

Faith that Prays: wrestling with God
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Let's begin this morning by looking at some verses about prayer together. The first one is Matthew 21:21-22 (READ). What do you think Jesus is trying to encourage? Through prayer you will be able to do incredible things. "When you pray that this mountain be moved it will happen; whatever you ask in my name you will receive if you have faith." Those are some pretty bold words from Jesus, aren't they?

Let's stay in the same book; Matthew 7:7-8 (READ). If you ask you will receive; if you seek you will find. Jesus says these words so confidently and with certainty. He doesn't soften it at all; he doesn't say, "Most of the time you will receive, often you will find." If you ask, you *will* receive; if you seek you *will* find.

One more; let's turn to James 5:16-18 (READ). James uses Elijah as an example of prayer; he's trying to encourage us to pray and he says, "It worked for Elijah! He was a normal guy just like you and he prayed fervently and it worked!" What conclusion is James trying to help us draw? If we pray fervently like Elijah our prayers will work, too. Prayers by the righteous are powerful and effective as they are working.

These words on prayer from Jesus, from James are meant to encourage and inspire prayer. Man, there are some mountains in my life that need to be moved and Jesus says if I pray without doubting, if I pray in faith, it will happen. If I ask, if I knock and seek I will receive and find. I love how James draws attention to Elijah's humanity. So often we read these stories in the Bible and think the people mentioned are superhuman. No, they are just like you and me. They had doubts, temptations, weaknesses, and limits. They sin like I sin. That's what makes their example so powerful; they are really like us and we are like them. And look what God did in their life; just imagine what he might do in yours! So, these passages and verses are supposed to inspire and motivate more prayer and more faith in God.

But is that all they do? Do any of them make you discouraged? Do any of these words actually make you doubt? I mean, doesn't it seem sometimes like this isn't what happens when we pray. Haven't you prayed in faith before, with fervency, and then nothing happened? Come on, let's not settle for Sunday school answers and discussion right now; let's get real. Sometimes prayer doesn't work. My most discouraging and heartbreaking moment of my spiritual life came because God didn't answer my prayers. I prayed fervently. I prayed hopefully. I prayed in faith; I talked to God like he was right next to me. And nothing happened. And then I talked to God again in anger; honestly, in a rage. I was so angry and hurt and disappointed all at the same time. And then, I felt guilty and ashamed and it took me years upon years to understand what happened in that moment.

My life with God has been a roller coaster ride of encouragements and discouragements; of faith and doubt. Sometimes, I can *feel* how following God is just right and good. Faith makes sense;

prayer works (and this is coming from a guy who works hard not to trust his feelings.) And then there are other times when I don't know why I pray at all. I don't know why I believe at all. Sometimes reading my Bible feels like a root canal. Sometimes when I pray I wonder, "am I just talking to myself right now?" I've asked and I didn't receive. I've knocked and doors did not open. I've prayed for mountains to move and the only thing that went into the heart of the sea were my hopes and desires. In fact, I've even said, "God, you said if I prayed you would hear from heaven; you said you would move mountains" and when I say amen I wonder, "Did any of my words make it to the ears of God?"

So, is it true that God answers prayer? That feels even a little dangerous to ask. We just read a bunch of verses from God's inspired, truthful word that he indeed does answer prayer. It seems like if my prayers don't get answered that's because of my failings not God's. But that's not good enough for me; I hope that's not good enough for you. Are you willing to dig into this more with me?

Our focus today, I'm hoping, will help us with this question and dilemma. I need to warn you: you may not get the answer you want. But if you're willing to receive God's answer, you will be helped. We're going to read Genesis 32:22ff one more time and examine a part of the story that gets into the nitty gritty of our relationship with God. That's where authentic faith and prayer happen; real life. In the hard stuff, the confusing stuff, the stuff where there are few easy answers. So, let's read our story one more time (READ).

Let's quickly set the scene again because it will be helpful for us. Jacob is on his way back home to the land of Canaan. He's running for his life because he cheated his father in law. But he cheated his brother, Esau, many years earlier and that's where he's headed. So, he feels stuck between a rock and hard place. Jacob is thinking, "What's going to happen? What should I do?" The first half of chapter 32 records Jacob scheming a plan to win his brother's approval. He sends Esau a bounty of gifts hoping to win his approval. But something else happens; Jacob prays to God (he sees his weakness as an invitation to seek God, just like we talked about before). He remembers an encounter he had with God many, many years earlier when he was running away from Esau and his home. Jacob had a dream and in that dream God told him in that dream that someday he would have the land of Canaan as his home. So, remembering this dream and God's promises, Jacob prays. He says, "God, you told me to come back to my home country. You said you will give this land to me. But will you deliver me from the hand of my brother? I'm afraid of him. You promised to help me. Will you help me now?" God is going to help, but it's going to happen on a wrestling mat.

