

Hold Fast

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Introduction

In this series – Turning Points – we intend three tasks. Firstly, we engage ourselves in a spiritual “turning point” experienced by a Bible character. We then confirm the moment as a turning point by observing it resonate in their life. Finally, we personalise the principles, exploring the relevance for our own discipleship.

This series has already engaged with Jacob – at Bethel. Today we deal with another Jacob “turning point”. I think this is important. Discipleship is fluid, not static. The development of character is not limited to a single insight or moment. It’s important to remain intellectually willing and emotionally open to the work of the Spirit, the power of the Word, the impact of experience, the still small voice. You will not be confined to a single important spiritual moment in your life. Nor was Jacob.

Personality and Character

In this turning point, we think particularly about character development. As you are aware, there is a distinction between “personality” and “character”.

“Personality” we can readily observe. We can describe someone’s personality as gregarious and extroverted, or contemplative and introverted. We can observe a personality trait of being a “talker” or a “listener”. When first meeting someone we may find their personality infectious, exciting, intriguing, attractive, or even off putting or not appealing. “She’s so fun.” “He’s too loud.”

But character is not like personality. Someone’s motivation or morality or psychology is often not immediately accessible or observe. Character reveals itself over time. Importantly,

character is best revealed in various life circumstances... when on holidays, when at work, when under trial, when in financial turmoil, when mourning, when at church, when away from church.

Two observations emerge about character:

1. Each of us have a “character gap” between our current character and what our character could be. There’s a need to develop character always; and
2. Importantly, character is malleable. Our characters can change. And there are recognised strategies for this. Strategies include having a positive role models (factual or fictional), or implementing moral reminders (signing an agreement, reading the ten commandments, a message on a fridge magnet, a daily text with a moral message or encouraging idea, etc)

Remember, your character reveals itself over time. It has space for development and improvement; is malleable; and there are strategies to assist character development.

As one such strategy is a role model, let’s see if Jacob can help us.

The author of Genesis provides two helpful literary tools that reveal both the “personality” and “character” of Jacob. Let -me jog your memory....

Tool #1 – Personality

The first tool is an insight into Jacob’s personality using a visual marker. The author demands we keep our eyes fixed on Jacobs hands. It’s the very first thing we see, as a hand that had wrestled within the womb is first seen wrestling from that womb. Those hands make pottage in the birthright incident; those hands are covered in goats hair in deception; those hands take a rock for pillow; those hands wrestle a brother by the brook. Jacob’s observable personality is one of forthright hands on active self-determination.

Tool #2 – Character

The second tool is an insight into Jacob’s character using another visual “code”. It is the innocuous or misunderstood piece of narration at his birth that Jacob “lived in a tent”. Just as everyone in that part of the story did.

“Tent life” is Code. It is Code for spiritual motivation, for spiritual attitude, for character. That same code is picked up in Hebrews 11 where “Tent life” is cod for a character of Faith.

The author has been generous to you and me, providing a lens to understand Jacob's personality, but more importantly his underlying character.

Turning Point – Genesis 32

Let's now press on with the "turning point" event. The wrestle between God and Jacob in Genesis 32. This chapter is rich with poetic imagery, great drama, exquisite storytelling, and important spiritual insights. This chapter is familiar to many, so we will be efficient with time. Please join in observing what the author is beautifully doing here as they provide a factual narration and at the same time a parable of Jacob's life.

The *narration* is of a journey in the day and a wrestle in the night. And the *parable* is a "wrestle" between God and Jacob, undertaken in BOTH the day and the night. With Genesis 32 open in front of you, or in mind, let's see this.

1. In Genesis 31 God pulls Jacob toward Him. Encouraging Jacob back to Bethel. And so Jacob yields. The movements of God and Jacob are in sync.
2. Chapter 32 commences with a remarkable encounter. As he journeys back toward Bethel, God journeys with him. Jacob visibly sees a companion group of angels journeying with him. An extra ordinary event this. Imagine for a moment on your own journey down the freeway, or on a plane, or hiking a mountain path, and you are joined by a company of angels.
3. This is an extravagant visual comfort, experienced by very few in the Bible. God is present. And so Jacob, responds – "Mahanaim" – Two Camps he notes. God pulls Jacob to Him.
4. Does Jacob yield and relinquish control to God? No. Jacob sends envoys to Esau. Jacob wrestles control from God to self. He adopts hands on coercion, and says as much as he instructs his envoys to carefully explain that he is wealthy and is personally seeking favour.
5. When the envoys return with the news of Esau and 400 men are on their way, we are given a raw insight into the wrestle at play. He's frightened! Jacobs response is to divide himself in to "Two Camps"!! Yet, we know that there are already two camps. Jacob displays no trust in the other camp, and wrestles power to himself. Taking matters into his own hands.

