

BELPRES CHURCH

Prayer: Wrestling With God

Genesis 32

(Optional additional reading: Genesis 33, Luke 18:1-8)

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Good morning. Good to see you all. If you don't know me, my name is Anthony Ballard and I'm the Director of Discipleship here. And today's scripture comes from Genesis chapter 32. And let me just say right now that it's a bit of a strange passage, some weird stuff happens. And before I read, there's some context I want to set up for you to help you know what's going on.

This story is focused on a man named Jacob. Jacob is one of the key figures in the Bible. If you haven't heard of him. He's the grandson of a man named Abraham. He is the son of a man named Isaac, and then he goes on to father 12 sons. Wow. 12 sons who then go and become the 12 tribes of Israel. And in this moment, Jacob was in trouble with his older brother Esau. And the trouble that he's in was trouble from his own making.

And just now that he learns that his brother Esau that he betrayed is coming to meet him with 400 men. And Jacob is like, "I'm going to die and my family's going to die. It's all over." But he has nowhere to run. He has nothing he can do, no army of his own or swords or anything. So the only thing he can do in this moment is pray. And here's what he says. "Oh God, my father, Abraham of my father, Abraham, God of my father, Isaac, Lord, you who said to me, 'go back to your country and your relatives and I will make you prosper.' I'm unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your a servant. I had only my staff when I crossed the Jordan, but now I have become two camps. You save me. I pray from the hand of my brother Esau, for I'm afraid he will come and attack me in the mothers with their children. But you have said, I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted."

And here's where he gets a little weird. 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." Then the man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob, he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." And 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's 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. Therefore, to this day, the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon. There you have it folks, a wrestling match in the Bible. You probably weren't expecting that, were you? Personally, I'm not a big fan of wrestling. I didn't grow up watching it or really care much for it. But I do know that there's two different types of wrestling. Okay? There's the actual sport of wrestling, which is in the Olympics. And then there's the WWE, which is people jumping off ropes and body slamming and all that kind of stuff.

And if you don't know, the WWE is purely entertainment. It's theatrics and showmanship and there's all kinds of actors and storylines involved in that type of stuff. But the real wrestling isn't nearly as hyped up. In fact, I can't name a single legitimate wrestler in my life. But I can name several WWE wrestlers and I don't watch it. And I like reading the stories about young men who grew up watching WWE and they get older and they find out that it was fake and they're devastated. Because they had no idea that they weren't actually getting punched. I think for some of us though, prayer, we might think of prayer like the WWE, where it might have some value, maybe. Maybe something's happening, but actually it's probably mostly fake because we can't actually see what's going on. But the thing is, prayer is wrestling, as we just saw in this passage.

Not like the WWE, but much more like the real sport where there's skill involved, where there's time involved, and there's less fame and far less attention to the moment. We're in this sermon series now we're outlining nine spiritual practices that Christians have been practicing for centuries. And these are also things that Jesus has done in his time on earth. And we believe that if we engage in these practices that over time in our lives we will become more like Jesus. And praying can be challenging because we don't pray to anything or any person that we can see, but we pray to an invisible God who is a spirit. We can't see him. So for some of us, praying is like some thing that just happens. But the passage that we just read, though is a moment when there was a physical manifestation of the spiritual practice of prayer.

And the reason Jacob was able to wrestle was because he was so desperate for God's help in this moment. And his wrestling wasn't met with punishment, but he got a blessing out of it. This encounter changed the trajectory of Jacob's life and it even changed his name. In verse 27, again, it says, then God said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but it will be Israel because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

Up to this point. As I said, Jacob had done a lot of meddling and had deceiving and tricking in his life, and most of the issues he was facing was his own fault. And God changing his name was significant because his name, his original name, Jacob, actually means trickster. But the name Israel means wrestling with God. And so I'm sorry if there's anyone named Jacob here that's probably like what? That's what my name means, but it's in the Bible, but you don't have to live out that character.

But the name change signified a complete transformation in Jacob's life and his character. And if I had time, I would tell you all about all the things Jacob did before this, the scandal and all that. But for those of you in All In groups, I've assigned you some extra reading so you can know what happened before and after this thing. Because if I keep going, the worship team will play me off the stage and then I can't. Yeah, but up to this point, Jacob's life has been totally transformed by prayer and wrestling with God. And here's the thing. We're not going to go through this sermon and just learn about prayer. We're going to actually practice this prayer. This Friday to Saturday, May 17th and 18th as a whole church community. We will be engaging in 24 hours of unbroken prayer and fasting. And we're asking everyone, anyone, to sign up for at least 30 minutes to an hour time block.

