

“Jacob Wrestles with God”
(Genesis 32:24-32)

Sometimes we need to wrestle to get what we want. Sometimes we need to put a lot of effort into it. If you want to achieve anything in life that’s worthwhile, it requires effort. Our president didn’t become president by sitting on his chair or by simply wishing that he was president. He had to do a lot of hard work to get there. Beethoven and Mozart didn’t become great composers by half-heartedly plunking on the keys of their pianos. They put their whole heart and soul into it. George Whitefield didn’t become the greatest evangelist who ever lived by sitting around and waiting for some kind of zap from heaven. He prayed and fasted and studied and labored in his preaching to see souls come to Christ. Nothing worthwhile in life will come to us without any effort. We don’t often think about it, but even our salvation required a great deal of effort on Jesus’ part, even as it does on our part. Working, struggling, laboring and wrestling are all a part of the Christian life. The road that leads to life is not an easy one to walk. It requires a battle with our number one enemy – ourselves, with our sinful desires. It’s not an easy road, but it’s the only one that we want to walk, because we know that the end of the road is worth whatever we have to pay.

Our passage this evening deals with the subject of wrestling – wrestling with God in prayer. We saw last week how the Lord protected Jacob as he was on his way back to the Promised Land. He sent His angels to guard him. He gave him the wisdom to send messengers ahead to see what Esau’s disposition was like. He gave him the wisdom to send a present ahead of him to appease Esau’s anger. But the greatest protection He gave Jacob was to send him the Spirit of supplication, so that he would pray, pleading the promises of God. This evening, we will see that the Lord graciously granted Jacob His Spirit again to wrestle with Him in prayer and to prevail with Him, so that He would be protected from Esau and so that the Lord could bring the Messiah through his loins. Through this we should also learn that the Lord will give us the strength to wrestle with Him in prayer and to prevail with Him, when it is His will to bless us. I want us to consider five things this evening: 1) The earnestness of Jacob’s prayer, 2) the duration of his prayer, 3) the cost of his prayer, 4) the results of his prayer, and 5) the memorial of his prayer.

Let’s consider first the earnestness of Jacob’s prayer. We read that after Jacob had prepared his gift for Esau and sent them ahead of himself and his family, he then arose that same night and took his wives and maids and his eleven children and sent them across the ford of the Jabbok. He then sent ahead what was left, and he was left alone. Then we read one of the strangest accounts in all the Scripture. Moses writes, “And a man wrestled with him” (v. 24). We don’t read anything about who this man is or where he came from, but only that he was there and that he was wrestling with Jacob. As we read down further, we find that this man is no other than God Himself, which is why Jacob names that place Peniel, which means “the face of God” (v. 30). Most likely, this man was the Son of God before He had become a man, who had taken this appearance to come to Jacob. Jacob must have believed that more prayer was necessary before he faced Esau. We know when we haven’t prayed enough and when we are about to go into a battle without the Lord’s presence. At times like this, we need more prayer. As Jacob was praying, this messenger of God was sent to him. The strange thing here is that in this case – unlike the many others where the angel of the Lord or other appearances of Christ are met with a great deal of

reverence – Jacob took hold of Him and began to wrestle. We have to assume that Jacob knew that this was at least a man sent from God, if not an angel, because he kept asking Him to bless him. Apparently, the man didn't bless him right away, which is why Jacob grabbed onto Him and wouldn't let go. But the point is: he wrestled with God for a blessing, the blessing of His protection, the blessing of His presence in His life, the blessing of the fulfillment of His promise.

As I said earlier, the Christian life is often represented as a struggle, as a fight, as a race, even as a boxing match, all of which show us that being a Christian requires a great deal of effort on our part. Paul says that our struggle is often against the spiritual forces of the enemy. He writes in Ephesians 6:11-12, "Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual *forces* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*." He writes in 1 Corinthians 9, that it is often against our flesh, or our sinful desires, "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but *only* one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then *do it* to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified." (vv. 24-27). The path to heaven is sometimes represented as a race, one that needs to be run with the greatest patience and endurance. The author to the Hebrews writes, "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1). And the same is true of prayer, where we are shown both by way of precept and example that it too can require a great deal of effort. Paul wrote to the Colossians, "Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with *an attitude of thanksgiving*" (4:2). And he commended Epaphras to them, because he was "always laboring earnestly for [them] in his prayers, that [they] may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God" (v. 12). If we are to overcome the enemy, if we are to gain victory over our flesh, if we are to progress in our way to heaven, and if we expect to be heard in heaven, we need to wrestle and strive with God in prayer, and we must not give up until we obtain what we are after. Jacob wrestled with the angel, and he refused to let go of Him until He blessed him.

This shows us something of the earnestness of Jacob's prayer and the kind of earnestness we need to have if we are to receive God's blessing. Second, let's look briefly at the duration of his prayer. We read, "Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak" (v. 24). It was night when he began, and at sunrise, he was still wrestling. And it's not because the angel wouldn't let go of Jacob; Jacob wouldn't let go of the angel. The angel even dislocated Jacob's thigh from his hip to make him let go, but he still wouldn't. Then the angel said in verse 26, "'Let me go, for the dawn is breaking.' But he said, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.'" I'm afraid that we have lost so much confidence in prayer today that if we ask for anything at all, we usually ask only once or twice, and if there isn't an answer right away, we give up. This shows that we really don't trust that the Lord is going to hear us or answer us. But is this the way it should be? No. In Luke 18, Jesus told His disciples the parable of the Unrighteous Judge, who finally gave justice to the widow because she persisted until he did, to teach them that "at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart" (v. 1). Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "With all prayer and petition, pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints" (6:18). Jacob prayed the whole

night and wrestled with God in his prayers until he received the blessing he was after. Our Lord tells us that this is the same kind of perseverance we must have in our prayers if we are to be heard and receive what we ask.

