

Seeing God Face to Face

Genesis 32:22-31

In the 2005 movie *The Pacifier* Vin Diesel portrays Shane Wolfe, Navy Seal who is assigned to care for the family of a government scientist after failing to protect the scientist himself.

As he gets to know the family, he realizes that protecting these five children is about as tough as any of the missions he has been given as a SEAL. They are uncooperative, and he has a hard time winning their trust as someone who really wants to protect them.

The oldest son, Seth, is having disciplinary problems at high school, partly because he is being picked on. Wolf is called to the office where he meets the vice principal and wrestling coach Dwayne Murphy. Murphy insists that the problem with Seth lies in a lack of discipline. He says Wolfe is too soft on Seth.

In the heat of the argument Murphy gets combative with Wolfe and challenges him to a wrestling match after school in the school gym. As you can imagine, everyone in the school turns out to watch these two wrestle.

Wolfe comes not to wrestle, but to give the students a demonstration in self defense. Murphy insists on trying to wrestle with Wolfe, but in the process ends up being shown as little more than the adult version of a school bully. The scene ends with Murphy on the ground and Wolfe showing students how to pin their attackers.

As a result, Seth comes to realize that this new Navy SEAL who was assigned to protect his family is not a nuisance, but someone who actually cares about him. Wolfe does not win a wrestling match so much as he proves his right to be there, and his integrity as the family's guardian.

On a metaphorical basis, this may be the image we encounter as we think about this fascinating, mysterious story in Genesis 32. As we walk through this story, I want you to put yourself in Jacob's shoes and ask yourself whether or not this story is reflective of your walk with God throughout your life, or for however long it has been.

This is the last story in our series on Jacob. For me it is easily the most interesting. But it also can be interpreted in many ways. So each of us may get something different out of it. And that's just fine.

Up to this point the Jacob we've read about was both a scheming con artist and a love struck husband. He was a fugitive in his own land, which God had promised to him and his posterity. His brother Esau was looking for him, looking for revenge after being tricked out of his birthright and the family blessing.

Jacob could have stayed out of that land to be safe, but God called him to return, promising that he would be safe, that God could protect him. But Jacob didn't know how Esau would react to the news that he was returning.

So he sent some messengers ahead of him to meet Esau and ask for safe passage. They were supposed to tell Esau how rich Jacob had become in the ensuing years. It was kind of a backhanded way of asking what Jacob would have to give Esau in order to buy off his anger.

When his messengers returned they brought a message that gave Jacob the willies: Esau was coming to meet him, with 400 men. Ouch. That didn't sound like the neighborhood welcome wagon.

As you might imagine, Jacob feared the worst. He figured Esau had been just waiting for him to come back. He imagined his picture on wanted posters in every police station from Bethel to the Negev. I guess Esau hadn't forgotten.

But remember, Jacob is very crafty. He is smarter than Esau. And he's wiggled out of some pretty sticky situations in the past. So he makes some preparations to try and minimize the damage when Esau does arrive.

First, he divides all his possessions, his flocks, his herds, his camels, into two groups and sends them in two different directions. He figures that if Esau stumbles across one set of flocks and destroys them, at least Jacob will have the other. He won't lose all of his possessions.

The second thing he does pray to God for protection. He acknowledges that he has not earned all of the goodness that God has shown him. But he reminds God that God has promised him a large family, and the possession of that land. In other words, God, if you let him kill me, you'll be breaking your promise to me.

Again, please don't try that one at home. Trying to manipulate God into helping you out of a jam or giving you the upper hand in a situation is a losing proposition. God doesn't work that way. We Cubs fans have been trying to do that for over 100 years and it hasn't worked yet.

The third thing he does is to send one of those two columns of flocks ahead of him in Esau's direction. He tells the servants who go ahead of him that when Esau asks who these flocks belong to, they should say, "These belong to your servant Jacob. They are a present to my lord Esau. Jacob is behind us in the line."

You gotta admit, folks, he's good. Esau's going to run into all these goats and sheep and camels only to find out that they're Jacob's present to him? Jacob figures this is the best way to buy off Esau's anger.

And what is this whole "your servant Jacob" and "my lord Esau" business? Jacob is doing everything he can to save his own hide here. I'm sure it's killing him to pretend he feels this way about Esau.

The last thing he does is to separate himself from his family. For their protection. He comes to a river at the edge of the Promised Land called the Jabbok. This place is now known as Nahr-ez-Zerqa, in modern day Jordan. Here's what it looks like now (**Slide**).

He and his family cross that river, then he sends them ahead. Jacob is all alone at that point, just him and his thoughts. And as he is there, stressing out, worrying, wondering if the next day would be his last, suddenly he realizes that he is not actually alone.

Before he knows it, another man attacks him. Jacob begins to wrestle with him. They wrestle for hours and hours, but neither one is able to gain an advantage. In fact, they wrestle until daybreak the next morning.

For reasons that are not explained in the text, this man does not want to continue wrestling with Jacob after the sun comes up. So he clobbers Jacob's hip and knocks it out of its socket. You can imagine how painful that had to be.

But Jacob was still not deterred. He would not let this guy go. The man tells him to let go, but Jacob refuses to do so unless this man gives him a blessing. Again, why does Jacob want a blessing from him? Who does he think this man is? The author doesn't bother to tell us.

The man asks Jacob his name. Jacob tells him, and the man gives him a new name, a name that would become world famous forever: Israel. I remember when I was taking a class on these first five books of the Bible and my professor asked the class, "What does the name Israel mean?"

