

*Introduction:*

- A. God's blessing is a mysterious thing. In her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson's narrator is an elderly pastor named John Ames living in a small Iowa town called Gilead. His best friend, Boughton, is also a pastor in that town. They are so close that Boughton names his son after his friend: John Ames Boughton. But the boy grows up to be a disappointment—a scoundrel; a kind of lost soul. As a grown man, the young John comes home to visit his dying father. Things don't go well, and he decides to slip out of town. His namesake John meets up with him and walks him to the bus depot. He gives the younger man a little money and they wait. Here's what happens next:

Then I said, "The thing I would like, actually, is to bless you."

He shrugged. "What would that involve?"

"Well, as I envisage it, it would involve my placing my hand on your brow and asking the protection of God for you. But if it would be embarrassing—" There were a few people on the street.

"No, no," he said. "That doesn't matter." And he took his hat off and set it on his knee and closed his eyes and lowered his head, almost rested it against my hand, and I did bless him to the limit of my powers, whatever they are, repeating the benediction from Numbers, of course—"The Lord make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee: The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace." Nothing could be more beautiful than that, or more expressive of my feelings, certainly, or more sufficient, for that matter. Then, when he didn't open his eyes or lift up his head, I said, "Lord, bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father." Then he sat back and looked at me as if he were waking out of a dream.

That story is a Jacob story. Turn again to **Gen. 32:22-32.**

- B. As is his habit, God had been contending with Jacob for years. God had been *the hound of heaven* "whose strong

*feet followed, followed after.*” Twenty years earlier, as Jacob was fleeing from the fury of Esau, God had given Jacob an extraordinary vision of the Lord himself and God extended the extraordinary promises to Jacob that he had first made to Abraham, including, *“All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”* **So it wasn’t like Jacob had not been blessed.** He had inherited the greatest blessing of the Old Testament! **But there was still something he lacked, and he didn’t even know it. That is, till the night he wrestled with God.** Turn to **Gen. 32:22-32**, the passage you’ve heard.

- C. Here’s the mysterious thing: it was God who ambushed Jacob but Jacob who won the fight. The mysterious Wrestler *said* Jacob won. *“You have struggled with God and humans and have overcome.”* Jacob in no way looked like he won. To begin with, the man had crippled him so that even with Jacob’s herculean will he could no longer fight. At the end, he’s clinging to the Wrestler and gasping, *“I will not let you go unless you bless me.”* Hosea said Jacob *“wept and begged for his favor.”* **He was pitifully desperate!** It is a strange way to overcome! But that is exactly how we overcome God. By begging for his grace, to which God replies, *“You win! I’ll bless you!”*
- D. None of us are spared those times. I don’t mean hard times generally. I mean dark, soul-wrenching times when God seems more enemy than friend, more attacker than comforter, more bent on breaking us than blessing us.
- E. And that brings me back to the subject of God’s blessing. *Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.” But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”* It has vexed me a great deal that, after all this, when the Bible says, *“Then he blessed him there,”* **it doesn’t tell us what he said!** What was the blessing?? I’d imagined wondrous words from the divine voice laying a great gift upon Jacob’s life, like a bejeweled crown and royal purple

cape. But, of course, God had already done that long before. **God's blessing is here in plain sight, in three parts. I call it the uneasy blessing of the God who won't let go.**

## I. WE ARE GIVEN THE BLESSED LIMP

- A. This socket-wrenching hip injury is important. It's mentioned three times. It is what disabled Jacob in that battle with the Wrestler. At the end of the story as Jacob left that place and headed out to meet Esau we're told, "*he was limping because of his hip.*" Then there is that strange footnote in **v.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.*" Which tells us that this was the key to remembering and making sense of this story. We say at Thanksgiving, "*Save the wishbone.*" They said, "*Save the hip tendon so we remember how God blesses us.*"
- B. Jacob's dislocated hip is a reminder that God will do what he must to bring us to our knees before him. This happens to every believer. Famously, it happened to the Apostle **Paul**, described in **2 Cor. 12:7-10**. God had shown him amazing, inexpressible revelations. But then, he writes:  
*Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. [God allows Satan to be his instrument, and Satan knows how to hurt us.] Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*
- C. Our God-given limp is no mere handicap. It is our boast and blessing. I'm always looking for illustrations and I realized that on this point every Christian biography—indeed, every Christians story—has this chapter. Just last

night, I was reading the amazing autobiography of my TEDS classmate, **David Kyle Foster**. At one point he's talking about how despite an amazing conversion and a great education, he had no place to minister. He writes:

