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Wrestling the Blessing

Genesis 32:22-31

Peter Hiett

September 23, 2007

It's been five and a half years now, so I think it's safe to tell the story. On April 27, six days after Easter, I arrived here at the church. It was 5:00. I arrived intense, focused, and ready to go.

I looked in the cry room. No one had come to the pre-service meeting. I walked into the sanctuary, and the band was not practicing. The ushers were not preparing. The communion bread and wine were missing. In their place was a strange-looking man and a talking donut. The sanctuary was full of little kids and adoring parents and grandparents. Bill Hammond came up to me and said:

There's been a mix-up in Children's Ministries, and so the Donut Man Show started two hours late. I told the Donut Man he could go on but he'd have to stop when I gave him the signal. I've been giving him the signal, and he won't stop!

Well, I thought of a few signals, but they weren't appropriate for Children's Ministry . . .

Meanwhile, new people from Easter were arriving, standing in back, and wondering what church was all about. In the sanctuary seats, preschoolers, parents, and grandparents sat mesmerized by a talking donut.

If the pastor assaults the Donut Man in front of four-year-olds in the church sanctuary, parents and grandparents get pretty angry. But if you substitute the Donut Man for the sacrament of communion, it tends to

confuse newcomers. Seminary had not prepared me for this.

At 5:20, ten minutes before the worship service was to start, Bobby Fisher cracked. He walked down the center aisle, stood in front of the stage, and stared the Donut Man down. But the Donut Man would not yield.

Finally, Bobby motioned like this [directing with his finger to come off the stage]. The Donut Man came over, but he wouldn't talk to Bobby. He made Bobby speak to the talking donut on his arm.

The donut said, "Oh, hi. What does this nice man want?" Bobby made his wishes clear, and the talking donut said to the crowd, "Oh, he wants us to stop. He wants me to stop." The crowd moaned.

At 5:25, the Donut Man was finally wrestled off the stage. And we got letters, lots

of letters. For years we on staff simply referred to the whole episode as “The Donut Man Incident.”

Sometimes church is so messy, painful, exhausting, confusing, and hard. And it seems like it should be smooth sailing, doesn’t it? But it usually feels like a wrestling match: a struggle that makes no sense but exposes everyone’s heart.

And to make matters worse, we *know* Jesus is in charge. In fact, I think He was laughing at me and the Donut Man. You see, we were both wrestling Him.

Well, I picked a silly example, because others are too current and too hard.

But church isn’t supposed to be like that . . . right? I mean, it’s a tranquil haven of rest, not a wrestling match . . . right? It’s the place you go to make your life work. I mean, we come to get a blessing, not a beating . . . right?

Well, what is “Church”? The Greek word is “Ekklesia.” It literally means, “The called out.” It is the

congregation of God’s chosen people. Paul tells us that in Christ we are grafted into God’s chosen people Israel. That doesn’t mean the Church replaces Israel, as if God no longer has dealings with ethnic Israel; it means the Church *is* Israel—faithful Israel. And you and I are children of Abraham adopted into God’s family by grace through faith.

So our name is also Israel: the Israel of God. “Christian” is a name we gave ourselves. Israel is the name God gave to us. *Israel* . . . and it means something.

God first gave that name to our great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather Jacob. Jacob was the son of Isaac son of Abraham. The name *Jacob* literally meant “liar,” “supplanter,” “cheat,” or “finagler.”

You’ll remember Jacob finagled the birthright and stole the blessing from his brother Esau, who then threatened to kill him. That’s why Jacob fled to Padaan-aram and his Uncle Laban.

It was on his way that God gave him his famous dream of the ladder to heaven and confirmed that he would be blessed and that through his “seed” all the peoples of the earth would be blessed.

In Padaan-aram, Laban cons Jacob, and Jacob finagles Laban, until after twenty years Jacob takes Rachel, Leah, his eleven sons, and his whole household and flees.

So now in Genesis 32, our text for the day, Jacob is preparing to cross the Jordan River into the land of his promised blessing. However, he gets word that Esau is coming with 400 men (an army). Jacob’s schemes are catching up with him.

He finagles a plan to appease Esau, but then desperate, he prays a most dangerous prayer. He asks God to save him, and he calls on God to deliver the blessing.

Genesis 32:22-24:

The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. And Jacob was left alone.

“Left alone.” From the evidence, it appears that Jacob had a late night, anxiety-

produced, devotional quiet time.

