

I. Set Up

A. This series is entitled *Broken: Preparing for the Day When Life Stops Working and Your Faith is Tested*. To that end we've been looking at how to press on through darkness, trials and pain.

B. In week one, we looked at shock – our initial response to major loss. In week two we looked at sorrow or grief. This week's topic is struggle.

1. Struggle is a key topic because not everyone makes it past this point. Everybody struggles. We struggle with other people. We struggle with God. Some people never get past this – others do, and move then into surrender, sanctification and service.

C. The emotion here is anger. The move from Shock to Sorrow to Struggle is a move from numbness, sadness to anger. Many of you are here. You are angry at God. The Psalms give voice to that:

1. Psalm 94 opens, "How long, LORD, will the wicked be jubilant?" In other words, "When are you going to do your job?"

2. Psalm 10 is much the same: Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

3. Psalm 42:9. I say to God my Rock, Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?"

4. Psalm 44:23-24: Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.

D. These are the words of people angry at God.

E. In a bit, we'll be looking at how Jacob's wrestling match with God helps us understand our need to face our struggles and push through them.

F. Right now...

II. Transition

A. We are going to watch a brief clip featuring that prominent 21st century theologian, Jim Carey.

B. This is from Bruce Almighty, a movie in which Carey complains to God about the way God is running the universe – in particular, how Carey's own life is unfolding – and God says, "See if you can do better."

C. It's a bad movie, and we need to be careful that we do not try to draw any insights from it, but it does set up the tension many feel with God. Let's watch this brief clip, which happens right after the figure played by Carey tries to do everything "God's way" and things only get worse.

III. Introduction

A. My stroke happened almost six months ago to the day. About two months ago I ended up in the ER in the middle of the night because I was having problems breathing.

B. My throat was affected by the stroke. Parts of it are paralyzed. For a while I couldn't swallow. I still have some problems speaking. And when I get a cold – as I did then – I cough and cough and cough, but it doesn't work. And on that night my throat was in rough shape and it kept getting worse, and finally, around 3 a.m. I thought that if it got any worse I would not be able to breathe. So I asked Sheri to drive me to the ER.

C. When you walk into the ER complaining that you can't breathe you get immediate attention. However, after they put the little pulse/ox meter on you and it reads 100% everyone goes back to what they were doing. That's what happened to me. The nurse said 100% and you could just see everybody shift into a slower gear. After a while the ER doc came in and asked me some questions and gave me an exam and then gave me a shot and he said, "Mr. Woodruff, your lungs are fine. Your heart is fine. There is no reason for this. I've just given you a shot of Ativan. It will help you relax." In other words, you are having a panic attack.

D. He then left and, as I was able because I still could barely breathe, I said to Sheri. "I don't want you to say anything about this to anyone." And she looks at me and tears are running down my face. And she said, "It's OK to be scared." And I said, "I'm not scared. I'm furious. I'm going to get knocked down again?" My anger at that moment was at God. What was happening to me seemed very unfair.

E. Perhaps you've been there. Perhaps you are there.

F. By the time I got out of the ER I was able to get in to see the throat specialist and he said "OK, I see a problem. We'll treat this with steroids and antibiotics and I got better." I felt a bit vindicated, but I was still a little miffed.

IV. As has been noted, we are exploring our response to major loss.

A. The typical pattern is: shock, then sorrow and then struggle – or numbness, sadness and then anger.

B. To frame our discussion I want to turn to the wrestling match that occurs between God and Jacob – the conniving son of Isaac. Jacob’s story begins in Genesis 25 and he remains a key figure all the way to chapter 47. There is much to say about him.

C. For starters, he is one of the Patriarchs, which means, if the Old Testament was a law firm, he’d be a senior partner.¹

D. Genesis 1 – 11 provides the cosmic context of the Bible. It covers creation, the fall and the promise God makes in Genesis 3 to send help – to send a redeemer. This promise is then the backdrop to the story that begins with Genesis 12 and the call of Abraham. There God makes a promise to Abraham – he enters into a contract of sorts – saying that if Abraham leaves his father’s land and goes where God sends him, then God will bless him with land and descendants and he will fulfill the promise he made in Genesis 3 through Abraham’s blood-line. Abraham accepts the offer and becomes the first of the Patriarchs. The drama Abraham and Sarah undergo has a lot to do with the fact that they are old and have no children. But Sarah eventually conceives (no doubt miraculously) and they give birth to a son – Isaac.

E. Isaac marries Rebekah and they have fraternal twin sons: Esau and Jacob, who are polar opposites.

1. Esau – whose name means *hairy* – is big and burly. Think outdoors. He’s a man’s man. In fact, he’s the original dumb jock.

