

Genesis 32:22-32
Wrestling with God
Sunday August 6th, 2017

A story is told about a bunch of ants on the T on a golf course as a “duffer” got up to t-off his ball. Soon there was grass and sand and dirt flying everywhere, but the golf ball wasn’t moving.



Finally, one ant said to the others, “If we want to live, we better hold onto the ball!”



This is a fun way of introducing the topic of holding onto God in the storms of life. We all have had storms in our lives, some are even in the midst of them this day, and for all of us storms and struggles are coming. In the midst of them we need to hold onto God as we wrestle with God and our faith.

When our daughter Sarah was born she went right from her mother’s arms into NICU for 3 days. As traumatic as that was it was nothing compared to what was coming. At one month old, after a series of fevers, Sarah was diagnosed with a condition that if left untreated would destroy her kidneys.

So at 2 months old she had surgery. That didn’t work so at 4 months old they went in again. She and Deede and I spent a month in the hospital the first 6 months of her life. All this was going on as I finished seminary and Deede prepared to leave Texas and all her family. Deede was so mad at God she refused to speak to God for a year.

The blessing has been that years later our daughter is a happy, healthy, faithful 33 year old English Teacher.

The ultimate struggle we have in life is not with disease, or death, or even other persons for Paul reminds us “we struggle not with flesh and blood but with the spiritual forces.”

There was a retired nurse at one church I served. She was the matriarch of her family. Her daughters and sons in-law were involved in that church along with many of her grandchildren who were involved in the children and youth program I led. Now this woman “rode me like a rented mule!” as they say. Nothing I could do was right. I got this attitude from her, her daughters and even many of the grandchildren. I got to the point when I saw her coming I would try to disappear.

This all occurred over a 5 year period in which her husband was dying of MS. It was a slow miserable death. After he passed on I was encouraged to lead a “Grief Group” along with another pastor at that church. It was the first one I led. Guess who signed up? I went to the first 3 meetings with the enthusiasm of boy going to the principal’s office for a spanking for I had had many verbal spankings by this woman.

After the 3rd meeting she cornered and trapped me in front of the nursery. It is amazing how clear some memories are. I thought, “Here it comes again.”

She then said something to me that very much surprised and healed both of us. She said, “I must apologize for how I have treated you these last five years. I finally realized I wasn’t mad at you. I was mad at God and you represented God.” We eventual became friends and the hostility I received from that whole family receded into the background.

Jacob (the supplantor or trickster) wouldn’t let go of God. Jacob struggled, or wrestled with God all night long. Jacob at first thought it was a man he was wrestling. He had sent his entire family and all his possessions across the river to be by himself, possible to pray and prepare to meet his brother Esau. Because the last time Jacob saw Esau he was fleeing in fear from Esau for Esau wanted to kill him. Jacob feared he had not given up.

Anyway, Jacob at first thought he was attacked by a man, but eventually realized he was wrestling with God; so he would not let him go until the man blessed him. This God did. God blessed, or more accurately, simply reaffirmed the blessing he had already given Jacob before he was even born. Jacob all his life strove for a blessing he already had.

This story is why we don't talk about a nation called Jacob, but the nation of Israel. **Israel means "he who struggles with God."** This accurately describes Jacob and the nature of the relationship the ancient nation of Israel had with God. They struggled with God.

This man who is God, whom Jacob wrestled, many ancient commentators think prefigures Jesus Christ who was both man and God. This struggle also prefigures our relationship with God in the storms of life. In the storms of life we struggle with the goodness of God. But we like Jacob need to hold on to receive the blessing.

Through the years I have talked with many believers who did not think they could be mad at God, much less verbalize their anger toward God; so they either internalized their anger which turned into depression, or they took it out on others like my friend the nurse did.

The Psalms, though, give us ways to express our wrestling with God in the storms of life. As we pray many of them they help us verbalize our anger. 2/3s of the Psalms are what are called, "Laments". These are Psalms, or prayers that help us verbalize our complaints, our struggles with God.

Like Psalm 13 that begins, **"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"**

How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?"

Or Psalm 22, **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"**

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.”

How many of you have spent a sleepless night in prayer, in the agony of despair? I know, years ago, when I was diagnosed with cancer I spent a few of sleepless nights in prayer asking God, “Why me?” Why at the age of 49?

But you know, all of these psalms of Lament but one end on a note of faith. All the writers of these psalms held on until the break of day and wrestled with God in their hearts and minds. I held on in prayer. My wife held onto her relationship with God despite not speaking to him for a while.

Just because you are not speaking for a while doesn't mean the relationship has ended. Just because you are angry with someone, or God doesn't mean it is over. Anger with someone is often the sign of a deep, deep relationship.

Some men will testify that, that long period of angry silence their wives give them is just the calm before the storm. And as they hold on they come to the blessing of the rainbow.



Jesus lives out this type of struggle with God in the Garden. He finally came to the point where he said to God, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” He held onto God as the nails held him to the wood even quoting Psalm 22, “My God my God why have you forsaken me.” But he never got to finish that psalm of which the 2nd to the last verse reads, “To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;

before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him.”

In Jesus' most desperate struggle with the evil of this world he held onto God and God blessed him and through him all of us. Job in his struggles with the circumstances of his life declared, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

The circumstances of life throw us into a struggle with God. These can be Kairos moments if we keep our eyes open and our hearts and minds focused on God.

Jacob's first big Epiphany or God breaking into his life was when he saw the vision of the stairway to heaven with the angels ascending and descending. This occurred as he was fleeing from his brother Esau who was intent on murdering him for stealing his blessing.

This second Epiphany or Kairos moment of God breaking into Jacob's life to wrestle with him occurred as Esau approached him and his family with 400 men. Jacob thought they were going to be massacred.

In a sleepless night of struggling with God in his fears Jacob prevailed, not because he was stronger than God, but because he held on. He refused to let go until he had a blessing. The man touched his hip, and many feel permanently dislocated it, as a permanent reminder of the blessing God gave that day of protecting Jacob from his brother that we read about in the next chapter of Genesis.

We need to do the same. We need to hold on in the storms of life. We need to refuse to let go when the storms of life consume our health, the lives of our friends and loved ones. We need to hold on to God through the tears, the pain and the loss. Because on the other side there is blessing, there is life.

And yes we are scarred by the encounter, we limp. To this day I can't go into a children's hospital without a host of negative emotions rising up from that time my daughter spent in the hospital, but the blessing is there!!

She is here and through her every year many 9th graders are blessed with a great English education whether they want it or not!

Have Job's attitude; take that of Jesus, not my will but thine be done. Hold on and wrestle with God like Jacob.

All healing is temporary. Death will find all of us and all our loved ones. Notice as we hold onto Jesus, Jesus holds onto us.



And as we hold onto God we will receive the blessing of living with our loved ones in heaven now and forever more.



I want to close by singing the first and last verse of "Stand by Me". I want to assure you that God is standing by you. He is big enough to wrestle with. You won't hurt him or his feelings. And the question is not will he stand by us. God has promised to never leave us or forsake us. The question is, "will we hold on and find the blessing?"

When the storms of life are raging, stand by me (stand by me).
When the storms of life are raging, stand by me (stand by me).

When the world is tossing me, like a ship upon the sea,
Thou who rulest wind and water, stand by me (stand by me).

When I'm growing old and feeble, stand by me (stand by me).
When I'm growing old and feeble, stand by me (stand by me).

When my life becomes a burden, and I'm nearing chilly Jordan,
O Thou "Lily of the Valley", stand by me (stand by me).

Amen