

Wrestling with Jesus on Psalm Sunday

Today, we celebrate Psalm Sunday—the Sunday commemorating Jesus’ entry into the City of Jerusalem almost 2,000 years ago. Listen now, as we hear the Apostle Matthew’s version of that original Psalm Sunday. ¹ As Jesus and the disciples approached Jerusalem, they came to the town of Bethphage on the Mount of Olives. Jesus sent two of them on ahead. ² “Go into the village over there,” he said. “As soon as you enter it, you will see a donkey tied there, with its colt beside it. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone asks what you are doing, just say, ‘The Lord needs them,’ and he will immediately let you take them.” ⁴ This took place to fulfill the prophecy that said, ⁵ “Tell the people of Israel, ‘Look, your King is coming to you. He is humble, riding on a donkey— riding on a donkey’s colt.’” ⁶ The two disciples did as Jesus commanded. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt to him and threw their garments over the colt, and he sat on it. ⁸ Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road ahead of him, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ Jesus was in the center of the procession, and the people all around him were shouting, “Praise God for the Son of David! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the LORD! Praise God in highest heaven!” ¹⁰ The entire city of Jerusalem was in an uproar as he entered. “Who is this?” they asked. ¹¹ And the crowds replied, “It’s Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.” Matthew 21:1-11 (NLT2)¹

As the people in the crowd waved those psalm branches and shouted their “hosanna’s,” they were not doing it because they understood Jesus to be their spiritual warrior. No, they wanted a military warrior. They wanted a Messiah who would take a sword in hand, like Joshua—which just happens to be Jesus’ name when translated into the ancient Hebrew language.² The people wanted a warrior-king, like David, to run Pilate and his Roman soldiers back to the Italian peninsula from whence they came. But, great military leaders—the kind like that they wanted—they made their grand entries in quite a different way than Jesus was doing. Whenever a Roman general entered his city after a great victory in battle, he would wear a crown of laurel, dressed in a purple toga that was embroidered with gold, and riding in a chariot pulled by four snorting stallions.³

But, not Jesus. Jesus rode that donkey’s colt into Jerusalem. He wasn’t fierce or snorting fire—just a little donkey. But, perhaps this fired the Israelites up even more, because many of them probably remembered, as Matthew pointed out, that the Messiah was supposed to enter into Jerusalem in exactly that fashion—riding on a little donkey. In fact, the Prophet Zachariah had predicted such an entry 5 ½ centuries before all this occurred.⁴ And so they felt it appropriate that Jesus, as the Messiah,

should be riding into town on such a mount as a donkey. And now, there He was—the most honored, the most anticipated One that the people of Israel had expected to come for so many centuries. Yet, Jesus rode in meekness. He rode in humility. He rode as a healer who mended brokenness, not as a warrior who would shed other people’s blood.

And, of course, as Jesus rode into Jerusalem, He knew that blood would be shed. He knew that pain and torture, whips and spitting, and a crown of thorns awaited Him as a preamble to His hanging in agony on the Cross. But no one in that crowd could see that far ahead—except, perhaps, Satan who smiled with delight as he stood there, perhaps with a palm branch in his own evil hand, mockingly fanning the people’s pride and blinding them to the true reason that Jesus now rode into the Great City. And, there in that city filled with Israelites and their Jewish religious leaders, Jesus would, indeed, go to war—but not with the Romans. Rather, Jesus would ***again*** be engaged in a life or death struggle with ***Israel itself*** in the greatest scene of combat the world had ever seen, or has ever seen since. ***Again?*** Why say ***again?*** When in the past had Jesus ever wrestled with the likes of Israel? And what does this have to do with Palm Sunday, and the coming of Easter? What does it have to do with you and me? The short answer is: ***Everything!***