2. Jacob is a momma’s boy, and his name means *conniver, deceiver, trickster* – is a momma’s boy. And he is a struggler. He is always trying to get the upper hand.

F. Many of Jacob’s struggles are with his brother. He and Esau apparently fight in the womb. (Gen. 25:22). They grow up fighting over their parent’s affection. He cheats his brother out of his birthright over a cup of soup. Then he and his Mom work together to trick Isaac into giving Jacob the blessing that belonged to Esau – think, they deviously changed the will.²

G. After he steals the birthright he has to run for his life. He flees home. On his way out of town (Genesis 28) is where we have the Jacob’s ladder piece.

¹ In fact, he was a name partner. And in the New Testament we will see this, because they will refer to the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”

² This is important for a few reasons: 1) It will be the first of several times when God ends up using the “wrong” person. The oldest male is the one who is supposed to be elevated. But Jacob will be the one to carry the bloodline forward. Joseph will be elevated over his older brothers, David will be elevated over his older brothers. God has a habit of using the one who is not formally qualified; 2) It’s also important because after stealing from Esau he has to leave town. And so he flees.

H. From Genesis 29-32 we have the whole Laban, Leah and Rachel saga. They would have had their own reality show had these events happened today. One of the take-aways is that God can use anyone.

1. Jacob is tricked into marrying – and sleeping with – the wrong sister. He and his father-in-law can't stand each other.

I. After twenty years of living with Laban, God tells him it's time to go home. And he does, but he goes in fear thinking that his brother may still want to kill him. This is where we are picking up the story. Jacob and his now very large family - two wives, 11 children, servants, cattle and sheep.³ He's very wealthy – are traveling home. As they do so they hear that his brother Esau and 400 armed men are heading out to meet them. This does not sound like a happy family reunion. No doubt Jacob would turn and run except God has told him to go home.

J. So he divides the group into various subgroups and send them out ahead of him in waves, each with gifts for Esau, hoping that by the time Esau gets to Jacob he'll be in a better mood.⁴

K. Our passage happens the night before he is to meet Esau. He is alone. And he goes to the Jabbok River and wrestles with God. From all we can tell, He is the only person to wrestle with God in this way – and what happens here is more amazing than any WWF cage match or MMA fight.

V. I'm reading now from Genesis 32.

A. Now Jacob sent his family across the Jabbok River but he stayed behind. That night, a Man came and wrestled with him until daybreak.

1. There is a pun here in the Hebrew that does not translate into the English. The word for "Jacob" is "YAY bok" and the word for "wrestling" is "YAY bek" and the word for the Jabbok River is "YA bok." So what we've got is YAY bok YAY beked God at Yah bok! Jacob wrestles God at the Jabbok River.

³ If you want an argument against polygamy, read Genesis 30. Some people say, "polygamy is in the Bible!" It is, but not everything that is in the Bible is being endorsed. Slavery is in the Bible. So is rape and murder. They are not being endorsed, we are being given a chance to see how they play out so we will not go there. By the way, the Bible is unique among religious books. It tells the truth even about the sins of the people. If you read other ancient religious books you find them filled with heroes and morally upright individuals. If you read the Bible looking for that you will be disappointed. The people are accurately described, which reveals their feet of clay.

⁴ Some say he is doing this to protect the rest of his family. I'm not so sure. It looks to me like he is trying to protect himself.

2. Jacob has been running from God his entire life – as have some of you. God says, enough. “Jacob, you’re not going to run anymore. We’re going to settle this. We’re going to the mat.”
3. Who, exactly, does Jacob wrestle: an angel? the pre-incarnate Christ? is this all a dream?
 - a) On the one hand, it sure sounds like a metaphor, which is the way many think about it. Jacob is wrestling with God in prayer.
 - b) On the other hand, he ends up with a limp, which I suppose could also be a metaphor, but I don’t think it reads that way, suggesting that the wrestling match actually happened.⁵
 - c) So, in some way, shape or form, Jacob is wrestling God or God’s representative.⁶

B. “When the Man (God’s agent) saw that he wasn’t winning this struggle, he touched Jacob on the hip, and it was thrown out of joint. The Man said, ‘Let me go; daylight is coming.’ And Jacob said, ‘I won’t let go until you bless me.’” So:

1. Jacob is jumped by this God-Angel-Man figure. Initially Jacob tries to get away, but at some point things change. He realizes who he is wrestling (angels and divine beings are not new to Jacob. He grew up hearing about his grandfather Abraham’s encounters), so rather than trying to escape he starts holding on.
2. The Man acts as if he can’t get away, but that’s not actually how this plays out. The word used for “touched” in Hebrew is a word that means “lightly tapped,” suggesting that the God-Angel-Man figure could have easily won this fight.