And you can do this at home, but we also will have space on campus in our welcome room out there, and we'll be transforming that room into a prayer room for the weekend. 24 hours of fasting, 30 minutes of prayer. Last week, pastor Scott preached about fasting, and if you haven't seen that sermon or heard it, I encourage you to go back and listen because he breaks down a lot of the power of fasting. But he gave some critical notes that I want to review with us because I don't want us to miss it. We are encouraging everyone to practice the biblical form of fasting, which is from food. Unless you are pregnant, have other medical conditions where you can't go without food or you struggle with disordered eating. If you're one of those areas, you should not fast from food. Consider instead fasting from anything that distracts you from God, like things like certain types of music or social media. And if you must eat, you can also skip things like dessert and you can just eat food that is unseasoned or bland.

And we're doing this in connection with our new Hope Revival community who's our East African congregation that's meeting in the upper campus. And they are doing 21 days of prayer and fasting, and they're fasting until sundown for 21 days and praying. We don't think that the rest of us are there yet, myself included, for 21 days. So that's why we start

with where we're at. We're doing one day. And the thing is our brothers and sisters in New Hope have been practicing, practicing prayer and fasting for a lot longer than us. It's a normal part of that culture. And so they've been building this muscle longer. But together, all of us combined, we're going to be asking God to move in specific ways that change us and change our circumstances to make the invisible things visible.

And so we're asking God to move in three specific spheres as a community. You and your family, our church and the world. And when you sign up to pray, you'll get a more in-depth list of all the things that we're calling you to pray for and about. So I won't go into too much detail here. But when it comes to praying for you and your family, we're encouraging to use the ACTS model of prayer, the acronym, and together this acronym spells out adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication.

And if you're like me, I get mixed up on what letter I'm on and all that and I'll forget, and then I'll forget what the word supplication means, and then my mind's going to wander off on a trail and then I'm going to mess up my whole prayer time. That's how I would work. But our kids and students Pastor Colin Robeson, he shared how he breaks down this ACTS framework with his five-year-old son.

And he said it like this. "Adoration means, what do we want to tell God that we love about him? Confession is what do we want to tell God that we're sorry about? Thanksgiving is what do we want to tell God that we're thankful for? And then supplication, what do we want to ask God's help with?" So now, it takes it from these words to a conversation that we can respond to with God. And when I heard this breakdown, I thought I was like, "Brilliant. I can remember that I cannot remember the other types of things.'"

And Jacob, we bring this back to Jacob. His prayer that he prayed just before his brother Esau met him was broken down in an ACTS style of prayer. Verse nine says, oh God, my father, of my father Abraham, God of my father, Isaac Lord, you who said to me, go back to your country and your relatives and I will make you prosper. That's adoration. I'm unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. Confession.

I only had my staff when I crossed the Jordan, but now I have two camps, meaning he had nothing and now he has much. Thanksgiving. Then he says, "Save me from the hand of my brother Esau, for I'm afraid he will come and attack me and also the mothers with their children. But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'" That's supplication.

So what do you want to tell God that you love about him? What do you want to tell God that you're sorry about? What do you want to tell God that you're thankful for? And what do you want to tell God that you need help with? That's the prayer model. And my wife

and I, we have a whole list of things that we need God to step in and intervene in our lives.

Because there's things that are beyond our control, beyond any knowledge or skills that we have that only God can handle and change. And there's people, there's family members, and other situations that we have all written down for us to bring before God. And Sarah and I, my wife, we can testify to this because we have seen God transform and move with over consistent prayers. And technically, we are married today due in part to consistent prayers of my mom and her grandmother. We have a little bit of an arranged marriage. Some of you know that we grew up in the same church as kids. And my mom and Sarah's grandmother were good friends and they used to pray that Sarah and I would end up together as teenagers. And we were not interested in each other at the time. They didn't push us or anything, but they would just kind of make us look in the direction and it wasn't working.

