

Wrestling With Faith

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Genesis 32:22-31

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I knew a man, let's call him Jacob, although any name will do, who was left alone one day as the sun went down. In that time of darkness, he was attacked. He struggled and was hurt but somehow he battled on until the sunrise of a new day finally shone upon him. This man described his time of struggle as a wrestling match with God, a battle that pushed him to the very limits of his strength and endurance. Now maybe this time of suffering lasted for just one night; maybe this time of struggle lasted for days or weeks or months. You fill in the details. You know Jacob's story as well as I do. We all know Jacobs; we've all been Jacob. But at last the sun rose and Jacob, though limping and shaken from the wrestling match, walked into the new day with a new name and a deeper faith.

This is a story about suffering and wrestling with God. You decide who the main character is in this story, whether it's you or someone you know. Hold on to that version of the story, while I remind you about some of the details in Jacob's life, the Jacob of the bible. Jacob was the grandson of Abraham, the younger twin son of Isaac. His older brother, Esau, was born seconds before he was, but when Jacob emerged from his mother's womb, he was still hanging onto Esau's heel. Tenacious from birth was he. Jacob's whole life was one long wrestling match, partly by circumstance, partly by choice. Jacob wrestled with his father, trying to win favor although Isaac always preferred Esau. Jacob wrestled with his brother, tricking him out of his birthright and paternal blessing. Jacob wrestled with his uncle, his father-in-law Laban, who tricked Jacob into working fourteen years for him in order to win his daughter Rachel's hand in marriage, but who later was tricked by Jacob when it came time to divide up the family's herd of goats and sheep. Jacob wrestled with his wives, as they struggled for dominance while Rachel the beloved wife failed to bear any sons. And in time Jacob wrestled with his sons, who battled to gain his favor, who deceived him by selling Joseph into slavery in Egypt, and who brought grief upon his heart for many years. That's the Jacob who was left alone as the sun went down on the shore of the river Jabbok – the one afraid to meet his brother again after so many years of distrust, the one struggling with his own identity as he prepared to begin a new chapter in his life. So on that night, out of the darkness, Jacob was leapt upon and all night he struggled and fought and wrestled.

Step back from this story for a moment. Wrestling, as all of you know, is a real sport with real rules (as opposed to the choreographed circus of stunts shown in TV wrestling matches). Wrestling involves trying to pin your opponent for four seconds. However in the course of a match you can earn points in several ways. You can even win a match on points. You get points for offensive maneuvers such as a takedown (taking your

opponent down to the mat and controlling him or her) or for a near fall, in which you almost get your opponent pinned. There are also points for defensive maneuvers, such as an escape, when you get away after being thrown down on the mat, or for a reversal, when you come from underneath to gain control over your opponent. It is not much of a stretch to see how earning defensive points in a wrestling match is similar to surviving hard times in life. Rarely does anyone become a champion who hasn't been close to being pinned and defeated at some point in their life. And we should remember that there are lots of points and wisdom to be won by escaping from tough situations and reversing one's fortunes in the wrestling match of life.

Wrestling matches and times of struggle come to all of us. (If you think I'm talking about everyone else here today except you in particular, you're not paying attention.) No matter how many people you have around you, on some level the wrestling matches of life are something you have to go through alone. The story is told about a first-grade teacher who had her students around her in a circle and asked them what they wanted to be when they grew up. One by one, each child stood up and said, "I want to be a nurse," "I want to be a banker," "I want to be a teacher like you." Then the most shy and timid little boy in the class stood up and said, "When I grow up, I'm going to be a lion tamer in the circus. I'm going to face those animals with my whip and chair and make them leap through hoops of fire." Seeing the disbelieving looks on the faces of his classmates who doubted he could ever act so bravely, the boy was quick to reassure them, "Well, of course, I'll have my mother with me."

No matter how much support you get from friends, spouses, and even your mother, on some deep level we each have to wrestle with suffering on our own. No one else is in the lion cage with you. You can talk with others and with God; you can pray with others and to God. But out of the shadows, you are the one assaulted. You are the one trying to hold on in times of suffering. You are the one seeking to make it until the dawn's early light. Like Jacob of long ago.

Dan Migliore, a theology professor at Princeton Seminary, makes an important distinction. He says that security is something behind which we take shelter from the risks and trials of faith. Shelter is singing and believing "A Mighty Fortress is our God." Shelter involves walls we can hide behind, preventive medicine, car insurance, promises to love and care for one another in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow. But to have confidence in the things that give us shelter, we have to face the risks and trials of life. We have to test and wrestle with the things we've depended upon to see if they are dependable. Migliore concludes by saying, faith is not like finding shelter from the storm in a safe harbor; it is more like going out from the harbor to face the storm.¹

The person or thing with which Jacob wrestled there on the banks of the river Jabbok is never named in scripture. Some suggest this story comes from an old, old tradition in which Jacob wrestled with a malevolent river god. Some suggest he wrestled with Esau himself. Others suggest he wrestled with an angel, perhaps the angel representing Jacob's own conscience. In the story, Jacob links God to the assailant, saying "I have

seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved.” There was certainly plenty in Jacob’s past life with which he had to wrestle and come to terms before he could cross that river and start a new chapter in his life. That’s just as true for each of us. I can’t take that away from you. No one can. If you doubt me, remember Gethsemane. Jesus was in the garden as evening fell, and from amid the shadows on that hillside he prayed, “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” He who did not count equality with God as something to be grasped emptied himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-7).

Shelter may well mean a safe harbor from the storm, but faith and the assurance of faith comes when we sail out of that harbor and face the storms and struggles and wrestling matches of life. If you’re mathematically-minded, the equation is not this: God wants to deepen our faith + Suffering is necessary to deepen our faith, therefore God is the source of suffering. Rather the equation is this: A life of free will carried out in fragile human bodies necessarily involves suffering + God has promised to be with us in all times and places, therefore whether we wrestle with God or angels or demons within and without, we are never alone nor without hope.

I can’t take away the wrestling matches. The Bible can’t take them away. Ask Jacob by the river Jabbok. Ask Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. And though wounded and forced to walk with a limp, Jacob did prevail. He held on. He met his brother, he was reunited with his family; he became Israel the patriarch of a great nation. And Jesus prevailed. He drank the cup put before him; he suffered an unjust trial, a wrongful decision of capital punishment, an ignominious death on the cross, and yet on the third day he arose. Believe the good news: We arise with him – then and now and tomorrow, even as that cup is placed before us or the wrestling match descends upon us.

The unexamined life is not worth living. The unquestioned faith, the one never wrestled with, is not worth professing. The blessing at the end of the wrestling match comes in the receipt of a new name. Jacob became Israel. We become Christians, followers of Christ. It is a name that reminds us to wrestle with angels each day – to ask the hard questions, to seek out the people in trouble, to hang on to our vision and hope with the tenacious grip of faith that refuses to let go. In doing that, the scripture of old is fulfilled: In all things we are more than conquerors through him who loves us, Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:37).

AMEN

¹ Daniel Migliore, *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, XV, 1, 1994, p. 48.

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