

Wrestling With God

Sterling UMC
July 23, 2011
Genesis 32:22-32

Have you ever wrestled with God? Have you ever come to a point in your life where you find yourself confronted with some questions that seem to have no answers, problems that appear to have no solutions, obstacles that are insurmountable, circumstances that seem to leave no way out, situations that look as if they are hopeless, behaviors and habits that have such a hold on you that they seem impossible to shake, sins that grip you with such power that it looks like there is no escape.

You wrestle, you fight, you battle. With every ounce of strength and energy you can muster you try to tackle things on your own. It consumes your thoughts, it dominates your attention, it keeps you awake at night. You grapple with God. You seek answers. You want strength. You demand guidance and direction. You grab hold of God and you become locked in mortal combat refusing to let go until God does for you exactly what you want. Have you ever been there?

This week in our Bible reading we read about one who found himself in this very situation. This man is Jacob. Jacob spent his life struggling to achieve, trying to take hold of things and people he felt he deserved. From his birth Jacob was a man of struggle – a person of strife. Always trying to do things his way, in his own power and strength. Using any means necessary to manipulate the situations to his advantage. Even his name, Jacob, “the one who supplants, the trickster”, tells us how he spent his life relying on his own wit and skill supplanting, conning people to get his way, taking hold of other people’s possessions.

But here in chapter 32 of Genesis we find Jacob in a situation that he can’t handle. His past is finally catching up with him. Jacob spent his whole life fighting for himself, and most of the time, he won. He still hasn’t learned, though. His commitment to God is still conditional. But God is about to bring him to the point where he has no other choice. Esau is hot on Jacob’s trail with 400 men with him. Jacob just knew that his number had come up, and that he was about to die. He is facing a confrontation with his brother, Esau, after twenty years. And Jacob is afraid. He is terrified.

All his life, he’s been fighting for himself and winning, but he’s now at a point that he can’t handle by himself. So, just before he takes those last steps towards home, he comes to a place called Jabbok. Tomorrow he meets his brother. Tomorrow he meets his fate. However, tonight he is left alone praying and asking God for deliverance. He is alone and in the darkness.

And this is where we pick up this powerful story. We are told "a man wrestled with him until daybreak". Who was this man? Some have suggested that Jacob fought with the "Angel of God" that we read about in Genesis 18. But Jacob says in verse 30, "He saw God face to face." Jacob was wrestling with God.

The two wrestled all night and then suddenly Jacob's opponent touches the socket of his hip and his hip was dislocated. Jacob still refused to give in and pleaded for a blessing from his opponent. Jacob eventually gets a blessing from God, and as the sun comes up Jacob walks away from this encounter with a permanent limp.

Now I believe that there is much that we can learn from this epic struggle. For I don't know about you, but I find some of myself in Jacob. Even as I seek to live the Christian life and to follow Jesus Christ and make him the Lord of my life I am constantly wrestling, grappling with things in my life that I need to change and turn over to him. You see I believe this powerful story is not so much about wrestling as it is submission. It's more about giving up, than holding on. It's more about God's way than our way. It more about God's will than our will. It teaches that we must be broken so that we can be made whole. In other words it's about control; it's about Lordship.

The question we need to answer is, "who is going to be in control? Who or what is the Lord of my life?"

Up until this point in his life Jacob had been in control. Yes, God had been with him, but Jacob had been his own master. It wasn't until he came to this time of crisis that Jacob came to the breaking point. When you're the undefeated champion of your entire life, you start to think that you can handle everything yourself – that even God isn't really needed.

But Jacob finds himself in the middle of a struggle; it was a battle that continued for the entire night until Jacob was exhausted. I suspect the angel would gain a little advantage and then allow Jacob to feel that he was gaining. This went on all night long. How exhausted they must have been. But it was necessary. Jacob needed to reach the point where he had no more strength. I believe it was at this point that God touched Jacob's hip. The message was clear . . . you have striven with all your might. Yet, I can with one touch defeat you. Jacob needed to see the superiority of his opponent with clarity.

Jacob finally realized that he couldn't do it anymore. Isn't that usually what happens to us? We struggle to maintain control of things. We don't want to give up. We think we can do it all by ourselves and things just don't seem to get any better. We get exhausted. We can't make any progress. It is not until we are hurt and get to the end of our rope that we truly can receive from God what he has for us all along.

