

Wrestling With God

A Christian's life is full of struggle.

We struggle with our own sinful natures, which Paul calls our "flesh."

He says: "in my mind I obey the law of god, but in my flesh I obey the law of sin."

We want to obey the Ten Commandments but we're fond of our sins as well.

We can't get rid of them because they're as much a part of us as our own flesh.

You might say that we're attached to our sins. We also struggle with that "love your enemies" thing. It's hard enough to love our neighbor; how in the world are we supposed to love our enemies? Then there's "doing unto others as you

would have them do unto you. Sometimes we're more inclined to "do unto others before they do it unto us." It's hard to live a life of Christian love when

we're saddled with sinful natures and we live in a sinful world. Today's scripture lessons are about three people who struggled but whose struggles ended in

victory. Maybe we can learn something from them that will help us with our own struggles. I'll begin with the *Old Testament* lesson which features one of my

favorite characters in the bible: Jacob.

Jacob's struggle began even before he was born. He wrestled with his brother Esau while they were still in Rebecca's womb and he was born clutching Esau's

ankle, trying to hold him back so that he could be the firstborn and receive his father's inheritance. When that didn't work, he used his superior wits to take

advantage of his brother's impulsive nature and swindle him out of his inheritance. His brother didn't appreciate that and decided to kill Jacob, so

Jacob ran away and went to work for his uncle Laban, who lived in the land of Paddan Aram, which was a long way from Israel. Over the course of the next

fourteen years, through a series of complex negotiations Jacob outwitted his uncle and confiscated a good part of his wealth. Jacob was extremely clever.

What he didn't realize, however, was that God had been helping him all along.

It was God working through Jacob's mother, who had arranged for Jacob to replace Esau as heir of the family fortune. It was God had given Jacob a dream

that showed him how to outwit his uncle and gain possession of his flocks.

Jacob was shrewd—but it was God who gave him his victories.

Then, on what was probably the most anxious night of Jacob's life, when he

feared that his brother Esau was going to kill him the very next day, God

appeared to Jacob in the form of a man and wrestled with him the entire night: mano y mano. When the dawn broke and God asked Jacob to let him go,

Jacob would not let go of god until he blessed him. So God blessed Jacob with a new name: he gave him the name "Israel," which means, "he who has

struggled with God and man and has overcome."

This story is a beautiful metaphor for prayer.

When we pray—and it's when we're full of anxiety and fear like Jacob that we pray the hardest—we are, in effect, struggling with God. We are saying “please do this, God,” or “please don't let that happen, God,” and we strive to persuade him to do what we want him to do. We wrestle with God—sometimes all night long—knowing that God alone can give us what we want. And as long as we are praying in Jesus' name and according to his will, God has assured us that he will hear our prayer and give us a blessing. His blessing may be what we were praying for or it may be something else but it will be a blessing. And while the Rolling Stones are probably my least favorite rock group in musical history, what they sang in one of their songs is true: you don't always get what you want, but if you try real hard, you just might get what you need.” And I mustn't leave out, “oh yeah.” Jacob got what he wanted—on the next day his brother spared his life and embraced him with brotherly love **and** he got much, much more: God gave him an immortal name and made him the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob got his blessing alright.

Then there's Paul. Paul knew a lot about struggling. He struggled with the rulers of synagogues who rejected the Gospel. He struggled with godless men who infiltrated churches he had founded and corrupted the faith of their members. He struggled with the Jews in Jerusalem who tried to kill him and with Roman officials who threw him in jail. On top of it all he struggled with his own sinful nature, just like we do. In our epistle lesson, Paul describes his struggles in terms of a competition, a race. He writes, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this...but I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” And Paul did press on through trials and tribulations, ending up in a Roman prison, where he rejoiced in his victory: “for I am already being poured out like a drink offering and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me....” Paul's struggles ended up in victory.

