

The Fifty (Thousand!) Shades of Grace, Part One The First Ever Wrestling Match

Grace and forgiveness are not the same thing—not quite. Forgiveness is certainly a part of grace, one shade of grace. But only one.

I don't know that there are 50,000 shades of grace. There might be more! There might even be 7.84 billion shades of grace. Which is of course the number of human beings on the planet as of last Friday. Let me just say that in the Bible the number one thousand, and even more so ten thousand, represents a very large number, unimaginably large. And 50,000 is five times that.

Throughout this sermon series, both today and in the sermons to come, I will periodically insert the phrase “Grace is . . . ,” and then name one of its shades. Or sometimes I'll name something grace does. We'll see how many shades I end up with at the end. I'm fairly sure I won't catch them all.

The word “grace” is primarily a New Testament word. It appears there 118 times, compared to only eight times in the Old Testament. But that doesn't mean you can't find grace itself in the Old Testament. It's actually there a lot.

You can find grace especially in stories. Grace is . . . a story. (That's #1, in case you want to write these down.) Stories involving relationships. Relationships between people and God. Relationships between people and other people. Grace is a relationship. (That's #2.)

Let's look at today's story involving Jacob. It features the “first ever wrestling match.” (Actually, the word “wrestling” first appears in the Bible just two chapters earlier, in Genesis 30:8, where Jacob's wife Rachel says, “With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister.” By which she meant Leah. Who was also Jacob's wife? That's a whole 'nother story. But Rachel and Leah didn't actually wrestle. At least as far as we know. Jacob on the other hand, did.

Let's review what we know about Jacob, leading up to this story. He was the second and youngest son of Isaac and? [invite congregation to respond; Rebekah]. Just barely second and youngest. He and his older brother? [Esau] were twins. But Esau came out first. And Jacob came out “gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob.” Which means “He takes by the heel,” or “He supplants.” As you'll see, names are very important in this story.

Now Esau (which some say means Red, because Esau had red hair) was a hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man,” we read in 25:27. And then the Bible says that “Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.” Now why do you think does the Bible adds that? Because, it's part of the story. And grace is a story.

Jacob would indeed supplant Esau—several times. First, when he tricked Esau out of his all-important birthright. Then again when, this time with his mother's eager help, he pretended to be Esau and tricked his sight-impaired father to give him, rather than elder son Esau, his all-important blessing. Leading Esau to 1) be very angry, and 2) to vow to kill him, once their father is dead and out of the way.

Rebekah catches wind of this and sends Jacob away to keep him safe, and while he is away, Jacob ends up meeting his cousin Rachel, whom he falls in love with, and asks his uncle Laban for her hand in marriage. Laban says, “Sure. You just need to work for me for seven years first.” Which Jacob does. But then on the wedding night Laban tricks Jacob into marrying elder sister Leah. What goes around comes around, right? Jacob finally got to marry Rachel as well, but only after seven more years of labor.

What goes around comes around. Jacob then tricks Laban out of his strongest and best sheep and goats. Because of which, we are told in Genesis 30:43, Jacob became exceedingly rich. At Laban's expense. Remember: the name Jacob means “He who supplants.”

There will go on to be more trickery yet in this story. But for our purposes, the plot gets particularly thick at the beginning of Chapter 32, when Jacob learned that Esau was “coming to meet him,” and four hundred men were coming with him. Oh oh. The axe is finally ready to fall. Which leads Jacob to pray to God (grace is a prayer; #3): “O God, I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and faithfulness you have shown me . . . “but deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him.” And Jacob decides to send a huge gift (and our story is very specific—he sends Esau 200 female goats, 20 male goats, 200 ewes and 20 rams, thirty milch camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, 20 female donkeys and ten male donkeys) all in hopes of appeasing Esau.

And that brings us to today's story. Here we go. "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 sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone."

Left alone. In the middle of the night. And Jacob, we suspect, knows the wrong he has done. All of it.

I'm curious. What do you think about when you are alone? What wakes you up in the middle of the night? The wrongs that you have done?

It weighs on us, doesn't it? It eats at us. It burns us. And it's hard to tell what's worse. Is it the guilt? The shame? The regret?

"Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." Interesting that we never learn the man's name. Even when Jacob asks him, "What is your name?" the man only says "Why is it that you ask my name?" As if to say to him "I think you already know."

"Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." Who are you?! Are you what I most fear? Are you a demon? Are you Satan himself? Are you my sin? Are you . . . me?

"Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." And Jacob fought hard. As we all do against our sins and our selves. Grace wrestles with us. [#4]

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."

It would be hard to wrestle, when your hip is out of joint. Think how badly it would hurt! Think how agonizing it would be!! But Jacob held on. Until the man said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking. But Jacob said, I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

That sounds just like Jacob, doesn't it? Always after another blessing, or birthright, or monster profit! It's who he was, right? "He supplants." But is it possible that this time, Jacob was actually after something else? Forgiveness, maybe? Was Jacob asking the man to bless him with forgiveness?

"What is your name?" the man now said to him. "Jacob," he said. As if the man didn't already know. "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." There it is. Grace gives us a new name [#5]. A new start. A second chance, a third, a fourth. Maybe even a thousand.

"Israel. I like that. 'I have striven with God and have prevailed!'" Except that's not what Jacob says now. For all appearances that Jacob had somehow won the wrestling match, Jacob knew that that wasn't the case. "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." Grace is . . . the face of God. [#6]

The man left Jacob. But Jacob was left with a limp. Grace leaves us with a limp. [#7] What is your limp? [*Selah*, the writer of Psalm 62 would add here.]

The writer of Genesis adds what seems to be an interesting aside: "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." "Ohh, that's why they don't eat the thigh muscle!" we may feel like saying, with innocent surprise. "I always wanted to know." Except, that's no mere aside. That's a monument being erected. That's remembering. Grace asks us to remember. [#8] Even when it's painful.

That's where our passage ends. But it's not where this story ends. I encourage you to read the first sixteen verses of Chapter 33. Trust me: you'll want to know what happens.

But for now, that's enough. Grace tells us, "That's enough." [#9]

Giving us nine shades of grace so far. Let's review. Grace is a story. Grace is a relationship. Grace is a prayer. Grace wrestles with us. Grace gives us a new name. Grace is the face of God. Grace leaves us with a limp. Grace is a monument, asking us to remember. Grace tells us, "that's enough."

Indeed. Amen.