

Wrestling with God

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[0 : 0 0] Good evening, everybody. As Tommy said, my name is Clay, and my wife Rachel and I were members of this church for about, I guess, close to five years, and up until about three years ago. So, have you been in existence for eight years now? Going on eight years?

Wow. That's amazing. Yeah, and I just want to acknowledge that this community was a huge part of our growth. It's where we met as a couple, and just individually and as a couple.

It was a place of healing for us, and we've often liked to say that Advent was a place where we felt like we were welcomed in as we are, but always challenged to grow and move beyond where we were at that particular point, which is really a picture of the gospel. And I certainly hope that that's still the ethos of this community, and I have no reason to think otherwise. But it's just fantastic to be with you all, and I look forward to chatting afterwards. But let's go ahead and pray before we begin. Lord, I ask your Holy Spirit to cause the words of your scripture that were just read to ring in our ears, and take them and place them in our hearts, and do with them what you will in our lives. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

So, prayer. Prayer is in many ways at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. The basic definition of prayer is talking to God, and if we're thinking about having a relationship with God, communication is pretty basic, pretty foundational to relating to Him. And for those of us who desire this relationship where we are known by and we know the God of the universe, the idea of being able to talk to God is both, it's exciting, it's attractive, and I imagine that many of us have had experiences at one point or another where we just are caught up into this intimate moment with God. And it's sweet, it's precious, it's even maybe exhilarating. But my guess is that for a lot of us, those moments are relatively few and far between. And a lot of time prayer involves feeling like we're taking some time to say the right things, maybe things that are theologically correct. Maybe it feels kind of formal.

But when we're done, we go back to real life, and there seems like there's this enormous emotional disconnect between what we've been doing in prayer and our daily lives. And we can kind of end up going through the motions, but not really entering into that experience that we long for. Or actually, we can get to the point where we don't end up going through the motions all that often because prayer ends up leaving us feeling unsatisfied, and we can't really see what the relevance is to our lives. Well, if this describes you, you should know that you are not alone. Most Christians experience this. I definitely experience this. And you should know that God definitely wants a deeper, richer relationship with you. And the good news is that the scriptures offer us a very clear antidote to this kind of anemic prayer that we sometimes experience. And that is that we learn to wrestle with God.

[3 : 34] A few minutes ago, we read the story of Jacob wrestling. He had this mysterious encounter. He was the founder of the people of Israel. And at this crucial moment in his life, he had an encounter with some sort of incarnation of God himself in the middle of the night. And the interesting thing about this encounter, what's notable about it is that it was anything but polite and surly and formal.

They were wrestling, of all things. It was this intense, gritty experience. And this God and this particular individual were having a formative moment in their relationship. And this encounter that they had has become, in many ways, a model for prayer. Where prayer is not a bunch of empty platitudes that we say, but it's a similarly intense experience with the God with whom we have a relationship.

And there are examples all over the Bible of people of faith wrestling with God in prayer. And one of the great examples that we have is the psalm that we just read together, Psalm 10.

And so I want to spend a little bit of time with you looking at this psalm. And I want to offer you three principles for how to wrestle with God in prayer. Be bold, know who you're dealing with, and don't let go. All right. So first, be bold. Wrestling is not a passive sport at all. You're not going to get anywhere simply by having good defensive techniques. No, you're always looking for that opportunity to go on the offensive. And I should say at the outset that I feel kind of sheepish talking about anything sports related, because anybody who knows me knows that I'm the least sporty person ever. But I've been to a few high school wrestling matches, and may or may not have looked up a few Wikipedia articles this past week. But boldness is one very clear thing about wrestling. And when Jacob has this encounter with God, he was evidently a pretty formidable opponent. It says that this God figure could not get the better of Jacob at the human level, and he actually resorts to the supernatural. He plays the supernatural card and nails him in the hip and then permanently injures him. I'm not sure if that's really fair fighting, but there you have it. Jacob is a bold fighter, and we see the same boldness reflected in the writer of Psalm 10. When he comes to God in prayer, he's brimming over with emotion, and he just lets it rip. He's filled with rage, because he sees oppression of the poor happening around him, and he knows that the perpetrators of this oppression are getting away with it. We started reading in verse 12, but there's 11 verses that go before where he gives a detailed description of what's going on, how these awful people prey on the helpless. They take advantage of the poor. They're violent, and they disregard God in this equation. And he pleads with

God in verse 1. Why? Why, O Lord, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? And then in verse 12, where we started, he gets really fired up and demands of God, arise, lift up your hand, don't forget the afflicted, break the arm of the evildoer, call his wickedness to account until you see him no more.

