



²² That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. ²⁴ So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

²⁷ The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

²⁸ Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel,^a because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."

²⁹ Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel,^b saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

³¹ The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel,^c and he was limping because of his hip. ³² 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.

I wrestled for two years in high school. A high school wrestling match is three, two-minute periods. A high school football game is 48 minutes. A basketball game is 32 minutes. Do you know why a wrestling match is only six minutes? Because you use 100% of your effort for every second of those six minutes. Win or lose, at the end of those six minutes, you are completely spent. This is why I am especially amazed that Jacob wrestled with a man all night long! At this point in time, Jacob was at least eighty years old and probably closer to ninety. How does a ninety year old man wrestle all night long? That may be the easiest of the questions that are begging for answers in this passage, for this was no ordinary man who wrestled with Jacob. Jacob wrestled with God. Why did God do this? Why did God allow Jacob to apparently "win" the wrestling match? What is the significance of this strange story placed right in the middle of the meeting with Jacob's brother Esau?

If you were here last week, you know that Jacob took the first chance he had to reconcile with Esau. If you recall, Jacob sent messengers to Edom to meet with Esau. The messengers returned the following report. "We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him" (Gen. 32:6). I have no doubt in my mind that Esau left Edom

bent on revenge against his deceiving, heel-grasping brother. Why would Esau have brought 400 men with him if he only wanted to reconcile with Jacob? If Esau had had even a slightly favorable attitude toward Jacob, would the messengers not have relayed that vital information? When you combine the facts of the story with Jacob's extremely fearful attitude, I think the conclusion is obvious that Esau's plan was to finally take out his wrath on his twin brother who had humiliated him and cheated him out of his blessing.

In the first part of the chapter, Jacob set forth a plan to divide the entire company into two groups and he prayed a very desperate prayer for salvation from the Lord and he claimed God's promises. The remainder of the chapter tells the story of setting his plan into action and the encounter with God. The entire story seems to take place in a single night. After he divided everyone and everything into two groups, he selected choice animals from his flocks and split them into three different herds, all of which were gifts for his brother. Jacob's reasoning is revealed in verse 20. *And be sure to say, 'Your servant Jacob is coming behind us.'* For he thought, "I will pacify him with these gifts I am sending on ahead; later, when I see him, perhaps he will receive me." Jacob hoped to "pacify" his brother. We could say that the gifts were a form of propitiation or atonement. Do you recall the definition for propitiation? It is the satisfying of the wrath of another person. Romans three tells us that God the Father put Jesus forth as a propitiation in order to satisfy his own wrath.

Speaking about God's wrath is about as popular a subject as an eternity in hell, but it needs to be clearly understood. Ephesians two tells us that before we God made us alive, you and I "were objects of wrath." Moreover, In John 3:36 we see a clear delineation between those who place their faith in Christ and those who do not. *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.* As long as the wrath of God remains on a person, they cannot "see life." This tells us that a person's sin is not atoned for and the wrath of God is not propitiated until they receive Christ as Lord and Savior. Understanding this makes our salvation all the more marvelous since the Son satisfied the wrath of the Father. Because of the nature of sin and tyranny, God's wrath was completely justified and the wrath needed to be satisfied if there was to be a restoration in the relationship. In the same way, Esau's wrath needed to be propitiated if there was to be a restoration in their relationship.

Tell me, did Esau have a right to take out his wrath upon Jacob? We know from Genesis that Esau "despised his birthright" and we know from Hebrews that he was a godless and foolish man. Nevertheless, Esau was deceived and cheated by Jacob in a huge way. Esau had a right to be angry for he was dealt a great injustice. However, no one would claim that he had the right to exact revenge. Whether the 400 men were marching for the sole purpose of killing Jacob or if they had more sinister ideas of mass genocide, either way, Esau's anger was far greater than the offense against him.¹ Murder was not a fair punishment for deception and stealing. Yet we all know this is what happens when anger is allowed to grow. How many of you have had someone cheat you or deal unfairly with you and you have said the following? "You know, the more I think about it, the angrier I get?"