Jacob was earnest in his prayers, and he continued to pray until he received the Lord's blessing. But we mustn't forget that there was a cost to his prayer. While he was wrestling with the angel, the angel reached out his hand and touched the socket of his thigh and dislocated it. Now it's not really clear why He did this or what this meant. One has suggested that He dislocated Jacob's thigh to show him how the Messiah was to come into the world – He was to come forth from Jacob's loins, through the act of procreation. I suppose that's possible. But it could also be to show us that there is a cost to prayer. Whenever we pray for something spiritually worthwhile and obtain it, we need to realize at the same time there is going to be a cost – some trial or tribulation: our flesh may rear up within us; the world may launch an attack against us; or the enemy may come in and tempt us with a great temptation. Generally, the Lord allows things like this to happen to keep us humble, to keep us from exalting ourselves. After the Lord gave Paul that great revelation of heaven that was so wonderful that he couldn't even find the words to express it, the Lord afflicted him with a thorn in his flesh, a messenger of Satan, to keep him from exalting himself (2 Cor. 12:7). When Paul asked the Lord several times to remove it, He answered, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." And what was Paul's response to this? He said, "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (vv. 9-10). There is a cost to prayer. Jacob received what he was after, but he was also afflicted for it. When we pray for great things and receive them, we need to remember that we must also be willing to pay the price.

Prayer is spiritual wrestling. It requires earnestness. It also requires that we continue in it until we receive what we are after. And there is a cost involved. Fourthly, let's consider the results of Jacob's prayer: the blessing itself. The angel blessed Jacob. He said, "What is your name?" And he said, 'Jacob.' And he said, 'Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and men and have prevailed'" (vv. 27-28). The name Jacob means "heal catcher" or "one who supplants," not exactly the most flattering name. But the name "Israel" is quite a bit different. It means either "God strives," or "he who strives with God," or "a prince or one who has power with God." Jacob wrestled with God in prayer and prevailed. He received the blessing he wanted from God. He became a prince with God. He would not only receive the promised blessings of the covenant of Abraham, that for which he strived his whole life, but he would also be a key figure in that covenant. The whole nation would be called by his name. I believe that it's also implied in what the angel says here that since he had prevailed over God, he had and would continue to prevail over man. In other words, the safety he sought from his brother Esau was now his. God would continue to watch over him until His promise was fulfilled. The Lord has also made us many wonderful promises in Scripture to bless us in many ways. And all of these promises flow to us from this same covenant and from this same promise, because it was through Jesus Christ that all the promises of God have become yes and amen (2 Cor. 1:20). But we will not receive what He has promised unless we are willing to strive with Him earnestly in prayer, unless we persevere in it until He answers, and unless we are willing to pay the price.

We've seen the earnestness of Jacob's prayer, the duration of his prayer, the cost of his prayer and the results of his prayer. Finally, let's consider for a moment the memorial of his prayer. The answer to this prayer was something that he didn't want to forget, nor

that God wanted him to forget. After the angel blessed him, Jacob asked Him His name. But He didn't tell him, probably because it was too difficult for Jacob to understand. Each name God uses to identify Himself shows us something of how great He is, but it doesn't comprehend His greatness. That's why God has several names. We couldn't comprehend His greatness in only one. But when Jacob heard this, he realized who it was he had been wrestling with – not merely an angel or a man of God, but God Himself. When Jacob understood this, he named that place Peniel – its also being called Penuel – which means “the face of God,” for he said, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved” (v. 30). The Lord told Moses that no one could see His face and live (Ex. 33:20). But yet Jacob did, as well as others in the Bible. This is probably because Jacob did not see God in His essence. His glory was veiled in this human form. It was also because of God's mercy to Jacob and the fact that He was soon to show mercy, not only to Jacob, but to all His chosen race. In just a short while, this same Being would veil Himself in human flesh and walk among His own people, and yet none of them would be killed, because of His mercy and grace. Jacob saw God face to face in the face of His Son, but his life was preserved because of God's covenant mercy. And so he named that place Peniel. But there was another memorial of this encounter with God besides the change of the name – there was also his limp. The Jews remembered this event by not eating the sinew of the hip which is on the socket of the thigh, because it was there that God touched him, and because they didn't want to forget God's covenant mercy to their forefather, and through him to them. This teaches us that we also shouldn't forget God's covenant mercies to us in Christ, but remember the gracious works of the Lord, both in saving us, and in mercifully answering our prayers.

But there is one more thing we should encourage ourselves with in this passage. I don't know if this question occurred to you when you read this, but it should have, and that is, “If the man Jacob wrestled with was God, how was he able to hold out as long as he did?” The answer is not that the Lord was so weak that He couldn't easily overcome him, but that the Lord strengthened Jacob and wanted him to prevail, so that He could bless him with His covenant promises. God wanted to give Him the blessing. He wanted Jacob to be kept safe from Esau, so that Messiah could come through his loins. And so the Lord gave him the strength to persevere. How will we ever find the strength to wrestle with God and prevail? It will only come through the same way. If the Lord wants to accomplish His work through us, He will send the Spirit of His Son into our hearts to give us the strength to wrestle with Him in prayer, until we obtain His promises through Jesus Christ. This should be an encouragement to us that when the Lord lays it on our hearts to pray, and when we pray according to His will, we will receive what He has promised, because it is God who strengthens us. May the Lord encourage us through this passage to know His will more and to seek to be filled with His Spirit more, so that He might use us to accomplish His will through prayer. Amen.