[6 : 57] Look at how this writer operates in his relationship with God. This isn't some lame, nice-sounding thing that a religious person would say. No, it's coming from the core of his being, because he's willing to be bold. It could be that one of the reasons that your prayer life isn't as energized as you'd like it to be is because you rarely speak your mind with God. Now, God desires all kinds of emotions to be expressed in prayer, and actually our liturgy helps us to create that balance with thanksgiving and confession and bringing supplications and that sort of thing.

But if you want to inject a little fervor into your prayer life, start with what makes you really angry. Because maybe like the psalmist, you see oppression around you, and it just makes you sick.

Or you look at the violence in the world, like what's happening with ISIS in Syria. There's just unspeakable things that are happening, and it grieves you. Or maybe something's happening in your personal life that's wrong or just really sad. Well, tell God about it. Be specific. Describe in detail what's going on, and tell him that you want him to act and change what's happening. And you wonder, why do we hesitate anyway? What holds us back? If we think that prayer is not the appropriate time to express that kind of emotion, then we've completely misunderstood what prayer is. It's exactly the kind of venue where God wants us to pour out our hearts to him. And here's the thing. Those kind of emotions that we feel are not just going to go away. We'll either end up taking them out on somebody in our life, or we'll hold them here, maybe for years on end. But God invites us to cast our anxieties on him. He can handle it. He already knows what's going on, and he just wants us to articulate those feelings to him. And when we come with our concerns, he wants us to be bold, because when we're being bold, we're being real. And that's the kind of relationship that God wants with us.

So in prayer, we have the luxury of being able to speak our minds. But our thoughts in prayer are not just supposed to be formed by what we're experiencing at a given moment, but also by who we're talking to. And so that takes us to our second principle in wrestling, which is you should always know who you're dealing with. In any kind of sport, a big part of your strategy is going to be able to understand your opponent, their temperament, their signature moves, how good their stamina is. And as Jacob wrestles with this character in the night, he slowly realizes that he is up against no ordinary wrestling partner. And we see this awareness in Psalm 10.

The psalmist is completely aware of who he's talking to. And the most important thing that's on his mind is that God is good. He has an unshakable conviction in the goodness of God. He's able to distinguish between the evil and oppression that he sees around him and the character of the God that he's talking to. In verse 14, he says, God, you do see the evil that's going on so that you can deal with it.

[10 : 24] Then in verse 16, you are king. You have the power to do something about these things. And he goes on to say that you hear the desire of the afflicted and you will incline your ear to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed.

So listen to how things kind of come into focus for this writer of this psalm as he reflects on God's goodness vis-a-vis what's going on.

And as the people of God, we can be brutally honest about the stark realities of this world, but it's never without hope. And it's not just a general hope, a kind of positive outlook.

Well, maybe things will turn out for the best. We'll see. Now, it's a hope that's rooted in the belief that there is a good God who cares about us and who acts in history. We don't always, we have, we don't come close to understanding how he does things and why he chooses to do the things the way he does.

But we can allow that knowledge that God is good to pierce through the darkness that we're experiencing and allow us to give it to give us some perspective and some hope, even when it's incredibly hard to believe that.

[11 : 38] One of my favorite books in the series, The Chronicles of Narnia, is The Silver Chair. And I feel like it's kind of an underappreciated one. So if you haven't read it, take a look at it. But there's this amazing scene where three of the main characters, Jill, Eustace, and Puddleglum, are on a quest to rescue the lost prince.

And they've been captured by the evil ruler of the underworld, who also is holding the prince captive. And she's trying to make them believe that nothing good that they've ever known outside of her kingdom exists.

And they might as well give up on the idea of getting back to the things that they love. And in turn, this will cause them to give up on their quest and just throw up their hands and say, it's not worth it.

But the response of the good guys in this story is just so profound. Because they turn to each other and they keep reminding each other that there is goodness. There is the sun.

There is warmth and beauty. And most of all, there is Aslan, the god figure in this series. They know that they've experienced him. They felt his presence.

[12 : 46] They've seen him. And he has sent them to this place for a purpose. And he's working to bring about an end to the evil in this world. And that knowledge is exactly what gives them enough hope to withstand the ploys of this force of evil and to get through this situation.

So it could be that one of the reasons are our prayers lack emotional intensity is that we're not really sure. We don't have those deep convictions that there is a good God who's going to act.

And so why bother reciting all these bad things that are going on to God if it's not going to change anything? But one of the reasons that we come to God in prayer is so that we can encounter him and encounter his goodness and allow it to pierce through the darkness.

So when you get on your knees, think about who it is that you're talking to. And look in the scriptures for descriptions of God's character that come to bear on your situation. The God of peace who hates those wars that you've been reading about or maybe even have experienced.

Or the God of reconciliation who has the power to heal relationships in your family. Look at the scriptures and even throughout history and see the ways that God has acted.

[14 : 05] It's often in the most counterintuitive ways. And then bring that to bear on your situation and have hope that he will act. We can only have hope if we can encounter this God who's the source of hope.

