

# THE DIVINE SCREW-JOB...<sup>1</sup>

## Genesis 32.22-32 (TNIV)

**Listen now for God's Word.**

*The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.*

*Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' So he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.' Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.' The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.*

**The Word of the Lord.**

Thanks be to God.

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What a day. And he was finally alone. He had spent all day trying to get his family moved across the river Jabbok. And yes, Leah AND Rachel had been right, he wasn't really "there" all day. His mind was drifting. His mind was on the next day; a day that seemed forever away, but a day he knew was fast approaching.

Esau. Big, red-haired, hairy, hunting, man-of-a-man Esau. It had been a long time. And Jacob had no idea how this meeting was going to go. In fact, he had sent messengers ahead just to check things out, and sure enough, in typical Esau-fashion, Esau was waiting with 400 hundred men. Enough to cause even Jacob to squirm. He had no choice but to split his people and animals into separate parties; at least then Esau couldn't destroy everything he'd worked so, so hard for.

And at the very end of the day, it was time to take his family across. There was too much noise, with all the animals, and the children, and babies...he needed

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<sup>1</sup> In contemporary wrestling terminology, a *screw-job* is "a match of ending which is not clean (definite) due to factors outside the 'rules' of wrestling." Because God, in a sense, "cheated" (see above, p.6), the wrestling match is, according to today's wrestling rules, a screw-job. Hence the title of the sermon. Another interesting contemporary wrestling fact. A *heel* is "a bad guy, a rule-breaker," which is what God is in this story. He "breaks the rules" by cheating and using divine powers against Jacob in the fight. But it is Jacob's name that means "he takes by the heel."

some time to be still. To be quiet. To listen. But...he had to get the last few loads of cargo over the ford, and then he had to get on his way to see Esau. He'd have to think while he walked. He had to figure out the speech he was going to give Esau the next day.

So, as he helped get the cargo packed, he began to run through possible speeches in his head: "You see, Esau, it really WAS mom who made me do it. I tried to tell her that it wouldn't work, that I wasn't as...well, you know, hairy as you, and that it just wouldn't work. But, she insisted, and, well, it did. It did work. But...oh shoot, but you know that, and here I am, and I really want to say..."

But that didn't sound right to him. A bit too much like he was just trying to play the "little brother" card. Perhaps, he needed to come across more mature, more in charge of his own life. "Esau, I know you've probably been upset, but, you've done well enough for yourself. Let's just get past this. We're both men now, and it's no point to get all bent out of shape about things done when we were just kids. So, we're okay, right?"

Getting closer, but...it still didn't sound right. And what would sound right? He had stolen Esau's birthright after all...he had deceived their father and stolen the blessing. Esau had a right to be upset – and that's what worried him. Earlier that day he had cried out to the God of his father, and his grandfather. "Deliver me, please, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers of my children!" And where was this God? God had come down and saved his father from being killed years ago – where was God now, now that Jacob could possibly be killed the very next morning? Where was God? Where?

Then again, perhaps Esau would have just forgotten about the past. No, of course not – would **he** have forgotten? Would he have given up on him? Would he have just let him be?

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Of course not. He could not have given up on Jacob, he would not have forgotten and he would not just let him be. He was too invested in this Jacob.

What a day. He had spent all day watching Jacob trying to get his family moved across the river Jabbok. There they were, the wives, the children. Jacob had done quite well for himself. Although his past was a little shady, he had stuck it out with Laban and worked the full 14 years for Rachel and Leah – he was becoming a family man – and now he was finally going to try and make amends with his brother.

He felt intimately connected to this family of Jacob's – from the close-call with his father, to the encounter at the top of Jacob's Ladder, to the future saga of his son, this was a lineage he was most concerned about.

But why was Jacob so worried about this reunion with his brother? Why was

Jacob so intent on trying to butter-up his brother? Why did Jacob not remember the promises made to his father and grandfather? Did Jacob really think he would be left alone? To fend for himself? Did Jacob really think he was forgotten about? Did Jacob really think he was alone?

Jacob was not alone.

He had been after Jacob for awhile now, and this was the night. This was the night to open Jacob's eyes a bit to the reality of his presence, the reality of the blessing, and the reality of the future. This was the night, to encounter Jacob in a visible way, in a bodily way, in a new way.

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And that's when it happened – out of nowhere a blur, a man...a something came flying at him – really, out of nowhere. It was a total sideswipe move, and Jacob was not mentally or physically prepared for the attack. He grasped the man, and both attempted to maneuver themselves into better fighting positions; arms and legs flailing, Jacob tried to come to grips with what was happening. Between right and left hooks Jacob frantically asked himself, "Who in the world was this? Was it a spy from Esau? One of Esau's men, come to 'finish off Jacob' before Jacob could even get a chance to argue his case in front of his elder, but less-blessed-brother? Was it Esau himself? Who was this?"

Jacob was strong but this man was clearly a worthy adversary; as they rolled and leaped and clung, dust flew up all around them so it was all a hazy, foggy mess. The man had hoped to get Jacob into a good choke-hold, a position where Jacob would remain still, a place where Jacob would be prepared to receive the revelation, but Jacob was relentless in his struggle. And the rolling, and flailing, and kicking and clutching and yelling and grunting went on throughout the night.

And then the dawn.

The man was getting desperate, he couldn't stay much longer, so he struck the socket of Jacob's hip. A cheap move, yes. Probably not according to regulation rules, but, he had to think of something. But even that didn't stop Jacob, and he really needed to leave.

"Let me go!" "No!" "Why not?" "Not till you bless me!" "What's your name?" "Jacob!" "Forget Jacob, you're Israel now, because you've struggled with God and man and have overcome!"

Immediately, there was a slight loosening of the grip on Jacob's part. He wasn't sure exactly what had just happened. Had he just received a new name? Had he just struggled with...

"Now! Please! I demand that you tell me your name!"

There was no response at first. Jacob didn't need to know the name of his grappling partner. Jacob knew. Jacob had known there was something about this "man" since the moment he had grasped hold of him.

"Why do you ask my name?" the man asked slowly. "You know. There is no need to ask. You know. And you know you are blessed..." And it was there that Jacob was blessed.

He slowly stood up, and began to limp away. He turned back around but...but there was no one. He looked at the ground where they had wrestled for the better part of the night. He looked at that ground...and he named it. Peniel. The face of God. God. Had it really been? God? He turned, and kept walking back toward the river Jabbok. To the place where he had stood the night before. And he realized...he was not the same. There was a limp, but...there was something else. He had just had an encounter with...no, it couldn't have been. But it was. It was an encounter with God, and he had to know...

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All he knew was that his hip hurt like hell, his brother Esau was only a few miles away and that he *didn't* know what was going to happen. Why had God injured him the night before his meeting with Esau? What did his name, Israel, really mean...? And why had God shown up in the night...instead of this morning? He could really use God right now.

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