the circumcision of his son by his wife, Zipporah (who was not an Israelite), spared Moses his life; the rite of circumcision being the external indication of keeping the Abrahamic covenant with God and belonging to him. In both instances there is a trial, and the victorious result of the trial is affirming one's identity and growing closer to God. Jacob saw the face of God and yet lived; the experience gave him the conviction to do what he was about to do and face his brother Esau. Moses met the Lord and survived, prepared for what he was about to do in meeting

his brother of the palace, the Pharaoh.

The Jacob story can be interpreted in a variety of ways. The interpretation delivered by the *Exposition of the Divine Principle* explains that this substantial struggle restored dominion over the angel, and by implication all things of creation, as part of the restoration of the three blessings by Jacob. It's a one-off sentence, and perhaps it isn't the most convincing interpretation.

Another way – and I'm certainly not asserting that this is the right way – of interpreting the struggle is to understand the 'man' referred to in the story as Jacob himself: The struggle that Jacob has throughout the night is with himself. How can you sleep the night before you are about to meet the brother who, for the last two decades, has planned to kill you? Jacob must have been praying or just simply thinking about the dangerously fearful thing he was about to attempt the next day. He was about to risk his life in meeting his brother. And yet, the next day when the brothers embraced and Jacob didn't die, in Esau's face Jacob professed to being able to see God. Perhaps the struggle the night before was a premonition, or a visualisation, of what was about to happen the next morning. In fighting himself and conquering, Jacob came closer to God by deciding to face up to his brother and accept his destiny. By risking his life for the sake of settling a family feud, he did something that marked him and changed his identity.



The interesting conversation that takes place after Jacob's victory could be attributed to a conversation taking place inside his own head. (I'm reminded of the film *Fight Club*.) As for the hip injury, perhaps Jacob slipped and injured himself as he was walking around the watery ford; his thoughts were elsewhere and may not have been so keenly focused on where he was walking. (Also, according to the Bible he was 97 years old, so he may not have been steady on his feet!) While this is an interpretation I imagined, I hope it's convincing.

I've sometimes spent many hour of the night walking in a park or along roads while praying to God. I would wrestle with my thoughts and feelings about a particular issue, sometimes shouting out to God, sometimes weeping, sometimes tired and confused and unsure how to deal with things. But the important thing, I feel, is that whatever the thoughts or feelings were, they were offered to God. By inviting God to receive my thoughts and feelings, and by seeking God's point of view on the situation I'm in, I grow closer in my relationship with God; I reinforce the notion that I belong to God, that my identity is most fundamentally shaped by my origin in God. Jacob connected his turmoil with God and after wrestling all night with his anguish, he finally arrived at a peaceful conclusion connected with a resolved determination to do what he felt was the right thing to do. I do believe many people have shared a similar kind of experience. And if this has not been experienced, perhaps it's time to stay up all night wrestling with a life-or-death determination to resolve a complicated issue.

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