Even when Sarah was in college, her grandmother would ask her, "What do you think about Anthony Ballard? Do you think he's a nice guy?" And Sarah would see my pictures on Facebook and I would be wearing suits and stuff, and she would be like, "No, I don't think that guy's interesting at all. He's weird actually." So it wasn't working. But their prayer though would not come to fruition for 15 years later. And the true thing is that they actually prayed for us to find spouses that loved Jesus and loved God more than anything else. But when Sarah and I got engaged, they made these signs that said, we prayed for this.

And just to be clear though. Just to be very clear, God moves over a course of time. Prayer does change circumstances, but more often, prayer changes us. A genie in the bottle will change a circumstance, but not the person. But God will change us with the circumstance. And because if Sarah and I had ended up together way back, way back then, we would not be together today because there was a lot of character development that I needed to undergo and I needed to change before I was able to be the husband that she needs now. God is not a genie in the bottle. He's God.

So our prayers can't just stop it ourselves though. We have to include in. We're part of this broader community, a church community together. And so, we're asking God to do a transformative work in Bell Pres as well. Pastor Scott shared three things that he hopes that God will do in us and through us.

One of those things being that we would experience miraculous signs and wonders, things that can only be explained by the work of Jesus, which was surprising for a Presbyterian church to say that, but that's what he said. But can you imagine, here at Bell Pres, that we start to experience things like healings and prophetic words and

reconciliation of families and marriages that are impossible without the work of Jesus. United communal prayer, well actually can help make that happen.

We are called also to pray for our world. We are part of bringing God's kingdom here in Bellevue and in Seattle and in Israel and Gaza and in Congo. We are a church that's connected to the world. And we're also a church made up of people from different parts of the world. Some of you in this church are from countries that are experiencing war and overt injustice. And for some of you here, these aren't just locations on a map, but they're places that have your friends, your family, and loved ones that you're connected to.

For people in this church, these are the personal prayers that they're praying for, that they need God to intervene in. And so, we believe that God can intervene directly and he can also intervene through us as a community. And so again, when you sign up for prayer and fasting, you'll receive this whole prompt list. And we're not just going to toss you in the prayer room and say, "Good luck." We're going to give you some things to help sustain that time. But we believe that God will transform and change things. If there's something you've been praying for it consistently or even for years, for even decades. Don't be afraid to bring it to prayer this week.

Whatever the grief is, the anger, the sorrow, the joy, you can bring it to God. God responds to consistent and insistent prayers. And Luke chapter 18, there's a parable from Jesus that totally reshaped my understanding of what a consistent prayer is.

And it says, then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said in a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, "rant me justice against my adversary." For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, "Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice so that she won't eventually come and attack me."

And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. It will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out day and night to him. Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice and quickly. However, when the son of man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

Notice that the widow doesn't just bring a long list of to-dos for the judge, do this, do that. But instead she sees the judge as the source of her justice. And so it seems to me that Jesus is suggesting that our faith should be so strong that we can and should be annoying to God with our consistent prayers. Not only does he want it, but he also likes it. Because what it really is showing is not demanding behavior, but it's showing dependent behavior. The Amplified translation quotes the judge saying it like this, "Because this

widow continues to bother me. I will give her justice and legal protection. Otherwise, by continually coming, she will be an intolerable annoyance and she will wear me out."

So one of your points for the sermon is it is okay to annoy God. It is okay to annoy God. We can exhaust him with our prayers until, until, until something happens, until we see something change, until we get a response from him, until he's so impressed by our annoyance and our insistence that he begins to hear our call. And so, our consistent and our insistent prayers when they're united and combined with prayer and fasting and community, they do not remain unanswered for long.

In an All In group I was a part of here at the church, there's a girl named Olivia who's in the group. And Olivia's dad had a heart disease, had heart disease, and he was seriously ill, and he needed a heart transplant. And previously in life, her dad, he was an athletic guy, he ran marathons and did all this stuff, but he was no longer himself now. And so our group at this point, our group had just started meeting for just a few days, and we didn't really know each other like that. And to share such a personal prayer request kind of made Olivia a little bit nervous.

But eventually, she brought it to the group and she shared in this early week that she needed prayer for her dad's healing. And this moment our group leaned in and we prayed for her, and it totally connected us on a deep level right off the bat. But as weeks went by, she continued to share the same prayer requests for her dad. And then months went by and nothing had changed. No healing, no transplant, and there was a real possibility that her dad could possibly die. And as time went on, she was a little more reluctant to share this prayer request. She even said, "Guys, I'm sorry to sound like a broken record, but I need prayer for my dad." Months we had gone through this.