I think this the only instance in the Bible where we see a wrestling match. And to make it more unique, the wrestling match is between God and Jacob. Now, it's not so obvious at first that this is with God. In fact, we're told explicitly that Jacob wrestled *a man*. But the further we read this story we learn it's not just a man. At the end of the whole ordeal Jacob says "I have seen God face to face;" this was a divine encounter.

We don't know much about the wrestling match, but there are two things that I want to highlight. The first thing about the wrestling match was that it was intense. The match lasted all night long. The word choice is also interesting; the word for wrestle means, "created dust." I think the picture we're supposed to imagine is an intense wrestling match where a cloud of dust was stirred by their grappling; that's how vigorous this match was.

Here's the second thing about this wrestling match that's worth noting: God commends Jacob for it. God wanted Jacob to wrestle with him; the intense wrestling match with God was actually an act of faith on Jacob's part and not an act of disobedience or rebellion.

Everything about this story hints that this wrestling match was not a situation where Jacob was rebelling against God, but instead he was interacting and contending with him in a way that we should too. Last week, we talked about the significance of names in ancient Near East and how names symbolize or represent one's nature or identity. Jacob was a cheat and a liar. But God's grace found Jacob very much like it finds us; unexpectedly and undeservedly. And this grace from God drew Jacob near. Now, just because God's grace draws Jacob (and us) near, there's still a collision; this wrestling match was a collision of God's grace and Jacob's will. It was a dirty, dustup between God and Jacob. But it was a dustup that needed to happen for Jacob's transformation.

But God's not mad about it; he's not angry. He doesn't see this as a sign of disrespect. Look at vs. 28 (READ). God gives Jacob a new name - Israel, which means, "strives with God." This marks a new beginning with God - this is *God's* name for him. We are witnessing Jacob's conversion. At the beginning of Gen. 32 Jacob remembers God's promises and believes. But his conversion isn't complete until Jacob gets honest with himself before God. This moment is Jacob's baptism, if you will; this is his new beginning. And God commemorates this moment by giving Jacob a permanent disability (let that sink in) and a new name, which means "strives with God." God means this in a good way. Now, if you're still not convinced that this striving, wrestling with God is a good thing, notice how the episode ends. God blesses Jacob in vs. 29; Jacob rejoices and says, "I have seen God face to face and my life was delivered." Every hint from this passage suggests that striving with God is exactly what Jacob needed to do.

Friends, don't see your struggle with God, your struggle with faith as a sign that you don't have faith or that you don't believe in God. Sometimes, wrestling with God is exactly what faith looks like. Walking away from God, ignoring God, giving up and tapping out is what we're not supposed to do. The wrestling, the contending, the cries of, "God, I don't get what you're doing!" and "Where are you, God? Why won't you answer me?" - that's faith.

I want to show an example of this from Psalm 44; whoever wrote Psalm 44 wasn't happy with life; or more specifically, wasn't happy with God. Life was hard and he doesn't understand why God isn't helping him. Look how he ends in vs. 23-26 (READ).

Did you know there are dozens more of psalms like this one in the Book of Psalms; they are called laments. The psalmist is contending with God. He's wrestling with God. He's honest about his

frustrations and confusions. He doesn't understand why this is happening. But rather than turning away from God; rather than giving up and walking away, he gets in the dust with God and his confusion. This is faith. Turning to God. Being honest with him. Trying to figure out where God's at and what he's up to.

Can I encourage you, friends. Some of you need to start wrestling with God. You need to change the way you think. You need to stop thinking that being complacent and proper and dishonest about your raw feelings and perspectives is what God wants from you. No. God wants you to get down and dirty with him. He wants you to kick up dust as you struggle with him, his grace, his promises, and the way life and faith are not working out like you thought they would. Stop being polite with God. He's not asking you to go easy on him. Some of you are stuck not because you are wrestling with him, but because you're not.

