

**“Exploring the Questions”**  
**Genesis 32:22–31**  
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Good stories often raise more questions than they answer. This is true even for biblical stories. Sometimes we just want answers, whether they hold up over time or not, but we are wise to heed the counsel of English minister Leslie Weatherhead who, after hearing too much false piety during World War II, said, “There is no final comfort in a lie.” Sometimes it’s better to live with some questions than to embrace bad answers, especially if they are connected to the character of God.

There are some stories that seem to raise one question after another with no clear purpose. The film “Dune” felt this way to me, but I haven’t read the book yet—maybe I will understand more when I have. Complex mythic narratives often take time to construct the worlds in which they are set, introduce us to characters and themes. But good stories often raise more questions than they answer. Jesus’ stories do.

Today’s reading from Genesis is a story like this. We know the basic details about Jacob wrestling with a mysterious figure in the night, how he comes away with a limp but also a new name and a changed heart. Whatever happens under the cover of darkness, which is surely a symbol of the mysterious and potentially sacred, Jacob is transformed.

But there are so many questions here, so much mystery. Exploring these questions may not lead to definitive answers, but it will deepen our understanding of the story and clarify its implications for us.

One question is as to whether this is an actual experience or simply a vision or dream. On one level, it seems real, and a number of scholars, including G. Henton Davies, believe it is. Jacob walks away with a limp, as if his hip has been dislocated by his wrestling opponent. Unless he moves about quite vigorously when he dreams, his hip wouldn’t be injured. But what happens in a dream can affect us physically and what is happening to us physically can affect what we dream.

Dana and I had a startling interactive dream years ago. We were in Las Vegas for the next-to-last Southern Baptist Convention we attended in 1989. Dana was dreaming that she was in a casino. They were closing and turning off the lights, which lets you know this was a dream. Casinos in Las Vegas never close! But in the dream, as she tried to leave, a stranger approached her and grabbed her by the throat, and she resisted.

Being completely unaware of any of this, I was dreaming that Dana was dreaming and clearly startled. So, I put my hands on her shoulders and tried to get her to wake up. But I was having trouble doing so. Finally, we both awoke at the same time and stared at each other. I had my hands on her shoulders near her neck, and she was trying to get free. We exchanged stories and then agreed that it must have been the tuna we had eaten for dinner. It was wonderful, but...

Dreams can affect us physically. So, while Jacob's experience may be real, it may also be some kind of vision or dream. Many scholars hold this view as well. And many prophetic figures see visions; Amos certainly does. God communicates with two Josephs, Jacob's son and Jesus' father, through dreams. So, perhaps this is some kind of dream. Thinking about the experience this way doesn't make it any less real.

In the film "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2," there is a fascinating scene that takes place after Harry has apparently died. He is in a train station, there is a cloudy mist all around, and Dumbledore appears. Harry seems to be in some kind of state between life and death, this world and the next. They talk for a while. Then, as Dumbledore is leaving, Harry asks, "Professor, is this real or has this been happening inside my head?" Dumbledore replies, "Of course, it is happening inside your head, Harry. Why should that mean that it is not real?"

Jacob's experience is real, whether it is a physical experience or a psychological one, and it is transforming. He is given a new name to symbolize this reality. He is no longer Jacob — meaning "he who supplants or takes by the heel," the deceiver. He is now Israel — "one who contends with, wrestles with, or prevails with God." And it is not just Jacob's name that changes. He changes. He is not perfect. He will still play games with his brother Esau because he is afraid of him. But he is no longer the deceiver at heart. He is a faithful Israelite.

The message for us is that change comes in many different ways, but change comes, transformation. There are actual life events, there are things we read or view, we have dreams and see visions, we think and pray and seek both human wisdom and Divine insight — all of this is a part of life, and all of this can change us. Or speaking theologically, God can use all of this to change us.

But this leads to a second question our story raises — with whom is Jacob wrestling in the night? The text says simply that it is a man, though at the end of the story, Jacob says he has seen God face to face. Hosea 12:4 says that Jacob strives with an angel, a messenger or representative of God. Walter Brueggeman says it is his brother Esau with whom Jacob wrestles, an intriguing notion. And perhaps the most fascinating possibility is named by G. Henton Davies who says, “The attack of the assailant is the accusation of his own conscience, opposing, denouncing, and condemning the kind of life which Jacob had led up to this point (*Genesis*, The Broadman Bible Commentary, p. 236).”

