

## Struggling with God

So here's the situation. Jacob is sitting in his camp, wondering what's going to happen next. He's about to see his brother Esau again after years of estrangement, estrangement that was Jacob's fault, and he suspected things were going to go very poorly. To make a long story short, Jacob had cheated Esau twice over, once out of his birthright, once out of his father's blessing, which, among other things things, meant that Jacob would now receive a double portion of their father's inheritance. So you can understand that years later, when the brothers were going to come together again, there was a sense of dread and all the hard, complicated feelings that arise when family members have hurt each other.

So it is the night before Jacob and Esau are reunited. Jacob is sitting in his camp. He had sent gifts ahead of him, hoping that they would help soften Esau's heart or at least persuade Esau not to kill him. And then, out of the darkness comes an unknown assailant, who begins wrestling with Jacob. The two struggle and fight until the sun begins to rise. This is quite a tussle. Jacob takes a blow to the hip, which slows him down, but he can still just grab hold, which he does, not letting go. His attacker wants to be freed but Jacob says, "I won't let go unless you bless me." That's when things take a turn. Not only does the wrestler bless Jacob, but he changes his name. "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, which means you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed." It dawned on Jacob that he had been wrestling with God. We know this because he named the place where this happened "the face of God." How does a person feel when you realize that the one you're really wrestling with is God? Jacob knew that feeling for sure. Maybe you know what that feels like too, to wrestle with God.

All this meant that Jacob was in pretty bad shape for his face to face with Esau. He had fought all night, he was limping from his hip injury, he was going into this volatile situation in a pretty vulnerable state. But he didn't have to fight again. Esau ran to him, wrapped him in a bear hug, and the two were reconciled. There was forgiveness. Incredible.

People love to debate Old Testament passages like this, but to me, this is one of the most realistic stories in the Bible. Here's what I mean. One simple takeaway from this episode in Jacob's life is that living in relationship to God is a struggle. Doesn't that ring true to you? Doesn't that capture something you can relate to? I would go so far as to say that if you've never struggled with God, you haven't taken him seriously yet.

You might be struggling with the way God seems to be ordering your life right now. You or someone you love may be suffering physically, mentally, emotionally, and you want Him to do something about it.

You look at the world and see hatred and disaster. You struggle with the violence and cruelty that you see, that God evidently allows.

Or you struggle with forgiveness. Forgiving that one person or that one group just seems unthinkable.

You struggle in your relationship to Him. You have a hard time with prayer. You have a hard time with some of things the Bible says. The question, "Did God really say that?" is a very old one. And even when you feel like you're in a pretty good place with God, you come to church and there's a stewardship emphasis, and the pastor is getting into how I invest my time with people, and how do I invest my money in kingdom work, and that God should be first, and that I should be using my talents for God's work, and there is a struggle. There's a struggle because I have a hard time relating to people in the first place, and I really don't like being told what to do with my money, and I know God should be first in my life, of course, but there's so many other things to do with my time, and yes, I could volunteer for something at church but somebody else will step up. Right?

Jacob's nighttime battle with God doesn't seem so strange, does it?

Centuries after Jacob, another man had a nighttime wrestling match with God. This one happened in a garden, a beautiful place for a beatdown. This man was so stressed that he was sweating blood, with good reason; in less than twenty-four hours, he would be dead, and he knew it.

In his unique relationship with God, he had been given the mission of living and dying perfectly. Through this sacrifice, all sins would be forgiven. A bridge between God and humanity would be rebuilt. Sounds great. But, it meant excruciating physical pain would come to him. And even worse, it meant a rupture of the relationship with his Father God. There, in the garden that night, Jesus struggled. There on the ground, he prayed, "My Father, if it is possible do not give me this cup of suffering." Jesus prayed that! This is not the stoic hero charging into battle; this a vulnerable, devastated hero looking at the destruction of his most treasured relationship. Why? One reason. To make things right for you. For me. For this world so twisted by corruption. To make things right for you and me by doing what we could never do and paying the price we could never pay. It terrified him. But like Jacob, Jesus found a way to hang on. He prayed, "My father if it is possible, do not give me this cup of suffering. But do what you want, not what I want."

"Do what you want, not what I want." Jesus said it and he meant it. He held onto His Father through the horror of the cross. With his last breath, he placed his soul into his Father's hands. I imagine him thinking, "I will not let go until you bless me," then closing his eyes in death.

That Sunday, at sunrise, the Son rose. The Father raised His Son from the tomb. Jesus came back to life in a resurrected body. All of which means that you and I and millions of other people are following Jesus, through suffering and death into new life. Jesus' prayer, "Do what you want, Father, not what I want"

makes this journey possible. Jesus dared to lose his Father approval so that you could have it.

When you struggle with God, it is hard. It is painful. It should in no way be downplayed. But when the dust settles, this is where faith ends up. I will not let go unless you bless me. Do what you want, Father, not what I want. It is surrender. It is freedom. It is where new life begins.