And the only way that we can encounter him is by spending time with him in these intense encounters that we've been talking about. So as we wrestle with God, we've got two sides of the equation in this conversation.

And we know that we can be we can be we can be frank about what we're experiencing and we know that we can come to see God more clearly in how he comes to bear on the situation.

And so the remaining question for us this evening is how do we respond when it seems like God is taking at least a really long time to act in this situation? And so that takes us to our third principle which is don't let go.

In wrestling, sometimes there are these long periods of time where not a whole lot is happening. And the two opponents are locked together and they're they've got they both had their best hold on each other and they're starting to shake and they're both getting really exhausted and you wonder if they're both just sort of going to give up after a while.

[15 : 26] But the worst thing that one of them can do in that moment is to let go because the other one's going to get the upper hand. And Jacob and God get to that point. And Jacob says, I'm not going to let you go until you bless me.

It wrestled all through the night. This has been a long time. And maybe you feel like you've been in an experience for a very long time and you're getting tired.

And it can be really difficult to know how to interact with God when it seems like a bad situation is dragging on and on. It can seem like he's not paying attention or he doesn't want to change things or worse, he can't change things.

How do you believe in God's goodness and his power when he allows something bad to happen in the first place and then he allows it to keep on persisting? We can end up pulling away from God either by lashing out in anger and shaking our fist at him or by just kind of disengaging because we're not really sure what to say.

I have a sister who's very sick at the moment. She has cancer all through her body. She is fairly young.

[16 : 49] She's got a husband and two pretty young kids, four-year-old and five months old. And when we first got this news, not quite a year ago, my initial response was to get on my knees and have intense prayer with God for healing and deliverance for a breakthrough in this situation.

But as the months have worn on, nothing has changed. Actually, things have changed. They've devolved and the situation's getting worse and worse. And I want to confess that my biggest temptation at this point is towards disengagement.

Just resignation. Throwing up my hands and pulling away from God because the pain is too great sometimes and the questions about why God isn't acting differently are too hard.

And there's a part of me that's afraid that my view of God, the way I've kind of put him in a box and the way he's supposed to relate to the world, is going to be challenged in ways that are beyond what I can bear.

And there's just so many things that I don't know. I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know how to understand this situation. And it's a struggle to relate to God in the midst of all this.

[18 : 19] There's so many things in this life that we hold on to. Good things, like our jobs, our health, our family, our very lives. But the reality is we have no assurance that these beautiful parts of our life are going to remain.

And in fact, the only promise that we're given is that even if those things pass away, nothing can separate us from the love of God. And so it's a great tragedy when in those circumstances circumstances where we feel like those things that we hold dear are slipping through our fingers, when we decide to pull away from God, we're pulling away from the one assurance that we truly have, this relationship with a God who loves us.

And instead, He calls us to hold on to Him through the mystery and the chaos and the pain as difficult as it is.

Because it's the only way. It's the only way for us to have hope and it's the only way for us to live. And I can't think of a better example of how to do this than the story that we read of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

We have this vivid example of God coming and entering into our suffering. And Jesus is there on His knees in the garden and He's preparing for what God the Father is calling Him to experience.

[19 : 51] One of the most terrifying and painful things that one could be called to experience. And He's incredibly emotional.

But the interesting thing is He's not shaking His fist at God in rebellion. No, He's saying, Your will be done. But He's also anything but resigned.

He's pleading with the Father to change the situation. Take this cup away from me. Don't make me go through this. Even at the 11th hour when He knows that this has been coming for years. Take this away from me.

He's pouring His heart out to God in such an emotional way that He's sweating profusely. But at the end of this conversation, it's through this intense encounter that He's able to face whatever is going to come in the next several hours and coming days.

And He emerges at one with His Father as He embraces suffering as the only way to bring transformation to this world. So as we press into prayer, we do so not knowing how God is going to act in this situation.

[21 : 06] There could be a huge breakthrough. There could be a dramatic miracle. Or maybe your view of the situation will be dramatically transformed and it's really you that changes in the situation.

Or you might discover that your suffering is going to bring life and transformation to people around you. Or it could be a combination of all of those. But the fact is, brothers and sisters, that we don't know.

There's so much that we don't know and it's a huge part of being human. And that's an incredibly humbling thing, but in a way it's also freeing. Because we don't have to have all the answers.

And our main role is to hold on to the one who does. So I want to close by calling you to play that role. I want to call you to hold on, to keep pouring out your heart to God in prayer, speaking your mind to Him, keep hoping, keep wrestling with Him until when all is said and done you are locked in an embrace with the one who has promised to never let you go.

And I want to close with the words that we read from St. Peter. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so at the proper time He may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on Him because He cares for you.

[22 : 29] And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

To Him be dominion forever and ever. Amen. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.