6. But, like us, in the dark times, Jacob falls to his knees and prays “I fear him, please deliver me”. He relinquishes power, gives the wrestle back to God. To and fro, God and Jacob, trust and fear, so the day goes. An earnest prayer, born of fear.

7. And how does Jacob rise from his prayer? Submitting to the power and care of God? No, he trusts in his own hands.

– 200 female goats

– 20 male goats

– 200 ewes

– 20 rams

– 30 milking camels and their calves

– 40 cows

– 10 bulls

– 20 female donkeys

– 10 male donkeys

And in verse 20 the author clarifies that this wasn’t a moment in harmony with God. It was a moment of self will,

For he thought ‘I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterward I shall see his face. Perhaps he will accept me.’ (Gen 32:20)

No mention of God, who he had asked to help him. The push and pull continues.

8. And the final act of self will, of not submitting, of self determination, was to concoct another plan of separation. The family on one side, and he on the other side, of the brook Jabbok.

I hope you can see it. The author is showing us Jacob’s personality. His modus operandus is to wrestle control from the Father, to trust in elaborate plans, gifts of persuasion, minimisation of risk and loss, tactics of engagement, and a single (but genuine) prayer.

A day of wrestling with God precedes a night of wrestling with God.

In The Night

In verses 24-30 the metaphorical wrestle becomes a literal wrestle. You are familiar with the event. Only three things to note of the wrestle.

1. They Wrestled All Night. Some commentators ask “how it is that an immortal angel and a mortal man can be equally matched?” They propose solutions such as the angel having temporarily diminished powers as a man. But this misses the point. The point is they wrestled “all night long”. Jacob had wrestled at birth. Over the birthright. For the blessing. At Laban’s. All the previous day. And now “all night long”. Jacob has been wrestling with God for years, dark years.
2. And the second point is... no one was winning! Neither God or Jacob were prevailing. Jacob was engaged in a spiritual wrestle, in which the power shifted, the dominance swung. But Jacob never fully relinquished to God.
3. The third observation is how gritty and raw God reveals Himself in this. Here is God engaged with Jacob in personal intimate hand to hand combat. Pushing and pulling, rolling in the dirt, tactile, involved... All night long. A remarkable insight into the Father.

The Turning Point

And now we arrive at a turning point. And all it takes is a touch. Jacob is painfully brought to see where the power lays, where the victory rests, where trust can be invested.

It takes just a touch. God is truly in complete control.

Don’t read over the touch too quickly. It is the turning point.

Years of wrestling with God lead to this point... And it all pivots on the touch of God. In pain. With a hip out of joint. He perceives what he and his hands need to do. They HOLD ON.

No pulling, no pushing, no striking, no grappling, no twisting... He holds on to the angel. He does not want to let God go. He genuinely does what he has never consistently done before... He clings to God. All his energies are completely focused, no secondary plan or back up plot.

So much so, that it is the angel that says, “Let me go”.

Is It Really A Turning Point

The thesis in this series is that we can only be certain that this is a turning point for Jacob by seeing it evidenced in subsequent commentary or behaviour. Let’s make that enquiry. Does this moment really result in a shift, a thorough change, in character development?

Proof #1 – Hosea’s Commentary

In his message to Israel, Hosea does what we are always trying to do. He takes a Biblical character and uses their experiences to provide instruction about discipleship. And Hosea uses both negative and positive aspects of Jacob’s life to convey instruction and advice. Hosea uses the examples of Jacob’s birth and life, then the wrestle at Jabbok, and then Bethel.

In the womb he took his brother by the heel, and in his manhood he strove with God. He strove with the angel and prevailed; he wept and sought his favor. He met God at Bethel, and there God spoke with us — the LORD, the God of hosts, the LORD is his memorial name: “So you, by the help of your God, return, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God.” (Hos 12:3-6)

Each ‘Jacob event’ is then matched by incident specific advice. It’s a form of chiasm.