When Karen visited her parents in Florida, her mom gave her a few old books that were given to her by her mother. One of these turned out to be a Christian classic written in 1884 which has sold over twelve million copies called *The Greatest Thing in the World* by Henry Drummond.

D.L. Moody liked it so much that he made this book required reading for all of his students. Karen found this great quote about anger that I thought would be beneficial to us all.

We are inclined to look upon bad temper as a very harmless weakness. We speak of it as a mere infirmity of nature, a family failing, a matter of temperament, not a thing to take into very serious account in estimating a man's character. And yet here, right in the heart of this analysis of love, it finds a place; and the Bible again and again returns to condemn it as one of the most destructive elements in human nature.

The peculiarity of ill temper is that it is the vice of the virtuous. It is often the one blot on an otherwise noble character. You know men who are all but perfect, and women who would be entirely perfect, but for an easily ruffled, quick-tempered, or "touchy" disposition. This compatibility of ill temper with high moral character is one of the strangest and saddest problems of ethics. The truth is there are two great classes of sins--sins of the *Body*, and sins of the *Disposition*. The Prodigal Son may be taken as a type of the first, the Elder Brother of the second. Now society has no doubt whatever as to which of these is the worse. Its brand falls, without a challenge, upon the Prodigal. But are we right? We have no balance to weigh one another's sins, and coarser and finer are but human words; but faults in the higher nature may be less venial than those in the lower, and to the eye of Him who is Love, a sin against Love may seem a hundred times more base. No form of vice, not worldliness, not greed of gold, not drunkenness itself, does more to un-Christianise society than evil temper. For embittering life, for breaking up communities, for destroying the most sacred relationships, for devastating homes, for withering up men and women, for taking the bloom off childhood; in short, for sheer gratuitous misery-producing power, this influence stands alone. Look at the Elder Brother, moral, hard-working, patient, dutiful--let him get all credit for his virtues--look at this man, this baby, sulking outside his own father's door. "He was angry," we read, "and would not go in." Look at the effect upon the father, upon the servants, upon the happiness of the guests. Judge of the effect upon the Prodigal--and how many prodigals are kept out of the Kingdom of God by the unlovely characters of those who profess to be inside? Analyse, as a study in Temper, the thunder-cloud itself as it gathers upon the Elder Brother's brow. What is it made of? Jealousy, anger, pride, uncharity, cruelty, self-righteousness, touchiness, doggedness, sullenness--these are the ingredients of this dark and loveless soul. In varying proportions, also, these are the ingredients of all ill temper. Judge if such sins of the disposition are not worse to live in, and for others to live with, than sins of the body. Did Christ indeed not answer the question Himself when He said, "I say unto you, that the publicans and the harlots go into the Kingdom of Heaven before you." There is really no place in Heaven for a disposition like this. A man with such a mood could only make Heaven miserable for all the people in it. Except, therefore, such a man be born again, he cannot, he simply cannot, enter the Kingdom of Heaven. For it is perfectly certain-- and you will not misunderstand me--that to enter Heaven a man must take it with him.

You will see then why Temper is significant. It is not in what it is alone, but in what it reveals. This is why I take the liberty now of speaking of it with such unusual plainness. It is a test for love, a symptom, a revelation of an unloving nature at bottom. It is the intermittent fever which bespeaks unintermittent disease within; the occasional bubble

escaping to the surface which betrays some rottenness underneath; a sample of the most hidden products of the soul dropped involuntarily when off one's guard; in a word, the lightning form of a hundred hideous and un-Christian sins. For a want of patience, a want of kindness, a want of generosity, a want of courtesy, a want of unselfishness, are all instantaneously symbolised in one flash of Temper.

