

## Wrestling With God

By Rich Jacobs, M.D.

*Yes, he wrestled with the angel and prevailed;  
He wept and sought His favor.  
He found Him at Bethel  
And there He spoke with us,  
Even the LORD, the God of hosts,  
The LORD is His name. Hosea 12:4, 5*

1. These verses are spoken by God through the prophet Hosea to encourage Israel to repent and return to Him. Read **Hosea 12:1-6** for more context.
  - a. The verb translated “he wrestled” (Hebrew: *yassar* - יָשַׁר) can also mean “he appointed as prince” (*Sar* in Hebrew, means “prince”, so *Sarah*, the feminine version of *sar*, means “princess”).
  - b. The verb translated “he prevailed” (Hebrew: *yuchol* - יָכַל) can also be translated “he endured” or “he attained”. With a little grammatical stretching, **Hosea 12:4** may be translated, “*He appointed as Prince the angel and he attained*” Since the angel turns out to be God, perhaps the lesson is that when we make God the king, we attain or prevail!
  - c. The NASB capitalizes “He” in “He spoke with us”. I believe this could be written “he -- small “h”, referring to Jacob, “spoke with us” - meaning the plural designation for God. (i.e. Jacob found God at Bethel, and there, Jacob spoke to God.) See **Genesis 3:22** for a similar construction.
2. Notice that the angel (Hebrew: *malach* - מַלְאָךְ) is none other than the Lord God (YHWH).
  - a. Not only is He the everlasting, all-knowing, almighty God, He is also the “God of hosts” -- a mighty Heavenly army
  - b. Jacob found God (or, God found Jacob) at Bethel, which in Hebrew means “house of God”.

### QUESTIONS:

1. Why do you think Jacob wrestled with the angel? (Hint: Note that Jacob also wept and sought His favor).
2. Why do you think Jacob was so desperate to win God’s favor? Explain.
3. How could “wrestling with God” appoint Him as King? Explain.
4. How could a mere man prevail against an angel, much less against God? What does this tell you about God’s intentions? What does this tell you about Jacob’s faith?
5. Why was God, through the message of Hosea, reminding the nation of Israel if this historical wrestling match?

Now, let’s look at the actual encounter between Jacob and God.

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*He took them and sent them across the stream. And he sent across whatever he had. Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob's thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking." But he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." He said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed." Then a Jacob asked him and said, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And he blessed him there. So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved." **Genesis 32:23-30***

1. Jacob had outsmarted his swindler father-in-law, Laban, and there was animosity between them. God told Jacob to return to Canaan and He would be with him (**Genesis 31:3**).
2. Fleeing from Laban, Rachel stole Laban's household idols (**Genesis 31:19** - perhaps they were made of a precious metal, like silver). Laban and his household pursued Jacob.
3. God appeared to Laban in a dream and warned him not to contend with Jacob (**Genesis 31:24**). Rachel successfully hid the idols during the encounter with her father, so Jacob and Laban were reconciled and made a covenant with one another (**Genesis 31:44**).
4. Having escaped Laban, now Jacob had to encounter Esau, whom he defrauded of his birthright. Esau was coming to Jacob with 400 men, so Jacob sent his entire household before him and remained behind to seek the Lord's help. He does so by reminding God of His promises to Jacob (**Genesis 32:11, 12**). This leads to the wrestling match with God.
5. Jacob does not give up. As a result, God changes Jacob's name to Israel and gives Jacob (now Israel) the blessing he seeks.
6. There is a play on rich imagery in **Genesis 31**.
  - a. Jacob's name (יַעֲקֹב *yaaqov*) is from the Hebrew verb "he supplanted, he overreached, he assailed" (אָקַב *aqav*). Jacob was born while grasping his brother Esau's heel, as though he was trying to overreach or supplant his brother in the birth order. A derived adjective in Hebrew means "deceitful" (אָקוּב *aqov*). This certainly describes Jacob, who was clever and deceitful in his dealings with Laban. A related word in Hebrew means "heel or hind part" (אָקֵב *aqev*). Jacob grasped his brother's heel during the birth of his fraternal twin, Esau. Jacob's name was all about who he had been and who he was as a person. This is typical in ancient cultures.
  - b. Notice that when the wrestling match ended, the "angel" touched Jacob on the "socket of his thigh" or "his hip" - *i.e.* on his "hind part" (although a different Hebrew phrase is used to express this).

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- c. When Jacob is renamed, his new name has nothing to do with Jacob or any of his characteristics. He becomes *Israel* (יִשְׂרָאֵל), which means “God perseveres” or “God strives”. Israel’s new identity is all about God persevering and striving with His people and not about Israel’s own efforts and performance. Both his nature AND his name changes.
7. Israel named the place of the wrestling match with God “Penuel” (פְּנּוּאֵל), which in Hebrew means “face of God”.
8. Notice all the emphasis and symbolism around names and the meaning of names. This is important.

### Questions:

1. Rachel brought Laban’s idols with Jacob as they fled to Canaan. There is no evidence that Jacob surrendered these idols to Laban or that he disposed of them. Do you think this could have had any spiritual consequences for the nation of Israel? Explain.
2. Why do you think God met Jacob and wrestled with him? We’ve already discussed why Jacob met God.
3. Why do you think God crippled Jacob by touching him on his “hind part” or his hip?
4. What does it say about Jacob that he continued to wrestle with God, even after his hip was dislocated?
5. Why do you think Israel’s dietary laws prevent them from eating from the “hind part”?
6. What do you think God was saying when He changed Jacob’s name to Israel? Do you think the fact that Jacob’s descendants took the name Israel for their nation is significant? Explain.
7. Who’s face do you think Jacob saw when he saw the face of God?

Now, let’s turn our attention to a parable Jesus taught about seeking God’s favor.

*Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, saying, “In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. “There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’ “For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.’” And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge \*said; now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? “I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?” **Luke 18:1-8***

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1. Notice that Christ's parable in **Luke 18** is all about persistence in prayer.
2. The widow strives with the worldly judge to gain the legal protection she requires. In a way, she "wrestles" with him, seeking his favor, just as Jacob sought God's favor at Bethel, as wrestled with Him there.
3. Even though the judge is an unrighteous man, he eventually grants the widow her desired justice.
4. The phrase translated ". . . she will wear me out . . ." in the Greek is *hypopiazae* (ὑποπιάζει), means "strike me under the eye" or "give me a black eye". In other words, the widow doesn't gain justice because of nagging. Instead, she gains justice because the worldly judge is concerned she will give him a bad reputation ("a black eye") in the community. Even a hypocrite is concerned about his name.
5. Christ ends His parable with a rhetorical question; "*When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?*"

### Questions:

1. What does the concern that the hypocritical judge in Christ's parable have to do with an assurance that God will answer our prayers if we are persistent?
2. Is God concerned about His name? (Hint: See **Exodus 9:16; 20:24; Deuteronomy 18:20** etc. I encourage to do a word search on "My name"!
3. Has God given you a new name? (Hint: See **2 Chronicle 7:14**) What is that new name? (Hint: What do we call people who follow Christ?)
4. What does the rhetorical question that Jesus ask tell us about the relationship between persistence in prayer and faith? Explain.
5. What do you think is the answer to this question, "When the Son of Man come, will He find faith on the earth?" What does this say about the end-times, when Christ returns again?
6. What does your prayer life say about your faith? About how well you really know God?
7. What can you do to improve in this area of your faith? When? Where? How?