

“Wrestling With God”
Genesis 32:22-31; Ephesians 6:10-12
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Growing up in the early 1960’s, I became a real wrestling fan. I think I inherited that from my English grandmother who loved her tea and apple crisp every afternoon at four o’clock. However, all that proper gentility went by the wayside on those nights that Gorgeous George with his long blonde locks was wrestling during the 1950’s. On Saturday mornings, I’d park myself in front of our small black and white TV to see the world champion and Pittsburgh native- Bruno Sammartino defeat such bad guys as Killer Kowalski, Gorilla Monsoon and Baron Scicluna, who ALSO hailed from Pittsburgh. I was thrilled when Fritz von Erich administered his signature move “the iron claw” to the challenger’s face driving him into submission, or when Bobo Brazil used his patented “coco butt” to knock his opponent out. When I moved to Waterloo, Iowa to become the pastor there, it didn’t take me long to learn how that city was ground zero for wrestling in our country. The National Wrestling Hall of Fame is located downtown while the greatest amateur wrestler as well as wrestling coach in U.S. history, Dan Gable--winner of the gold medal in the 1972 Olympics—grew up just around the corner from where I lived. In Iowa, I discovered that wrestling wasn’t just a sport- it was a bona fide RELIGION there.

This morning, we’re ALSO watching a wrestling match, but it is unlike ANY you will ever see on pay-per-view or Saturday morning TV. There was nothing contrived about it like professional wrestling is today. In fact, we’re not sure who WON as nobody walked away a clear winner from it. It’s not even clear who the second opponent WAS- whether it was a man, a demon, an angel, or perhaps GOD HIMSELF? It is one of the strangest accounts in the Bible and yet it remains one of the most DISCUSSED and DEBATED pieces of scripture there is. But first we need to provide some background to it.

Last week, we saw how Jacob, while fleeing for his life from his twin brother Esau whose birthright he had stolen, stops in the middle of the wilderness and dreams about a stairway extending between heaven and earth with angels ascending and descending on it. Then God appears at the top to reaffirm the covenant promise he had given to Jacob’s father Abraham, that he—Jacob--would HIMSELF be a “father of many nations” with descendants as numerous as stars in the heavens. Furthermore, God unconditionally pledges to protect him and help bring that promise to fulfillment. The Bible presents a picture of Jacob as utterly forsaken and alone. Yet it ALSO shows us how the love of God is SUCH that the most UNEXPECTED of men in the most UNEXPECTED of places receives the GREATEST promise ANYONE could possibly receive.

For the next twenty years, Jacob lived in Haran with his uncle Laban where, using some of Jacob’s OWN tricks, he is fooled into working for him for fourteen years in order to eventually marry the woman of his heart- Laban’s lovely daughter Rachel. Over the passage of time, he has grown rich and his wealth includes not only great herds and livestock but a large family of sons. God has now indicated to him that it is time for him to return home to Canaan and make amends with Esau. Afraid that his brother is not QUITE so forgiving, he sends some messengers to meet Esau in the country of Edom to sound him out. They report back that he

seemed favorable to the idea but that he ALSO had with him four hundred of his men. This scares Jacob and he prays to God, telling him he is not worthy of his love. Reminding him how obedient he has been, he asks God to remain faithful to his covenant promise and protect him in his encounter. Then he divides his entourage along with gifts for his brother into two groups that in the event the first group is attacked and killed, there would still be a significant number of men and resources left. Then he has them proceed across the Jabbok River while he stays behind, alone.

Filled with dread at the prospect of what Esau might do to him, he suddenly finds himself in the grip of a mighty adversary. We're not told who he is or where he had come from- only that they wrestled together all night long and that the battle went back and forth with neither one seeming to gain the upper hand. As dawn finally approaches, the stranger--whom Jacob believes is God--needs to leave so as to preserve his hiddenness, his undisclosed identity- for as it says, no man has seen God and lived. To end the stalemate, he grabs Jacob's thigh and squeezes it hard, giving him a permanent limp. STILL, Jacob refuses to let him go until he receives a blessing from him. When he asks Jacob for his name and he tells him, the stranger gives him an entirely NEW name- "Israel" or "He that strives with God." When Jacob asks the stranger what HIS name is, he refuses to give it to him, bestowing upon him the blessing that he requested instead. After his opponent leaves, Jacob then names the place "Peni-el" or "the Face of God" saying "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

