

Genesis | Wrestling with God

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Alison Sampson ~ Genesis 32:22-31

How often have you been there? Everything is ticking along nicely when, boom! you find yourself flat on your face. The longed-for thing is no more. The relationship falls apart. The lump you tried to ignore turns out to be cancer. Your children move away, your loved one dies, your house becomes shockingly empty. Things were going so well when it happened. It's unlooked-for, unwanted, a burden. It's a disruption to 'real life', and you struggle.

Things were going pretty well for Jacob. Between them, his wives and slaves have given him eleven sons so far. He has finally navigated a way out from under the thumb of his father-in-law, the scoundrel Laban, and he's left that place, taking his family, his slaves, and his great flocks of striped, speckled and mottled livestock with him. He's on his way home after many years away, and he's ready to take up his position as head of the family. Married, rich, blessed with children and goats and sheep and oxen, about to come into his own – what could possibly go wrong?

But word comes to Jacob that his estranged brother, Esau, is heading his way. Worse, Esau is travelling with four hundred men. In fear, Jacob decides to split his assets. He sends half his entourage in one direction and half in the other, so that if Esau is coming to take revenge, some of Jacob's people might survive.

The wives, slaves, children and livestock all leave, and Jacob is left alone in the night. And a stranger appears, and tackles him.

One of the most insidious ideas about God is that life should be easy for the faithful. In our privileged context, where wealth is abundant and longevity a given, this is too easily assumed. Do the right thing by God, and God will do the right thing by you. We are told to hand our cares over to Jesus, and some of us have so few cares that we find ourselves praying for a parking spot.

When suffering does come, we can be bewildered. ‘Why, Lord?’ we might ask. ‘Why me?’ We can be surprised when life gets difficult, taken aback by an experience of affliction. We can become resentful of God and reluctant to engage with whatever the difficult times might offer us.

Many years ago, I had a very hard few months. In a short space of time my mother died, my husband and I married, we left our church abruptly, and we moved house. Anything else? Well, I blew up and walked out on my job, and my husband took on a significant new role at his work. Getting married was good; otherwise, things were pretty rough. It was tempting to sedate myself with wine or medication. It was tempting to turn from the pain. And sometimes I did. But mostly, life was a struggle.

Jacob didn’t have to wrestle. He could have kept his entourage with him, and surrounded himself with his women and children and servants. There is safety in numbers.

Jacob could have sedated himself with wine or some ancient Palestinian Prozac, and allowed his encounter with the stranger to remain a blur.

Jacob could have yielded to the stranger at the beginning, crying ‘Leave me alone! I give up!’

But he didn’t. He placed himself there, he stayed awake, and he wrestled.

The years that followed my mother’s death weren’t pretty. Wrestling rarely is. Often I was angry and weepy and snotty, a real mess. I read a lot. Genesis, Job and the Psalms, books on faith. I raged at God.

And I struggled. I struggled with sadness and the sick feeling I got every time I saw three generations of women out together. I struggled with my impotence in the face of my mother’s illness, and at my inability to fix anything. I grieved for the past and everything we had failed to say; I grieved for the future and all that would now never happen. I resented her peers who were coming into their powerful middle age. I envied my friends whose parents both lived, and I despised women who complained about their mothers. I raged at a God who allowed suffering to happen. I ripped shreds off a medical system which prolonged people’s pain, and I wrestled with our lousy way of doing funerals.

The night was long, the night was very dark, and I struggled.

The stranger is strong, but Jacob is determined. The stranger persists, but Jacob will not give up. All through the night they grapple and twist and grab and roll, neither Jacob nor the stranger prevailing. In the first light of dawn, the stranger finally slips under Jacob's guard and, with a low blow, dislocates his hip. The stranger tries to leave. But in agony, gasping, Jacob holds on tight. He asks the stranger's name, and demands a blessing.

Grief wounds. Your heart aches in your chest. It's fragile, fragmented, knotted together by bits of fraying string. Any sudden movement could jolt the pieces apart, never to be made whole again. Grief is an icicle lodged in your torso. It's too big for the space, too cold, too hard. It makes it difficult to breathe deeply, difficult to move easily, impossible to laugh. Every sudden shift causes pain. Grief is a sick lurching in the pit of your stomach; a ringing in your ears; a cloud obscuring your sight; a dull fog in the brain. You can't eat. You sleep in the day; you wake in the night. Grief leaves its marks on the face, on the body: the lines around the mouth, the sadness in the eyes, the drooping of the shoulders, the general turning in. You move slowly, carefully, like an invalid fearing the treachery of every step.

You limp.

Grieving and wounded, still I held on. Again and again through that long and dark night, I clutched at faith. I reached for poems, for flowers, for beauty. I grabbed at bread and wine around dinner tables and communion tables. I seized new life and gardens and babies; I latched onto new friends; I learned to sing.

My mother's death left a gaping hole in my life, but in the absence I found more room for me. I began to study theology. I started to write. In leaving one church, we found another. In rejecting a magical God who rewards the righteous with an easy life, I came to recognise the God who engages with our difficult questions and never shies away, the God who enters our suffering, comforts the afflicted, and leads us to life in abundance.

We can turn away from struggle. Thanks to television and alcohol and busy-ness and travel and any number of escape mechanisms, we can avoid engaging with the mysterious stranger who comes in the night and pins us, terrified, to the ground. Or we can put up a token fight, then throw up our hands in defeat and stop asking questions.

Because wrestling with the stranger changed Jacob, and who wants that? Life mightn't be great, but our pain is familiar. We fear change. We don't want to be different from how we were; we don't want to do the hard work of growth. So we gloss over things. We sidestep the challenge that is thrust upon us and live in denial. It feels easier to keep being the scoundrel Jacob, or the angry person, or the happy shiny Teflon man. The infinitely brave in the face of bereavement. The wounded lover, the family scapegoat, the rejected one. We can turn from responsibility and instead remain the victim whose life is thrown about by the fates.

But we are not invited into little lives in which we gain credit for being childish. Instead, we are called to life in abundance. We are called to maturity. We are called into the love dance of creation and, out of our experience of woundedness, we are called to offer healing to others.

And while faith is a gift, transformation comes to those who are willing to wrestle. For when we are forced to leave the old ways behind us, we have a chance to grow. And when we stay awake in the darkness, alone and vulnerable, limited in strength, shaking with fear, we might finally be open to God's holy presence and surrender to God's refining fire.

Indeed in struggle, we discover new depths of endurance, and courage, and independence of thought. In struggle, we find wisdom and patience, compassion and insight, vision and strength. Through struggle, we are transformed. Through struggle, we get to grow up.

So the next time you are assailed in the night by a terrifying stranger, don't walk away. Don't turn your back or pop a pill or pour another drink. Leave the television off. Instead, engage. Wrestle, and try to catch a glimpse of the stranger's face. Use every dirty trick you know, and hold on tight. Whatever you do, don't give up.

Because, whether that same night or many months down the track, the dawn will finally come. And then like Jacob you might find yourself in pain and gasping, but with new self-knowledge, perhaps a new name, and a new awareness of the presence of God. And you might come away limping, but I reckon that's a small price to pay for this wisdom, these gifts, this blessing.

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