Finally, we come to a very single-minded struggler: the widow in Jesus' parable. This woman was faced with an almost impossible task: she wanted to obtain justice from a corrupt judge who had no interest in providing justice to her or anyone else. This judge feared neither God nor men, and since the widow was among the poorest and most helpless members of society she had zero leverage on him. So she simply did what she could do: she wheedled and badgered the unjust judge until he finally caved in and gave her the verdict she wanted—just to get her off his back. She persevered until she finally prevailed. Her strategy was simple doggedness: she just refused to give up. Doggedness won the day and that's how our Lord tells us to pray. **Just don't give up.**

These, then, are three people who struggled and were victorious. Jacob obtained peace with his brother and an immortal name; Paul preached the Gospel and the Gospel transformed the world; and the widow got the justice she sought. But why does God make it necessary for us to struggle so? Why doesn't he just give us what we pray for the first time we ask without making us go through all the waiting and worrying and struggling? Why has he so arranged things that struggle should be a necessary part of our Christian lives? Let's go back to these same three scriptures to see if they provide the answer. In the case of Jacob, God obviously **let** Jacob win the wrestling match. Jacob couldn't have won it by his own strength because he was wrestling with God. *God let Jacob overcome him so that he could give Jacob a blessing.* If that sounds strange, just remember that about two thousand years later this same God would let his human enemies overcome him so that he could give them a blessing—the forgiveness of all their sins. That was the point of the crucifixion, wasn't it?

And what about Paul? As it turns out, Paul knew that the prize he was competing for was already his! Right after he said, "I press on toward the goal to win the prize..." he added, "only let us live up to **what we have already attained.**" Paul was struggling to win a prize which he had already received! And that provides a clue as to why struggle is such an important part of Christian life. **Our struggles are not the reason for our victory; our struggles are the result of our victory.** We don't struggle in order to win; we struggle because we've already won. When the Holy Spirit comes to live in us at our baptism, a lifelong struggle breaks out between us and God—between our sinful flesh and the Holy Spirit. And while the struggle is agonizing and never-ending, we ought to thank God every day that we are engaged in it, **because the struggle itself is a sign that we are under grace!** The unrepentant sinner who has embraced his sin and hardened his heart against the Holy Spirit doesn't struggle like this. He is a contented citizen of the kingdom of the prince of this world. But once the Holy Spirit begins to till the black soil of the human heart, there will be no worldly peace for the believer because his true citizenship is in the kingdom of God but he's living in the kingdom of the prince of this world. The only real, enduring peace he can have is peace with God, but that is a divine peace which guards the human mind and heart from all the assaults of the world, our flesh and the devil. It's the peace that Charlotte Elliott described in her hymn, "just as I am, tho' tossed about, by many a conflict, many a doubt, fightings and fears within, without, o lamb of God, I come, I come."

Then there's our last valiant struggler: the woman in Jesus' parable. Do you recall what it was that she struggled to obtain from the judge? It was justice against her adversary! And the judge finally gave her the verdict she wanted. And how much more, Jesus said, will God give us justice against our adversary!

For our adversary is God's adversary, and Jesus has already vanquished him and given us the prize: complete forgiveness of all our sins. All we have to do is, "live up to what we have already obtained."

Luther described it this way in his hymn "*A Mighty Fortress*": this world's prince may still, scowl fierce as he will; he can harm us none; he's judged, the deed is done. One little word can fell him!"

As the day of his crucifixion drew near, Jesus said to his disciples: 'now the prince of this world will be driven out.' And what a blessing was delivered to mankind through **that** struggle! If you are ever asked "when were you saved?"—you can answer, "About two thousand years ago, on a cross."

Jesus compares our struggles to those of a woman in labor as she struggles to bring forth her child: "I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy."

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is through our struggling that we are gradually growing into the image of our savior. That's why God makes us struggle. God has already given us the prize: he has given us justice over our adversary, victory in the race we are running, the love and forgiveness of our brother and a new name—the name of Christian—which means, "One who has struggled with sin and overcome—through Christ."

Amen