This event in Jacob's life represents a great turning point for him. All along, he had been a conniver, a schemer, someone who used his smarts to get over on his brother and other persons. But now he--whose name means "trickster"--is given a NEW name and with it, a whole NEW identity. He is to be called "Israel" meaning "He that strives or wrestles with God." This is the beginning of a new and MORE MATURE outlook for him. Jacob is growing up and evolving into the kind of man God intended him to as the soon-to-be Patriarch of a great people.

To begin with, he realizes that the blessings of God are not subject to conniving or scheming or manipulation. Twenty years earlier, after his dream of the stairway in the wilderness, he awoke and realized that he had had a dramatic encounter with God in that place which is why he named the place "Beth-el" or "House of God." He then made a vow to God saying, "If you, God, be with me and protect me from my brother and future enemies and provide for all my physical needs including food to eat and clothes to wear, ONLY THEN will I let you become my God." He ALSO says that if God gives him great wealth, then he promises to give back to him one-tenth of it for an offering. Once again, this was Jacob at his worst--bargaining, calculating, treating God as though God was some kind of merchant who could easily be bargained with. NOW, twenty years LATER, there is a new depth and humility to his life and we see it illustrated in his prayer. Gone is the smug self-confidence that always got him into trouble. Instead, he opens his prayer, "I am not worthy of the LEAST of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness which thou hast shown to thy servant."

Certainly, if ANYONE was undeserving of God's favor, it was JACOB- one of the LEAST TRUSTWORTHY characters in the Bible. And yet, that's what makes grace "grace"- it is unmerited, wholly undeserved favor from God. Grace received, as demonstrated in the story of Jacob, is the story of OUR lives TOO. As Paul says in Romans, "But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."(5:8) Where at times we have turned our backs on him and spurned his love, God never stops pursuing us; where we deserve nothing but

his judgment, he never ceases to offer us forgiveness and mercy. God takes such proud and selfish creatures as ourselves, removes the old and replaces it with the new so that over time, we are NO LONGER the same persons we once were. He gives us a NEW NAME with a NEW IDENTITY even as he did for Jacob so that we are no longer only born from below, that is from flesh and blood, but RE-BORN from ABOVE with a NEW heart, a NEW family, and even a NEW parent whom we call “our Heavenly Father.” And as Jacob could do nothing to earn or work for this blessing, neither can WE- all we can do is receive it gratefully and praise him for it so that we TOO find ourselves exclaiming, even as HE did, “I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness which thou hast shown to thy servant.”

A second correlation between his life and OURS is that the Christian life involves SPIRITUAL WARFARE. If Jacob was to receive God’s blessing, he would first have to learn that the REAL obstacle in his life was NEVER his brother Esau but rather his GOD, that once he understood how Yahweh was FOR him and WITH him--then and ALWAYS--he could then see how victory was ALL BUT ASSURED. The fact is that our struggles throughout life are foremost of a SPIRITUAL nature and they can’t be won by carnal or materialistic means. No amount of fame or success can possibly provide us with the peace and the fulfillment that our hearts so desperately yearn for. No amount of money or sensuality will ever fill the terrible deep void that exists within each one of us. I’m referring to the numbing loneliness that causes us to think we are so darn unlovable, the nagging guilt that tells us how worthless we are, the fear that makes us suspicious of everyone else, the sadness and despair that robs us of any chance for hope or joy in our lives, the raging anger that alienates us from even the ones who love us most.

St. Paul explained the TRUE nature of our struggle when he told the church in Ephesus, “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”(6:12) Nothing in the Christian life can be meaningful and worth anything without some form of struggle. As the poet Robert Browning once penned, “When the fight begins within himself, a man’s worth something.” We STRUGGLE with our consciences when there is a conflict between right and wrong. We STRUGGLE with temptations when there is a conflict between our higher and lower natures. We STRUGGLE with our self-image when there is a conflict between what society defines as successful or beautiful or true and when GOD defines such values for us. We STRUGGLE with our health because we fear losing our independence or becoming a burden upon others. Yes, life is a CONSTANT struggle! But as Jacob had to first get through GOD before he could meet with Esau, so do WE have to get through God before we can resolve any of the problems WE face in life.