Hence it is not enough to deal with the temper. We must go to the source, and change the inmost nature, and the angry humours will die away of themselves. Souls are made sweet not by taking the acid fluids out, but by putting something in--a great Love, a new Spirit, the Spirit of Christ. Christ, the Spirit of Christ, interpenetrating ours, sweetens, purifies, transforms all. This only can eradicate what is wrong, work a chemical change, renovate and regenerate, and rehabilitate the inner man. Will-power does not change men. Time does not change men. Christ does. Therefore "Let that mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus." Some of us have not much time to lose. Remember, once more, that this is a matter of life or death. I cannot help speaking urgently, for myself, for yourselves. "Whoso shall offend one of these little ones, which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea." That is to say, it is the deliberate verdict of the Lord Jesus that it is better not to live than not to love. *It is better not to live than not to love.*²



Jabbok River

Interestingly, like the Prodigal son, we have the anger of an older brother being visited upon the foolishness and selfishness of a younger brother. Esau's temper consumed Jacob. He had God promise that he would go back to the land of promise, but did it eliminate his fear and anxiety? On this dark night, Jacob lived in the shadow of death. And because the river that he was about to cross, the Jabbok River, was in a valley, one could say, reminiscent of the 23rd Psalm that Jacob was in "the valley of the shadow of death." Jacob had fear when he learned of the approaching army of Esau but we are not told if he remained fearful

after his prayer. What we do know is that he continued with his plan. I imagine that Jacob figured that a large group of gifts couldn't hurt. After all, if Esau killed him and the others, he would take all of his possessions, so why not give a large gift in an attempt to prevent the slaughter, to pacify his anger and to propitiate his anger?

The prayer was prayed, the plan was set into action and Jacob found himself all alone on the far side of the river—until a guy jumped him in the dark. From Jacob's perspective, he must have been thinking, "Can my life get any worse than this? There is an army of 400 men bearing down upon me and now a crazy person is fighting me in the dark!" You wonder if Jacob thought it was Esau who was fighting him, or one of Esau's men. If Esau's plan was to only kill Jacob and spare everyone else, this was the perfect opportunity to slaughter Jacob while he was all alone. While he fought for the rest of the night with strength and stamina completely foreign to a man his age—supernatural even—he was ignorant of the identity of the wrestler. We the reader, know

his identity—a human incarnation of God. This was probably a preincarnate visitation by Jesus. Jacob wrestled the man who would, humanly speaking, one day be his descendant. This is almost one of those time-travel scenes where the main character is sent back in time to visit his great, great, great, great—you get the picture—grandfather. Except the Creator is not bound by time or space or anything else. Furthermore, he is always the main character. Jacob gets most of the ink in this story and in these many chapters, but God is always the main character.

This scene raises more questions than it answers. Why did God allow Jacob to “win” the wrestling match? When did Jacob realize that it was God he had been wrestling? Let’s break it down into the things we do know. First, we know that God did indeed let Jacob “win” and his purpose for the physical brawl was to have this verbal exchange we have before us. God did let Jacob win but the a simple touch of his hip demonstrated that God was not second place to anyone. But even after Jacob’s hip was injured, he continued to wrestle until God seemed to cry “uncle.” “Let me go: the Lord said, for it is daybreak.” Being a former wrestler, I am very curious what kind of hold Jacob used. Was it a cradle a granby or a banana split? Or was it like mixed martial arts and he had the Lord in an arm bar? Of course it doesn’t matter because no combined power in the universe could pin the Lord to the ground. Then Jacob boldly replied, “I will not let you go until you bless me.”

The Lord did not give in and say, “OK, Jacob, I bless you” because he had a much greater blessing in mind and asked Jacob, “What is your name?” Do you remember the last time Jacob was asked this question? Isaac asked Jacob who he was and Jacob answered deceitfully saying, “I am Esau, your firstborn.” Jacob knew he could not deceive this man, but more importantly, Jacob did not want to deceive this man. That was twenty years ago and Jacob has matured in his faith. Then came the reply from the Lord. *“Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.”* Jacob was no longer the deceiver but had struggled with God and man and had overcome. This scene with the Lord, which again was probably Jesus, is very similar to Jesus’ encounter with Peter on the shore after the resurrection. Three times Jesus asked him, “Peter, do you love me?” and each time Peter confessed his true and deep love for the Savior. On that day, Jesus restored the fallen disciple back into ministry. He was no longer Peter, the one who denied Jesus but Peter, the one who loved Jesus and would feed his sheep.

