

SAMPLE: TRADE NON-FICTION

Portfolio Context: The following chapter excerpt demonstrates long-form theological exposition and structural narrative. It is formatted with clean typography, clear section breaks, and standardized blockquotes for scriptural focus.

Wrestling for a New Identity

How God Renames You in the Places You Have Stopped Telling the Truth About

Chapter 1 — Alone at the River

The thing about Jacob is that he had run his whole life and finally had nowhere left to run.

The night the story turns, he is standing at the edge of a river called Jabbok with everything he owns on the other side.

His wives. His children. His servants. His herds. Twenty years of accumulation, hard-earned, half-stolen, the carefully constructed evidence of a man who has done well for himself.

He sends all of it across the water ahead of him.

And then, for reasons the text does not fully explain, he stays behind.

There is a sentence in Genesis 32 that is easy to read past, but it is the hinge of the whole story.

And Jacob was left alone.

Four words. The Bible's understatement of the year.

Because what happens next is that a stranger appears in the dark and the two of them wrestle until daybreak.

By morning, Jacob is a different person — limping, blessed, renamed, sent into a future he could not have walked into the night before.

But before the wrestling, before the blessing, before the new name, there is this: he was left alone.

If you have ever wondered why God seems to keep clearing your life of the things you were leaning on — the relationship that ended, the job that did not work out, the community that fell apart, the plan that collapsed at the last minute — this chapter is for you.

Because if Jacob's night at Jabbok teaches us anything, it teaches us that God does some of His best work in the rooms He has emptied of everyone but you.

This book is about that room. It is about what God does in the dark, when the lights of the life you built have all been carried over to the other side of the river, and you are left with nothing to negotiate with and no one to perform for.

It is about identity — the one you have been telling everyone you have, and the one God has been quietly preparing to give you.

And it is about the limp you will walk out with, because real encounters always leave a mark.

But before we get to any of that, we have to sit with Jacob in the dark.

The Crossing You Have Been Avoiding

Jacob is forty-something years old when this happens, and he is going home.

He has been gone for twenty years — twenty years on the run from a brother he cheated and a father he deceived.

Now God has told him to go back. He has sent ahead an enormous gift to soften his brother Esau, and he has sent messengers, and he has divided his household into two camps so that if Esau attacks one, the other might escape.

He has done everything a strategic man can do. And then night falls, and he sits down beside the river he has not yet crossed, and the strategy runs out.

You know this place. Maybe not the river, but the place.

It is the place where the prayer you have been praying for years still has not been answered, and the workarounds you have built to live without the answer are starting to fail.

It is the marriage you have been managing instead of mending.

It is the inner life you have been outsourcing to noise — to the phone, to the next sermon, to the next conference — because the silence has become too loud to sit in. It is the version of yourself you have been carrying around for so long that you have started to forget it was ever a costume.

Genesis does not call it a crisis. Genesis calls it being left alone.

But they are often the same place.

What we learn from Jacob's night at Jabbok is that being left alone is not the same as being abandoned.

The text is careful. It does not say God left him.

It says he was left alone. The Hebrew has the texture of a deliberate setting-aside — as if the whole landscape has been arranged so that this man and this God can finally meet without anyone else in the way.

This is the first thing the night at Jabbok wants us to see.

The seasons in which you feel most isolated are often the ones God has carefully engineered.

He removes the supports not because He has stopped caring about you, but because He has finally found a way to get past them.

It is a hard thing to write down, and it is a harder thing to live through.

But the people in Scripture whose lives bent decisively toward God almost all describe a season like this one.

Moses had forty years in the back of the desert before the burning bush.

David had years in caves before the throne. Paul had three years in Arabia before the apostleship.

Elijah had a long walk to a quiet mountain after the fire on Carmel.

Jesus Himself was driven into the wilderness before public ministry began.

The pattern is so consistent that it functions less like a coincidence and more like a method.

God isolates the people He intends to use, not because isolation is the point, but because isolation is the room in which the next thing gets built.

So if you are in that room right now, do not waste the silence trying to fill it.

The voice you have been waiting to hear has a hard time getting through when the room is loud.