First he read Psalm 23: “You make me lie down in green pastures.” Then he read the “Footprints” poem that he had downloaded from the Internet. And then Jacob decided to sing all the verses of “Sweet Hour of Prayer.”

[Singing:]

Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer,
Thy wings shall my petition bear
To Him whose truth and faithfulness
Engage the waiting soul to bless;
And since He bids me seek His face
Believe His Word and trust His grace
I'll cast on Him my ev'ry care
And wait for thee sweet hour of prayer.

And there at the end of the second stanza—BAM CRASH BANG!

Out of nowhere this guy just nails Jacob and starts beatin' the tar out of him! At his lowest point, in the middle of the night, when Jacob is calling out to God to “send the blessing,” BAM! Unexpected, confusing, painful, passionate, violent wrestling . . . all night. And

somewhere during that crazy night, Jacob realizes, “This guy isn't just good; He's divine!”

Now, I don't know about you, but if I'm Jacob, I'm thinking, “It's time to check out a new religion.” But Jacob doesn't finagle and he doesn't flee like before. Jacob hangs on and even prevails.

But it's clear the God-man *lets* him. For as the sun rises, He just touches Jacob's hip and the bone rips right out of the socket.

In the book of Genesis, men make covenants by grabbing the hip or loin. I know that's weird, but that's the way it was, and you have to deal with it.

So it's like this God-man makes a covenant that just about kills Jacob. So Jacob can no longer finagle or flee. Exhausted, depleted, and defeated, at the end of himself, Jacob hangs onto this God-man and begs for a blessing.

Maybe that's what the wrestler wanted all along: a clinging, defeated Jacob. For only then could Jacob receive the blessing . . . called *grace*.

Genesis 32:24-31:

And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God

and with men, and have prevailed.” Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.” The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

Then as you know, Jacob limps into the Promised Land. It turns out the wrestler was the door . . . like the flaming sword at the edge of Eden, like the gate to heaven.

The wrestler names him Israel. It basically means “God wrestler.” Israel then asks the wrestler his name, but the wrestler just says, “Why do you ask my name?” and blesses him.

I don’t know if Jacob-Israel knew the wrestler’s name, but you do. Who is God and man? Who is the face of God? Who is the door to the Promised Land—the Kingdom of Heaven?

A couple thousand years later, He’ll show up again. And He’ll wrestle the children of Jacob, and He’ll let them prevail. In fact, they’ll nail Him to a cross.

But as the sun rises on Easter morning, the God-man will rise from the dead, confirming the covenant and saving all those who cling to Him in grace through faith.

He is the door to the Promised Land. Jesus is the door, the way, the truth, the life, and the light. And He is the Word.

You know, we modern, American Christians tend to think that in order to get to the Promised Land you have to understand the Word. But according to Genesis 32, in order to enter the Promised Land, it’s more like you have to *wrestle* the Word, get beat up by the Word, but then cling to the Word.

You know, wrestling is a pretty good description of relationship, don’t you think? I think it’s the first thing on a father’s job description: wrestle with your kids.

I used to always wrestle with my dad, until I started breaking his ribs. As a youth pastor, I always brought my toolbox to church so I could fix the molding at the end of each meeting. Every meeting turned into a giant wrestling match, because I found that if I wrestled with kids, I could speak to those kids and touch their hearts with the Word. Wrestling exposes hearts to your words.

All my best friends are the ones I’ve wrestled with, if not physically, emotionally. That’s what makes a good small group; that’s what a good church is: people willing to wrestle and then hang on.

Wrestle the garbage out of each other, and then bless each other. Most people bail out when the wrestling starts and never get to the blessing.

That’s what a good marriage is: wrestling.

Every weekday at 2:00 p.m. in Gering, Nebraska, Martha Gertson lowers the shades, disconnects the phone, and turns on the TV. Martha and Chris Gertson watch *All Star Wrestling*. Martha says that when she gets sufficiently worked up, she throws a step-over toe-hold on her husband Chris. Then it begins. In the living room, they try to pin each other in front of the TV.

Martha says, “Those romantic soap operas are fake. But the wrestling is *real!*” including hers with Chris. You see, they have a “real” marriage in an “unreal world.”

Paul Harvey says, “Martha usually wins. But Martha Gertson is only 76. Husband Chris is 82.”

