

Genesis 32:22-31 & John 1:43-49. Wrestling with God

1 – WRESTLING CAN BE A CALLING

When I was in my twenty's I went to Bristol, and I made two commitments. One was to overcome my paralysis in asking a girl out, and the other was to explore Christianity. Happily, I had success in both, but I found it much harder to ask God if I go out with him! And to believe that God might answer, "Yes"!



I had lots of questions about all the suffering in the world, about how could some Christians claim God healed their toothache, when God didn't seem to do anything about the droughts in Africa, despite all the millions of their prayers. I was also becoming convinced that God does not bless those he loves with health, wealth, and happiness, and curse those who don't love him with AIDS, poverty, and broken homes. "How come, God, you continue to relate to Christians and preachers who believe and teach such things?" I thought, in my arrogance, "I know about Grace, God, but you take it too far! What about justice?"

So I had lots of questions. I got to have so many questions, and no answers, that I was reaching a crisis, when I knew I couldn't continue with Christianity. As brilliant an idea as the Cross and Resurrection is, and as brilliant as people living in the way of Jesus loving even their enemies etc, is I had nothing to go on, except ideas and questions. I knew I couldn't make Christianity true, but I also knew I couldn't go on with a brilliant lie. I needed some answers.

While I was contemplating having to reluctantly abandon Christianity, just after a service at the Church I went to, God came to be real to me. Out of the blue, God "said" to me: "I AM real. I AM worth struggling for". No words from outside, and not words I made up, but words from God for me: "I AM real. I AM worth struggling for." At first, it was brilliant! God was real! And God was with me as I struggled for answers, even if he didn't give me many. And a bit later it was brilliant to come across the story in Genesis of some body else wrestling: Jacob!

Background question for you: What does the name "Israel" mean?...

Look at Genesis 32:28, and any footnote... "Israel" means "wrestles with God".

We read that the mysterious Man that Jacob wrestles with names him "Israel" because he wrestled with God and people and has overcome. What a brilliantly honest name the Jewish people of God were given for themselves! The name they were given to share with their neighbouring nations and religions was not the grand, "The Nation Chosen by God", or the boastful, "The Ones Favoured by God", but rather the more enigmatic and embarrassingly honest, "Israel: The People Who Wrestle With God"!

Others wrestle. Nathanael wrestled: "Ha! Can anything good come from Nazareth???" And the disciples wrestled: they met the risen Jesus, and they worshipped, "though some doubted". John Wesley wrestled: and that lead him through a dark time eventually to encounter God, as a gift of Grace, warming his heart and changing his life.

I suspect that a good number of Christians wrestle, and pretend not to. What are you and I wrestling with God over at the moment? We are fallible, fragile, mortal human beings with astonishing potential, and we live in the 21st Century in the West, so there will be things we wrestle with. However frustrating that may be, when you wrestle with God, you're simply being an Israelite! Wrestling with God can be a calling.

2 – WRESTLING CAN BE BRUISING

Wrestling with God can feel like a curse, because it's not an even contest, is it? For God is sovereign. Jacob was bruised on the hip. And Jacob was a horrible person who had to face up to who he was.

Another background question for you: What does the name, "Jacob" mean?

Look at Genesis 25:24-26 and any footnote. "Jacob" means "Deceiver". Literally, "Jacob" means "holding his heel". Jacob had a twin brother, Esau, and Esau, was born first, with Jacob born "holding his heel". In other words, Jacob was trying to be born first, and therefore be the heir to the blessing both of his father, Isaac, and of God. But Esau was born first. So we are to think of Jacob fighting his brother and trying to deceive Esau and steal his firstborn birthright from him, not only throughout his life, but even in Rebekah's womb!

Now in those days, when few people could read and write, you used to seal a contract by a handshake in public witnessed by others. "Holding your heel"

was a Jewish phrase that meant “to deceive”, presumably because it is the opposite of a handshake seen by everyone. It is a deceitful, grubby act, a grabbing down in the dirt, not likely to be seen by anyone, an attempt to trip someone up and bring them down into the same gutter level as the one doing the deceiving.

So Jacob means “Deceiver”. And he was a deceiver right through to his bones. Jacob pressured Esau to give up his birth-right over a trivial thing: a meal for a hungry hunter. And later, when Isaac, was an old, frail, blind man, and easily confused, Jacob was helped by his mother to deceive his Father, so that in a sacred and irrevocable ceremony, his Father, Isaac, gave him, Jacob, the family’s sole blessing of God. Not surprisingly, this act of supreme deception destroys the family. Esau is utterly bereft and mortally incensed, and promises to kill Jacob. Jacob flees for his life, and it takes him years before he has matured enough to face up to, and wrestle with, just how horrible a person he has been. Eventually he does. And this is the time, as he crosses the river Jabok at night, facing his own demons, as he crosses over back into his homeland, back into the promised land, back to face his murderous, estranged brother. Jacob wrestles with himself, and wrestles also with God. Not surprisingly, this wrestling is costly. It’s bruising. It has to be if Jacob is to change and begin to be truly blessed by God.