- Instead of a life marked by wrestling, wait continually for God
- Instead of wrestling God, hold fast to love and justice
- Like God promised at Bethel to return Jacob back to the land, you too should return back to God.

So, Hosea, pinpoints the important element of the wrestle at Jabbok; the turning point. His incident-specific ‘Jabbok advice’ to a nation astray is to “hold fast”. It’s the important moment, it is the key message from Jacob’s Jabbok experience that the Israelite should heed. Those hands that wrestle with God *must* become hands that Hold Fast to God.

Let’s pause for a moment and clarify something. I need to be clear about this idea of “wrestling”, which can be used as a noun and a verb, and today a metaphor. So, let’s clarify –

1. It is true that our entire lives will be a wrestle. We will face trials, both natural and spiritual. We may fall upon hard times. Or we may have spiritual doubts. Or perhaps one will trigger the other. These wrestles or trials will just simply exist. And they will influence your character. But this is not the type of “wrestle” that is occurring in Genesis 32.
2. The “wrestle” that the author of Genesis is asking us to see is not one of life’s trials and tribulations. This is different. This is a man directly fighting God. And that is not ok. The Word is very clear about this (Romans 7 for example). For the committed disciple, our wrestle is principally with ourselves. In the case of Jacob, the wrestle is not the

triumph, it is not what is celebrated in this story. Be careful not to glorify the wrestle. The triumph in this story is that Jacob gets to the point where he *stops* wrestling *against* God, and starts to *hold fast* to God.

Yes our life will be marked by a wrestle with trials and tribulations. But to wrestle against the will of God is not celebrated; holding fast to God is the goal.

And so the questions that naturally arise for Jacob are: Is this what we see next? And does wrestling with God diminish and holding fast emerge? Do we see Jacob get to that final piece of advice from Hosea, a man who not only “holds fast, but also “waits continually for God”?

Proof #2 – Jacob Changes

It is an unequivocal “yes”. In fact the author of Genesis seems to be at pains to show this.

In Genesis 34, Dinah is tragically defiled. Jacob’s daughter is harmed. I have three teenage daughters. I know this is an appalling atrocity for Jacob. What will Jacob do? What will his hands see fit to do? Usually they do something.

He does... Nothing.

Then, adding greater burden, it is his sons who act. They resort to religious trickery and murderous rampage. What will our Jacob do?

The author says... “Jacob held his peace”.

In Genesis 35, Jacob’s son Reuben stages an insolent power play and lays with Bilhah. I’ve always scratched my head at Jacob’s response. The author simply says, “And Israel heard of it”. He doesn’t respond. This is a deliberate piece of writing by the author, demanding that you must see a different man now.

No longer Jacob. It is Israel. Who “waits continually for God”.

Genesis 46 is the most remarkable proof for me. As an old man, Jacob is told that Joseph’s supposed death was really a cruel and callous deception. Think about what is happening for Jacob. Any parent understands that nothing would get between you and re-uniting with your child. Any parent who has lost a child will understand this fiercely. Nothing would stop you. Nothing would distract you from that short journey from Southern Israel to Egypt to just see, touch, smell, kiss, hug your beautiful child.

And yet we read of Jacob...

So Israel took his journey with all that he had and came to Beersheba, and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. And God spoke to Israel in visions of the night and said, "Jacob, Jacob." And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again, and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes." (Gen 46:1-4)

Can you see what the author is telling you? Can you see who Jacob has become?

At the edge of the land, over the horizon, a short journey, is Egypt. But work through what Jacob does here. He stops. He takes an animal and kills it and prepares it and then offers sacrifices. He sets up camp and sleeps. But it is a troubled sleep. Because Jacob had something on his mind. He needed an answer. He wasn't sure if he should leave Israel. **EVEN THOUGH** Joseph awaits. And so it is God who intervenes, who holds Jacob, and assures him that he doesn't need to be afraid about going, that it is ok to go to Egypt.

If that was your child, would you? I wouldn't give God the chance.

This is my favourite account of Jacob. It is a complete triumph of character development. Every single one of us would forgive him for being the self determined, strong willed, hands-on father who charges to see a child he thought dead, but now alive. This is the precise moment that we would accept Jacob just pushing to achieve whatever he wanted to achieve. We would applaud his urgent journey to Joseph.