The Stranger in the Dark

What happens next is one of the strangest scenes in the Bible.

A man appears. The text does not tell us where he came from or how Jacob knew there was anything unusual about him.

They simply meet, and they wrestle. The wrestling lasts all night.

And here is the detail that should stop us: Jacob wins.

Not really, of course. The text is careful again. When the man sees that he cannot prevail against Jacob — that Jacob will not let go — he touches the hollow of Jacob's thigh and dislocates it with a single touch.

So we understand. This is no ordinary opponent. This is someone who has been holding back the whole time, someone whose mildest move undoes a man who has been fighting him for hours.

And yet Jacob, even with a wrenched hip, even at the absolute end of his physical strength, refuses to let go.

“I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.”

This is one of the great sentences in the Old Testament, and it is easy to read it as desperation.

But it is something more precise than desperation. It is the sound of a man who has finally understood who he is fighting.

He cannot win and he knows it. So he changes the goal.

He stops trying to defeat the stranger and starts asking for something from him.

That is the spiritual movement we have to make if we want to come out of our own dark nights with anything to show for them.

You will not out-wrestle God. You will not pray longer than His silence. You will not figure out the puzzle.

You will not earn the breakthrough. But you can refuse to leave the encounter empty-handed.

This is what persistence in spiritual life actually looks like. It is not loudness. It is not eloquence.

It is not even particularly strong faith. It is the simple, stubborn unwillingness to walk away from God without being changed by the meeting.

Jacob holds on with a dislocated hip. He holds on because the alternative — going back to being the man he was when he sat down at the river — is no longer livable.

The cost of staying has finally exceeded the cost of being undone.

If you have ever sat in a room past midnight and prayed prayers that did not feel like they were going anywhere, you already know what this kind of holding on feels like.

It is not glamorous. It does not look like a breakthrough from the outside.

From the outside it just looks like exhaustion. But it is the most important thing you can be doing in that room.

The blessing is on the other side of holding on.

The Question He Will Not Stop Asking

Now the encounter takes a turn no one in our age expects.

The man does not bless Jacob. Not yet. Instead, he asks Jacob a question.

“What is thy name?”

For a moment, set aside the fact that the stranger almost certainly already knows the answer.

Set aside the theological complications. Just hear the question.

What is your name?

Jacob has to say it out loud. He has to say the name his mother gave him when he came out of the womb gripping his brother's heel.

He has to say the name that means supplanter, deceiver, one who takes by trickery.

He has to admit, in the dark, with his hip out of socket, that he is the kind of man whose own name is an accusation.

And he said, Jacob.

There it is. The hardest sentence in the chapter. Two syllables of unvarnished self-recognition from a man who has spent his entire adult life trying to be anyone but the person his name said he was.

This is the part of the story that most of us would rather skip. We want the blessing.

We want the new name. We do not want the moment where we have to say what we have actually been all this time.

But God does not give Jacob a new name until Jacob is willing to name the old one.

And there is a principle in that we cannot get around: God will not transform what we are unwilling to confront.

We are very good, in our time, at outsourcing this confrontation.

We have language for it that lets us off the hook.

We talk about our seasons and our journeys and our wounds.

All of those words are true, and all of them can become hiding places.

There is a difference between saying I was wounded and saying I have become the kind of person who lies to protect myself from being wounded again.

The first is the beginning of a memoir. The second is the beginning of a transformation.

The stranger at the river is not interested in Jacob's biography. He is interested in Jacob's confession.

He wants the name. He wants the man to acknowledge, out loud and to God's face, who he has been all the years no one was watching.

Most of us have a name like this. Not the name on our birth certificate — the other one.

The one we have been quietly answering to for so long that we have stopped hearing it. The Performer.

The Caretaker. The Fixer. The One Who Will Never Be Enough. The One Everyone Eventually Leaves.

The One Who Always Has to Be Right. The names live in the silence between our thoughts and we rarely say them out loud because saying them out loud feels like becoming them.

But you have already become them. That is the whole point. Saying it out loud does not create the reality.

Saying it out loud begins to break it.