You see the thing we need to see very clearly in this story is that Jacob didn't win this battle by prevailing. He won the battle by submitting – by surrendering to God. Jacob finally said the words that God had been waiting to hear for over forty years: "I will not let you go unless you bless me". Finally, Jacob realized he was helpless, and cast himself on God's mercy. The minute that Jacob submitted, he won.

This is a hard lesson for us to learn. It's only when we stop fighting, stop relying on ourselves, that God is finally able to bless us as he wanted to all along. We put conditions on God. We fight the battles ourselves. But God will eventually bring us to the point where we realize that we can't fight all the battles, that the only way to live is to die – that the only way we can win with God is if we surrender to him.

This morning I want to share with you a testimony of someone who found themselves wrestling in the darkness:

"My story is about a subject many of us have considered at one time in our lives, or we know of someone who has attempted or was successful at it. It happens in both middle school and high schools, especially to those teens who don't fit in or have been bullied, it happens to college students who feel the pressure of school is too much to handle and are afraid of being a failure. To adults who are depressed and can no longer see

beyond the next day. Usually it is swept under the carpet very quickly if it happens in a family because of the stigma it carries. It is the subject of suicide.

These words today are not meant to give you the warning signs of suicide, but I'm here to tell you my testimony of my attempt to take my own life.

Most people would look at me and think I have it all together, On the outside, I'm fun loving, I wear the right clothes, drive a nice car, you can always count on me if you need a hug, I travel, I have lots of great friends, and a loving family. It appears to others that I have a great zest for life, however, it was all just a picture, a facade that you saw,

On the inside I hurt and I lived in emotional pain, a pain that was so intense I had to get away from it. I remember the losses leading up to my decision. My mom had passed away. I never had a great relationship with her but when she fell and broke her hip, and was put in a nursing home, I made a vow that I would take care of her to the best of my ability. I wanted to walk away with no regrets. Despite the emotional toll it took on me, when she passed away, I was there in the room and I was frightened by what I had just witnessed. I was an orphan now both my parents were gone, I had no family. My sister disowned me after my mom's death. She was only in it to see how she would prosper from her passing, she never came home for the funeral. I carried my mom on my lap in her oak box, with stained glass birds on the top, to her resting place by myself. Shortly after that my best friend moved away to NC. She was my rock always an ear open for me to talk to, and a close friendship that I cherish was shattered, like glass dropping to the ground, breaking into a million pieces. These were all significant people who made my life a quilt and as the threads began to unravel so did I. I also lost my job of 10 years. I cried all the time, life at home wasn't great. Who was I now? I lost my voice. I could no longer express my own thoughts and feelings. I felt a sense of hopelessness in my life. The things I used to enjoy I no longer wanted to do, and I was so sad all the time.

I went to a funeral and I remember thinking to myself, "She wanted to live and what I wouldn't have done to trade places with her. Why did God take her and not me?" It just didn't seem fair. So 3 days later I could no longer handle the pain I was in. On the spur of a moment I decided to end my own life. I fell into what is often referred by suicide survivors as the dark place where only pain and I existed. I had no hope, there was no sense of family there, just me, pain, hopelessness that left me in the depths of despair. I remember lying on my living room floor and I started taking sleeping pills 3 by 3 until I began to feel the effects of the drugs. As I laid there on the floor crying out to God to take me to heaven, a thought popped into my head. "If I take my own life am I really going to heaven? What does the bible say about suicide? Am I really going to accomplish what I set out to do, or was I going to hell and I certainly didn't want to be there?" I had no definitive answer.

Then of course God always knows when to intervene when we need him most. My son found me and called 911. When the paramedics arrived, my blood pressure was low, and by this time I was very sleepy, however I held tight onto my bottle of sleeping pills,

not wanting to give them up they were my only hope of making the pain stop. Slowly in a groggy state of mind I relinquished them.....

I went to a mental health facility, scared and alone, where I was stripped of my dignity, shoe laces and most important to me, my freedom. I slept in a small room with two other women with a mattress on the floor and only a sheet to cover me. I was cold, frightened and abandoned. I remember there was no sleep so I prayed all night long for God to be with me so I wouldn't be alone anymore. I searched out other Christians, lucky for me both a minister and a youth pastor were there both suffering from their own life tragedies. We shared our stories, prayed for each other, and formed a tight knit family. They understood me when no one else did and I understood them, never judging their situations. Saying goodbye was hard, for those were the people I could relate to them. I had to step back into my own life a changed person and into a world that I no longer fit into. Who was I now and where did I belong?