You see, on the DEEPEST of levels, all such wrestling is actually WITH God. The book of Job offers us one of the MOST IMPORTANT lessons we can ever learn about faith. If you observe closely, you can see how the REAL drama going on in that book is NEVER REALLY between JOB AND HIMSELF, nor is it between JOB AND SATAN. After the first chapter, Satan disappears altogether and you never hear from him again. Rather, the REAL struggle in the book lies solely between JOB AND GOD, and this tells us that the GREATEST STRUGGLES we ever face, the most TORTUROUS BATTLES waged in the depths of the human heart and spirit, are never between US AND OURSELVES or US AND THE DEVIL, but always between US AND GOD. Our battles with the Adversary are always more superficial than we believe- he may tempt us OUTWARDLY or PHYSICALLY, but the testings that go on INWARDLY or

SPIRITUALLY are ALWAYS a DIVINE/HUMAN struggle. It is the human soul wrestling with God- struggles concerning faith and doubt, hope and despair, love and rejection.

This is MOST apparent with Christ in the Gospels. At the very outset of his ministry, he ventures into the wilderness for a time of testing and is subjected to three great temptations by the devil. With each one, he rejects the urge to satisfy his own wants or needs so as to remain faithful to the will of his Father in Heaven. When the third temptation fails, the devil realizes he can't undermine his faith and commitment to God so he becomes irrelevant to the rest of the story and disappears from it ALTOGETHER. Throughout the rest of the Gospel, we see how the battle is never within himself- that is, between his conscience or his flesh; it is never between himself and the religious and political authorities; it is never even between himself and SATAN. Rather, the struggle going on deep within his soul is always between HIMSELF AND HIS GOD.

This is clearly in evidence when Jesus goes to Gethsemane in the hours just prior to his arrest and wrestles with the decision of whether to go to the cross or not. We are told that his prayers were SO intense that even the sweat on his brow took on the appearance of blood. Like Jacob, he was engaged in a mighty wrestling match with God throughout that night. Still, he is able to say at the conclusion of his struggle, "Not my will but THY will be done!" Again, the GREATEST struggles waged in the human heart and spirit are ALWAYS between US AND GOD- struggles concerning faith and doubt, hope and despair, love and rejection. As P. T. Forsyth, the great British theologian of a century ago, once wrote:

Cast yourself into his arms not to be caressed but to WRESTLE with him. He loves that holy war. He may...lift you from your feet. But it will be to lift you from earth, and set you in the heavenly places which are theirs who fight the good fight and lay hold of God as their eternal life. (from The Soul of Prayer)

Rev. Dr. C. Welton Gaddy passed away a little more than a year ago but his work on behalf of churches will survive long into the future. He was ESPECIALLY noted for courageously taking on the Southern Baptist Convention--his OWN denomination--for sacrificing its soul for greater legitimacy and political power. In a sermon he preached on this morning's text, he spoke about the need for Christians to never stop wrestling with God over any of the great issues of life:

Let it be said on Jacob's behalf, he was willing to struggle. Some people do not want any hassle--not even the bother of finding peace with God. Jacob was not like that. He was ready to settle the issue. Jacob and God locked themselves into one more powerful struggle. In fact, at one point God was ready to go, but Jacob would not let the matter rest. He wanted a blessing from God, and he determined to hang on to God until he got it.

Doesn't all of that sound strangely familiar? When we finally do face into the reality of God, we have to settle this matter about who is the Creator and who is the created, who is sovereign and who is subject, who is Savior and who is in need of salvation. The battle grows fierce at points because we want redemption at our price, written into a contract developed by our legal counsel. Yes, we will fight--anyone, including God. We are accustomed to calling a stock-broker, saying, "Sell," and knowing he sold. So we cry to God, "Give me a blessing," and we wait for God to obey.

