

Prayer as Wrestling With God **By Rabbi Stuart Dauermann, PhD**

In the Book of Genesis, we read of the Patriarch Jacob who is about to encounter his brother Esau again for the first time in 20 years. The last time they saw each other, Esau was out to kill Jacob because he perceived that Jacob has cheated him out of his inheritance. In reality though, Esau had made some foolish mistakes which resulted in his losing that birthright. But now Jacob has heard that Esau is coming out to meet him, with 400 armed men. Jacob is scared. And here is what happened.

*25 And Jacob was left alone. Then someone wrestled with him until daybreak
26 who, seeing that he could not master him, struck him on the hip socket, and Jacob's hip was dislocated as he wrestled with him.
27 He said, 'Let me go, for day is breaking.' Jacob replied, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.'
28 The other said, 'What is your name?' 'Jacob,' he replied.
29 He said, 'No longer are you to be called Jacob, but Israel since you have shown your strength against God and men and have prevailed.'
30 Then Jacob asked, 'Please tell me your name.' He replied, 'Why do you ask my name?' With that, he blessed him there.
31 Jacob named the place Peniel, 'Because I have seen God face to face,' he said, 'and have survived.'
(Genesis 32).*

What are some lessons we can take from this story for our own lives?

[1] God wants to wrestle with us in intimate encounter:

[2] We can encounter God intimately—mortal flesh can touch the Eternal realm. In other words, God is truly knowable.

[3] God always takes the initiative in these break-through encounters. However, it takes two to wrestle. Without our whole-hearted and persistent response, such an encounter remains nothing more than a transient superficial experience, an accidental brush against the transcendent in the midst of darkness. Mere goose flesh instead of glory.

For almost all of us, these occasions of close encounter with God come in the midst of crisis and suffering of some kind. Not all times of suffering become encounters with God, but most encounters with God come in the context of crisis and suffering. Why is this? I think the chief reason is that it is when we are really up against it, when we feel threatened, or afraid, or devastated, when we deeply and totally are consumed by a sense of need, it is then and only then that we are ready at last to give God our undivided attention. He has promised that we would seek for him and find him when we searched for Him with all our hearts. Usually, it is only when we are in deep crisis or suffering that seek him in this way.

Most of the time, the best we do with him is either pay him lip service or treat him like a convenience or add-on to our already busy lives. We shouldn't kid ourselves here: very few of us live and act like our relationship with God is a high priority—much less our highest priority. And for that reason, most of us have at best a superficial knowledge of God. All most of us have is information and goose bumps—but nothing more.

These crises where God finally has our attention, and where we finally decide to struggle and strive to engage with the Holy One are often old, recurring themes that come back to haunt us again and again. Such was the case with Paul, whose crisis—his thorn in the flesh—was a recurring and persistent problem that plagued and distracted him. It drove him to seek the L-rd, to plead with him three times during three different seasons of prayer. You get the feeling these weren't the kinds of prayers you toss up into the air while you're on the run somewhere else. No, these were times of concerted, struggling, wrestling prayer.

In fact, Paul speaks of wrestling in prayer in Colossians 4:12, where he writes of his co-worker Epaphras: “He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.” For Epaphras, wrestling in prayer was a habit of life. And you can be sure that this man really knew God in a deep way. As for Paul, although he didn’t get relief from his thorn in the flesh, he did experience a break-through in his relationship with God. God told him—and Paul heard it down to the marrow of his bones—“my grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in your weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). As a result, Paul’s life was transformed in his relationship with his thorn in the flesh—whatever it was. What had formerly been an annoying preoccupation became an occasion for praise. Look how his relationship with his affliction was transformed: “Therefore I will boast the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Messiah’s power may rest on me. That is why for Messiah’s sake I delight in weaknesses. . . in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” [2 Cor 12:8-10]. He now “boasts” and “delights” in his weaknesses that formerly caused him to cry out to God for rescue. Struggling in the darkness, like Jacob in our story, Paul wrestled with God in prayer, and God transformed his life. And the same could happen for each of us, that is if we truly want transformation rather than just goose bumps and data.

Paul characterizes his seasons of prayer as times he “pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.” Our arenas of suffering, or dark places, our times of crisis should, as in the case of Paul and our father Jacob, drive us also to deeply and earnestly seek God—to plead with him. Do you know anything about pleading with God about your life? Most people never really do this, and they certainly do not do so as a habit of life. What is the result? The result is that at the most people have “spiritual experiences,” brushes with the numinous, but not deep encounters with the Holy One, and certainly know nothing of transformational relationship God deeply desires for all of us. And this is important: God deeply desires this for us: but we are too busy or unaware, so nothing happens. Instead of glory, the best we have is a growing heap of religious data and recollections of goose-flesh.

So for today the lesson is this: God invites you to wrestle with him. Wrestling is hard work, but the rewards are great. Are you up for it?