

“Wrestling With Dad”
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Scriptures: Genesis 32:3–8, 22–30; Psalm 121; II Timothy 3:14–4:5; Luke 18:1–8

Ten days from today, I will be turning 37. I think by all metrics I will officially be exiting my mid-thirties and entering into my late thirties. And no, I am not going to complain about getting older today, but I do want to reflect on something that I find myself experiencing less. I remember with increasing fondness, especially as a child, those moments where whatever I was doing was so engaging and fun, that I did not realize how tired I actually was until I stopped. Maybe you can relate to what I am talking about: going waterskiing, jumping on the trampoline for an hour, running around a soccer field chasing a ball, so engaged in the moment that your body wears out without you even realizing it. These days, I am *very* aware of when I get tired. I could be enjoying what I am doing immensely, but I am very rarely having enough fun to not realize how tired I am. And so when those moments do happen, they are a gift.

For me, growing up, wrestling with my dad was one of those activities where I wouldn't realize just how tired I was until I stopped. Wrestling, especially with someone who wrestled in highschool and knew what he was doing like my dad, is a whole body exercise. And so when there was a break in the action or one of us had determined we had had enough, the next activity was to lay down on the floor and do nothing for a few minutes.

There is some research that suggests that age-appropriate wrestling/roughhousing between parents and children can have great benefits in terms of emotional regulation, delayed gratification, and impulse control. One of the writers that has focused a lot of attention on this is a fellow Christian, a professor named Anthony Bradley, and I heard him say in an interview that in his years and years of working with college age men, without fail, the mature, well-adjusted guys always say that they wrestled with their dads growing up.¹

We've got a wrestling story today from the book of Genesis, perhaps the most widely renowned cage match in the course of human history. Ali vs. Frazier has nothing on Jacob wrestling God in the desert.

What comes to mind when you think about wrestling with God, aside from this story? When we are wrestling, is that a description of someone who is having an easy time? Is it a picture of someone who is thriving?

In a post-Enlightenment culture, which often values certainty over truth, wrestling can be a bad word. To wrestle with God must mean that we are doubting, or that we are far from God. We wrestle with adversaries, not with our beloved parents. To wrestle is to be weak, or so we might assume.

¹ See

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/raising-boys-masculinity-jordan-peterson-and-why/id1018952191?i=1000658427182>
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/singletons/202304/benefits-of-roughhousing-with-your-children>

But in the spirit of those benefits children receive when they wrestle with Dad, what if the first thing we need to learn about wrestling with God is that it is not a bad thing?

It is not quite as frequent of a discussion these days, but the presence of the deconstruction conversation is still felt. One of the things that made me the most sad about the discourse around the deconstruction of people's faith was that those genuinely struggling with big questions were lumped in together with those who had simply decided to walk away from faith. And I fear, when genuine wrestling with God is treated with fear and suspicion, it may cause us to give up the struggle.

But God honors the struggle. We don't typically struggle with things we do not care about. We don't keep wrestling if our heart is not in it. Reading through the book of Job or Psalms will make it clear that God can handle an honest question, even when he will offer a correcting perspective. Our text today from Genesis sees Jacob walk away from his match with his Creator not only with a limp, but with a new name, Israel, Hebrew for "he strives with God." This is the name God chooses to give not just to Jacob but to his entire chosen people. Indeed, God can handle our wrestling. He names his kids after it. We should not be afraid to wrestle with God and indeed see the struggle, properly framed, as good work.

Another thing about wrestling is that it helps us find boundaries. In the interview I mentioned earlier with Anthony Bradley, the interviewer recounted a story where he was wrestling with his teenage son and his son threw his soccer bag at him, hitting him in the face and giving him a black eye. Dr. Bradley's comment on that story was

to say that the son learned a really important lesson about boundaries, the limits of his strength, and the need to keep himself in check.

Now we can't give God a black eye, but we do need to understand that there is a difference between wrestling and rebellion. There is a difference between struggling to come to grips with God's word and rejecting it when it says something we don't like.

So the issue is not whether or not we wrestle with God, but a question of how we wrestle. And to wrestle with God in a way that honors God and strengthens us, we need to understand several things.

We need to understand fully who it is that we are wrestling with. We need to understand that God is *good*. I must mention something about this conversation that should not be, but sadly is. For some of us, the idea of wrestling with our Heavenly Father brings up the image of our own fathers. I can look back fondly on wrestling with my dad as a child because I could always assume that Dad was around and that when I was with my dad, I was safe. Sadly, that was not and is not an assumption everyone can make. And so whether we make this statement as a comparison or a drastic contrast to our own fathers, we can be assured that the God we wrestle with is one with whom we are safe. Not safe in immunity from difficulty, but safe in his good and loving care.

If you want to know what kind of Father it is with which we wrestle, all you need to do is read our Psalm for this morning, Psalm 121. He is our help, our firm ground. He

does not sleep; he is our keeper. Not even the sun or moon can touch us with him at our right hand. He will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. One thing we can trust in wrestling with God is that we will be okay, because ultimately we are with our Father. When we wrestle with him, we are in the same position as a joyful toddler laughing as his trustworthy dad launches him from one side of the couch to another.