*One night, I poured out my heart to God, telling Him that I could not take it anymore. Since He had placed this powerful call on my life, He needed to give it an outlet or just take me home. My heart was weighed down with heaviness, as if an elephant were sitting on it. I cried out, "Lord, I'm literally dying inside." In His still, small voice, He gently replied, "That's what's supposed to be happening." As soon as He said it, I knew that it was not only true—it was wonderfully true. As if I were looking in a mirror for the first time, I saw that I was full of myself—my ardor, my training, my need to be affirmed. Yes, I needed to die. Otherwise, my service for the Kingdom would be polluted with self rather than being a selfless overflowing of my love for Him.*

D. If you know Jesus you have wrestled with him and, in one way or another, he has crippled you. Some hurt has been imbedded in your life that humbles you. Something is dislocated. No one gets a pass on this because it is how God blesses us with his grace and strength. If somehow the disabilities of our souls were all manifested in our bodies this morning, most of us would walk out limping, our red badge of God's love.

E. *Illus.*: Twila Paris wrote a song called, "This Thorn". One verse says:

*Thank you for this thorn, fellowship of pain,  
Teaching me to know you more, never to complain  
Thank You for this love planted in my side  
Faithful patient miracle opening my eyes.*

Now about the name. Illus.: R. C. Sproul told about a college student in a class he taught who had cerebral palsy. You know what that looks like—spastic movements, garbled speech. But as is often the case, this student was very bright and capable. Sproul

wrote, “One day he came to me vexed with a problem and asked me to pray for him. In the course of the prayer, I said something routine, with words like, ‘Oh, God, please help this man as he wrestles with this problem.’ When I opened my eyes the student was quietly weeping.

“I asked him what was wrong and he stammered his reply, ‘You called me a man—no one has ever called me a man before.’”

[#3771; *More Stories for the Heart*, p.19] That is not far off from what happened to Jacob, saddled with a selfish, grasping name that he always lived down to. But the Wrestler said to him in **v.28**, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and humans and have overcome.” Our blessing part 2:

## **II. WE ARE GIVEN THE BLESSING OF A STRONG NEW NAME**

- A. As you can see in your Bible’s footnote, Israel means something like ‘he wrestles with God.’ *The Message* paraphrases Israel’s name as “**God-Wrestler.**” At first, that seems like a kind of dubious name, doesn’t it? Wouldn’t you rather be called Victor or Favored. But it is a **short-hand name for the man who not only wrestled with God and humans, but overcame.** That’s what’s so great about this name. *Wrestled and overcame.* And how did he overcome? By being crippled by God, by weeping and begging for God’s favor. That’s how you overcome God and how God grants his blessing. **We prevail on God when we play to his grace and plead for his mercy.**
- B. The New Testament teaches that as believers in the Messiah, Jesus Christ, when we are born again we are grafted into the vine that is the nation of Israel. We become Israelites by adoption. So this name, Israel, God-Wrestler, is our name, too. Not just our name, but our identity. **Alexander** Maclaren wrote over a hundred years ago, “*that name [Israel] was transmitted to his descendants, and has passed over to the company of believing men [and women], who have become overcome by God and prevailed with God. It is a charter and a promise. It is a stringent reminder of duty and a lofty ideal. A true Christian is an ‘Israel.’ His office is to wrestle with God.*”

C. Frankly, I'd like a name that wasn't so much work. God-wrestling, even when we prevail, takes it out of you. But this is our God-blessed identity and no one who has surrendered to God's grace in Christ Jesus can evade the responsibility and privilege of this name.

Don't forget this: not everyone can wrestle with God and prevail. Most people who fight with God lose. We're successful God-Wrestlers *only because* God has blessed us with this calling, this benefit; **only because we know how to wrestle from our knees.**

D. This name makes us pray-ers. Because of this God-given identity we can offer prayers mighty enough to bring down kings, prayers groaning under life's contradictions and God's delayed answers, prayers probing deeply into our own souls, prayers that bring Christ himself into dark places, prayers celebrating our overcoming, prayers that usher people to the gates of God's glorious kingdom. Our prayers matter! **We live up to our Israelite name when we pray.**

Jesus was the truest Israelite and nothing proves that more than his praying, especially in Gethsemane, when he wrestled with his Father in prayer, begging for another way of salvation and yet surrendering to God's will. He struggled so fiercely that he sweat great drops of blood.

