

Lessons in Prayer From a Wrestling Deceiver

Have you ever wrestled with God? A man did, and lived to tell of it. That man was Jacob. We read the account of Jacob wrestling with God in Genesis 32:24-32. Jacob wrestled with God for a whole night. The Bible says, ‘He wrestled with a man’. The reason we know this man was God in human form was because after Jacob has wrestled with Him he named the place of his encounter Peniel, which means the face of God, and Jacob comments, “I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved”.

This was what is sometimes called a ‘pre-Bethlehem appearance of Christ’: God the Son manifesting Himself prior to His birth as a human. So Jacob really wrestled with God. Hosea 12:3 says of the encounter “Yea, he had power over the angel, and prevailed: he wept, and made supplication unto him: he found him *in* Bethel, and there he spake with us”. The Bible is saying that Jacob’s wrestle was made up of agonizing prayer. And through this experience we learn about an aspect of prayer seldom mentioned, truly wrestling with God. Have you ever thought of wrestling with God in prayer? What does it mean to do so? Are we allowed to do it?

We’ll learn some things regarding prayer looking at Jacob’s encounter with God, and how we too, can have a similar experience.

Jacob’s wrestling was both physical and spiritual. It was a physical match, but primarily a spiritual one. There is much to read between the lines here. First, how common is it for someone to just meet you out of the blue and begin a wrestling match with you? No, clearly something deeper is going on here. Jacob is familiar with this person, or at least familiar with what He represents. Jacob wrestled with Him because He had been resisting the man prior to that. The wrestling was now just a climax of his struggle with God. It was a physical manifestation of the spiritual reality: Jacob was fighting and resisting God.

Jacob had been scheming and resisting God all his life. From his birth, he held onto his brother’s heel. His life was filled with schemes and plans to make life work his own way. From stealing his brother’s birthright, to bargaining for Rachel, to coming up with a plan to appease Esau, till right before his confrontation with Esau, splitting his party into two groups so that Esau could only get one. Jacob, the master schemer. He really is no different from any of us, all of us try to make life work our *own way*. We also come up with plans, ideas, schemes and ways to make life run according to our schedule, our liking, our design. That might be expected for an unbeliever. He has rejected God’s authority from the start. He has never submitted himself to the lordship of Jesus, so we would expect him to try and make life work his own way. But for the child of God, things are different. A believer has surrendered his life to God. God has full rights and full ownership over the believer. To seek to make life work your own way apart from God when you are saved constitutes rebellion. To make plans, schemes, ideas, decisions without bringing them first to God, without seeking His direction first, is rebellion to His authority. It is simply a slave acting like a free man. Your freedom in Christ is actually slavery to God. And when we resist God’s control and absolute Lordship over us, you can expect He will begin to block you, resist you and thwart your plans. He never forces you against your will, but ultimately He can make your life impossible to live apart from surrendering to Him.

Now in Jacob's life, God had brought this about. Jacob was so independent, so proud, so self-sufficient, that God bring a crisis upon him. God brings the dangerous situation of meeting Esau again, who had sworn deadly revenge on Jacob. Jacob knows his schemes are fast running out. He knows his plans might not save him this time. In desperation he cries out to God in vv9-12. But God knows Jacob's heart. Jacob has not surrendered yet. He has not submitted to God's lordship. He merely wants God to intervene, to help him out. Like many believers, he says, "God, this is where I am now! Help!" He did not seemingly consult God about anything previously. God sees that Jacob's heart is hard enough to need desperate measures. He Himself will go and wrestle with Jacob, to personify for Jacob how he is really living. He will show Jacob that truly, this is how Jacob is living moment to moment, in a constant warfare with God. How does all this teach us anything about prayer? What does this have to do with prayer?

Firstly, the wrestle began when Jacob was alone (v24). Real prayer begins in personal prayer. Jesus told us this by telling us how our prayers should be in a closet, totally private, purely between you and God. If you can't find a place of solitude, then you need at least the attitude of solitude, where all others disappear and it is just you and God.

Secondly, and most importantly, prayer is the place where we truly wrestle with God. Many people have got a lot of funny ideas about prayer. Some think that God is a bellhop, whom you command. You tell Him what to do. You demand what you want, and then put the authorized signature at the bottom of the prayer, 'in Jesus name!'. For others, prayer is a distant, cool, impersonal request, never too bold, never too loud, often quite timid and fearful in the presence of a God who may just destroy us while praying. Well, neither are Biblical.

