

## Sermon- Struggling

A Christian's life is full of struggles. We struggle with sin, with things we know we shouldn't think and say and do, but we keep on thinking and saying and doing them. We struggle to give our children what we think they need and they don't think they need it. We struggle with loving our neighbor because he isn't always easy to love. We try to live by the golden rule—to do unto others as we would have them do unto us—but sometimes we do unto others before they have a chance to do it unto us. We struggle to live a life of obedience and love but we're saddled with sinful natures and it's not easy to do. And so our lives are full of struggling. Today's scripture lessons are about three strugglers like us. Maybe we can learn something from their struggles that will help us with our own. I'll start with our Old Testament lesson which features one of my favorite characters in the bible: Jacob. Jacob struggled from the get-go. He wrestled with his brother Esau while they were still in their mother's womb. As he was being born he struggled to get ahead of Esau so that he could be the firstborn and inherit all their father's property. Later he struggled with his Uncle Laban in a war of wits that lasted over fourteen years. Still later, on what was probably the most anxious night of Jacob's life, when he was terrified that his brother was going to kill him the following day, he spent all night wrestling with God who had come in the form of an angel. Finally, as dawn was breaking, God allowed Jacob to prevail and blessed him with a new name: "Israel"—which means "he who has struggled with God and man and has overcome." Jacob had spent his entire life struggling to get what he wanted, but only God could give him what he needed. Only God knows what we really need.

Then there's Paul. Paul knew a lot about struggling. He was thrown into jail, locked in stocks, flogged, beaten with rods, stoned and shipwrecked. He was driven out of the Jerusalem temple by an angry mob, arrested by the authorities and transported to Rome where he was thrown into prison. In addition to these struggles Paul also struggled with his own sinful nature. Listen to him describe the intensity of the battle that raged within him: I do not understand what I do, for the things that I want to do I do not do, but the things which I hate—I do. I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out... for what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing...what a wretched man I am!" Can you identify with Paul? I sure can. Unable to get the better of his sin, Paul cries out: "who will save me from this body of death?" And God gives him the answer he needs: "thanks be to God through Christ Jesus our Lord!" Only God could give Paul what he needed.

Finally, we come to a very dedicated struggler: the woman in Jesus' parable. This woman was faced with a huge obstacle: she longed to obtain justice over her adversary from a corrupt judge who had no interest in providing it. His ears were deaf to her complaint:

as a widow she was among the poorest and most helpless members of society and he was a person who cared neither for God nor man. She had zero leverage on him. So she simply did what she could do: she wheedled and badgered and hounded the corrupt judge until he finally gave her the verdict she sought. She persevered in her struggle and the judge finally allowed her to prevail.

So we struggle to get what we want and finally God gives us what we need. So why struggle at all? Why not just turn everything over to God? After all, didn't God say, "Be still and know that I am God"? Let's go back to the same three scriptures we just looked at to see if they can give us an answer. In the case of Jacob, God obviously allowed Jacob prevail in the wrestling match since Jacob couldn't possibly have done so by his own strength. He let Jacob prevail so that he could give him a blessing. About two thousand years later this same God would come to us in the form of a man who would allow his human enemies to prevail so that he could give them a blessing. Isn't that what the crucifixion is all about? God works in mysterious ways—but he does work. And what about Paul? Through all his struggles with his enemies and his own sinful nature, Paul learned that victory lay with God and with God alone. "Who will save me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Christ Jesus our Lord!" Only God can give us victory over sin. And what about the woman in Jesus' parable? Do you remember what it was that she was struggling for? It was justice against her adversary! And the judge finally gave her the justice she wanted just as God gives us the justice we seek against our adversary through our faith in Jesus Christ! These struggles and their God-ordained outcomes give us a clue about the role struggling plays in a Christian's life: **our struggles are not the cause of our victory; they 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 war breaks out between our sinful nature and the Holy Spirit. From that point on, we are like two people rolled into one. One person is led by the Holy Spirit and wants to obey God and live a life of obedience and love. The other person is led by his sinful nature wants to serve number one and let the devil take the hindmost. It's a war to the finish and while the struggle is agonizing, we ought to thank God every day that it is going on because the struggle itself is a sign that we have already won! The unrepentant sinner, who has embraced his sin and hardened his heart against the Holy Spirit doesn't have this struggle. To one degree or another he has anaesthetized his conscience and lives contentedly in this world, seeking only what this world can provide. But once the Holy Spirit has come to dwell in a person there will never be worldly peace for him this side of the grave: he will be at war with the world and with himself. The only abiding peace he can have in this life is peace with God. But that peace is a divine peace, a peace which surpasses human understanding and assures him that the victory is His.

As we sing in the 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." In another great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," we sing the following words: "This world's prince may still, scowl fierce as he will; he can harm us none; he's judged, the deed is done." On the night before he was crucified, Jesus said to his disciples: "Now the prince of this world will be driven out." The struggle to drive him out took place the next day at a place called Golgotha, and it was a struggle that surpasses all human imagination. But what a blessing was delivered to mankind through that struggle! If you're ever asked, "when were you saved?"—I hope you will answer, "about two thousand years ago on a cross." One of my all-time favorite movies is "a river ran through it." It's a story about a Pastor who is an avid fisherman and does his best to raise his two sons with a love for the Lord and a love for fishing. They both grow up loving fishing, but that's where the similarity ends. One son follows the straight and narrow way of faith. The other son takes to the wild side of life and ends up being murdered over an unpaid gambling debt. Later, when his father retires, he ends his final sermon with these words: in this life we try to give those we love what they need and they don't want it. And what they do need, we don't know how to give them. We know what we want but only God knows what we really need. And so we struggle. Jesus compares our struggles to those of a woman in labor. "I tell you the truth," he says: "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, our lives are lives of struggling. But it's a struggle in which we can rejoice because we have already won the prize! God has given us victory over our adversary, God has given us victory over sin, and God has given us a new name: the name of the one who struggled with God and man and has overcome: our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen.