

Reeves: Wrestling with God

April 5, 2017

When we hear the word "wrestling," many of us might automatically think of the bright lights and the over-the-top antics of "professional" wrestling. Most would be amazed to consider, however, wrestling occurs right on the pages of the Bible. So, for those who think the Bible is "behind the times," I offer to you wrestling—Bible style.



Danny Reeves

The Bible's version of a wrestling match occurs in Genesis 32, but we need to look back at the history of Jacob to understand it better.

Jacob was born to Isaac and Rebekah, and his original name meant "he who grabs the heel or trickster." The name fit, because Jacob was cunning. He tricked his brother out of birthright, and even more, he went on, with his mother's help, to coolly calculate how to steal the family blessing.

The plan worked, but the blessing came at a heavy price as Esau, his brother, was ready to murder him. The family is, thus, torn apart, and Jacob is forced to go into exile. Twenty years of exile.

During this time, the tension between Esau and Jacob goes completely unresolved, but a meeting between the two is inevitable. The night before

this contentious reunion is the context of Genesis 32. You see, Jacob has been involved in a lifetime struggle against seemingly everyone, and it culminates in this “strange” wrestling match with God.

But wrestling with God isn’t all that strange, is it? I mean, everyone knows what that’s like, right?

Have you ever felt God’s leadership and you rejected it? You’ve wrestled with God.

Have you ever stared temptation in the face and grappled whether to say yes or no? You’ve wrestled with God.

Have you ever tried to live life without God, but circumstances brought you to your knees, and you realized you couldn’t make it alone. You’ve wrestled with God.

All of us in the struggle of life have found ourselves in the ring, and our opponent, we feel, is God.

So, what should we, Baptists, learn from Jacob’s and God’s wrestling match? Consider three main phrases in the story:

“Jacob was left alone”

There is so much value for us seeing these words, because it has been said, “To be left alone with God is the only true way of arriving at a just knowledge of ourselves and our ways.”

We never can get a true estimate of ourselves until we are alone with God. No matter what we think of ourselves and no matter what others think of us, the real question is, “What does God think of us?” The answer to that question can only be determined when we are left alone—away from the world, away from support, away from distractions, away from thoughts—alone with God.

“And there wrestled a man with him”

Notice it does not say Jacob wrestled with a man, but a man wrestled with him. Jacob wasn't wrestling with God to receive a blessing, but God was wrestling with him to gain something. What did God desire to gain? God wanted to reduce Jacob to nothing; to cause him to see what a poor, helpless creature he was; to teach him that true strength lies in our recognized weakness. God simply touches Jacob's hip, and it instantly was dislocated.

When we are touched by God, we recognize how truly helpless we are.

“I will not let you go until you bless me ...”

It's amazing. Jacob could no longer wrestle. All he could do was cling. God had brought him to a point where Jacob was just hanging on for dear life. That's a good position for everyone to be with God.

Great lessons. But I can't help but ask—the sports fan in me wants to know: Who won the fight?

It's hard to say, right? It seems as if both won. Frederick Buechner called this episode the “Magnificent Defeat.” What he meant was paradoxical, “Yes, Jacob lost, but, yes, Jacob won.”

This can be explained by examining the post-fight results. The outcome was that Jacob was changed. He had a new name, Israel. It means, “he who strives with God.” His new name signified a change in character. He had gone from being the “trickster” to being the “one who strives after God.”

Jacob lost the fight, but without a doubt, he won a brand-new start.

In addition, he had a new limp. Jacob had been wounded in his wrestling with God. It's interesting to note that this meeting with God didn't offer warm, fuzzy feelings or healing. It resulted in a crippling. It makes

sense—to be one who strives after God is to be one who is weak and crippled in themselves. Yes, Jacob lost the fight, but he won an understanding of who he was.

So, we see the ultimate winner was God, because he restored a life, and he resumed his purpose in the life of Jacob.

I have some questions for you:

- Does God need to wrestle with you today?
- Are there issues in your life that need to be wrestled from the grip of your heart?
- Do you understand you need a new name and a new character and even a significant limp to be useful in God's hands?

Today, I know you wrestle with God, and so do I. The key is to realize accepting defeat ultimately is accepting victory. Clinging to God truly is the Magnificent Defeat.

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