

## Wrestling With God

A frail old woman, one leg battered and bruised, dragged behind her as she hobbled up to the front of the church. A few rubles was a fortune to her, but a precious gift for the Saviour to use. There are many less fortunate than her, and the heart of Christ beat strongly in her tiny body. Oh that his blood would flow as purely through my veins. That is my desire, but the flesh is weak.

Sheer will power cannot change a numbed heart. We have so much here in North America. Why can't we sacrifice it, why can't I sacrifice to the tune of this woman, who has far out-given me.?

We jest about the naive believer who prays for patience, because we know He will stretch our patience. I myself have joked many times, "O.K. Lord, I have learned patience, you can stop now." And with a chuckle we all continue on way. But, is not faith more than a cynical, passing conversation about spiritual things. Do we long for a deep, abiding sense of God's presence? We satisfy our flesh with many good things, but our souls are deeply crying out with words too deep to be uttered. "Tongues" cannot satisfy this hungering and thirsting. A supernatural sound and light show doesn't make it. "Worshipful" music leaves us after a moment. But, what moves me to make the sacrifice worthy of Christ.

Jacob was such a man. He desired God's blessing. He desired it so much he found himself wrestling with the King of Kings and Lord of Lord. Imagine that! The insolence of a mere human who has the audacity to grapple with God. He should have been cowering in abject humility before Him. We might even say groveling, after his 14 some odd years of rebellion. But, wrestle he did. And wrestle he continued until he got what he wanted. A blessing.

What was this blessing? It was greatly sought after and greatly valued. To be sure it had somewhat to do with God's presence. In his prayer just prior to this he pleaded, "O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, O LORD ... I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant ... But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'" An honesty that was to be affirmed

in his wrestling. Did he really believe God's promise? He believed it enough to wrestle with God?

You may say, how can a mere mortal wrestle with God? Answer: Only when God enters the ring and says, "Come on". O what tenacity - "I will not let you go unless you bless me." Insolence? Me think not. The divine pre-incarnate Christ himself gave Jacob a name of faith - Israel "...because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." God commends him!

But, when one wrestles with God, one must pull out all the stops, go for broke. Everything must be on the line! You see, wrestling, though greatly commended by God, comes only with a sacrifice. How great a sacrifice am I willing to pay. For Jacob, he came away with a holy limp. It could have been far worse. But, it was a direct result of his struggle.

We North American Christians do not struggle with God enough. We are immensely comfortable, even the worst of us. Our luxury is sinful when compared to the vast majority of the world and we feel so self-righteous if we give as much as a tenth of income to the Lord or charity. What a farce. That includes me.

There came a point in my life when I prayed an unusual prayer. "Lord do what ever it takes to break me and bring me closer to you. I want to experience your presence, I want my life to be simply a vessel for Christ to fill to overflowing. Well, there was a time I would have said you shouldn't pray a prayer like that and everyone would give a knowing chuckle (those of us that have been Christians for a while). My ministry was going somewhat well—comfortable to say the least.

I really wanted to grow deeper in my walk with the Lord. I read books on the spiritual life, went to conferences. Scheduled my time to get up earlier in the mornings to spend "quality time" with the Lord. All the clichés were in my vocabulary. In fact, I even preached on such things to help others, making the customary rhetorical admissions of my own "humble" shortcomings. You know what I mean, "I feel so *terrible* that my devotional life has been limited to only a half-hour in the mornings, and hasn't increased to 45 minutes." The whole while enjoying the admiration of having at least accomplished 30 minutes. These kinds of illustrations are usually given after one or two days of renewed personal fervor.

But, dissatisfaction kept growing. My heart yearned for something deeper. The occasional mountain top experiences were fairly predictable.

“O God, please do something!” was my cry. Nothing I was doing was “working”. How exactly does one “let go and let Jesus”? My stubborn and mysterious will refused to give way. That’s what I thought it was—my will. It seemed more like the wet cement of my early Christian life was just about set, never to be remolded. Renewal after a while cannot even change solid concrete!

Spiritual sledge hammers do wonders—when the Lord brings a catastrophe, disaster, the unthinkable, the absolutely undesirable into your life. But, what happens if the results are more than a spiritual “limp”. What happens if it is a complete washout, broken to dust and scattered. No semblance of what was there before. Do I desire God that much?