Prayer has many parts to it. Some have used the acronym ACTS to try and describe what prayer should be. The A is for Adoration, the C is for Confession, the T is for Thanksgiving and the S is for Supplication. Now all that is valid. But I feel there is a part of prayer that is missing in that formula, and that is really wrestling with God until we are in His will. This is really what happened to Jacob. He was fighting God all along. His wrestling match really illustrated it literally. The Bible says all night He fought with God. Now think about it. God is trying to wrestle Jacob into submission, into accepting His good plan for his life. Jacob is resisting. Jacob is rejecting God's way and fighting to overcome God, to have his own way. We may shake our heads in wonder, but that's exactly what you and I do daily when we live independently of God. We resist Him. Now, prayer is the place where you wrestle yourself into a place of submission to God. Many think that prayer is where you wrestle God into accepting your request. No, prayer is where you wrestle yourself into accepting God's will for your request. See, prayer is never meant to be an easy, simple thing. Prayer is effort, hard work, and often very agonizing. Sometimes, probably most times, it is a delight. But often enough, you will have to wrestle with God, long in prayer, to get yourself under God. Perhaps it's accepting God's will with regard a home situation, a church situation, a work situation. Whatever it is, the only real peace you will find will be in persistent prayer with God.

Consider sometimes you cry out, "God, where were you? Why didn't you come through for me in that situation?" Wrestling in prayer will mean asking those questions, struggling to come under God's lordship again. You will wrestle with

Scriptures that teach God is always active, while asking God, if that is so, why don't I see you? You will wrestle with the truth that He loves you and that all things work together for good to them that love Him, but will ask, why doesn't it seem like it Lord?". You will wrestle with the fact that God is just and fair, but will ask, why do You seem to allow so much evil" Ultimately, real, godly prayer, will result in you wrestling yourself into believing the truth about God, taking his promises on faith, and leaving with peace.

See, some people make out like every meeting with God must be a formal interview with suit and tie. They say, "You can never question God!!" Remember, God is afraid of no one, least of all your questions. God wrestled in the dirt with Jacob. He is not afraid of an encounter with you. There is nothing wrong with asking God questions. God the Holy Spirit sovereignly chose to use David's inspired questions to Him in the Psalms "My God, why hast thou forsaken us?" "God why art thou afar off?" "God, will you be angry at us forever?". Sometimes you read the Psalms and David's questions seem rude, impudent, even cheeky and disrespectful. But God Himself included them in the Scriptures to show that He did not regard them like that. He saw a heart filled with passion, that treated God as a Person, not an entity, and questioned Him when he needed answers.

See, the kind of questioning that is ungodly is where you go beyond asking God for answers or struggling to accept His Word as truth by faith, it is where you begin to ask Him if He is righteous in the situation, if He is truly just. It is where you, like Job, begin to accuse God of being wicked and unfair. There the clay is saying to the Potter, "What doest thou?" See the kind of struggle we are talking about still has a reverence for God, but it is nonetheless a passionate, intense, heated struggle. If the thought of a heated struggle with God makes you uncomfortable, then consider that if you are resisting God then you are doing it anyway, and God is not scared of it.

The wonderful thing is that God calls you to this struggle. He doesn't want emotionless, cold children who robotically nod to everything, who unfeelingly numb themselves to their own questions, concerns. He invites you to the struggle. Isaiah 45:11: "Ask me of things to come concerning my sons, and concerning the work of my hands command ye me."

The thing you must know is that God is always going to win. "So why bother?", you may ask. Because God has ordained prayer that way. Consider the Bible says that God knows what our requests are before we ask them. So why pray? Because He told us to. "Ye have not, because ye ask not." God has set up the spiritual law that way. So it is with real surrender to God. You can say, "I can surrender to God without wrestling with Him long in prayer." That's probably true for a lot of areas in your life. But I can guarantee you that you will encounter some issues so dear to you, so close to our heart, that a prayerful wrestle with God is inevitable.

Consider that we have the perfect example of this in the Lord Jesus. Jesus prayed for hours in the Garden of Gethsemane. There Jesus is about to be arrested and tried and crucified. He is agonizing in prayer over the horror of bearing the guilt, shame and wrath of every sin ever committed. The burden makes His heart heavy to the point of death. The excruciating thought of being forsaken by His Father for the first time in Eternity tears Him apart. He is praying. What is He praying for? "And he went a little

further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou *wilt*.”

Jesus was wrestling Himself into the will of God. He was one with God, yet the awesomeness of the atonement made even Him shrink back. Prayer was His means of wrestling Himself into saying, Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done.” Jesus, the Perfect Son of God, agonised for hours in prayer, sweating drops of blood, till He got Himself into a place of oneness with the heart of God.

See, that is why it is difficult to comprehend Christians who talk of their surrender to God like it is a painless, quick and simple process. I wonder if they have not disconnected themselves from their feelings. Jesus sweated drops of blood. Jacob wrestled in the dirt all night. How long do you spend, wrestling yourself into being one with God’s heart and accepting His will for whatever you are dealing with?