This is what the dark room at the river is for. Not to humiliate you. Not to punish you.

To get you to say, out loud and to God's face, the name you have been answering to in the dark, so that He can finally give you the name He has been waiting to give.

The Naming That Reassigns

And then the moment turns.

“Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.”

Read it slowly. Notice what God does and what He does not do.

He does not give Jacob a pep talk. He does not tell him his struggle was unnecessary or his old name didn't really define him.

He does not say don't worry, it's all fine.

God takes the man's confession seriously and answers it with a renaming.

This is not a small distinction. In Scripture, a name is not a label. A name is a destiny.

Abram becomes Abraham — father of nations. Sarai becomes Sarah — princess.

Simon becomes Peter — the rock. Saul becomes Paul. The name change is not cosmetic.

It is the announcement of a reassigned future.

When God renames Jacob Israel — one who has wrestled with God and prevailed — He is not flattering him.

He is reassigning him. He is saying: the man you were is not the man you have to be from this point forward.

The whole script changes here.

This is what God is after in your dark room too. He is not after a self-improvement project.

He is not after a few adjusted habits. He is after a renaming.

He wants to take the version of you that has been answering to the wrong name for years, and He wants to give you a new one that you will spend the rest of your life learning to live up to.

The renaming does not erase the past. Jacob remains the man who took the birthright.

Israel will still have to face Esau in the morning.

The renaming does not delete the consequences of the old name; it announces that those consequences no longer have authority over the new one.

That is what grace actually does. It does not pretend the old name never existed.

It writes a new one over it in ink that will not wash off.

The Limp You Walk Out With

There is one more thing we have to talk about before the chapter ends. Jacob does not walk away from the river the same way he walked into it. The text is precise.

He halted upon his thigh.

The dislocated hip never fully heals. For the rest of his life, Jacob walks with a limp.

The limp is not a punishment. It is a witness.

It is the body's permanent record that an encounter has occurred.

This is what makes the story honest. Real encounters with God leave marks.

They are not weekend retreats you come down from on Monday morning unchanged. They reorganize the way you walk.

They remove things from your life that you did not know you were going to have to give up.

They make it harder, in some ways, to live the way you used to live, because the muscles that carried that life have been touched and they will not work the same way anymore.

We do not advertise this part of the story very often. We prefer the renaming. We prefer the prince-with-power-with-God-and-with-men sentence.

We do not prefer the limp.

But the limp is the proof. The limp is what tells you the encounter was not a dream.

If you have been asking God to change you, and He has been answering by quietly removing your ability to keep doing some of the things you used to do — letting you exhaust yourself on the old patterns, letting the old strategies stop working, slowing you down in ways that feel inconvenient and even unfair — pay attention.

That may not be God ignoring your prayer. That may be God answering it.

The limp is the new walk. You do not get the new name without it.

Naming the Place

When morning came, Jacob did one last thing. He named the place.

“And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.”

Peniel. The face of God.

He marked it. He made sure he would remember it.

He gave the geography of his life a coordinate so that for the rest of his days he could point and say: that is where it happened.

That is where God met me. That is where I went in as one man and came out as another.

You will need a Peniel of your own.

Not a physical place, necessarily, though it might be. A marker. A coordinate.

A point in your story you can point back to and say: that is where God met me.

That is where I told Him my name. That is where He gave me a new one.

That is where I started walking with this limp.

Most of us never do this. We have encounters with God and we don't name them.

We feel something shift in a service and we go back to our seats and by Tuesday we have forgotten what He said.

We do not give the geography of our spiritual lives any coordinates.

So I want to leave you with one practical invitation as we close this first chapter.

Find your Peniel. The moment, the season, the room, the river — wherever it was, or wherever it is right now — name it.

Write it down. Mark it. Build something there in your memory so that when the next season tries to tell you the encounter wasn't real, you can point back and say: I was there.

I saw His face. I came out walking differently. The new name He gave me is the name I answer to now.

The rest of this book is about what comes next — what it looks like to walk, day after day, with the new name and the limp.

But none of that walking is possible until you have named the place.

Jacob made it across the river the next morning.

So will you.