In the same way, Jacob was no longer the deceiver but was, in a sense, restored to ministry and wholeness through this encounter with the Lord. His new name, Israel, literally means “struggles with God.” Israel was an overcomer. But what does that mean? How did he overcome? Some have applied this scene to the prayer life of a Christian. In other words, if we persevere in our prayers, God will answer them. There is certainly some truth in this. James reminds us that “we have not because we ask not.” Many Christians are prayer wimps and certainly could persevere more strenuously, but I don’t think this is chiefly about prayer. Others have applied it to success and prosperity. If you believe that you are an overcomer you will think and act like an overcomer. Blessings and prosperity will flow into your life and you will overcome the trials and problems that come your way. Again, there is a kernel of truth in this thought. The nation of Israel was blessed with prosperity when they obeyed the Lord and in general, obedience will bring some kind of blessing to the believer, whether in this life or the next, but I don’t think this was chiefly about prosperity.

Let me ask a simple question of this complex passage. How did Jacob overcome? How did he wrestle with God and man and overcome? The incredibly obvious answer is that the Lord did the overcoming for him. Jacob did not defeat the Lord in this no holds barred wrestling match—God let him win. Jacob was victorious because the Lord handed him the victory. Do you see—this was all of grace. Any victory, any overcoming, any prosperity would be of grace. Jacob’s change of name from Jacob to Israel was not just about him, but about the promise to make them into a nation. The first time that the name Israel is used for the nation and not for the person happened in Exodus 3:16 when the Lord spoke to Moses through the burning bush. *Go, assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob— appeared to me and said: I have watched over you and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt.’* Between Genesis 33 and Exodus 3, Jacob’s family grew from seventy people into the nation of Israel and over two million strong. Interestingly, as God’s chosen leader of Israel, Moses asked for the Lord’s name and his request was granted. “I am who I am.” But when Jacob asked the same question, God replied with his own question, “Why do you ask my name?” In other words, I’m not going to tell you.

Israel the man will overcome but only because the Lord wills it and grants that it happen. Israel the nation will overcome but only because the Lord wills it and grants that it happen. But the problem that you and I have is that we often have a different understanding of what it means to be an overcomer. Just as God had promised in Genesis 15, Israel would be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years. If you would have looked at their daily lives of servitude you would not have called them overcomers. But in God’s economy, he was making that nation of promise into descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and sand on the seashore. He was multiplying them rapidly and vigorously. They were slaves but at the same time they were overcomers. Can you be an overcomer and still be wrestling with God and with man?

The other thing that was happening here was that Jacob was visited with the actual presence of God. There was a great degree of intimacy in this struggle. But we don’t usually associate the presence of God with a battle, do we? You may have had a wonderful experience in a worship service, a conference or even all by yourself when the presence of God was very powerful. There was a tremendous peace that filled the room.

Jacob was in the “presence of God.” You cannot get more personal than a wrestling match. Yet this presence was not peaceful and serene. It was a dusty, sweaty mess. Can God be powerfully present in your dusty, sweaty mess of a life? The Lord promised Jacob, I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go.” Jacob could have asked, Lord, even when Laban deceives me and makes me marry the wrong woman? Even when my wages were changed ten times? Even when my vengeful brother is marching toward me with 400 men?” “Yes, Jacob” was the Lord’s reply. “Especially during those times.”

Rich Maurer
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^a *Israel* means *he struggles with God*.

^b *Peniel* means *face of God*.

^c Hebrew *Penuel*, a variant of *Peniel*

¹ But Jacob's gifts caused Esau to change his mind. A similar story is told with David in 1 Samuel (1 Samuel 25). David was on his way along with 400 men to destroy all of the men of Nabal's household who has cheated David. Abigail, the wife of Nabal, sent large gifts to David as a way of appeasing David's anger. The offer of gifts had the effect of changing David's mind about exacting revenge. Likewise, I believe that sending the gifts to Esau was a form of propitiation—that is, they appeased and satisfied the wrath of Esau. Esau was able to see that Jacob was genuinely repentant. In this case, Jacob's planning perfectly corresponded with his praying. The Lord saved Jacob through his plan of offering gifts to Esau. In this way, Jacob's prayer and Jacob's plan truly worked together.

² Henry Drummond, *The Greatest Thing in the World*, Grosset and Dunlap: New York, ©1884, pp. 21-25.