

# The Struggle Is Real

## *The Blessing of Wrestling*

February 4, 2024

Today we're learning to look for the hidden blessings behind our battles. Cuz let's face it – *life* is a struggle! Whether it's *personal, professional, or spiritual*, living down here ain't ever *easy*; but it *is necessary*! And if *that's* actually by *design*, then *somehow*, God's got a good reason for all our *daily difficulties*. And if *we* want a peek at *their purpose*, it means a serious study of our struggles, so let's open *that* can of worms with today's question: **Where do you wrestle most?**



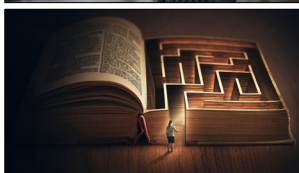
And while you ponder that *personally*, I want to address it *collectively*; cuz here at His Place, *celebrating* struggle is a *core* component of our *character*. We believe **challenge grows you, failure teaches you, and discomfort strengthens you**. And if you've been here more than a *week*, you know one of *our* favorite places to wrestle is with *God's Word*.



So last week, when Bruce was about to launch into a *stack* of Scripture, and he *paused* to remind us that **"You don't have to agree, but you do have to think"** – I hope you recognized *that* as the His Place equivalent of **"Let's get ready to rumble!"**



Cuz what *followed* was some *compelling* Scripture that *resolved* biblical *contradictions* but *created* an uncomfortable *challenge*: Was King David a *dwarf*?! But here's the thing, whether your response was, **"How interesting..."** or **"How dare you!"** – the *suggestion* had us *all* asking **"How?"** And *either* way, if *we* wanted to have an *opinion*, it forced *us* to *open* our own *Bible* to get into our own *struggle* with Scripture. Which *is* definitely *one way* God teaches:



[Like the Psalmist says:] Before I was afflicted I went astray, but *now* I obey Your Word... It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn Your decrees. – Psalms 119:67,71 NIV

For [God] wounds, but He also binds up; He injures, but His hands also heal. – Job 5:18 NIV

[In fact,] The Lord binds up the bruises of His people and heals the wounds *He* inflicted. [Cuz overcoming affliction grows us and *He* knows *we* need growth to live!] – Isaiah 30:26 NIV

[So,] We also *glory* in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. – Romans 5:3-4 NIV

And I love the idea that David's small size could've actually been a *God-given* daily difficulty that taught the extreme *perseverance, character* and *hope* that *prepared* him to take on Goliath. And if a lifelong struggle with size *is* what led David to expert slinging, it makes sense that he'd say:

Praise be to the Lord my Rock, who trains my hands for war, my fingers for battle. [Cuz *God's* training can be hidden in *any* of the circumstances we're born into!] – Psalms 144:1 NIV

But whether it's *David's* size and status, *your* struggle with Scripture, or any *other* affliction we have to endure, the point is *this*: **struggles build strength**. *Physically, intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually* – all difficulties produce *progress*; especially when we *embrace* and *understand* that:

Our light and momentary troubles [are allowed by a loving God because they] are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. – 2 Corinthians 4:17 NIV

*Got it?* Our struggles serve *God's* purposes; **temporary troubles produce eternal glory**. So what's the problem? If we know the tough stuff is just the price we pay for perfection, why can't we stick it out? **Temporary doesn't feel temporary**. *Living life* is the *longest* experience any human will ever have! And **affliction is only good if it has an end**. Otherwise, it's literally *hell*. So, until we can truly see *past* this temporary life we'll try to *prematurely* end our affliction *before* we get its *benefit*.

[So] Beware of turning to evil, which you seem to *prefer* to affliction. – Job 36:21 NIV



Ask anyone with big muscles the *secret* to strength and *ultimately*, they'll all say the same thing; **time under tension**. It sounds like a sick joke, but **the more sustained the struggle, the more substantial the strength**. And if you want a *real-world* confirmation that *God* is an advocate of *this* approach to *training*, just look at *His* chosen people!



