

# “I Was Called America’s Pastor But It Didn’t Reveal the Truth”

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**By Max Lucado**

*Editor’s note: The following column is adapted from the author’s new book God Never Gives Up On You: What Jacob’s Story Teaches Us About Grace, Mercy and God’s Relentless Love. Pastor Lucado hopes to help “weary” people find strength in stressful times.*

SAN ANTONIO, Texas—I have had my own occasions in which I’ve wrestled with God. Seems we all could account for a divine wrestling match.

One of the most dramatic occurred some 20 years ago; I was about 50 years old. To the casual observer, I was on top of the world. Our brand-new church sanctuary was bursting at the seams. We added new members every week. The congregation had very little debt and absolutely no doubt that the pastor was doing great work.

Our church actually appeared on the list of popular San Antonio attractions. Tour companies bused tourists to our services. The magazine *Christianity Today* sent a reporter to write a profile on me. The writer called me “America’s Pastor.” *Reader’s Digest* designated me as the “Best Preacher in America.”

All cylinders were firing. I turned sermons into books. My publisher turned books into arena events. I wrote kids’ stories and recorded kids’ videos. It was wild!

What no one knew was this: I was a mess.

Our staff was struggling. Departments were squaring off against one another. Tacky emails were flying like missives. Ministers were competing for budget dollars. A couple of invaluable employees, weary from the tension, quietly resigned. And, since I was the senior pastor, it fell to me to set things in order.

Yet who had time for intramural squabbles? I had lessons to prepare. The problem with Sundays is that they happen each week! In addition, I led a midweek prayer service and taught a weekly early-morning men’s gathering. Deadlines were coming at me from all sides. I needed time to think, to pray, to study.

What's more (or consequently) I was unhealthy. My heart had the rhythm of a Morse-code message: irregular and inconsistent. The cardiologist diagnosed me with atrial fibrillation, put me on medicine and told me to slow down. But how could I?

The staff needed me.

The pulpit required me.

The publisher was counting on me.

The entire world was looking to me.

So I did what came naturally. I began to drink.

Not publicly. I was the guy you see at the convenience store who buys the big can of beer, hides it in a sack, and presses it against his thigh so no one will see as he hurries out the door. My store of choice was on the other side of the city lest I be seen. I'd sit in the car, pull the can out of the sack, and guzzle the liquid until it took the edge off the sharp demands of the day.

That's how "America's Pastor" was coping with his world gone crazy.

Life comes with inflection points, junctures in which we know our world is about to change. Events that time-stamp life. Crossroads that demand a decision. Go this way? Or that? Everyone has them. You do. I do. Jacob did. Jacob's came with a name: Jabbok. It is the location where Jacob wrestled with an angel and walked away with a lame hip.

My Jabbok, as it turned out, was a parking lot. The wrestling match lasted for the better part of an hour on a spring afternoon. I told God I had everything under control. The staff issues were manageable. The deadlines were manageable. The stress was manageable. The drinking was manageable. But then came a moment of truth. God didn't touch my hip, but he spoke to my heart. *Really, Max? If you have everything together, if you have a lock on this issue, then why are you hiding in a parking lot, sipping a beer that you've concealed in a brown paper bag?*

Jabbok. That moment in which God brings you face to face with yourself, and what you see you don't like.

Jabbok. When you use all your strength, only to find your strength won't give you what you need.

Jabbok. A single touch on the hip that brings you to your knees.

Jabbok. Jab. Buck.

Yet even in the moment, or especially in that moment, God dispenses grace. Look what happened next to Jacob.

“What is your name?” the man asked. He replied, “Jacob.” (Genesis 32:27, NLT).

On the page of your Bible, there is scarcely a space between the question and the reply. In real time, however, I sense a pause, a long, painful pause. *What is your name?* There was only one answer, and Jacob choked to spit it out. *My . . . name . . . is . . . Jacob.* This was a confession. Jacob was admitting to God that he was, indeed, a *Jacob*: a heel, a cheater, a hustler, a smart operator, a fraud. “That’s who I am. I’m a Jacob.”

“Your name will no longer be Jacob,” the man told him. “From now on you will be called Israel, because you have fought with God and with men and have won” (verse 28).

Of all the times to be given a new name. And of all the times to be given *this* name—*Israel* means “God fights” or “God strives.” The name celebrated, and celebrates, God’s power and loyalty.

The old Jacob fought for himself. The old Jacob relied on his wits, trickery and fast feet. Jacob, himself, took care of himself. The new Jacob had a new source of power: God. From this day forward each introduction would be a reminder of God’s presence. “Hello, my name is God fights.” Each call to dinner a welcome instruction, “God fights, it’s time to eat.” His email address was god-fights@israel.com. His business card reminded all who read it of the true power of Israel: “God fights.” His old name reflected his old self. His new name reflected his new strength. “God fights.”

What grace.

God extended it to me. Abundantly. I confessed my hypocrisy to our elders, and they did what good pastors do. They covered me with prayer and designed a plan to help me cope with demands. I admitted my struggle to the congregation and in doing so activated a dozen or so conversations with members who battled the same temptation.

We no longer see tour buses in our parking lot, and that’s fine with me. I enjoy an occasional beer—but for flavor, not stress management. And, if anyone mentions the “America’s Pastor” moniker, an image comes to mind. The image of a weary, lonely preacher in a convenience-store parking lot.

God met me there that day. He gave me a new name as well. Not Israel. That one was already taken. But “forgiven.” And I’m happy to wear it.