

“WRESTLING WITH GOD”

Genesis 32:22-30

Late that night, Jacob stood on the bank of the Jabbok River; troubled, frightened, sleepless. Those dearest to him—his wives, Leah and Rachel; his children— had, at Jacob’s insistence, already crossed the Jabbok, along with the servants, livestock, and possessions. Now Jacob was entirely alone.

Somewhere in the darkness Esau approached with four hundred armed men. Esau, the vengeful brother from whom Jacob had stolen the birthright twenty years earlier. Esau, who had sworn to kill Jacob once their father Isaac was dead. Oh, how Jacob must have stood, sat, paced, wondered: “When will Esau arrive? What will he do”

Most of all, Jacob must have wondered about God. Yes, where was God amid all this trouble and uncertainty? Was God approaching too? Surely God would deliver Jacob and his family. After all, God had been the One to set Jacob on this journey, saying, **“Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you,”** Genesis 31:3.

Did God come to Jacob that night? Yes, but in a way that Jacob did not expect. God wrestled with him; literally wrestled. The Hebrew word, AVAK, means to pound and make small; and afterwards to wrestle in such a fierce way as to raise up dust. Can you imagine? Dust raised by two opponents trying to push each other backwards? Dust rising when one opponent falls, struggles to

his feet, and rushes forward again? Why would God wrestle with Jacob?

And that the ‘Man’ wrestling with Jacob was in fact God—no doubt the pre-incarnate Christ—is evident from Jacob’s own words: **“And Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared,’ ”** Genesis 32:30.

That difficult, lonely night by the banks of the Jabbok River, Jacob wrestled with God; or to be more precise, God wrestled with Jacob. Notice Genesis 32:24. **“So Jacob was left alone, and a Man wrestled with him till daybreak.”** In other words, God instigated the wrestling match. God was the first to crouch in a wrestling stance, circle, size up, hold, throw, raise dust.

God wrestled with Jacob. But tell me, hasn’t God also wrestled with you? Isn’t Jacob’s experience your experience? Haven’t you wrestled with God in prayer throughout a long and lonely night? Just because the bumps, bruises, and scrapes of such a wrestling match are not visible, they are nonetheless real and no less painful. Your wrestling with God may not raise dust; but has it never raised doubts? “God, why are you doing this to me? Why are you opposing me, wrestling with me, pinning me down?” Have you never asked these questions? I know you have, because I have asked them too.

I wrestled with God when my father lay dying in a hospital bed for four consecutive months; connected to tubes and monitors, constantly pricked with needles, unable to swallow, struggling to breathe. “Let him live, God,” I prayed. “Please let him live.” Yet, by all appearances, the Almighty opposed me at every turn, with every prayer.

I wrestled with God when I lost my corporate job and was unable to find another one for three long years—not even at Walmart or McDonalds. “Help me find a job, God,” I prayed. “Please fight for me, not against me.” Yet, the praying felt like a slug-fest. And the result? Financial collapse; bankruptcy; a one-bedroom efficiency apartment on the third floor.

Without question, the worst wrestling match I had with God occurred when going through an unwanted divorce. I prayed and prayed for God to save my marriage—prayed, not from dark to daybreak, but for seven years. One dismal night, when like Jacob I was too restless and frightened to sleep, I walked to the nearby church building; went inside; locked the door; lay down prostrate before the altar of God, and there poured out my grief to the Lord. Can you imagine a pastor with his nose pressed against the red carpet where, on Sundays, he stood to conduct worship and offer encouragement? That night I found no encouragement for myself; only the dust raised from wrestling with God.

So yes, I have wrestled with God. And so have you. But why? Why does God at times oppose us, hold us in place, or even pin us to the ground? Jacob undoubtedly asked the same questions until the wrestling match was over; until he understood that God’s intent all along—through the bumps, bruises, scrapes, and submission holds—was to empower Jacob to win the match. What do we learn from wrestling with God?

First, when we wrestle with God, we learn that God is personally involved in our daily lives and daily problems. Frankly, I can’t imagine a more personal competition than wrestling: head to head, nose to nose, shoulder to shoulder, hand to hand, one to one. Perhaps we don’t think of God’s wrestling with us as “personal attention;” but it is. Jacob prayed for God to answer, act,

and deliver him; and that is exactly what God did. God came to Jacob as the patriarch worried and fretted by the banks of the Jabbok River.

And God comes to us in the same personal way, if not in the same place; as we lie sleepless in our beds; as we wait for the results of a medical test; as we struggle to improve a troubled marriage; as we fret over family matters. But should we expect anything less than personal attention from the God who came to share in our humanity; experience our problems and pains; and suffer the punishment for our sins?

Second, when we wrestle with God, we learn our limitations and weaknesses. As a boy, I loved to wrestle with my dad. Somehow, despite my small size, I almost always won the wrestling matches; almost always managed to roll dad onto his back; almost always pinned his shoulders for a count of ONE-TWO-THREE. After my stunning win, I would dance around the living room with my arms raised in victory—as if I were Dusty Rhodes or Gorilla Monsoon or Haystack Calhoun.

Yet, now and then, especially when I strutted too much, dad would pin me on the floor, holding me there despite my wriggling, giggling, and eventual complaining. Why? To keep me grounded in reality. To remind me who was in charge. To show me my limitations. To teach me that there were some things I could not do on my own.