YES. I prayed the prayer. “Whatever you deem necessary to soften this old stale heart of mine, O Lord!” Do you realize what you are asking? “Yes, I not only give you permission, Lord (as ridiculous as that statement may sound), but I ask you to go beyond that. Take the hammer, if that is what would please you. And if it gives great glory, then destroy me.”

My ministry began to fall apart, the very people I was making great sacrifice for turned on me. Friends deserted me. Betrayal, denial—these must be the hardest thing for a person to take. I was told my ministry was not appreciated or wanted. The pain was severe, at times I felt I was being “blind sided”, wondering who next would add to the foray. “What in the world is happening?” The deep disconcertment was sprinkled with the haunting thought “Could this be the Lord?” It seemed more the work of a devil. Accusing, challenging.

From an objective vantage, I certainly brought some of this on myself. Secretly, I harbored a deep affection for being well thought of. I mused in my mind that I was capable of being a great preacher, someone who had great success in influencing people for Christ. I longed to hear people say, “That was a fantastic message, can I get a copy of the tape?”

Yet, the attack on my soul seemed to far outweigh my sin. I didn’t deserve so harsh a treatment. The whole while I could faintly hear, “My child, did you not pray ...” “But, Lord, I never imagined you would strike so deeply in my heart.” He returned: “I see that you truly love me. I need to bring that out, and in order to do that I must rip out that which has supplanted me in your desires.”

Bitterness began to grip my heart like vice-grips. Fingers of steel wrapping around, squeezing. I can see it clearly, I know what is

happening. God has brought this about so that I will see my sin for what it is and let go. But, I can’t let go! Oh, God, don’t abandon me. I can’t let go of my blackened heart. Can’t you see, I am trying.” The pride of my heart has so intertwined who I am, like cancerous tentacles woven through a spinal cord.

One day, the conflict came to a head. I told my wife I was going to a park to wrestle with God. That was my last resort, my only option left. “This is unfair,” I said, to myself. I didn’t know when I would return, “Don’t hold dinner for me.”

“It isn’t fair,” I repeated to God. I fully expected He would see my “honesty”. But, he didn’t, because it still wasn’t there. This honesty wasn’t deep enough. God wasn’t satisfied. “What do you expect from me, God—Lord? I have done everything I can. I simply cannot live the sacrificial life.” Anger would have been a mild term. Alternating groaning and crying, my anger, then my sense of hopelessness—all seemed loss. I pleaded, “I can’t remove the bitterness in my heart at those who have taken away the very thing I wanted—my pride. And Lord, if you don’t do something about it, then I am doomed! I leave it with you.”

But, the Lord did nothing! I had wrestled, but the bitterness remained! There were no more tears. I left, returned home dejected. Failure in wrestling with God! Over the next few days depression was not just at my doorstep—it had taken over my soul. Numbness seemed to be the only relief from the bitterness. It was like I was dead. My pride was gone, ripped from me. How could I live the rest of my life with a gaping wound like that.

As the days passed, I began to notice a change in my response to people. New accusations arose, but they didn’t hurt. I thought it was numbness in my soul. But, in reality there was nothing left to hurt. The deadness of my soul shocked even me. Slowly, in reckless abandon, I found myself casting simply on the Lord’s mercy, daring to believe once again that he is the Father of all compassion and comfort, and that He still cared deeply for me. II Cor 1:9 says “But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raises the dead.”

My only hope was that He, the one who saved me, was not going to discard me like a used paper plate. Dare I believe he could still use me? Dare I enough? Yes, I **had** dared! I had wrestled with God, I now claimed the blessing! God does love me and his promised of Eph 1:3 still

holds true “[He] has blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.” It is indeed true. But, I would not have seen it had I not dared wrestle with the Lord. Flash of lightening? No. An existentially enlightening moment? No. A sign or a wonder? No. Rather, a slow letting go of the thing *I thought* I desired most and grabbing hold of that which I *truly* desired the most—the Lord. This was confession in a way I had never known before. Slowly my mind began to focus not on my detractors, but on the sinful outworking of my prideful heart. My sins against my brothers and sisters was ever before me. The foot of the cross came to be a comfortable place again!

The years have come and gone. I can now thank my Father for that bittersweet experience. He was so kind to me in allowing me to grapple with Him. And I can now say I truly have a compassion for my detractors of those times—and pray the Lord will help them recover from the experience as well. The bitterness? It faded away, as I held my Father’s hand. The anger and the hurt? Past tense now. The pride? Well ... “Lord do what every it takes to break me and bring me closer to you...”

Chuck Gianotti, 10/05/02