Maybe that’s the secret to marriage, the secret to real relationships: Great and persistent wrestling with a tenacious desire to cling to each other at all costs, in order

that two self-centered, finagling, fleeing people might become one . . . like two hearts beating as one.

Well, God is our Father, Jesus is our friend, and Israel (the Church) is His Bride. Maybe He wants a relationship with us.

So Jacob wrestled the God-man, and the God-man blessed him. You know, the blessing was far more than a real estate deal, far more than a ticket to the Promised Land. God had promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob a “seed” through whom all the peoples of the earth would be blessed.

The Apostle Paul tells us who that is: That seed is Jesus—Jesus from the bosom of the Father—the heart of God—the love of God. And Jesus is the God-man.

You see, it was sweet Jesus who beat the tar out of Jacob! That means it was Jacob’s great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandson according to the flesh. That means it was Jacob’s blessing. Jacob was wrestling his blessing. Or maybe I should say his blessing showed up and wrestled *him*. He beat the hell out of Jacob and wrestled the kingdom of heaven into him. He wrestled the Promised Land into his heart.

See, the blessing is a relationship with God. The blessing is God’s heart. He wants to give you His heart. And it’s just hard to receive when you’re full of hell.

One day several years ago, I asked my eighty-one-year-old pastor and father, “Dad, do you think that Jesus would ever show up and just beat the hell out of you?” He turned to me with a smile and said, “He sure has me.”

I think my dad was one of God’s favorites. My dad knew God’s heart.

So how do we wrestle?

1. God is sovereign, and all our life is wrestling. So God our Father wrestles us through all the circumstances of life. Like Martin Luther said, “Even the Devil is God’s Devil.” Like *I* say, “Every talking donut is God’s talking donut.” So God uses this fallen creation to wrestle the darkness out of us and Himself *into* us.
2. He wrestles with circumstance, and He wrestles with His Spirit that tugs on our hearts and convicts us of our sin.
3. Circumstance, Spirit, and He wrestles with His Word. Jesus is the Word. He is the “angelos” messenger of God, and He is the message. Scripture is the message written down. So empowered by Christ’s Spirit, we’re called to wrestle with Scripture. Israel (the Church) is a community of people willing to wrestle the Word.

Rob Bell writes:

The ultimate display of our respect for the sacred words of God is that we are willing to wade in and struggle with the text—the good parts, the hard-to-understand parts, and the parts we wish weren't there.

The rabbis have a metaphor for this wrestling with the text: the story of Jacob wrestling the angel in Genesis 32. He struggles, and it is exhausting and tiring, and in the end his hip is injured. It hurts. And he walks away limping.

Because when you wrestle with the text, you walk away limping.

And some people have no limp, because they haven't wrestled. But the ones limping have had an experience with the living God.

They have a personal relationship.

So I'd like us to think about that for a minute. What is wrestling? Wrestling is:

Passionate. I mean, you wrestle with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. I've heard people say, "Peter studied acting." Well, I've never taken an acting class. I've never had a part in a play. I was a geology major. But when I preach, I'm wrestling. I'm not wrestling you; I'm wrestling the Word. And I want you to help me.

Passionate, painful, exhausting. Sometimes, especially on Saturday nights, I preach with a limp. I know it worries folks. They say, "You seem tired, troubled, and kind of stressed." I suppose that's often my own fault, but I want to say, "Well, dang. For three days I've been alone in my office wrestling the Word! Of course I'm limping! I'm half insane! I'm near dead!"

Passionate, painful, exhausting, confusing, and challenging. You know, you shouldn't worry if you're challenged or confused by the Word. You're *supposed* to be! And if you're not, I doubt you're wrestling.

You know, usually when Jesus would preach, He'd tell some outrageous, confusing story or say something utterly shocking and then just walk away and leave folks wrestling with His Word.

Recently I heard a friend say, "I love my preacher because he makes the Bible clear and tells me exactly what I need to know." I didn't say it, but I wanted to yell it: "You'd better get out of that church! Because I suspect you're preacher is makin' stuff up, and he's keeping you from wrestling with the Word!"

To preach isn't to explain the Word; it's to proclaim the Word ("kerusso" in Greek, *proclamation*). I'm to proclaim it, and you are to wrestle it. Wrestling is confusing, challenging, and **personal**—really personal.

On Judgment Day, I don't think Jesus will ask, "Who does John Calvin say I am? Who does Tim LaHaye say I am? Who does your pastor say I am?" He'll ask, "Who do *you* say I am?" And how will you know Him? Maybe you ought to wrestle Him—the Word.