So, which is it? Does Jacob wrestle in the night with a man, God, an angel, Esau, or his own conscience? I would say — yes. That is, Jacob wrestles with all these human entities, including himself, yet through it all, he ultimately wrestles with God. God is not separate from every other part of his reality. God is intimately involved with each of them. If we were to press the question, “Is Jacob struggling with a personal human matter or with God?” we might best reply by following Dumbledore’s lead in saying, “Of course, he is wrestling with a personal human matter. Why should that mean he is not wrestling with God?”

There is merit to each potential identity of Jacob’s wrestling opponent. He is certainly struggling to understand and accept himself. The life of a deceiver may enable him to acquire things, but it is not without cost. In his song “Raised Up Family,” James Taylor reflects on what did in a cousin. He says, “Could it have been that whiskey, rotgut, bootleg, bathtub gin? It's like it took a lot of liquor just to let him live in his own skin.” It’s not liquor that lets Jacob live in his skin, but he has a hard time doing it. So, he spends his time running, not just from Esau, but from himself as well. He could be wrestling with himself.

But speaking of Esau, Jacob struggles in his relationship with his brother, and “struggles” is an understatement. He schemes him out of his birth rite, he steals his blessing, he has to run away in fear which distances him from the rest of his immediate family. Whether the mysterious wrestling adversary in the night is Esau or not, this broken relationship is on Jacob’s mind.

And without question, Jacob is struggling in his relationship with God, his calling from God — the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is on that list, but he is last on the list. All three Patriarchs struggle with their roles, but Jacob really struggles. Perhaps it is God he rolls in the dirt with, fighting with all he has. In truth, he is rolling in the dirt with God one way or another because, as we have noted, God is involved in every aspect of his life, including personal and familial struggles.

The message for us is that all of our struggles are significant in and of themselves, but they have added meaning because God is involved in them too. There is no separation of the personal and relational stuff from the God stuff. It’s all God stuff.

John Killinger includes in his book *Bread for the Wilderness, Wine for the Journey* a story in which a friend describes running into an intoxicated man in the night and later wondering if that man might have been Jesus incognito. “Lord, was that You I gave the dollar to last night?” he wonders, “... was that You or Rodriguez, half-drunk with the suffering of this world? Was that You asking for a quarter or a half-dollar to buy a taco?”

He is referencing Jesus’ words in Matthew 25 about being present in the least of these in need. But Christ is also present in the family members and friends we struggle to love, and in our struggle to love them. And Christ is present in us — in our search for self-acceptance. God is involved in every aspect of life.

There is one other question I would raise about our story. Why does Jacob have this transformative experience now? He has needed change since his birth. He has been in positions that might have led to change before, like when he had a dream about a ladder reaching up to heaven. What is different about this moment that leads to change?

It has something to do with his vulnerability. He is scared out of his wits, rightly so. He is going to meet Esau, and Esau has plenty of reason to be angry with him and resources to harm him. Fear has a way of exposing a person, opening them to whatever help is available. This condition also pushes Jacob toward honesty, which is another helpful quality. He is more self-aware, more willing to face his flaws, which is required for any needed change. And he is persevering. He wrestles with all his might. He holds on to his adversary and won't let go until he receives a blessing, which if he believes this is God, implies that Jacob possesses something else — trust, faith, or hope that God can help him.

Vulnerability, honesty, perseverance, faith, and hope — these are qualities that lead to transformation for Jacob and us. It doesn't mean we magically change in a moment. It does mean we can change, and it points to the ways we do, the ways we allow God to help us.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once said that optimism is the belief that things will get better while hope is the faith that together we can make things better. He went on to note that hope is a human virtue but one with religious underpinnings. It is the belief not that God has written the script of history, will save us from the error of our ways, or protect us from the consequences of evil, but simply that God is mindful of our aspirations, and has given us the means to save us from ourselves, and thus we are not wrong to dream, wish, and work for a better world (*The Dignity of Difference*).

It is a different perspective on hope, but one which squares with the experience of Jacob. God's transformation enables him to be who God has created him to be. God offers us the very same gift, if we will open ourselves to it.

There is no one right answer to any of the questions we have asked. We tend to think there must be, but in Jewish tradition, there are almost always multiple answers. It's why Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof" says, "On the one hand... but on the other hand..." In our story today, there are multiple possibilities with regard to just about every question we want to ask, but the one central truth is that God is involved in all of life, including all our struggles, and so we always have hope.