*God's* been *Israel's* *personal* trainer since the start, and yet, you'd be hard-pressed to find a group with a *more sustained* struggle. They've battled to survive *slavery, enemies, famine, the desert, slavery again, total destruction, the diaspora, the holocaust, and a whole lot of hate*.

And that's cuz **struggle has been synonymous with God's people** since He *personally* picked a fight with their leader and changed his name from Jacob to *Israel*; literally meaning "*fight*" and "*God*".

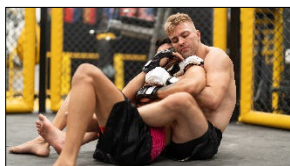
[Y'see,] Jacob was left alone; and a Man *wrestled* with him until the breaking of day. Now when He saw that He did not prevail *against* him, He *touched* the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of *joint* as He wrestled with him. And He said, "Let Me go, for the day breaks." But he said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me!" So He said to him, "What is your *name*?" He said, "*Jacob*." And He said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but *Israel*; for *you* have struggled with *God* and with *men*, and have prevailed." Then Jacob *asked*, saying, "Tell me *Your* name, I pray." And He said, "*Why* is it that you ask about My name?" And He *blessed* him there. So Jacob called the name of the place *Peniel*: "For I have seen *God* face to face, and my life is *preserved*." – Genesis 32:24-30 NKJ

And to *confirm* what Jacob suspected about this mystery *man*, Hosea recaps later on in the OT:

Yes, he struggled with the Angel and prevailed; He wept, and sought favor from Him. He found Him in Bethel, And there He spoke to *us* — That is, *the Lord God of hosts*. The Lord is His memorable name. – Hosea 12:4-5 NKJ

And that means there's a *lot* to learn from *this* passage! Cuz *in it*, we're given a point-blank picture of the way *God Himself* handles *us* in *His* plan. And *here's* the headline: **He wants to wrestle!**

Why? Well I see at least *three* reasons to wrestle in the story: **One, it's relational, two, it's educational, and three, it's transformational.** So, first off, how is it **relational**? Well, *how's it not?!*



Wrestling is one of the most personal things we can do! Cuz **wrestling forces our focus on our opponent!** When you're wrestling, you *don't* think about what you're going to make for *dinner* or which *Netflix* show you want to binge next – *that's* what you think about at church! ... *Busted!*



*But seriously,* we can *sing* a worship song, *listen* to a *great* sermon, or even hold hands to *pray* – and *still* never *really* meet God one-on-one. Even if He's always *in the room*, **there's a big difference between being around God and being alone with Him.** Like Jacob, we *have to* meet Him "alone" if we want a *personal* rather than *environmental* relationship.



Then, when two people share sustained alone *time*, what *happens* depends on what they *want*. **If the two people try to impose opposing wills we call it wrestling; but if the two people try to impose the same will we call dancing!** And as much as we'd like to think we dance with God,



The mind governed by the flesh is *hostile* to God – Romans 8:7 NIV



So, until we've turned over 100% control to the Spirit, we're *all* at odds with God and if we find ourself one-on-one with Him – we should *expect* a wrestling match. Just *remember*, **wrestling with God, means allowing His opposition.** We can't say things like, "*I refuse to believe in a God who allows suffering*" or "*A loving God wouldn't have written such a difficult book!*" cuz *rejecting* God for challenging *our* beliefs – is *not* wrestling or dancing; it's *avoidance*. We can't claim the right to question God if we deny Him the *same* claim. That's a *dictatorship*, not a *relationship*.



But it seems God *wants* to wrestle *because* it produces a real *personal* relationship that *forces* us to pit *our* ideas *against* His. And during all that *time under tension*, we discover how **wrestling is also educational.** As our *struggle* becomes more *sustained*, certain *truths* naturally *pop out*; like when the Lord fights all night to test Jacob's *determination* but suddenly *shuts* things *down* when He just "touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of joint". *What?* Jacob's *gotta* wonder *what's* going on – seeing this Guy could've *crippled* him at any point, with a *touch*.