A professional can't do it for you. A commentary can't do it for you. *I* can't do it for you. The Word wants to wrestle *you*. In America, we're used to paying professionals to do stuff for us. But you don't pay someone to get to know your father for you. You don't pay someone to get to know your husband for you. However, you might pay someone to help you wrestle. They're called counselors. In the Bible, they're called

pastors.

See, I'm a wrestling coach. But my job isn't to wrestle *for* you; it's to help you wrestle. A shepherd's job isn't to chew the grass for the sheep. It's to point to the grass so the sheep can go chew it.

Sometimes people will say, "Peter, is this the right place to raise those biblical questions you do?—you know, Sunday morning in church (the Israel of God)? I mean, don't you need to protect the sheep?" Yeah! I need to protect the sheep from *wolves* but not the Word! My job is not to protect you from the Word of God. If I keep you from wrestling with the Word of God, I keep you from knowing the heart of God.

For 2,000 years, the institutional Church has been tempted to protect the people from the Word, tempted to say, "Don't worry, we're professionals, and we've wrestled for you. So repeat after me, tithe 10%, and we'll punch your ticket for the Promised Land. No wrestling."

That's tempting for the Institutional Church and tempting for each one of us. Because wrestling is passionate, painful, exhausting, confusing, challenging, and personal. And it's **not safe**.

Soren Kierkegaard wrote, "The New Testament is a handbook . . . for those who are being sacrificed." See, Jacob was dying to himself that night at the Jabbok. The Word was wrestling an old heart right out of his chest. So he was tempted to finagle; he was tempted to flee. But beat to the end of himself, he hung on.

So this is the advice of your wrestling coach Peter Hiett: Hang on! Keep wrestling and hang on! Hang on to what? The One you're wrestling. Hang onto the Word.

As many of you know, in twelve days I'm scheduled to be questioned on the floor of our denomination's governing body the Presbytery. And that's fine and good, and actually kind of exciting.

People have said all kinds of things about me, like I don't believe there's a hell (which certainly isn't true) or that I'm a "Universalist" (which I've never said). I don't know what they mean by that word, and I don't think I am one of those.

In my opinion, the problem is that I'm hanging onto the Word . . . gettin' the tar beat out of me, but hanging onto the Word . . . like Revelation 21:5 where He says, "Behold, I make all things new." If you have a problem with that, it's not with *me*; it's with the Word. Matthew 19:26 says, "With God all things are possible." I'm also hanging onto Matthew 25:46 where He says, "And they will go away into eternal punishment."

I'm not sure how to explain all the Word, but I'm hangin' onto the Word, and I'm not planning on letting go. And I'm wrestling out loud, because I want you to wrestle along with me. You don't have to agree with me.

I want us to wrestle and hang on, hang onto the Word of God. The Word is the way, the truth, the life, and the light. We wrestle in the light, and now get this: The Word is not just print on a page. The Word is Jesus.

I want us to hang onto Him. He's the meaning of all things, He's the heart of God, and He is the door to the Promised Land. He is the Prince of Peace, and He *is* the blessing!

So, yes, Israel of God! Wrestling is: passionate, painful, exhausting, confusing, challenging, personal, and unsafe, yet no place is safer than wrestling with Jesus. He is sovereign over all. He sits on the throne. So don't fear; just hang onto Him. And then you

are wrestling your blessing. And He is a pretty big blessing.

You know, I think we all come to church looking for a blessing, but it's like C. S. Lewis said, "The problem isn't that our desires are too big; the problem is that our desires are far too small."

We'd like a bite-sized blessing; a manageable, safe, and convenient blessing. We'd like a talking donut sort of blessing or a nice sermon and tranquil worship song sort of blessing . . . a spot of bread and drop of wine sort of blessing.

And then we think something is wrong when we experience some wrestling.

We're like Giuseppe Pennisi. I read about him fifteen years ago in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Fifty-three-year-old Giuseppe and his crew were netting rock cod and sole about forty miles southwest of San Francisco on their eighty-one-foot commercial fishing vessel, the *Diana*.

(The Church is like a ship, you know . . . fishing on the ocean.)

Well, this was a normal day, a tranquil day, trawling for a nice-sized catch of rock cod and sole. Then BAM! All at once, the two 5/8" steel cables that held

Diana's 7,000 pounds of net lost all slack. Suddenly, they were being pulled out to open sea.