Who has not fought with God? “Make sense of the mystery,” we demand. “Explain this untimely illness!” we implore. “How can you be good and allow so much evil?” we taunt. “Why does there have to be pain?” we beg. “You will tell me how this venture will end, or I will never begin!” we threaten. Sometimes the struggle even gets nastier. We sense we are losing. Deciding we cannot best God, we choose to DENY God. That is the way we will get at God. Many atheists came to their creed out of a fight. Thus we write books about God’s disappearance from the world, and we print on the cover of TIME magazine that God is dead. Now we have got him. He will serve us or we will show Him. Surely, God must laugh at our attempting to get at him by shaking our fist at the heavens. But, no, he doesn’t laugh. The struggle is far too serious for that.

Jacob finally got a blessing from God. But it cost him—it cost him a broken hip and a name change. It cost him his identity and his stature, Jacob’s struggle ended with God still being God and with a strong-legged Jacob becoming Israel with a limp.

We will never receive a blessing by demand. Don’t you know? God’s favor comes as a gift. Even then, however, it comes only when we know our need. Jacob now knew he needed God. Maybe, after all, THAT was the blessing—a recognition that he was NOT self-sufficient, that he had a limp in his walk, that his spirit needed God’s Spirit. Maybe THAT was a blessing. It is a blessing to realize our need for God.

At sunrise, at the very point when Jacob should have been most tired, Jacob was changed. Where does it happen for US—in a hospital room? At the grave side? In a closet of despair? When screaming questions have left our voices silent and our throats hoarse? When we are unemployed? When we are separated from loved ones? Just when Jacob could have given up, he got up. With God’s help, Jacob got up. No longer was he on his own. The one with whom he had struggled was the one with whom he would travel. He was ready to settle into the Promised Land.

Friends, Jacob was more than one of the great Patriarchs of Israel- he serves as a mirror of OURSELVES. Like Jacob, we TOO are undeserving of God’s grace and love and yet we are the recipients of it ALL THE SAME. Therefore, let us take God at his word and believe him when he tells us that we are his children, loved with an everlasting love, and that nothing, no NOTHING, will ever separate us from either his presence or his love. If we DO, then regardless of what it is WE may be wrestling with at the present time, we CAN prevail and win. If we are wrestling with AGONIZING GUILT OVER SOME PAST DEED, just know that our sins have been forgiven once and for all and we stand before our God pure and cleansed as an unblemished lamb. If we are wrestling with SORROW OVER THE LOSS OF A LOVED ONE, then be reminded that Christ is not only lord over LIFE but lord over DEATH as well and that death will never have the last word- EVER. If we wrestle against FEELINGS OF REJECTION AND LONELINESS, remember that none of us ever has to walk through this world alone for not only does Christ walk beside each of us, but our brothers and sisters who make up his Body in the world do so AS WELL. If we are wrestling with ANGER ISSUES OR AN INABILITY TO FORGIVE ANOTHER FOR SOME PERCEIVED WRONG, remember how there was a time when we were yet enemies of God and he loved us ALL THE SAME; therefore, WE can do the same for OTHERS. If we are wrestling with FEARS, EITHER REAL OR IMAGINED, may we remember the admonition of St. John when he said “Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world” and Paul’s words, “If God be for you, then who can POSSIBLY be against you.” We

can prevail and win IF, like Jacob, we TOO come humbly before God, recognizing our own helplessness and inadequacy; if WE TOO trust in the promises God has pledged to do for us; and ABOVE ALL, if WE TOO cling TENACIOUSLY to our God and NEVER EVER let him go. Let us pray...

Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, we come before you, humbly and broken, for our spirits are heavy and our souls can find no rest outside of your Presence. We need you Lord to show up strong on our behalf right now. We're tired of wrestling; we're weary in the struggle of it all. We don't understand what you're doing, we can't fully wrap our minds around your ways, but our hearts cry out to you for help and peace in our time of desperate need. But we know and believe that no matter how much we've struggled, you alone can see the big picture. And we praise you, that you are with us in it all. Help us to hear your voice and have confidence in your presence this day and in all future days, regardless of how difficult those days may seem. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.