

Sarah Kretzmann
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It wasn't our best night, a few weeks ago, over there at 212 Spring Street. It might shock you to learn that in our household there is the occasional temper tantrum and the sporadic mental meltdown. That night, a few weeks ago, was a major deal, it was a Perfect Storm collision of a tantrum and a meltdown, and what's funny is I don't even remember the cause of it all. But I can tell you it was a standoff between myself and my middle son, whose permission I got before I even attempted to write this sermon.

I do recall from our fight my asking him, in absolute frustration, "Why do you have to fight me about *everything*?" This characteristic has marked Jacob since his arrival in this world, seven short years ago. In fact, he was my kickiest unborn child, sometimes giving me a whollop to the lungs that completely took my breath away. So anyway, Jacob was upstairs

in his room for a long time, working out whatever it was he needed to work out before he would be in any position to talk. Finally, the dramatic screaming and flailing of limbs subsided, and I could hear only faint gasps as his breathing steadied. I poked my head in through his door and asked him, “Jacob, are you ready to talk?”

“Yes,” came the shaky reply.

I walked in and crawled up into the top bunk. We laid side by side for several minutes, both of us looking up at the ceiling. Jacob began to speak.

“Why did you even *have* me?” he asked me. I was not prepared for this. I was prepared for...*why do you yell at me when I bury your silverware in the sandbox...or why do you get mad when I put Lego’s in your shoes...or why are you not thrilled when I fill your vegetable crisper with wet mud and apple seeds so that an apple tree can grow by morning, just for you?* I was prepared to engage any one of those issues, but I was not prepared for the

deep questions, the probing, existential questions that begin to tug at the brain of seven-year-old boys.

“Why did you even *have* me? And why did you even *name* me Jacob?” he rolled over on his side and looked at me, and I saw his eyes were red and puffy from crying and his chin was still quivering. And suddenly, it hit me, like a bolt of lightning. This was the perfect opportunity to tell my middle son why he was named Jacob, and, furthermore, this would help him understand why he was here on this planet.

“Ok,” I said to him, “let me tell you a story from the Bible.”

“Noooooooo!” he said, this middle son of mine who has told me on several occasions, sometimes even during service, that church is his least favorite place in the entire world to be. “Not a *Bible* story!”

“Just listen,” I assured him, “this story will answer both your questions.”

“There was a man in the Bible named Jacob who had a twin brother named Esau. The two brothers fought with each other their whole lives long; they even fought while they were babies in their mother’s belly. As the years passed, they fought all the time, even when they became grown ups. The final straw came when Jacob tricked his older brother Esau out of their father’s blessing, which was a very important thing back then. After that, Esau left, promising to kill Jacob the next time they met. Many years later, Jacob got a message that Esau wanted to see him. But Jacob didn’t know if Esau was tricking him. So Jacob collected everything he had in the world, all his family his slaves, his animals, and also many fancy gifts for Esau, just in case Esau was still secretly mad at him. So finally the day arrived for the journey to meet his brother. Jacob, while shrewd, was not always brave, so he sent all his family and slaves ahead of him, and he traveled at the back of the pack. Finally, as it got late, they came to a river, and night began to fall,

so Jacob sent his family and his slaves and all his animals bearing his fancy gifts across the river to the other side. By then, it was pitch dark, so Jacob yelled to them to pitch their tents and he would catch up to them in the morning.

And that is how Jacob found himself alone on the banks of the River Jabbok.

Now if you know a lot about biblical languages, which your mother happens to know, you would notice that the word Jacob and Jabbok are opposites...this is a clue that there is about to be a major shift in this story...a big change is about to happen. Anyway.

Jacob began to be very afraid of the next day, wondering if Esau really wanted to forgive him, or it was a trick and he was really going to kill him. Could this be his last night alive? Jacob was terrified. Suddenly, a man jumped out of the shadows and began to wrestle with Jacob. It really was an

angel of the Lord, but Jacob didn't know that. They wrestled all night long, they were an even match, until the sun began to rise in the east, and the angel told Jacob it was time for him to go.

‘Before I go,’ the angel said, ‘tell me your name.’

‘My name is Jacob,’ Jacob replied.

‘You are a worthy opponent,’ the angel said, ‘and you have wrestled with God all night long. You are strong and you do not give up. I will change your name to Israel, which means “one who wrestles with God.”’

‘Now you tell me your name,’ Jacob demanded.

But the angel was in a hurry, so he kicked Jacob in the hip, breaking his joint, and then he disappeared. The next morning, Jacob caught up with his family, and was reunited with his brother Esau, who did not kill him...but Jacob limped for the rest of his life.

‘And that is why you are named Jacob,’ I said to my Jacob, ‘and that is why you are on this earth.’”

“*What?*” Jacob asked me, with big, curious, seven-year-old eyes.

“You are named Jacob, because you fight and struggle to understand everything, because you ask questions that are too big for you, because you wrestle with ideas too large for you, because you feel pain beyond your years, because your eyes are not the eyes of a seven-year-old. You are here on this earth to make me see the importance of struggling. You are here to show people that there is beauty in the struggle, no matter who wins or loses, that sometimes the fight itself is the goal.”

His eyes grew droopy and he slowly faded into a strange sleep, animated by dreams of dark river banks and misty wrestling matches with angels and fear and strength all mixed up into one unnamed emotion.

“...and you are here,” I continued, speaking softly to my sleeping son,
“to remind me of Jacob from long ago, whose soul you somehow reflect, a
Jacob who wrestled with everything, just like you, a man who struggled,
who fought...a Jacob whom God loved very, very much, a man who got a
new name, a blessing, and a limp. You are here to remind me that our faith
in God is not occasionally visited by struggle, faith is rooted in it. Faith is
defined and shaped by struggle. We don’t fight with things we hate—we
fight with things we love, as we struggle with God, as God struggles with us.
It doesn’t come without pain, as Jacob in the Bible limped for the rest of his
life. We, too, bear scars and bruises and bumps and limps from our fights
with God, but God doesn’t abandon us in the struggle. And God forces us to
leave behind the old and embrace the new, like Jacob from long ago, God
blesses us and loves us all our days, knowing we are going to kick and fight
and punch every single step of the way...and that, my dear, Jacob, is why

you are named Jacob and that is why you are here, to remind me of the most beautiful relationship in the world, the one between people and God...a relationship of mutual and heart-breaking faith, a relationship of mutual and heart-breaking strength, a relationship of mutual and heart-breaking power, where Creator and creature roll up the sleeves and get down on all fours for the wrestling match of lifetime...you are named Jacob to remind me for the rest of my days to find beauty in the struggle, and to engage it with raw and passionate ferocity....and for that, my exhausting, sleeping, middle son, I give you thanks.”