

Voices: Don't be afraid to struggle

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The story of Israel, God's chosen people, is and always has been a story of struggle. Struggle is even in the name; Israel means "he strives with God." The name was given to Jacob on the night he wrestled with God, and it was passed down to the nation he fathered.

Israel the people never outgrew this inclination of Israel the man, this pathological need to grapple with God in every aspect of their lives. In their morals, in their emotions, in their decisions, in their lifestyles, in all corners of their daily existence, they felt the hand of God reaching down to guide and batted it away.

Maybe they needed to figure things out a little bit. Maybe they needed to stumble. Maybe they needed to scuff their knees a few times. Whatever the case, they never made walking with God easy on themselves. It always was a struggle.

We all struggle

Of course, Israel is not unique in this attribute. I haven't known anyone who is a stranger to struggle of some kind. Some people are better acquainted with it than others, and some work hard to disassociate themselves from it or convince their friends they've never met it, but all have found themselves tangled up in a heap on the wrestling mat with struggle.

All of us have reached the end of a day with aching muscles and ragged breath, blinking furiously through the sweat dripping down into our eyes to

see what prize awaits us having completed our match.

Sometimes there is a prize. Sometimes there is only another mat and another opponent, the same struggle in a different leotard itching for another crack at us. And sometimes, we cannot seem to pull ourselves up off the first mat or break free from the chokehold our adversary has on us.

The results of these struggles, whether we win or lose, may not be as important as we think. Naturally, our desire is to win, though we may not win or even be able to win every time. There are fearsome opponents in our path, seasoned veterans with countless belts buckled around their waists or hanging over their shoulders, a sorrowful swath of vanquished men and women stretching behind them.

Sin, addiction, depression, doubt, rage, fear, anxiety, stress, disconnection, toxic behaviors. All have mastered techniques through centuries of experience through to incapacitate even the best wrestlers before they even know they're on the ground.

Biblical heroes struggled

There is no shame in getting pinned or losing a round to such a foe. Whatever the outcome, there is nobility in the struggle. Such struggle is a big part of what separates the heroes of the Bible from the rest: Who struggled, and who struggled well?

The great men of faith were not without blemish, nor were they moral exemplars all the time in anything other than their faith in God. Even there, they often fell short. Sometimes they ran from the struggle. But when they stopped, stood their ground and met that struggle head-on, miraculous things happened through the hand of God. They wrestled with their own sin, their own doubts, their own uncertainties and their own flaws and failings.

They were not always victorious in their wrestling. None of us will sport a perfect record in our lives, because defeat is just as much a part of life as struggle. The key to a joyful, faithful life is not found in avoiding struggles but in redeeming them.

One day God will bring final victory over them, but until then, they are as much tools for building us up into Christlikeness as are blessings and good times.

What struggle does for us

Struggling does not make one a worse or lesser Christian. Struggle is another way God draws us near to himself and molds us into his Son's image. It's a serpent transformed back into a staff to help us walk, venom engineered into an anti-venom, water deep enough to drown used to quench our thirst.

Christians are supposed to struggle. It shows we have not given into the darkness all around us, now will we let the waves pull our heads under the water. We fear revealing our struggling would be weakness, but in truth struggling is strength.

When I struggle with depression, it means I am not submitting meekly to the warped reality my mind would present me. When I struggle with anger, it means I am not allowing my emotions to master me. When I struggle with my faith, it means I am not falling asleep at the wheel and letting myself drift aimlessly or simply careening off a cliff. When I struggle with my fears and insecurities, I am letting go of the lies I and the world have told me about myself and reaching for the truth God offers me. When I struggle with sin, it means I am not letting it stuff me into my grave and heap dirt on me.

So, struggle. Struggle loudly, struggle undignified, struggle messily,

struggle ugly. Just don't struggle alone, and don't give in. No matter how many rounds or matches you lose or how badly you lose, keep struggling. Victory is coming, and God will make sure your struggling is not in vain. He will redeem.

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