But wrestling is hard. And that's why we don't do it. The ultimate victory in wrestling is pinning your opponent. I love seeing a wrestler refusing to get pinned. They're on their back; their opponent has got them just where he wants him. It's pretty much all over. All he'd have to do is ease up and let his shoulders be pinned to the mat. But he won't let it happen. He fights and fights and won't give his opponent the satisfaction of getting a pin. But that's hard, friends. That determination doesn't come easily. Wrestling is tiring; wrestling is humbling; it takes an enormous amount of energy.

Most of us don't wrestle with God because it's too hard. Rather than wrestling with God about our frustration and struggles, we try to escape them by losing ourselves in TV or surfing the internet. We'll just pretend everything is ok while closing our hearts and refusing to believe what God says is true. It takes work to wrestle with God.

One of the biggest mistakes we make about faith, friends, is thinking there is no effort required. Somewhere along the way we've come to believe that faith in God is supposed to be easy and effortless. Faith in God is supposed to be like our favorite comfort foods; we can just sit back in our spiritual lazy boys and watch life go by like we're watching TV. No. Faith in God is like wrestling. You have to trim the fat; you have to train every day; when you get on that mat there's nowhere to run. That's work. I think we've confused *effort* with *earning*. We can never earn God's grace and help. God always gives his mercy, his love, his favor as a gift. There's nothing we can do to earn anything from God. But there's work.

Another reason why we don't want to wrestle with God is because we have to linger over our confusion and disappointment longer than we'd like. Do you know what I mean? Why did my husband leave me, God? Why are others getting healthy, but I stay sick? Why can't I find anybody? Why won't you change my prodigal son? I love the way the psalmist says to God, "What's the point of following you when nothing good seems to happen?" God has answers to all of those questions; they're answers we may not want or like to hear, but he's got them. It's hard facing, it's difficult being honest with our own disappointments and confusions with God. It's easy to say a curse word and get on with our day; it's easier putting on a happy face acting like everything is just fine. But the

doubts, the hurts, the confusions that live in us are like cancer eating us from the inside out when we refuse to wrestle them out on the mat.

One of the things you'll notice when you read the laments in the Psalms and the wrestling they are doing with God is that it is hopeful. What I mean by hopeful is that even though they are expressing frustrations, honest confusion, and even anger to God, it's done out of a recognition that God is the sovereign of the universe; he is Almighty God and we are not. Another way of saying that is this wrestling is done out of pride like, "I've got the answers, God; why don't you get with the program?"

One of the things Korby and I try to implement in our parenting is the Obey first, ask second principle. We usually don't answer "why?" questions unless we see our boys obeying or humble. Kids ask, why, right? Why me? Why not my brother? Why do I need a curfew? Why can't I shoot fireworks in my room? But sometimes when children ask why they really don't want to know why, right? Why isn't really a question; it's an accusation; it's not "help me understand," it's "let me tell you how dumb that is." Do you get what I'm saying? I'm not trying to pick on kids; I was like that when I was that age and I'm still that way now with God. Here's what I'm getting at: your wrestling with God, your contending with him, will not produce the answers you want to hear if all you want to do is tell him how bad God is at running the universe. If you've already made up your mind about the way life is supposed to work, wrestling with God won't bear much fruit. But, if you wrestle with him asking him "why" and "how come" with a humble heart ready to receive his response as a gift, knowing he's got good reasons that you don't understand, then you will find blessing from God.

Here's what I'm wondering for you: have you been putting off contending with God? Are there some things you need to wrestle with him about, but you're avoiding it? Maybe you're tired of dealing with your disappointments and you're trying to escape. Or maybe you're lazy in your faith; you want to have a faith that's easy and comfortable; wrestling with God is hard and you've got TV to watch or computer games to play. I want to challenge you: look at this pic (PIC). This is a wrestling mat; if you go outside the circle you're out of bounds. Did you know that some wrestlers will leave the circle to escape from the match; to runaway? If they do that it's a point against them. Get in the ring with God, brothers and sisters. Don't go outside the circle. Stay in there. Wrestle with him. There are blessings for you. You may not get the answers to your prayers, but you will get something much better.

Key vs. Gen. 32:28

Questions for the week

- What's the most important thing you heard this morning?
- Is wrestling with God a good thing or not? Did your mind change at all after the sermon?
- Pastor Brian shared reasons why we might not wrestle with God; what might keep you from contending with the Lord?