

“BELIEVING IS WRESTLING”

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Genesis 32:24-29

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My big brother and I were born with a contrast in physical endurance. He was born sporty and had better physical strength than me. Sport for him is something natural, but not for me. However, since we both were born to a father who was a sports teacher then whether we liked it or not, physical activities were undeniable when we were kids. So, while I wasn't born sporty yet I was “broken” (shaped) to become one.

Then, I started to like this particular sport: running. According to my dad, running is an effective way to keep us healthy and kick away depression. I thought my dad was crazy when he said that, but then I read a book by Nita Sweeney, a #1 best-seller in bipolar disorder. Sweeney says, “Depression hates a moving target.” She figured that running with her dog brought her back from the brink.

I didn't really understand what my dad said and what Sweeney said at that time, but as I got older and started to realize that life is complex and can be stressful, I began to understand what he said. But then, I started to use running as an act of escaping. I figured that running is not only keeping me healthy and kicking away depression but running is also effective to kick away problems. In other words, if I didn't want to face problems, just run! There were times in my life when I ran physically in order to kick away my anxiety as well as to escape from the source of my anxiety.

I still remember the day when I failed grade 5. I ran from school to my house wet. Wet due to sweat and also due to crying. I couldn't bear the shame that I could not go to grade 6. Long story short, my parents made the decision for me to move to another school where my mom was there teaching me and my friends (yes, I believe you can imagine how awkward that must be). I learned one thing: running away from problems was a sweet escape since I didn't have to face reality. Nobody knew who I was in the new school where my mom was also my teacher. I could start from zero.

Just like my story when I was in grade 5, perhaps some of you have also experienced “the benefits” of running away from problems and/or difficulties. But today I want to share with you that we will never grow wiser and turn out to be better people until we learn the art of running to God and stop the habit of running away from God.

Learn the art of running to God now before it is too late or too difficult for you to learn. And as we learn the art of running to God be ready: He will welcome you with a wrestling match. And He doesn't mind twisting your hip in that wrestling match. There are times when believing means wrestling.

Please go with me to the strangest wrestling match in history. It is not Man vs. Lion or Man vs. Gorilla; it is Man vs. God.

Do you remember the story of Jacob and Esau? If you do, you will remember that Esau was favored by his dad, and Jacob was favored by his mother. When their father, Isaac, was on his deathbed, he asked Esau to kill some wild animals for him with the promise that he would then bless his oldest son. While Esau was out hunting, Isaac's wife Rebekah helped their younger son Jacob comes up with a scheme to trick Isaac into blessing him instead.

When Esau returned, Jacob had already received the blessing — which guaranteed him a double portion of the inheritance. Esau was furious and vowed to kill him. What did Jacob do? He ran. He ran from his problems and thought that he could escape the consequences of what he did to his brother Esau.

Now after years of living apart, Jacob decided to return to his home and hoped to make peace with his brother. One night on the journey, he sent everyone ahead of him while he stayed behind.

Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he could not defeat him, he struck Jacob's hip socket as they wrestled and dislocated his hip. Then he said to Jacob, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

"What is your name?" the man asked.

"Jacob," he replied.

"Your name will no longer be Jacob," he said. "It will be Israel because you have struggled with God and with men and have prevailed."

Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name."

But he answered, "Why do you ask my name?" And he blessed him there. (*Genesis 32:24-29*)

In Genesis 32, Jacob is on his way back home to Canaan with his small tribe of wives and children after a twenty-year sojourn in Paddan-Aram. And he is scared to death, because his estranged brother, Esau, is coming to meet him — with four hundred men (*Genesis 32:6*). This is no welcome party; it's an army.

So, after splitting up his household into two camps to try and avoid complete annihilation, Jacob, understandably suffering insomnia, intends to spend the night alone — no doubt in desperate prayer.

But a strange man who shows up and wrestles Jacob till daybreak rudely interrupts his plans. At some point during this weird contest, Jacob realizes that he is wrestling God. And when God decides it's time to end the match, He dislocates Jacob's hip and demands to be released. And Jacob, in significant pain, replies, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (*Genesis 32:26*).

This response clearly pleases God, who pronounces this blessing on Jacob: "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob [deceiver], but Israel [strives with God], for you have struggled/wrestled with God and with men, and have prevailed" (*Genesis 32:28*).

Jacob then limps toward his tense reunion with Esau with a weakened body and a strengthened faith. Having wrestled with God, he knows his prayers regarding Esau will be answered.

Take note of what God did when he wrestled Jacob. Jacob began the night dreading Esau's arrival. He was full of fear and desperation. But he ended the night of struggle with God's blessing and a renewed faith. Friends, all of our struggles with God in faith always lead to peace.

And isn't it interesting that God did not simply speak to Jacob in a dream or vision as he had at other times (*Genesis 31:13*) and restate his promise and speak comforting words? This time God addressed Jacob's fear by requiring him to wrestle all night.

This probably felt to Jacob like a badly timed hassle when he just wanted comfort and assurance. But later he realized just how comforting it was. Sometimes when we want God's comfort, he sends it in unexpected and even unwanted packages.

God even afflicted Jacob with a debilitating injury. This had the effect of making Jacob even more vulnerable to Esau, forcing Jacob's faith to more fully rest on God and not himself. If necessary, God will cause us to limp to increase our faith.

Lastly, wrestling with God changed Jacob's identity. He was no longer to be known as one who received his blessing by deception. This time he received God's blessing by prevailing with God by faith. This struggle turned out to be a profoundly gracious gift of restoration that God gave to Jacob. Jacob's tenacious faith pleased God and he rewarded Jacob's request (*Hebrews 11:6*). Jon Bloom says, "When God calls us to wrestle with him, there's always more going on than we first understand and God always uses it to transform us for good."

When God makes us wrestle him for some blessings, it is not because God is reluctant to bless us, even if that's how it first feels. It is because he has more blessings for us in wrestling than without it.

Remember, God pursued Jacob for this match. God was the initiator. Jacob was boiling in his own anxiety over Esau and his approaching slaughter squad when God showed up. And the wrestling drew Jacob out of his fearful preoccupation and forced him to focus on God.

I doubt that Jacob wanted this forced focus or even believed he needed it at first. And it wouldn't surprise me if at the beginning Jacob had prayed, "God would you get rid of this guy? This is the last thing I need right now." But what he discovered was that wrestling was a means of God's grace, a channel for God's blessing on him.

So, as I close this sermon let me ask: What do you really need from God right now? What blessing do you want from him? How badly do you want it?

God will meet you in your anguish, anxiety, fear, and uncertainty. But he may not meet you in the way you expect or desire. Your greatest ally may show up looking at first like your adversary, inciting you to wrestle with him.

If so, remember Jacob. There are multiple blessings in wrestling. You may not need soft words of comfort, you may not need to be left alone with your thoughts, you may not need sleep, and you may not even need a healthy hip! What you need is God's blessing as you're wrestling with Him! Because believing sometimes means wrestling.

So next time when God calls you to wrestle with Him in prayer, it is an invitation to receive His blessing. Stay with Him and don't run away from Him. Do not let Him go until He blesses you!