I wrestled with all the questions I had before asking Jesus to accept me into following him and his way. But I have found that wrestling with God, and life, and all the rubbish that I find in my self is bruising. There are not often many easy answers, or magic wands, or the answers to prayer aren’t what I want. I wanted God to answer all, or at least some, of my questions, so I could go further in thinking about faith in Christ. But he didn’t answer *any* of my questions. So I thought God was a bit of a rat bag really. God’s gift to me of questioning and wrestling seemed like a curse. But that may not be the whole picture. Instead, wrestling may simply be a sign that God is calling you to himself in a way you have not been called by him before.

Some Christians think that *no* Christians should wrestle, that wrestling is a sin, that it has nothing to do with faith in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Even though Jesus himself wrestled with God, most notably and profoundly in the Garden of Gethsemane. In real life, wrestling can be a calling, and it can also be bruising.

However, to run with the wisdom of Ecclesiastes: there is a time for wrestling, and a time for resting. Wrestling for its own sake, like anything for its own

sake, and apart from Christ, is pointless, is not of God, is a farce, is a false idol.

3 – WRESTLING CAN BE A FALSE IDOL

There is nothing magic about wrestling. When we wrestle we can just go around in circles. Instead of training our body, we just beat the air and shadow box. We can be like Jonah and pretend that we're wrestling when we're actually disobeying God and running away. Struggling can have more to do with my deceitfulness, or a personality trait than the call of God.

Jesus says of Nathanael that he is "a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit". We are not to play at wrestling with God, and what is of God in us, and what is not. We are to be utterly honest about the highest heights in Christ, and deepest depths in us. And there is to be no deceit about this. Other wise we are only playing at wrestling with God, and actually running away.

God says to me, "If you are serious about wrestling with me, where is the bruising, where is the change, where is the fruit? Where is the love, joy, peace, faithfulness, hope, patience, generosity, compassion, humility, and self-control?

And Christians are not to say to one another, "You must wrestle, for wrestling is an essential mark of faith." No Christian who wrestles is to look down their noses at those who don't wrestle and patronise them by assuming that they must have only a simple, or a simplistic, faith. John writes in chapter 21: The risen Jesus says to Peter, "Follow me". Peter turns and sees the disciple whom Jesus loved, and he asks, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus answers, "What I want for him, what is that to you? You must follow me." In some ways each person will follow Jesus in their own unique way. This is true regardless of however tough that makes me feel when I compare myself to other Christians. To adapt something that Paul of Tarsus wrote to the Galatians: "For in Christ Jesus neither wrestling, nor not wrestling, is anything. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."

So, wrestling can be a calling, wrestling can be bruising, and wrestling can be a false idol. Finally:

4 – WRESTLING CAN BE A BLESSING

It was a blessing for Jacob! He holds onto God with the dawning realisation that he is wrestling not just with anyone, but with God's very self! And he risks

holding onto God as day broke, when Jacob will see God face to face, and then, Jacob's flawed and awful reality will be overwhelmed by the awesome and full reality of God, and that will destroy him. Still, God playfully yields to him, effortlessly bruises him, and graciously blesses him: with a new name, for he has a new identity. No longer "The Deceiver of Others", but "He Wrestles with God".

And God, laughing at my wrestling and realising how important my questions were to me, took pity on me, and met me, telling me, "I AM real. I AM worth struggling for." My encounter with God was anything but the spiritual high of a prayerful saint. It was a pastorally necessary, partly patronising "There, there," from God, a spiritual pat on the head because I was in such a total spiritual mess. But it was also an encouraging affirmation to me that it was OK and worthwhile to keep on questioning and struggling with God, and seeking who God is, in himself, in others, and even in me.

And Christ has given me a new identity. He is sovereign, I am subject to him, and to his Kingdom, to his Reign. And he calls me to follow him and discover more and more who he is, and what is his Way of the Cross, and what it means that he comes first and everything else, and everyone else, comes second, and that I come wherever he wants me to.

Let's pray.

Jesus, Lord,
if you call us to wrestle with you,
may we obey you.
May doing so bring us into your presence,
into real, bruising contact with you.
As your light dawns on us,
may we see ourselves more as you see us.
Then may your fire purify us,
so we can be Israelites,
with less and less deceit in us,
and with more and more
of your graceful and subversive love for all
in us.
Amen.