It is what we do, we Christians. We pray. Paul told the Colossians that their friend **Epaphras** was "*always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.*" This is God's great **blessing** upon us. We are his God-Wrestler-Victors.

Illus.: I ran into Pastor **Tim Ophus** this week. He's the church planter in the North Park neighborhood of Chicago. He's also an Uber driver. He told me about a hip looking young guy he'd just picked up this week who wanted a ride to a hospital. He was quiet the whole ride. When Tim got to the hospital, he asked the guy what entrance he wanted. He needed to get to the cardiac care area. As part of his Bible study group, Tim that week had set a goal of praying for someone for healing. So he asked the guy, "*I don't want*

*this to be weird, but would you like me to pray for you?” “I would really like that,”* the guy said and he had tears in his eyes afterward. **Tim Israel** prayed for him.

**Live up to your great name. Pray. Wrestle with God and other people in your prayers because you can prevail.**

There is one more great dimension to our God-blessed lives. Listen to **vv.30-31**, “*So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.’ The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.*” Apparently, the Wrestler had delayed his departure just long enough for the dawn to whisper its presence, just long enough for Jacob to catch a shadowed glimpse of his face in his human disguise, and what he saw was like ... well, what was it like? ... It was like seeing the rising sun shining on him!

### **III. WE ARE BLESSED WITH SEEING THE FACE OF GOD**

- A. Jacob said, “*I saw God face to face, and I was saved.*” He means, I think, that the experience didn’t kill him as it might well have. Seeing God exposes a person to his holiness which is like a spiritual antiseptic. Unfiltered exposure to God’s holiness can kill you. “*Woe to me!*” Isaiah cried. “*I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.*”
- B. But Jacob didn’t die, despite his sin. “*My life was spared.*” Or an equally valid translation is, “*I was saved.*” Jacob may have only meant that he escaped inevitable death. But when I read this as a Christian I see my story: “*I have seen God face to face, and I was saved.*”
- C. **Paul** wrote in **2 Cor 4:6**, “*God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.*” There’s **light** again! Illus.: One of my Einsteins friends quizzed me one day about some things in the Bible. At one point he said, “*How can anyone really know what God is like?*” “*By looking at Jesus,*” I replied.

- D. Most of us will not see an actual vision of Christ in brilliant light. But that doesn't mean we don't see "the face of Christ." God's way is to make "*his light shine in our hearts*" which "*gives us the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.*" **God intends us to see his glory by knowing Christ.**

I don't think we value enough this indescribable blessing given to those who wrestle with God. God, who once said, "*Let there be light, and there was light,*" has said that into your heart and mine. "*Let there be light in this God-Wrestlers heart,*" and at his command, we were filled with the knowledge of God's glory, which is to know and love Jesus Christ. We were born again. We were literally God's new creation. I'm moved by this to resolve to spend more time this week in just simply seeking the face of Jesus.

- E. This line in **v.31** is pure poetry: "*The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel [Face of God], and he was limping because of his hip.*" *The sun rose above him as he passed the face of God.* Do you see why it is so significant that many years later God told Aaron to bless his people, Israel, the God-Wrestlers, with these words: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD **make his face shine upon you** and be gracious to you; **the LORD turn his face toward you** and give you peace."

## Conclusion

It is not easy, even for Almighty God, to wrestle us into the blessing he wants to give and we so desperately need. Illus.: God is like the Australian prizefighter years ago who wired his father after a bout, "*Won easily in 84 rounds.*" [#428] Maybe that's how God felt as he vanished from Jacob's presence, and how he feels about his bouts with you and me. *Won easily in 84 rounds.*

**Charles Wesley** wrote a great Methodist hymn about this story entitled, "*O thou Traveler unknown.*" In that hymn, he sees himself like Jacob and Jesus as the one with whom he wrestles.

*My strength is gone, my nature dies,  
I sink beneath thy weighty hand,*



*Faint to revive, and fall to rise;  
I fall, and yet by faith I stand."*

And finally, he names the unknown Traveler:

*I know thee, Savior, who thou art,  
Jesus, the feeble sinner's friend;  
Nor wilt thou with the night depart,  
But stay and love me to the end:  
Thy mercies never shall remove,  
Thy nature and thy name is Love.*

There's an old spiritual that gets to the point too:

**Changed Mah Name**

*I tol' Jesus it would be all right  
If He changed my name*

*Jesus tol' me I would have to live humble  
If He changed mah name*

*Jesus tol' me that the world would be 'gainst me  
If He changed mah name*

*But I tol' Jesus it would be all right  
If He changed mah name*