It is also important to understand that it is God who sets the parameters of reality. When a father wrestles with his children, the ground is usually carefully chosen. Perhaps the couch cushions come off and make the floor an appropriate place for a body slam. The sharp corners of furniture are covered or moved, and there are clear out of bounds zones. Furthermore, I was a fool as a youngster if I ever really thought I could best my dad.

All it takes for Jacob to be defeated is one touch on the hip. The match didn't have to have lasted all night, it could have been over in an instant. It lasted as long as God saw fit. We fool ourselves if we walk in to contend with our Creator thinking we will emerge with our own way victorious over his. The struggle is the ground of humbling acceptance that he is God and we are not, and really, it is best for us when things are that way.

There is a big difference between bringing our lack of understanding into God's presence and telling him exactly what he is going to do next. We forget whose house we are living in. We forget that he sets the rules of engagement. We forget that the

struggle can be over as soon as he decides. “Where were you, Job,” God says, “when the world was formed?”²

If we need to understand God in the midst of our wrestling, we also need to understand ourselves. We need to understand the questions we are really bringing to the table. By the end of his all night wrestling match, Jacob wants a blessing from the mysterious man with whom he wrestles, but there is a lot more going on. As we read, Jacob enters into this momentous night in a state of great fear and anxiety. He is afraid because he is returning to the land of his family, and he is worried that his brother Esau, whom Jacob had tricked and cheated, was out for revenge. Indeed, Esau is coming to meet Jacob with 400 men, and in verse 7 of Genesis 32, Jacob devises the morbidly efficient plan of dividing his family and belongings in two so that at least some will get away from the bloodshed. Jacob is feeling guilty, fearful, and trapped. And then he wrestles with God.

How many times have you been in a conversation or an argument that was about something different than what a transcript of the conversation would suggest? “What is really going on here?” That is a common question in many types of relationships. In our wrestling with God, it is important for us to acknowledge what is really going on inside of us. The questions we have may be disguised in layers of intellectualism, but truly boil down to questions of identity and trust. “God, I don’t know who I am.” “God, I am struggling to trust you.”

² Job 38

I love how at the end, after Jacob has been hobbled by a single touch to the hip, he receives a reassurance of his own identity and God's presence with him. Jacob gets the name of the one who wrestles with God. Jacob is going into this encounter with his brother that will change his life, Jacob thinks for the worse. God could have told Jacob that everything was going to turn out ok, he could have told him that the reunion with Esau would not look like his worst fears, which would have been true. But God doesn't do that. Instead he simply says, "I'm here. I'm God. And you're going to keep wrestling with me."

Wrestling with God develops in us a sort of perseverance and tenacity in the face of difficult circumstances. Just like the child wrestling their father will get stronger, more skilled, and more emotionally resilient from year to year, we too will grow in the midst of healthy struggle. Jesus tells the parable in our Gospel reading today of the persistent widow, who goes after a wicked judge for the just result that is due to her. And even though the judge in the parable does not respect divine or human authority, the woman receives what she wants because she is so persistent. She wears the judge down. Persistence and resilience are things that God knows we need to survive and thrive in a world that is broken and accustomed to injustice and suffering. Why did Jesus tell his followers this parable? Look at Luke 18:1 "And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart." If the wicked judge relents, then the Righteous God will surely hear our complaint.

Nothing will increase your endurance like wrestling. I remember the stories I heard from the wrestlers in my high school, all the wacky workouts that they used to do – running up stair wells and around the interior halls of the school and other nonsense. Wrestling practice sounded terrible. But if you want to be successful at

wrestling, you need some peak endurance. The word some of us need to hear this morning is “keep going; keep asking of the Lord; keep wrestling.” We don’t serve a wicked judge, but a good one.

Fr. Esau McCaulley, a fellow Anglican and a great writer, wrote a book called *Reading While Black*, that is an excellent study of how to read the Scriptures while also having pieces of his own story woven through the narrative. One of the driving questions of the book stems from a tension Fr. McCaulley felt as he was coming up in the academy between the faithful witness of the Church that had nurtured his faith and the experience of the Academy that seemed to suggest that it was the Church and the Scriptures that were a main cause of the oppression of people who looked like him. This narrative didn’t square with his experience at all and his book is an attempt to show how an authentic Christian witness takes the Bible seriously and as a result, has plenty to say about justice in God’s world. He suggests a way of reading Scripture that harkens back to Jacob’s wrestling story. He writes: “I propose we adopt the posture of Jacob and refuse to let go of the text until it blesses us.”³

There are plenty of voices telling us to let go. To let go of God. To let go of God’s word. But the blessing comes in the wrestling. You may be in the midst of an intellectual struggle, grappling with the perils of belief. Your struggle may be squaring your experience with goodness and faithfulness of God. Wherever you are today in your wrestling with God, keep it up. Rest in the assurance that a match with our heavenly Father is one where we are safe, loved, and being made better. Let our

³ McCaulley, Esau. *Reading While Black*, p. 21.

faithful wrestling be rooted in our identity as his beloved children. And let all our wrestling be to the glory of the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.