⁵ And one of the things the person Jacob is wrestling against will say is, “it’s almost dawn,” which is code for, if the sun comes up and you see my face, you will die.

⁶ At some point you have to decide if you are going to trust the Bible or not. Billy Graham tells his story about this. He was struggling with various issues in Scripture, felt like he was at a crossroads, decided he would chose to believe that the Bible is true – and went on to become the one noted for “... but the Bible says.” I faced a similar turning point and also made a decision to trust the Book. Not, by the way, because of Billy did. But because Jesus did. If you follow me there, the challenge becomes figuring out what a text means. The Bible employs many forms of genre. Sometimes it’s easy to tell that we are to take a passage symbolically. When Isaiah says that the “trees of the field will clap their hands” (Isa 55) we do not think the trees grows hands. Other times – and Genesis 32 is one of them – it’s a bit more challenging to figure out what is going on. Given Jacob (Israel’s limp) I chose to believe that it was a real event. That said, clearly the phrase “wrestling with God” almost always refers to struggling with God’s will or struggling with God in prayer.

a) I do not know much about wrestling. I did it for one year. In 7th grade I went out for wrestling. I weighed 86 pounds and for various reasons I decided to try to lose 4 pounds so I could wrestle at 82. I remember two things: 1) not eating much at Thanksgiving because of a weigh-in that Monday; 2) learning various ways to hurt people so they would do what you wanted – namely flip on their back and yell “uncle.” If there was a “lightly tap the guy on the hip and you’ll win move, then I didn’t ever learn that one. And that’s because it doesn’t exist. We have lots of muscles keeping our hip in place. It’s pretty hard to dislocate a hip.

b) What we have here is much like the wrestling matches fathers have with their 3-year old sons. The dad may act like they are being thrown all around, about to be pinned. But as soon as it’s time to go to bed he can easily win the match.

3. The Man could have quickly subdued Jacob, but he lets the struggle go on for a while. Why? Does God like to wrestle? I’m not thinking that’s it. But I do think God sees value in our wrestling with him, engaging with him – especially when you realize that the opposite of wrestling is running away, avoiding God. He would rather have us fight against him than flee from him. And in this case the Man is there to help Jacob face the truth.

C. V.27: The Man asks Jacob, “What is your name?”

1. Which is a strange question in the middle of the wrestling match. And please realize this: when God asks a question it’s not because He doesn’t know the answer. He knows. He wants you to learn the answer. This question forced Jacob to say, “They call me deceiver, conniver. cheater.”

2. In those days, names meant something. You were often named for your character. It was your brand. Jacob means: deceiver, conniver, manipulator.

a) As an aside, it would be interesting if we were named after our major sin. Profoundly awkward – what’s your name? Greedy, Lust, Gossip, Sloth. “Hi! I’m insecure manipulator, what’s your name?”

3. Jacob is called cheater because that has been his m.o. He’s gone through life trying to manipulate everyone: his brother, his parents, his father-in-law. When God asks Jacob “What’s your name?” He’s saying, “Jacob you need to face the problem – and the problem is you! The reason we’re in this struggle is you. Because you won’t give up. You still keep trying to control everything in your life and you’re making a mess of everything.

D. The Man answers, ‘You will no longer be Jacob [because...] You have struggled with God and with men, and you’ve won; so your name will be Israel.’”

1. This is the man the nation of Israel is named after. He's given a new identity. The name Israel has two meanings:
 - a) One: "struggles with God," or "God-fights (for and with)" which will certainly be true of the nation!
 - b) Two: "Prince with God."
 2. God says, "You're now a prince. You used to be a manipulator but now you're going to be a prince. You used to be a deceiver but now you're going to be a leader."
 3. Jacob's struggle with God changes his identity, which is a good thing and also an important point for us to face: when God wants to work in us, He changes us; He changes our identity. He needs to change the way we see our self; He changes our perspective.
- E. "Then God blessed him there. (As a result of the wrestling match God blessed him). So Jacob called the place Peniel – which means, "face of God," saying, 'It's because I saw God face to face and yet my life was spared.'"