Consider that the line in the Disciple’s Prayer, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” carries exactly the same idea. “Lord, may your way overcome my way today. May your perfect way and heart conquer and have victory over mine today. May the Heavenly be clearly seen in me, the earthly today.” To accept God’s Will automatically means you have crucified yours, the victory of God’s will will mean the defeat of yours. Surrender is not where you call a truce between your will and God’s, surrender is where you accept defeat for trying to get your own way, lay down your arms and accept His way and will as your own.

Read verse 25. Read between the lines here. It is not that Jacob was beating God at wrestling. It was that Jesus saw that Jacob was not going to surrender, and submit to Him. His independent spirit was still intact.

When God saw that Jacob would not submit, He touched him. He caused him pain. God knew Jacob was not going to surrender his own way, so God turned up the heat and broke him. You may wrestle with God, but to try and beat God is foolish. Wrestle knowing He will win, but wrestle in faith nonetheless. It is likely that Jacob limped for the rest of His life. His stubbornness with God cost Him, but perhaps his limp permanently reminded him that surrender to God is a lot less painless than resisting Him. James 4:6.: “But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.” “Resists” carries the idea of siege warfare. An army would surround a city and lay siege to it, cutting off its supplies, attacking its defenses, until it crumbled or surrendered. Well, the Bible says that that is what God does to the proud spirit: He lays siege to it. It may take hours, days, weeks, months and for some, like Jacob, years. But He will win in the end. He has had 6000 years of experience in dealing with proud humans, and His infinite wisdom will not lack creative and innovative methods to break the proud. But that can be avoided, by surrendering to God. Prayer is a divine gift to be used to break your own will that, if left to itself, will destroy you. It is a tool to break under God, and give Him the throne of your heart again. The result you are looking for is a genuine, heartfelt surrender to God, a new submission, a renewed and refreshed trust in Him, a strengthened faith in His power and promises, a new hope. God accomplished this, by breaking Jacob.

Something else happens. As day began to approach , we read v 26. God has already put Jacob’s thigh out of joint. The chances are Jacob has stopped fighting. He has been broken and is probably exhausted and has accepted defeat. Then why does God

say, “Let me go”? I think Jacob had given up the fight, but was clinging to God with all his might. He had stopped wrestling, but didn’t want to let God go without blessing him. God knows that if the sun comes up, Jacob will see his face and die, for God says, “No man can see my face and live.” For Jacob’s sake, He mercifully needs to go and asks Jacob to just let go. Jacob refuses until God blesses Him.

What a beautiful picture of prayer. The wrestling and struggling is over. Jacob lies there exhausted, but contentedly in submission, but His new-found love for his God will not release Him. He now craves His presence. His wrestle has brought good fruits: the fruit of a devoted, submissive and obedient heart. He now asks God to bless him. His surrender to God has now brought a deep thirst for God. His submission to his Lord has now brought a great hunger for Him. From fighting God, he now won’t let go of God. He has gone from rebel to lover, from fighting to fellowship. This is what prayer does. It breaks the stubborn heart, and unites it with God.

Jacob is saying, “I have accepted your will, but now be close to me, reveal yourself to me, bless me with yourself”. We are reminded of Moses’ prayer of passionate love: “I beseech thee, show me thy glory!” God delights in that request. God is like that in His nature, He longs to bless His people. God blesses Him with a new name, blesses him in v 26. God, by nature, wants to be amongst His people, and especially share Himself with you in prayer and the Word.

It was definitely a new day for Jacob. He walked away profoundly changed. Some say this was where He became a believer, whether or not that’s true, He never behaved the same after it. The old scheming Jacob is gone. A wise father, leader and patriarch is seen in the remaining chapters of Genesis. No wonder it was here that his name was changed from Jacob to Israel. Israel has a dual meaning , “prince of God” and also “he fights with God” both which symbolized Jacob.

Verse 31: a new day for Jacob. If he hadn’t had such a wrestling with God, who knows what would have been the outcome of his meeting with Esau the next day? But when Rachel and Leah saw their limping husband approach, they knew something had changed, and changed permanently.

How about you? Have you been trying to keep your clothes clean in prayer? Have you been trying to numb your doubts, fears and anxieties with spiritual clichés?

I urge you, go to God in prayer. Meet Him alone. Let Him show you where you resist Him. Ask God, question, speak, talk, wrestle, until your heart is brought into surrender, acceptance of His Will. Don’t hang on to your pride, lest God’s siege warfare break you entirely. You will know you have broken, when accepting His will has gone from being distasteful to sweet, from something you reject, to something you willingly choose. There your attitude will change to a loving desire for Him. May you have your reverent wrestle with the Almighty. Understand that He will win. Seek to surrender. But don’t avoid the combat. Surrender to God will ultimately bring that new day in your life, the sun will rise upon you, and others will see the limp in your walk , they will know you have been with God and resolved the issue.