As the winches began slipping on the nets, Giuseppe shut down *Diana's* powerful engine. They were being dragged at about five knots backwards into the ocean.

Bubbles were coming up all around the boat. One of the steel cables snapped like a rubber band. At this point they knew: Whatever they were wrestling had the power to drag them into the abyss.

In desperation, Giuseppe frantically radioed the Coast Guard. Then all at once, the struggle stopped.

And this is the scene I'd die to see: These old fisherman watching to see what they'd caught in their nets. Can you see them? "What the heck is that?"

Then suddenly, out of the depths, right next to their boat, longer than a football field, displacing 6,500 tons of water, rises the USS *Parche*—nuclear attack submarine, most likely loaded with nuclear warheads, capable of starting World War III, an Armageddon Machine, hundreds of millions of dollars . . . snagged in Giuseppe Pennisi's fishing nets.

It was the catch of the day.

Maybe you came to church trying to snag a little blessing, and now you're experiencing some wrestling. Well, God wrestles with His people—the Israel of God.

He wrestles through the circumstances of your life.

He wrestles with His Spirit deep in your heart.

He wrestles you with His Word, who rises from the abyss.

Hang on and don't let go.

It's not that something's wrong; something's *right*. If you hang onto Jesus, you're wrestling your blessing, and your blessing is not small. It's the heart of the Living God.

So on that night, the Word of God—face of God—heart of God took bread and broke it saying, “This is my body given to you. Take and eat.” And in the same manner after supper, He took the cup and said, “This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood shed for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, all of you. Do it in remembrance of me.”

So if you would like the blessing, come forward, tear off a piece of bread, and dip it in the cup. Take the bait. He loves you. Come to the table and receive the blessing. But don't be surprised when you experience some wrestling. Amen.

[Communion]

Relevant Texts and Quotations (from bulletin)

As soon as Esau heard the words of his father, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry and said to his father, "Bless me, even me also, O my father!" But he said, "Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing." Esau said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has cheated me these two times. He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing." . . . Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring [seed] shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." . . . And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him." Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. He divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps, thinking, "If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the camp that is left will escape." . . . The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered."

~ *Genesis 27:34-36a, 28:10-16, 32:6-8, 22-30*

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

~ *2 Corinthians 4:6*

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. . . . And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

~ *Galatians 3:16, 29*

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

~ *John 1:1-5, 14*

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God.

~ *Revelation 19:11-13*

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

~ *1 Thessalonians 2:13*

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. . . .

~ *2 Timothy 3:16*

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them

that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

~ 2 Peter 3:15-16

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

~ Hebrews 4:12-13

Now the rabbis had technical terms for this endless process of forbidding and permitting and making interpretations. They called it “binding and loosing.” To “bind” something was to forbid it. To “loose” something was to allow it.

So a rabbi would bind certain practices and loose other practices. And when he gave his disciples the authority to bind and loose, it was called “giving the keys of the kingdom.”

Notice what Jesus says in the book of Matthew: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

What he is doing here is significant. He is giving his followers the authority to make new interpretations of the Bible. He is giving them permission to say, “Hey, we think we missed it before on that verse, and we’ve recently come to the conclusion that this is what it actually means.” . . .

Binding and loosing can only be done if communities are willing to wrestle. The ultimate display of our respect for the sacred words of God is that we are willing to wade in and struggle with the text—the good parts, the hard-to-understand parts, and the parts we wish weren’t there.

The rabbis even say a specific blessing when they don’t understand a portion of the text. When it eludes them, when it makes no sense, they say a word of thanks to God because of the blessing that will be theirs someday. “Thank you, God, that at some point in the future, the lights are going to come on for me.”

The rabbis have a metaphor for this wrestling with the text: the story of Jacob wrestling the angel in Genesis 32. He struggles, and it is exhausting and tiring, and in the end his hip is injured. It hurts. And he walks away limping.

Because when you wrestle with the text, you walk away limping.

And some people have no limp, because they haven’t wrestled. But the ones limping have had an experience with the living God.

~ Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*.

There is, in a word, nothing comfortable about the Bible—until we manage to get so used to it that we make it comfortable for ourselves. . . . Have we ceased to question the book and be questioned by it? Have we ceased to fight it? Then perhaps our reading is no longer serious.