And it is in this context we see the most remarkable man he has become. He does the exact opposite. Finally, he "holds fast" and "waits continually on God".

And for the first time we can comfortably see Jacob as Jesus. As he pauses at Beersheba, and in action – and maybe even in prayer to the Father – he says "not my will, but Yours be done".

Jacobs difficulties in life become worse after Jabbok: a daughter raped, sons become murderers, one son lays with his concubine, Rachel dies, Joseph dies. A series of tragedies that would break any one of us.

But the Genesis author shows us something remarkable. A radically different man from Jabbok onwards. Who holds and waits on God.

Proof #3 - Hebrews 11

A final and helpful proof that Jacob is a changed man after the wrestle at Jabbok is found in Hebrews 11. Our understanding of Jacob helps us to interpret the power of the words.

By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. (Heb 11:21)

On the face of it, the statement is anti-climatic. There is nothing remarkable about an elderly man, at the point of death, (a) leaning on a staff and (b) blessing his grandchildren. It is the rule, not the exception. And if that is all there is to faith, most grandfathers throughout history would qualify.

But you can see what the author here is doing. It is a remarkable word picture with evocative memory triggers. Hands. Not wrestling. Hands now holding.

A reviewer of this article helpfully educated me that the word “hold” in Hebrews is the idea of a meeting point between holding on and being held up; to brace oneself and to be braced; to lean on and to be supported. A fabulous insight into the complementary actions of Jacob holding on and God holding him up.

The word picture includes that of a man blessing his grandchildren, with crossed arms. And so those hands, once so natural in their use, once so self determined and self reliant that it was his personality trait, by the end the hands are unnaturally crossed. Spiritual over natural. Waiting on God, not self.

21st Century Disciple

Our final task is to personalise the principles at play in this account for a 21st century setting and disciple.

It is character development that leaps of the pages for Jacob. Jacob’s personality is so easy to see. It is so stark in the pages. Some may find it engaging and attractive. Others may find it brash and jarring. But the author goes to great lengths. Engages us with beautiful and thoughtful writing. Providing evocative imagery and careful relating of events. All to show us a character that proved to be malleable. A character that triumphed through the experiences of life, even despite the experiences of life.

Perhaps the thing that I most impressed by is the radical nature of this character development. For many years I falsely thought that Jacob's character developed steadily and progressively. Born of the school of hard knocks.

But this is simply not true. The author cannot make it any clearer that the turning point at Jabbok is radical. It is immediate. It is a breathtaking, stunning transformation.

And this is an inconvenient truth for me.

When it comes to wrestling with God, the example of Jacob is not one of snail paced or gradual spiritual change in my life. There is no place for fighting with God. There is no endorsement of pulling or pushing God away.

This is an example of a man who despite his own personality traits of self will, and despite significant life challenges, swiftly found a way to live in harmony with the will of God. To still self will and allow God's will. To hold fast and to wait continually.

The wrestles in your life will not diminish. They may in fact become intolerably worse (none of us wish for that). But any wrestle against God, not allowing God to prevail, not relinquishing to God... That just has to stop. Radically. Like Jacob.

Surely this is why Hosea uses the example of Jacob to Israel. Hosea is not suggesting that Israel should undertake a slow, measured, gradual dissolving of sin and eventual return to God. Of course not! Jacob is his urgent example for Israel to "return", "hold fast", and "wait" on God. Radically. Immediately.

Only you know your "character gap". Only you know if there is still something that you and God wrestle with. Where you have yet to relinquish. Where you refuse to acquiesce power. Where you pull back. What your hands are still holding on to.

The good news is that character is malleable. It is not fixed. I am not a victim to my personality traits. Our characters can change.

One strategy to assist character development is a role model. Jacob is there for you.

At the very least he is an example of the possibility of character development. At best, Jacob can be your inspiration. He is relatable. His life tragedies are many – some may even be relevant to you. He is raw and fallible.

Most importantly, Jacob is the proof that character gaps can be bridged. The triumph of radical change is open to a disciple. That a disciple, today, wherever they may find themselves, and whatever circumstances surround them, can grab on and Hold Fast to God, and

triumphantly just relinquish a life to God, choosing to Wait Continually on Him. It is one of the most dramatic and stark turning points in all of scripture. We are just so blessed, so happy, to have his story.

Perhaps it will be your story too.