And to see why that is true, we need to go way back to the 32nd chapter of Genesis—2,000 years⁵ before Jesus rode that donkey into Jerusalem, for it is there that we can read about another great battle. It’s one which involved that trickster named ***Jacob***. Now, we usually think of the patriarchs of the Old Testament as being pious, holy men. Men like Abraham, and his son Isaac—both ancient founders of our faith. And they were faithful men—not perfect men—but they, for the most part, wanted to please God. And then, Jacob comes along—the son of Isaac, the grandson of Abraham. The story of Jacob’s life up through Genesis 32 was not stellar by any standard when it came to piety, holiness or trying to please God. Oh, Jacob was not a pagan, but neither did he exhibit, in any particularly strong way, the more positive aspects of godly faith that his father and grandfather were noted for. Even the meaning of Jacob’s name bears this out. Do you know what Jacob’s name means? It means “***cheater,***”⁶ “***deceiver***”⁷ or “***to follow with evil intent.***”⁸ It can also mean “***grabber***”—as in someone who is always grabbing things to take advantage of a situation, often at the expense of someone else. There are a lot of “***grabbers***” in this world—their problem is that their “***grabbiness***” is more indicative of the ways of the world than of the ways of God. And so it was with Jacob.

During his years as a young man, Jacob seemed to fluctuate between godliness and worldliness. And, true to his name, he was a trickster who seemed all too willing to deceive people to gain his own advantages. For example, Jacob took advantage of his brother Esau. One day when Esau came in from

hunting, he was absolutely famished. Jacob took this opportunity to cheat him out of his birthright by giving nothing more than a lousy bowl of stew. Jacob conspired with his mother, Rebekah, to deceive his father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing of the first born son—when that too should have been Esau’s. Jacob engaged in some highly questionable, if not unethical, conduct in his dealings with his uncle, Laban, that left his uncle on the short of the stick in their business endeavors.⁹ That’s the kind of man that Jacob was when he became involved in a most unexpected battle with a strange “*man*”—one with whom he wrestled for the most part of a night until the break of day.

And if we go to Genesis 32, we see that it was a time when Jacob had sent his family ahead of him across the Brook of Jabbok and he remained there in the darkness of the far bank of the brook in camp all by himself. That’s where the story picks up and describes an epic battle scene: ²⁴ This left Jacob all alone in the camp, and a man came and wrestled with him until the dawn began to break. ²⁵ When the man saw that he would not win the match, he touched Jacob’s hip and wrenched it out of its socket. ²⁶ Then the man said, “Let me go, for the dawn is breaking!” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” ²⁷ “What is your name?” the man asked. He replied, “Jacob.” ²⁸ “Your name will no longer be Jacob,” the man told him. “From now on you will be called Israel, because you have fought with God and with men and have won.” ²⁹ “Please tell me your name,” Jacob said. “Why do you want to know my name?” the man replied. Then he blessed Jacob there. ³⁰ Jacob named the place Peniel (which means “face of God”), for he said, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been spared.” ³¹ The sun was rising as Jacob left Peniel, and he was limping because of the injury to his hip. ³² (Even today the people of Israel don’t eat the tendon near the hip socket because of what happened that night when the man strained the tendon of Jacob’s hip.)” Genesis 32:22-32 (NLT2)

Now you have to admit, that is a very unusual story. In fact, the 16th century Reformation leader, Martin Luther, called it the most “obscure” story in the Bible—and, he may well be correct. So what is going on here? In the past, this trickster Jacob had often asked God to bless Him. But the reality is that he did it with no more sincerity than when he deceived his brother, or his aged father, or his uncle. He wanted a blessing—that’s for sure—but, he wanted it all for himself, for his own self-interests, and not to have a closer relationship with God. There are a lot of people in the Christian Church today who are like that. When things are bad, when the chips are down, they call out for God’s blessings. Or, if there is something ***they want*** to further ***their plans***, they have no hesitation to ask for God’s blessing, rather than ***first*** seeking what ***God’s plan*** may be for their lives and what ***He wants*** for them. So many are so much like Jacob.

And so, we find Jacob existing in this self-centered, pride-filled state when, there on the banks of the Jabbok Brook, a “**man**” comes along and attacks him and wrestles him to the ground. Now, don’t think that this is a dream. No, what Jacob experienced here was quite real. He was in a very real fight that night. But, the initial mistake that Jacob made was that he thought this attacker was merely a man. But, as we read, this “**man**” was actually God with whom Jacob was contending, and it wasn’t until day break that Jacob finally realized this.

And with today being Palm Sunday, I want you too to realize something else about the identity of this attacker who wrestled with Jacob. From our New Testament perspective, we can be a little more specific about who this unexpected wrestler really was. Most Christian theologians agree there are many instances in the Old Testament where Jesus actually appeared to men in what is called His “pre-incarnate” form—that is just a fancy way of saying that Jesus actually visited earth on several occasions long before He came in the flesh as a little baby in that Bethlehem cradle. For example, Jesus and two angels appeared before Abraham not long before the two angels destroyed the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, while Jesus stayed behind to converse with Abraham.¹⁰ Much later, Jesus came to protect Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from those flames in King Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace—where, in Daniel chapter 3, it tells us that One “**like the Son of God**” (referring to Jesus) appeared there in the flames walking around with them.¹¹ None of this is surprising to us, because we know that John’s Gospel teaches that Jesus was around long before this at the very time of Creation¹²—“for all things that were made, were made by Him.”¹³

And so here in Genesis 32, we have such conservative Bible scholars as John MacArthur and J. Vernon McGee affirming that **it is Jesus** who is the One wrestling Jacob to the ground.¹⁴ And during this wrestling bout, Jacob cries out, like he had done in the past, for God to bless Him. And Jesus asks him to tell him his name. Of course, Jesus already knew Jacob’s name, but Jesus’ question had a point to it. The point was to have Jacob to ask himself who he really was. And when he answered Jesus and said that his name was “**Jacob**,” it apparently dawned upon him, for the first time, exactly how very well that name—which meant “**trickster**,” “**deceiver**” and “**grabber**”—fit him to a tee. That name, “**Jacob**,” identified the very nature of his core personality and the very fabric of his being. And when you have lived your life as a deceiver and a liar, as Jacob had, and finally see things in the Light of Jesus Christ,¹⁵ you come to realize that your relationship with God is faulty. You begin to understand that you cannot be both a “**child of God**”¹⁶ and also aligned with the “**father of lies**”¹⁷—who is Satan. You have to choose between one or the other. And up until this wrestling match, Jacob had tried just sitting on the fence—living a life that deviated between Heaven and Hell. But you can’t live your life that way. Because for

those who try to sitting on that fence, they will learn that, in the end, they'll teeter over on the wrong side—into the pit of Hell, not into the Kingdom of Heaven.

And once Jacob came to grips with that reality, he was in for a little surgery—a little hip surgery, to be specific. You see, that hip injury that Jesus performed upon him when He pulled his socket out of joint, it wasn't an injury at all. It was actually a kind of ***spiritual surgery*** that implanted a little humility into Jacob. Jesus is a master surgeon—He does a lot of surgical procedures like that. And once Jacob was struck with a little humility, it allowed Jesus to give him something spiritually new—Jesus gave him a new heart. Jesus replaced the cold one made of stone, with one that was warm, caring and pliable when it comes to following Jesus' Way.¹⁸ And so, Jesus' blow to Jacob's hip was a blow that saved his life—in the eternal sense. Interestingly, Genesis 32 says that Jacob fought with God and "**won.**" It is true—Jacob was successful in this bout with Jesus, but not in the sense that Jacob defeated anyone. To "**win**" with God—to be successful with Him—meant that Jacob needed to be crippled, to be brought down a notch or two so to speak, to be freed from his pride and his false sense of self-sufficiency.¹⁹

If you want to come into God's Kingdom—share in the New Heaven and the New Earth that is coming²⁰, you have to humbly surrender to Jesus. Isn't that exactly what Jesus preached 2,000 years after this wrestling match with Jacob, when Jesus said: "God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth." Matthew 5:5 (NLT2) That is the kind of "***hip-surgery***" that Jacob needed. It was the only kind that could change Jacob. And to inaugurate this transformation of Jacob, Jesus told him: "Your name will no longer be Jacob. From now on you will be called Israel, because you have fought with God and with men and have won." Do you know what Jacob's new name meant—that new name of "***Israel***"? The best translation is that it simply means, "***God fights.***"²¹ That is so very important, not only for Jacob, but for you and me—because ***God fights for us*** as well. That is our call to faith. That is why on Palm Sunday, Jesus humbly rode into the City of Jerusalem on that little donkey in order that He could die on that roughed Cross. Jesus died fighting for us, sacrificing Himself for your sins and mine. He fought His battle for you with nails driven through His hands and through His feet.