VI. Underlying all of this are some themes – some take-a-ways:

- A. One: It's OK to struggle. Many people avoid struggle – avoid the conflict – and consequently stay stuck.
 1. This happened to our land lady years ago.
 - a) When we were first married we lived in the upstairs apartment of a home in Deerfield, owned by a widow. Part of the deal was that in exchange for some reduction in rent, I would help in the yard. I did. But to my frustration, the land lady hovered over me, critiquing my work and talking nonstop, mostly about her husband, who I thought had recently passed away. I felt sorry for her until one day Sheri asked me if I knew when her husband had died. I said I didn't, but I thought it was just a few months before we moved in. She said, it was about fifteen years ago. Our land lady was stuck. In fairness to her, she did not like the way her life had unfolded. But what she couldn't see, but others could, was that she was making it worse.

2. Many avoid asking God the hard questions, and they do not process the pain and the loss, and they stay where they are. You know these people. Perhaps this describes you. You have big questions for God. Where are you God?⁷

B. Two: Our struggles are often ultimately with God.

1. We may not see this. Had you asked Jacob who he was struggling with, he would have said Esau or his Dad or Father-in-Law.

2. You can make a strong case that he was wrestling against himself.⁸ Leadership of others is challenging. Leadership of our own lives is harder yet. Our biggest battles are often inside of us – with our fears, our flaws, our insecurities, guilt and regret. And also with a skewed perspective. We do not see ourselves very accurately. Or the situation we are in very accurately. Many live in denial of their part in the problem. You should assume that your perspective is wrong, or at the very least, incomplete.

3. But ultimately, most of our struggles are with God.

C. Three: These struggles are often the path forward.

1. Often, God has to wrestle us in order to help us move forward. We seldom get better when we are comfortable. Pain and trials help us grow in ways comfort seldom does.

2. I want to invite you to watch a video in which you see hard things happening, but I think you also see growth. here. Jeff is our deacon chair. VIDEO OF JEFF S.

3. There is nothing about Jeff's story that is easy, but he describes

⁷ In a sermon series recently, Rick Warren said that he struggled for years with a son who was mentally ill and then took his life. He says, "I prayed for that healing every single day of my life. It was a struggle in my life." He then asks, what should my response be to a God who did not answer that prayer? Warren goes on to argue that God loves to wrestle. He is not a detached God who set the world in motion and then started looking the other way. He cares deeply about how you feel. And he loves you and he cares about you and he's sympathetic, he's not apathetic and he's not detached. In fact, the Bible says this, on the screen, 1 Peter 5:7, "Cast all your cares on him for he cares for you." He argues that God is a caring God. If God didn't care about you, you couldn't wrestle with him. You couldn't struggle with him. You couldn't argue with him. The very fact that God allows you to argue with him, and it's all through the Bible, examples of this, is because God cares. Because God loves you.

⁸ Paul gives us words to talk about this in Romans 7:15. The Message paraphrases it this way: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it." We can all identify with that passage. We often want to do things that we don't do. And we do not do what we know is right. We struggle not just with other people; we struggle with ourselves.

4. Jacob left this match with a new name and a limp.⁹ One that would constantly remind him of what had happened and that his name had been changed.

D. Four: Do not be afraid to take your anger to God – and to wrestle with him in prayer.

1. Engage God. Plead your case. Ask for a blessing. Hold on. Ask him to use you. Don't be passive. Engage God.

2. Next week we are going to look at Surrender – not waving a white flag, but accepting God's plan. Don't miss it. There is a time to yield, to accept. But what I want you to see here is that it's we need to engage with God.

3. Jesus wrestles with God in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.

4. The Psalms reflect people angry with God. Don't be afraid to go there. Don't complain about God – that doesn't get you anywhere. But don't be afraid to complain to God.¹⁰

5. Say: God, very little is working right. Things are a mess in my nation, in my family and at work. Lord, when I read the Bible and I hear about how good, loving and powerful you are. So, help me with this. Help me. You are great. You have helped others in the past. Will you not help me?¹¹

E. The last of the story, the story of Jacob, ends in verse 31 of Genesis 32. It says this, "So the sun rose [this is after this big wrestling match] as Jacob left Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip."

VII. Are you running from God? Something else? Yourself? Engage. Turn into the pain and ask God to bless you – to help you move on.

⁹ Jacob was pretty adept at running. He ran from responsibility; he ran from the messes he made; he ran from the struggles he created. God put an end to that by giving him a limp. No more running for Jacob. God may humble you in your area of strength.

¹⁰ When Moses complained to God, God answered. When the children of Israel complained about God, they got stuck in the desert. Clearly, there's a right way and a wrong way to complain to God.

¹¹ Rick Warren argues that Jacob's prayer follows the pattern of many laments: CARE. Complain, Appeal, Remind God of what he said, and then Express trust in God. He argues that this a pattern that David, Job (Job 13:15), Jacob, Habakkuk (3:17-19) all followed.