So *what* does Jacob *learn*? Well, this Guy is *clearly* more powerful but for *some* reason, He's been *letting* the struggle go all night! So, because he *knows* there *must* be a reason other than *winning* behind this struggle, Jacob doesn't *let go* but he does let his opponent *know* that he's aware he's *outmatched*, saying "I will not let You go unless You bless me!". Because as they *both* know:

Without doubt the lesser is blessed by the greater. – Hebrews 7:7 NIV

And when the Lord sees he's both *admitting* weakness *and* asking for *help*, He gives it by saying "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed." cuz that's the only hint he needs to finish learning his lesson.



I can just imagine the moment, *“Hang on – sure we’ve been fighting all night but how do you know I’ve struggled with Go — otcha!”* And with the revelation of this *mystery man’s identity*, the implications of what he learns doesn’t just *blow* his mind, it *changes* his mind, because as our wrestling *teaches us lessons* it *also* becomes **transformational**.

When we wrestle, the experience *changes* us; it makes us *understand* and *accept* who we *are* in relation to our *opponent*. And when we learn our battle is *unwinnable*, two things happen, **our opponent gets glorified and we get humbled**. And *accepting* that *reality* is the first step in accepting the new *identity* God gives – the way Jacob *becomes* Israel. And likewise, when we *learn* from our God-given struggles, *we* change. *We* are people *allowed* to wrestle with God even though He *could* put us down with a finger. *We* are people *given* the grace and mercy to take the time to *learn* our lessons from *our* self-centered fights. And *we* are people *blessed* with an invincible *ally* once our *struggle* turns into *submission* and *God’s* will becomes *our* will. **We’re people transforming from wrestlers to dancers!**

And it’s clear *David’s* struggles *taught* and *transformed* him to trust in the *relationship* he had with God because he *explains* his surprising strength by *citing* what he *learned* from *former* fights:

The *Lord* who rescued me from the paw of the *lion* and the paw of the *bear* will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine ... [And we know he has humbly submitted to God’s greatness cuz he glorifies Him as the ally with the supreme strength, saying] I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty ... This day the *Lord* will deliver you into my hands ... for the battle is the Lord’s – 1 Samuel 17:37, 45-47 NIV

And then sure enough, *sling, ding, dead*. Cuz *that’s* what working *with* the Lord produces; *victory!*

[So] Let Israel rejoice in their Maker... Let them praise His name with *dancing* ... For the Lord takes delight in His people; even if He has to wrestle them into submission first! Because He wants us to win, but – He crowns the *humble* with *victory*. – Psalms 149:2-4 NIV

And there’s the *Gospel* in a nutshell! It’s knowing that **losing a fight with God is winning a war against pride** – and **surrendering to His will puts His strength on our side!** It’s the victory that comes from knowing **our true strength is faith in God’s strength**. And *that* knowledge comes from the loving relationship that does whatever it takes to get *us* to **admit weakness and ask for help**.

So, **where do you wrestle most?** Is it with your *patience, appearance, or finances?* Is it at *work, at home, or in Scripture?* Well, *whatever* the answer, I got *good news*, you’re gonna *lose!* We were just *created* too *weak* to win against *this world!* And if you got a *problem* with that, I’d advise you to take your complaint to the *Creator* – cuz you *won’t* win *that* war either – but you will *learn* from *it* and be *changed* by *it*. Because **He’s willing to keep the fight alive until you’re smart enough to see the whole battle is for your benefit**. And only when you *realize* that Him *restraining* infinite *power* takes infinite *mercy*, will you have *strong* enough *faith* to surrender. And then, here’s the *blessing* – all your other enemies flee, cuz you’ve become the ally of an undefeated King! So, **hurry up, let go, and give in** – it’s the only way to end all other battles before they begin!

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Father God, thank You for loving me in spite of my sin; forgive me and cleanse me by the sacrifice of Your Son, my Savior; and free me and lead me by Your Spirit and Word, as I seek to trust and follow Jesus Christ, as the Lord of my life. Amen.