And one week we read this parable together about praying and not giving up to encourage her, and her boldness was renewed. And we as a group continued to pray like a broken record every week for her dad. After a year of meeting together, a year of eating and laughing and discussing life, sharing stories and praying, her request was finally answered. And her dad received the heart transplant. And he's alive today. And for a time he was only surviving in life, but now he is thriving. And she told me recently that he had a goal to be able to jog a mile after his transplant by June of this year. And he has already completed that goal in his life.

Our group is a witness to the power of consistent and insistent prayer. And I'm looking around the room. I think some of us are in here right now in our All In group. This happened here on this church. And we can experience more of that transformation and more of those miracles here today. The practice of prayer transforms us from being independent on ourself, independent and caring for ourselves, to being dependent on God. It's wrestling with God in prayer is like Jacob are going before the throne with

persistence like the widow in Jesus parable. It changes our circumstances, but more importantly, it changes you. It changes me.

So Friday and Saturday, we want to be a church that grabs God by the leg and begins to wrestle with him. And then when God tells us to let him go, we say, "Not until you bless us, not until we get a response from you, God." Some of you may be prayer is something that you don't really want to do because maybe you haven't heard a response from God. I encourage you to show up and say, "God, I just want to hear your voice. I want to hear a response." You will hear a response.

In verse 17, God, it says that God blessed him there. So that Jacob called the place Peniel saying is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared. Then the sun rose above him as he passed Peniel and he was limping because of his hip. When we wrestle with God, two things happen. We get a response and we get a limp. We get a response because God is faithful to hear the people who humble themselves with prayer and fasting, and he will hear and act on their behalf. And then we get a limp because God does in moments like this, he makes us less independent and more dependent on him. And so I hope though for us that we actually become a church that limps, that we have a limp problem.

We have a hip that's dislocated because that means we're a transformed church that's less dependent on ourselves and dependent on the only one who can do anything about anything. And the limp isn't bad. It's not a bad thing, but it reminded Jacob of his encounter with God that he once saw God, the God of the universe, face to face. So the word for you is walk with a limp.

Amen.

Amen. Let's go. It's a sign of victory. Jacob's limp was a sign of his victory in his encounter with God. And someone else had a sign of victory. Jesus. Jesus, after his resurrection, he ate rose with a new body. He had all power and all authority. He was now free from any type of weakness our natural bodies have. Yet two or maybe actually four things existed still when he rose. It was the holes in his hand and the marks in his feet that showed that he had, these were not signs of his defeat or his death, but they were signs of his victory, that he had overcome death and that he was alive with all power. Signs of victory. The limp is a sign of victory.

And so, I encourage you this week to bring all your fears, your hopes, your dreams, your anger, any grief that you may have and wrestle with God in prayer, wrestle with him and watch how he transforms you, transforms circumstances. And if thinking about telling your friends you're going to prayer on a Friday night sounds boring, tell them that you're going to a wrestling match that's going to change your life.

Amen. All right. Well, let's pray. Lord Jesus, we are coming before you as we prepare ourselves, our hearts, and our minds to wrestle with you. Lord, we all have needs. Some of us have big things. Some of us just need to hear your voice. Maybe we haven't heard you speak to us before. So Lord Jesus, I pray that you'd meet us, whether we're praying here on campus or we're praying at home, meet us, wrestle with us. And Lord, we will not let you go until you bless us. So we know that you're faithful to do that. And it's in Jesus' name that we pray. We love you, Lord. We want to be more like you. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- Jacob was faced with a life-threatening problem, in that moment he turned to God in prayer (v 9-12). What stood out to you from his prayer?
- Jacob encountered God face to face in a location and then gave it the name Peniel (Face of God) to remember what happened there. Is there a special place or time in your life that reminds you of God's presence?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- In his sermon, Anthony laid out the ACTS prayer framework: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication. Which of the 4 steps comes easiest to you, which do you need to further develop and why?
- Have you ever felt like you've wrestled with God in prayer or in life? If not, is there something you need God to do for you that you may need to wrestle with him about?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.