

WRESTLING WITH GOD

There are mysteries in Christianity—mysteries that defy our powers of reason and even our imaginations. For instance, who could have dreamed up a God who would die for His enemies because He loved them? Or a Creator who would enter His own creation as a helpless infant? Or an all-powerful God who would wrestle with a man all night long and let him win? Even Stephen King would have had a problem with stories like that.

Today I would like to consider another mystery of the Christian faith that is near and dear to all of us: why do God's children have to struggle with so much adversity in their lives? And in order to answer that question I would like to take a look at three famous strugglers in the Bible—the three in today's lessons: Jacob, Paul and the woman in Jesus' parable. We'll start with Jacob.

Jacob was struggling with his twin brother Esau while they were still in their mother's womb. (*Genesis 25:22*) When he came out of her womb he was clutching his brother's heel, trying to pass him up and be the firstborn so that he would be the one to receive his father's inheritance. That is why he was named "Jacob" which means "heel-holder" or "trickster"—someone who uses his wits to get the better of others. After he had failed to be born first, Jacob bided his time until the two brothers were grown. Then he stole his brother's inheritance by tricking his father Isaac into giving it to him instead of Esau. Esau was furious over being fleeced so he decided to kill Jacob. When Jacob heard about it, he fled to the land of Haran where he went to work for his uncle Laban. But Laban was a pretty shifty character himself, and for the next twenty years, Jacob struggled with Laban just to get him to give him what he had promised. Finally he managed to trick Laban out of a substantial part of his wealth and he set out for home with his wives and family. During his journey he learned that his brother Esau was headed his way with four hundred men. Since the last he had heard Esau wanted to kill him, Jacob was terrified. But on the night before Esau arrived, God came down to Jacob in the form of a man and the two of them wrestled all night long. As daylight was breaking, the man demanded that Jacob let him go, but Jacob refused to do so until he blessed him. Then God blessed Jacob by giving him a new name—the name of Israel—which meant "*one who has struggled with God and with men and has overcome.*" (*Genesis 32:28*)

Our next struggler is Paul. Now Paul knew a lot about struggling. He had been thrown in prison, fastened in stocks, flogged, beaten with rods, stoned and shipwrecked. He'd been attacked by mobs and driven out of city after city. But Paul says that his greatest struggle was with his own sinful nature. In his letter to the church at Rome, he cries out: "*...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...For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within*

my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will save me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:18-19; 22-24)

Finally there's the woman in Jesus' parable. This woman was struggling with what seemed to be an impossible situation: she was trying to get justice from a corrupt judge who had no interest in giving it to her. As a widow she was among the poorest and most helpless members of society and had no leverage on the judge. So she did the only thing she could do: she persisted in wheedling and badgering the judge with her problem until he finally gave in and handed her the verdict she wanted. She struggled against injustice and she finally prevailed.

So we have three strugglers who finally obtained what they wanted: Jacob got a blessing, Paul got the victory over his own sinful nature, and the woman got justice. But the interesting thing is that it wasn't their struggling that got them what they wanted: it was God. It was God who revealed a plan to Rebekah to help Jacob trick his brother out of his inheritance. It was God who showed Jacob in a dream how to acquire Laban's wealth and it was God who gave Jacob the name that has never been forgotten: the name of Israel. It was God who gave Paul the victory over his own sinful nature. When he cries out, "*Who will save me from this body of death?*—he answers his own question: "*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*" (Romans 7:25) And it was God who turned the mind of the corrupt judge to give the woman justice. It was God all along.

So the question remains: if it's God and not our struggling that gives us the victory then what is the value of our struggling? Does it earn us some kind of reward? Does it make us better Christians? Are we sanctified by our struggling?

Here again, reason and imagination fail us. Why would a God of grace who freely gives us salvation allow us to struggle as if we could earn it? Let's return to Scripture for the answer—in fact to the same three strugglers we've been talking about and see what they might tell us.

I'm sure we can all agree that if Jacob was wrestling with God, the only way he could win the match would be if God allowed him to. No mortal could possibly overcome Yahweh by his own strength. God let Jacob win.

And what about Paul. He knew that the prize he was competing for was already his! He says, "*I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things... Only let us live up **to what we have already attained.***" (Philippians 3:14-16) In this verse lies the clue to why Christians are faced with struggles: We don't struggle to win; we struggle because we've already won. ***Our struggles don't lead us to victory; our struggles are the result of our victory.*** When the divine seed of faith is planted in us at our baptism, a lifelong struggle begins between the Holy Spirit that lives in us and the trials and temptations of the world, our flesh and the devil. And while this struggle is wearisome, discouraging and, at times, agonizing—we should thank God every day that we are engaged in it because the fact that we're struggling means that we have already won!

That we have nothing to fear because God has already given us the victory! The man whose heart is set on his sin and hardened against the Holy Spirit—that man knows nothing of spiritual struggle. He is a contented citizen in the kingdom of the prince of this world. But when the plow of the Holy Spirit begins to till the black soil of the human heart, from that time on there is struggle in a Christian's life. There is peace from God of an entirely different kind—a peace that surpasses human understanding and guards our hearts in Christ Jesus, but our struggles with the world, the flesh and the devil are going to continue as long as we are in this world. How do the words of the hymn go?

*“Just as I am, though tossed about
By many a conflict, many a doubt;
Fightings and fears, within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.”*

Do you remember what the woman wanted from the judge? She wanted victory over her adversary. And even though the judge was corrupt, he finally gave the woman the victory she longed for. But how much more blessed are we who have a Judge who has already given us victory over our adversary. As we sing in another hymn:

*“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 world can fell him!”*

On one occasion, Jesus said to his disciples: *“Now is time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out.”* (John 12:31) But the way Jesus drove him out required the greatest struggle of all: His suffering and death on the cross. But what a blessing was delivered to mankind through that cosmic struggle! If you are ever asked *“When were you saved?”*—tell the person who asks you, *“About two thousand years ago on the cross!”*

On the night before he was crucified, Jesus compared both his own struggles and ours with those of a woman in labor. He says, *“A woman giving birth 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!”* (John 16:20-21)

Brothers and sisters, there's no getting around the fact that Christian life involves struggle. But it helps to know that our struggling is also a victory celebration because it means that we have already won the prize.

Amen.

Genesis 32:22-30 Jacob Wrestles With God

²² That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. ²⁴ So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. ²⁶ Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." ²⁷ The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. ²⁸ Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." ²⁹ Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. ³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

Philippians 3:12-16

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵ All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

Luke 18:1-8 The Parable of the Persistent Widow

¹⁸ Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ² He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. ³ And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'

⁴ "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!'"

⁶ And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸ I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"