Obviously when he asks it like that, you know that the meaning the Bible gives in this passage isn't really the literal meaning of the word. In Hebrew this word probably means "God rules". It is derived from the language of some of the tribes who lived there before the Israelites.

But the author of Genesis gives that word Israel a new meaning. The man says that Jacob has been renamed Israel because he has wrestled with God and with other people and has prevailed.

Again, what does that mean? Does that mean that Jacob has been wrestling with God all night? If so, why does God need to leave before sunrise? Is God a vampire or something? And if God is wrestling with Jacob, how is it that God can't win?

Is God not trying to win, just to mess with Jacob's mind? Or, has Jacob just beaten God in a wrestling match, because the man says Jacob prevailed. Or maybe this isn't God. Maybe this is one of the other people the man mentions. If so, who is it? Why does this man need to leave? Is it an angel or a demon? Does Jacob have to wrestle with this man because he has just entered the Promised Land?

That's one of the difficulties in interpreting this passage. We don't really know whether Jacob is wrestling with God or an angel or another human being. Among Jewish interpreters the most prominent idea is that Jacob is wrestling with Esau's guardian angel.

If that's the case, then Jacob has defeated Esau's angel and now has won the right to enter this land. That's why after the wrestling match Jacob says that he has seen the face of God. That's why when Jacob meets Esau in the next chapter he says that seeing Esau is like seeing God face to face.

So that's another possibility. I know – it's really confusing. I don't think anyone has a solution to the question of who this is, or how Jacob wrestles with God and with people and prevails.

But what is clear is that Jacob again interprets this encounter, whatever you make of it, as a direct encounter with God. He claims to have seen God face to face. He expected, as many people of his time would have, that a direct encounter with God would cause instant death.

He believed God was so great that he would die just from being in God's presence. And yet, he seems to have won. How can that be? You can't wrestle with God and win, can you? But that's exactly what this man tells him.

“You have wrestled with God and with humans and have prevailed.” When you think of it, this seems like a really odd image for the person after whom the entire nation of Israel was named.

And yet, for the Jewish people this image encapsulates their national identity. This is who they are. It's who they always have been. They have not walked hand in hand with God through history. They have never had peaceful relationships with their neighbors. And yet, they still exist today.

So if Jacob, now Israel, is a metaphor for the Jewish people, and if we count ourselves as his spiritual posterity, if we believe in the same God, if we believe we have benefitted in some way from the promises God made to Jacob, then one of the questions we need to ask

ourselves as we reflect upon this passage is whether or not we ourselves are those who wrestle with God and other people and prevail.

Or, let me put this another way, what does it mean for us to strive with God and other people and prevail? How does this image shape the way we think about our relationships with God and other people?

It honestly sounds a little confusing. We don't generally like to think of ourselves as wrestling with God. And when we do, we are taught to consider it a bad thing. On top of that, the last thing we would talk about is us prevailing over God.

Same thing with other people. Jesus tells us that the one who wants to be the greatest must be the servant of all. So the object of the game isn't to prevail over others, but to serve them. So what do we do with this image?

I think part of the confusion arises from the way we understand this idea. I think it's right for us to ask ourselves how it is that we are Israel, that we strive with God and others and prevail. Personally I don't usually see myself as prevailing all that much. I feel pretty fortunate if I just get through the day.

I don't think the image of us striving with God and others is how "it's supposed to be". I think it's just how it is. It's the nature of people who follow this God who revealed God's self to Jacob, then to Jacob's family, and through their nation to the rest of the world.

To walk with God is to wrestle with God simply because of the nature of who we are and the world we live in. The same is true for our relationships with others. I think the prevailing part has to do with the fact that we don't give up, that we keep going.

I think every day that we get up in the morning and say to ourselves, "I'm going to try and be a godly person; I'm going to try and love my neighbor as myself, I'm going to try to be the living embodiment of Jesus Christ today", I think every time we do that we prevail.

I don't have to tell you that saying it is a lot easier than doing it. We all know that. And even when we have the best of intentions, we're going to wrestle with God because goodness and righteousness don't come easy.

We're also going to wrestle with other people because not everyone has our best interests in mind. Sometimes we think we have others' best interests in mind when we actually have our own interests in mind.

I want to close by talking about someone who was probably the best example any of us knows of one who prevailed. As you all know, Bea Fluke prevailed for 95 years in life. Most of you know more about her than I do.

But one of the things I didn't realize was that she suffered from Parkinson's disease for the past 20 years. She had been on meds to keep the disease from worsening. I have to say, they seem to have worked pretty well.

I'm sure Bea felt terrible a lot of the time. And if you know her, you know she felt terrible about feeling terrible, like she let someone down or something. But Bea kept going. She kept doing everything her body would allow her to do.

I remember visiting her and seeing the flowers she had been working on in the back yard during the summer. She apologized for there not being more. I personally have been acquainted with a few people over 90 who would have been glad to have accomplished the things she only apologized for.

One of the things she taught me is that in the end, even though you're struggling with God and you're struggling with others, really your struggle is with yourself, with whether or not you believe in yourself, whether or not you are doing what you feel God wants you to do, whether or not you are treating others in the way you want to be treated.

In my mind, Bea Fluke was Israel. She spent a lifetime of struggling with God and with others. And we would all agree that she prevailed. That's why she was such an inspiring person. That's what we saw as her godliness.

But then again, **you** are Israel. **I** am Israel. A life of godliness is like a wrestling match. Sometimes we get our hips knocked out of joint (some of us more literally than others).

Sometimes our encounters with God and others leave us limping a little. But every morning when we get up and limp into the sunrise like Jacob did, we're reminded that we have prevailed. And by God's grace, we always will.