My doctor told me, attempting suicide, creates a bruise on your brain and it takes a year or so for your brain to heal from this injury. Slowly my personality began to shine through the darkness. Despair is like dark clouds that roll out of our lives, but night does turn into morning and dark clouds shall pass and the sun has once again shined down upon me. I love who I am now, fun loving, strong, independent, hopeful, and creative but my favorite piece of me is my warm and loving heart, I wouldn't trade those characteristics for they make me a unique and special person.

However, the dark place will always be a part of my life. Occasionally it will lure me in, where life seems hopeless and desolate. Sometimes I get on my knees and pray when the dark place is sitting next to me. And when I do I remember hearing God in my head saying "be still and know that I am here." Sometimes when it's closing in around me, I'll get a phone call, email or text distracting me and I always know during those times, it was really God intervening, for he is always with me, I know that loss will sadden me, hope will comfort me, and love will heal me.

On the outside, I am only a photograph on paper, but on the inside I am an intricate painting full of color and texture and with each stroke of Gods paintbrush he has painted a new person, and brought me back to life."

Friends I don't know what it is that you may be wrestling with this morning. But I do know this, God will give us victory. He will give us His blessing if we give ourselves to Him. But God does not take our lives by force. He is not going to come in like a conquering general; He comes like a loving father. We have to submit our lives to his control. He wants to be invited in. He is patient, but he is not passive. He is always searching, seeking, calling, knocking, yearning, inviting, drawing us so that we will give ourselves to him in love and surrender.

But many people believe that when they submit and surrender to God that they are giving up so much; fun, joy, happiness, friends, relationships, hobbies. That their life is going to be a boring drudgery, a life of rules and restrictions, do's and don'ts. But

in reality the opposite is true. Surrender and submission to God breaks the bondage of sin in our lives. It sets us free to live life the way God intended. It brings release, freedom, and a joy that is independent of situations and circumstances.

In short it makes us a new person. That's what happened to Jacob. After all of this he was a changed man. God even changed his name. He changed it from Jacob (trickster) to Israel (he who strives with God). But he not only had a new name, he was a new person. And he also had a new walk.

The same happens to us when we give ourselves to Jesus Christ. We are victorious because he (Jesus) is victorious. We don't have to fight the battle, because he has already fought that battle for us. He has taken all our struggles, all our turmoil, all our circumstances, all our sins on himself. He has gone toe to toe with it all. On the cross it looked like sin had defeated him. He looked like he had lost the fight. But praise be to God on the third day Jesus rose from the dead victorious, conquering sin, defeating death, and he lives forever as our conquering hero. And because of his victory, we can have victory. Because of his death we can have life. We are new creations. When we win the struggle he changes our name. He changes our name from sinner to saint, from enemy to friend, from rebel to son/daughter; he gives us his name, Christian.

But he also gives us a new walk. Every step Israel took from that day forward he would be reminded of his encounter with the Lord. He would never be the same. The same is true with us. When we give ourselves to the Lord, when we submit ourselves to him, it leaves a mark. Our lives are never the same again. We are different. We walk different, we talk different, we behave different, we treat others differently. People should notice our walk. It is a distinct new walk.

The ultimate issue is this: Who will be in Charge? Who will be Lord? Who will control your life? Will you try to control, or will you let God be in control. Will we seek to lead or will we submit our lives to Jesus and his control?

Jacob named the place where this struggle took place Peniel (the face of God) for he said, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been spared." This morning, this place can be your "Peniel." God is here. Have you been wrestling with God? Have you struggled with him in the dark night of your soul? Do you find yourself here today wrestling in the darkness? If you are, I have good news for you. Today can mark a new beginning, a fresh start, a new life, a new name. You don't have to wrestle; you don't have to fight that battle anymore. The battle has already been fought for you. Let go and let God. Give in and go on. He wants to bless you. He wants to forgive you. He wants to help you with your problems. He wants what's best for you. He wants to make you whole and complete. Why fight it?