

Genesis 32:22–30: ²²The same night [Jacob] arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. ²⁴And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. ²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” ²⁷And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” ²⁸Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” ²⁹Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.”

Wrestling with God

INTRODUCTION

Yesterday on ESPN’s College Gameday, the guest picker—the celebrity who helps the College Gameday team pick that day’s college football winners—was the professional wrestler, Ric Flair. Mr. Flair is a 16-time world champion wrestler—considered by some the greatest wrestler of all time. In his prime, Mr. Flair was 6 foot 1 inch and 240 pounds of pure muscle. How would you like to enter the ring with that guy?

Probably not! But how many of you feel like at times you’re wrestling with God?

When I was a teenager, I felt like I was wrestling with God just about every day! Going through puberty was hard enough, but as a small, skinny kid I had to endure daily bullying. The teachers knew about it, but they turned a blind eye. I lived in fear everyday. I wrestled with God all the time in prayer—“Why is this happening to me, God? What have I done to deserve this? Why don’t you make it go away? Why can’t my parents move to another town?”

Perhaps you wrestle with God because life is unfair, filled with trials and tribulations.

Perhaps you're a little bit angry with God because you don't seem to get the breaks other people get. Perhaps you wrestle with God because of family issues or health concerns.

Perhaps you wrestle with God because you have a guilty conscience. There's stuff you do that you know is wrong, but you keep on doing it—and God keeps on afflicting you with a bad conscience.

Perhaps you wrestle with God because your most ardent prayers seem to go unanswered.

Jacob was a man who did a lot of wrestling—and for all the same reasons you wrestle. He was a troubled man—and no wonder! His name means, Deceiver, and he certainly lived up to his name. He had deceived his brother, Esau and then his father, Isaac. He had stolen the birthright and the blessing of the firstborn from Esau and had to run for his life. He fled to the home country of his mother, Rebekah. There he met someone who was even more deceitful than himself—his uncle, Laban. If you remember, Laban had two daughters, Leah the older and Rachel the younger. When Jacob saw Rachel it was love at first sight. He wanted to marry Rachel, but Laban insisted that Jacob work for seven years to earn the right to marry his daughter. When the time came for the wedding, Laban switched Rachel with Leah. In the morning Jacob discovered he had been deceived—boy was he angry—kind of like Esau after Jacob had deceived him! Laban agreed to give Rachel to him in marriage, but Jacob had to agree to work another seven years for Laban. But after 20 years of working for his father-in-law, things between the two men weren't going well and Jacob had to flee again.

Our Old Testament reading finds Jacob on his way back to his homeland—back to Esau. And when he hears that Esau is coming with 400 men, Jacob is filled with fear. The night before he is to meet his brother, he goes off alone to pray—and he ends up wrestling with God—not figuratively, as we do—but quite literally: “And a man wrestled with [Jacob] until the breaking

of the day.” That “man,” as we see at the end of the text, was indeed the Lord. “So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel—Peniel literally means, ‘the face of God’—saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.’”

Have you ever tried to wrestle by yourself? I bet you’d look rather goofy if you did—kind of like when you walk through a spider web and do that crazy dance. But have you ever thought that Jacob wrestled with God because God was right there with him? You wrestle with God because He’s involved in your life—He’s right there with you. I’ve had bosses who sat in their offices all day, and I’ve had bosses who roll up their sleeves and get dirty with the rest of us. What kind of boss would you rather have? Your God is the kind of God who isn’t sitting in His penthouse suite up in heaven, watching you from afar. He’s right here in this world of sin with you.

God was right there with Jacob. That wrestling match let Jacob know there was nothing to fear from Esau—God was with Him. That wrestling match let Jacob know that his sins were forgiven, that God would help him, and that God hadn’t forgotten his promise to make Jacob the patriarch of a great nation—a nation that would be named after him, for no longer would he be called “the Deceiver,” but now his name would be Israel—“the one who has striven with God and with men and prevailed.” God’s grace was also evident in the fact that Jacob encountered God—and lived!

Ray Comfort has said regarding atheists who want to deny the existence of God: “Atheists don’t hate fairies, leprechauns, or unicorns because they don’t exist. It is impossible to hate something that doesn’t exist. Atheists hate God because He does exist.” How many of you talk about fairies, leprechauns, or unicorns as you go about your daily business? None of you, as I

would expect. But atheists talk about God all the time—because He exists.

The fact that you wrestle with God is a sign that God is real, that He is very much a part of your life and that He is right here with you. God knows what you're going through because God is one of you. In Christ Jesus, God became a human being. He knows the challenges of living in a sinful world. He knows what it's like to be sinned against, to be tempted, to lose people you love, to be abandoned. But He also knows your hopes, your dreams, your failures and your fears. In Christ Jesus, God has given Himself a new name—it's Immanuel—"God with us."

But there are very good reasons why God wrestles with you. This is a sinful, broken world and dying world. But sometimes even Christians act like this world is paradise and hang on to it for dear life. As He did with Jacob, sometimes God afflicts you with the unfairness of life so you know this world isn't home—heaven is home.

Have you ever heard the term, "stir the nest"? Did you know that mother eagles build their nest out of sharp sticks and rocks and bone, and then line the nest with feathers and grass and other soft stuff. The baby eagles are nice and snug in their soft nest—it's so soft they never want to leave. But when the time comes to fly, mother Eagle makes it uncomfortable for them to stay in the nest. She "stirs the nest"—she pulls out the soft stuff and exposes the sharp sticks, rocks and bones. The nest isn't a comfortable home anymore—and the young eagles are encouraged to fly into the skies where they belong. When life is unfair, God may be "stirring the nest," reminding you that this world isn't home, but that He has something much better for you. Something His Son has prepared for you—heaven.

When God afflicts your conscience that's a good thing because it means that God loves you and wants to save you from your sins and point you to your Savior. When your conscience is afflicted, it means the Holy Spirit is wrestling with you so that you acknowledge your sins in

repentance, and turn to Christ in faith.

And when it comes to prayer, Jesus was no stranger to wrestling with God. If you've ever read the account of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, there you see a very human Jesus wrestling with His heavenly Father like no other person ever. Jesus prayed and prayed and prayed. He said, "Take this cup from me." But God said, "No." God said "no" because that was the best thing for the world. It was the best thing for the world that Jesus drink the cup of God's wrath for our sins down to the very last drop on the cross. God said "No" to Jesus so He could say, "Yes" to all of your cries for mercy and grace and help in times of need.

So in prayer, there are times when you must wrestle with God. But you wrestle with God knowing that He is with you. You wrestle with God knowing that He loves you. You wrestle with God knowing that He has already blessed you with the greatest blessing of all—the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. And the One who has given you Jesus, promises for His sake to hear your prayers and answer those prayers according to His good and gracious will.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.