There were a lot of trickster "***Jacobs***" standing there at the entrance to Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday waiving their palm branches. I wonder if they knew that their real names were "***Jacob***"? They didn't seem to realize that they needed more than a name-change—that they needed a Savior to transform their hearts and save their souls—not merely their own self-interests and national pride. All of which prompts us to consider several questions.

Like . . . is Jesus wrestling with you today? Will you be "***successful***" in your bout with Him—in the same sense that Jacob was "***successful***"? What is your true name today? Is it more like "***Jacob***"?

Or, it is more like the name “Israel”?—the one that affirms the reality that Jesus Christ, God is the Flesh, fought and died for us? And finally, are you a candidate for a little “*hip surgery*”? They’re some questions worth pondering on this Palm Sunday before Easter.

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
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¹ See also: Mark 11:1-11, Luke 19:28-44, and John 12:12-19.

² *Yehōshua*—James Orr, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (Chicago: Howard-Severance Co., 1915), s.v. “JESUS,” WORDsearch CROSS e-book.)

³ Wikipedia, Roman triumph (*triumphus*), <https://en.wikipedia.org>.

⁴ Zechariah 9:9 (NIV) Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zechariah served as a prophet around Oct.-Nov. 520 B.C.—SEE: NLT Study Bible, Timeline, 2008 by Tyndale House Publishers. Database © 2014 WORDsearch, p. 1525.)

⁵ SEE: NLT Study Bible, Timeline, 2008 by Tyndale House Publishers. Database © 2014 WORDsearch, p. 15.

⁶ Gary D. Baldwin, Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), s.v. “JACOB,” WORDsearch CROSS e-book.

⁷ NLT Study Bible, Genesis 25:26, fn.

⁸ James Oscar Boyd, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Chicago: Howard-Severance Co., 1915), s.v. “JACOB (1),” WORDsearch CROSS e-book.

⁹ T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, ed., *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: “JACOB”.

¹⁰ Genesis 18:1-2, 22 (NIV) ¹ The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. ² Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. ²² The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD.

¹¹ Daniel 3:25 (NKJV) “Look!” he answered, “I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.”

¹² Tim Chaffey, “Theophanies in the Old Testament,” Answers in Genesis, answersingenesis.org, January 13, 2012.

¹³ John 1:1-3, 14 (NKJV) ¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. . . ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

Colossians 1:15-17 (NKJV) ¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. ¹⁷ And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.

¹⁴ John MacArthur, MacArthur Study Bible, 2006 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Database © 2014 WORDsearch. See also: J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1983), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: “Chapter 32”.

¹⁵ John 8:12 (NKJV) Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life."

¹⁶ Galatians 3:26 (TLB) For now we are all children of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

¹⁷ John 8:44 (TLB) For you are the children of your father the devil and you love to do the evil things he does. He was a murderer from the beginning and a hater of truth—there is not an iota of truth in him. When he lies, it is perfectly normal; for he is the father of liars.

¹⁸ Ezekiel 36:26 (NLT2) ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. Psalm 51:10 (TLB) Create in me a new, clean heart, O God, filled with clean thoughts and right desires. Matthew 5:8 (ESV) Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

¹⁹ A. P. Ross, "Jacob at the Jabboq, Israel at Peniel," *BSac* 142 [1985]: 51-62, cited in *NET Bible*, First ed. (Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 1996), *WORDsearch* CROSS e-book, Under: "Chapter 32".

²⁰ 2 Peter 3:13 (NLT2) ¹³ But we are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth he has promised, a world filled with God's righteousness.

²¹ "The name "Israel" (יִשְׂרָאֵל, *yisra'el*), meaning "God fights" (although some interpret the meaning as "he fights [with] God")." *NET Bible*, First ed. (Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 1996), *WORDsearch* CROSS e-book, Under: "Chapter 32".