For most people, the understanding of the Bible is, and should be, a struggle: not merely to find meanings that can be looked up in books of reference, but to come to terms personally with the stark scandal and contradiction in the Bible itself. . . .

Let us not be too sure we know the Bible just because we have learned not to be astonished at it, just because we have learned not to have problems with it.

~ Thomas Merton,

quoted in *The Bible Jesus Read* by Philip Yancey

Being alone with God’s Word is a dangerous matter. Of course, you can always find ways to defend yourself against it: Take the Bible, lock your door—but then get out ten dictionaries and twenty-five commentaries.

~ Kierkegaard

Herein lies the real place of Christian scholarship. Christian scholarship is the Church’s prodigious invention to defend itself against the Bible, to ensure that we can continue to be good Christians without the Bible coming too close. Oh, priceless scholarship, what would we do without you? Dreadful it is to fall into the hands of the living God. Yes, it is even dreadful to be alone with the New Testament.

~ Kierkegaard

A young girl is at age sixteen and it is her confirmation day. Among various other gifts she also receives a beautifully bound New Testament. Look, this is what we call biblical Christianity! Actually we do not expect her to read it, not any more than the rest of us. She receives this book as a safeguard in her life: “Here you will find consolation if you should ever need it,” we tell her. Of course we do not expect her to really read it, otherwise she might discover that here are true terrors. For in comparison to the persecutions witnessed here, the ordinary hardships of this world are but jest.

~ Kierkegaard

What is the New Testament? A handbook for those who are to be sacrificed.

~ Kierkegaard

At the worship service last Wednesday, the Lord spoke some pretty intense things to me that are challenging my “knowledge” of His nature and helping me along this journey. He said, “It is in my nature for you to be angry with me.”

At first I thought it was just some strange thought that come to me. . . .

When He first said something about being angry with Him and even started showing me some areas of my past where that anger might come from, I started rejecting the notion based on my incomplete understanding of His nature. But the voice was just too clear. Now I think I might have an inkling of what He's getting at. Maybe I need some strong emotion like anger from betrayal to shake (and wake) me up enough out of my apathy to go wrestle with God and get some answers.

~ *A member here at Lookout*

I saw you enter a boxing ring. The place was empty . . . Still. I watched you circle the ring. You threw a punch here and there, practicing, waiting, letting your blows fall upon the air. Harmless.

As you moved to your left I saw a belt with a HUGE front panel. The inscription on the panel said, "UNDEFEATED." At the same time I saw a figure enter the ring sliding up under the ropes. He moved unhurriedly towards the belt; with careless ease he slipped off the robe he wore, tossing it over the ropes.

My first thought was, "Peter, my brother, you are in deep ____ now—it's Jesus!!!"

In that same moment Jesus flooded my mind with joy, peace. He was going to enjoy this. He had come not to beat you up but to train you, to spar with you, to test your mettle.

You saw Him and did not make a move. He threw a quick left-right jab sequence followed by a ruthless uppercut. I watched the blood drops fly in slow motion from your face. You sat down hard, stunned. But I could see you were processing that move, learning it. . . .

I heard these words, "Don't be amazed at the fiery ordeal that's taking place to test your quality as though something strange was happening." Your quality is being tested! God wasn't concerned about changing the situation. He wanted to change YOU! And He came Himself to do it.

I watched you move to your right and then your hands moved out. You tried that first sequence He had shown you. He moved easily to those punches. They didn't really land, they grazed Him. He let you!

Then something changed in you. You started punching Him really hard. You moved in close. You had your head on His chest and you were beating on His mid-section. I watched your muscles bunch and ripple. You were yelling things into His chest, into His HEART! Oh, Peter! You were so very angry, and He just wrapped His huge arms around you. He bowed His head down over yours and started kissing your forehead, kissing your mind, loving you so very intimately—peace, peace pouring out of those tender kisses.

He will show you the areas of correction with mercy and love. You can yell and scream and punch Him because He loves you.

~ *A prophetic word from a member here at Lookout.*

Contrary to a widespread modern opinion, the Pharisees were not the strictest of the Jewish parties. Their intent was to interpret the law so that it could be obeyed by ordinary persons under the conditions of daily existence.

~ *Dr. J. C. McCann,*

International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

But you say, "If anyone tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is given to God, he need not honor his father." So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

~ *Matthew 15:5-9*

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.

~ *John 5:39-40*

The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh.

~ *Genesis 32:31-32*

Wrestling the Blessing

Genesis 32:22-31

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