Jacob learned this same lesson from wrestling with God. If you've read the Book of Genesis, you know that early in his life Jacob often accomplished things in unscrupulous ways. His very name, YAKAOV in Hebrew, literally meant 'he who grabs the heel.' Though Jacob and Esau were fraternal twins, Esau was born

first; then Jacob was born grasping Esau’s heel; as if to say, “Oh no you don’t. Get back here. I should be the firstborn.”

Along with ‘he who grabs the heel,’ Jacob’s name also came to mean trickster, usurper, deceiver—similar to our English phrase “to pull someone’s leg.” And true to his name, Jacob tricked Esau out of his birthright with a savory bowl of lentil stew; and later, tricked blind Isaac into giving him the birthright by making Isaac believe that he, Jacob, was Esau. And what did all of Jacob’s schemes and plans accomplish? Ultimately, a dark, dismal night by the Jabbok River, in which Jacob faced the real threat of losing everyone and everything he loved.

Jacob needed to learn that God was in charge; that God’s way was the right way; that God would accomplish what God had promised. You and I need to learn that same lesson. There is no greater comfort than in believing and saying, “God, You are in charge. You are in charge of this crazed, chaotic world. You are in charge of this problem. You are in charge of this illness. And especially, You, God, are in charge of my eternal salvation.”

And if God teaches us this important lesson—that we have limitations and that He has none—by wrestling with us or placing us into a submission hold or putting His omnipotent hands on our head while we spin our arms and fists in desperation, should we blame Him or praise Him?

The fact is, there are times when we need to wrestle with God in prayer; times when God must tenderly hurt us to heal us. Yet, He always knows how much to hurt. He knows exactly how hard to wrestle with us; exactly how long to hold us in place; exactly how long to push us backward before boosting us forward; just as He did with Jacob. I say this because the Bible says it. **“God is faithful,”** wrote Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:13. **He will not let you be tempted**

beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

Third, when we wrestle with God we learn His strength.

Yes, God graciously wrestled with Jacob from darkness to daybreak. But let’s be honest: God could have won that wrestling match without wrestling at all. When wrestling, God gave Jacob only a glimpse of His power, dislocating the patriarch’s hip with a single touch.

To oppose such divine power is foolishness and destructive; for which reason the author of Hebrews wrote, **“It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”** (Hebrews 10:31) By contrast, to rely on that almighty power of God is to undertake every God-pleasing endeavor with absolute confidence, from crossing the Jabbok River to repairing a troubled marriage.

How many impossible circumstances are you facing today? Family issues? A serious illness? Financial difficulties or career disappointment? But are any of your impossibilities stronger than God? Can you name a single opponent that can best Him? Of course not. He teaches us this very lesson when He wrestles with us.

No matter what impossibilities you are wrestling with today, I can assure you that none of them are as impossible as those which confronted Abraham. We read of him in Romans 4: **“Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God,**

being fully persuaded that God had power to do what He had promised.” (Romans 4:18-21)

Fourth, when we wrestle with God, we learn that victory comes through faith. Listen to Genesis 32:25. **“When the Man saw that He could not overpower him, He touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the Man.”** What does this verse mean? How could God not be able to **“overpower”** Jacob; a mortal man with a sinful nature and a past history of personal schemes and personal failures?

Was it truly that God could not overpower Jacob? No. The touch to Jacob’s hip proved otherwise. Rather, through that long night of wrestling, God taught Jacob that while he, Jacob, could not hold on to God by his personal strength, will, ingenuity, wealth, or works, he could cling to God through faith.

“I will not let you go unless you bless me,” said Jacob in Genesis 32:26. This is the language of faith. Faith which trusts God despite outward appearances. Faith which knows that God, who has every reason to be against us, for His own sake is for us. Faith which insists **“God loves me”** when times are good and still insists **“God loves me”** when times are bad. Faith which recognizes that the omnipotent arms which may seem to push us away are really pulling us into an embrace.

Remember Jesus and the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15—how Jesus seemed to wrestle with her and rebuff her requests for help? **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel,”** He told her. And when the woman ran ahead of Him, kneeling in the road to block His way, Jesus insisted, **“It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.”** But the woman answered, **“Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their**

masters' table.” To which Jesus replied, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.”

Faith overcame Christ's objections, which is what He had wanted all along. Faith overcame in Jacob's wrestling match with God, which is what the pre-incarnate Christ had wanted all along—so that when God seems to wrestle with us, He wants us to cling to Him, as did Jacob. He wants to say, **“I will not let You go unless You bless me;”** and, “Lord, no matter what is happening in my life right now, no matter what the difficulties, no matter how hard You seem to hold me in place and pin me down, I know who You are. I know what You did for me on the cross. And I believe that You will deliver me now.” Will God refuse such a prayer? Never. It's not that we overcome God; rather, it's that He always, inevitably, invariably, allows us to win.

Finally, when we wrestle with God, we learn to be better wrestlers. A simple point, but an important one. I can't say I've ever enjoyed wrestling with God. I can say that each time He has wrestled with me, called me out, crouched into a wrestling stance, pushed me away or pinned me down, I've become I better wrestler. Better by realizing how personally involved He is in my life. Better by remembering that He is in control. Better by relying on His strength. Better by expecting that in the end, no matter how long the match or fierce the bout, God, my God, will let me win.

And if it takes a limp to remind me of this, praise His holy name.