




## Wrestling With God

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from Jesus Christ our Savior and our Lord, amen.

I've always known professional wrestling as we see it on Monday night TV was fake.  (SLIDE) I mean it's not as fake as fake news, but it's pretty close. Professional wrestling isn't considered by many to be a real sport because it's well known that the outcome is predetermined. That doesn't mean the struggle isn't real, just that the eventual winner of the match is determined in advance. Why is that you might ask...

Well, I did the research this week and discovered professional wrestling in America got it's start shortly after the Civil War.  (SLIDE) At first the matches were actual wrestling, but the sport struggled to find an audience because they considered the sport too boring. So, the wrestlers quietly began to fake the outcomes of the matches to make it more entertaining for the audiences. Kayfabe is the practice of pretending that professional wrestling is a true sport. Wrestlers would at all times flatly deny allegations they fixed their matches, and they often remained in-character in public even when not performing. When in public, wrestlers would sometimes say the word kayfabe  (SLIDE) to each other as a coded signal that there were fans present and they needed to be in character. Professional wrestlers in the past strongly believed that if they admitted the truth, their audiences would desert them.

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(SLIDE) In today's scripture a "Man" wrestled with Jacob by the ford of the Jabbok. Let's review Jacob's story so far... He was the second born fraternal twin. His brother who was older by a minute or two was named Esau. From their birth, Jacob tried to better his older brother. At birth he grabbed Esau's heel trying to pull Esau back into their mother Rachel's womb so he could be first born. As a young man Jacob tricked Esau into giving him his birthright for a bowl of lentil stew. Even when their father, Isaac, was near death and blind, Jacob, again the trickster, fooled Isaac into giving him his final blessing instead of Esau. All this family drama led Jacob to flee back to their father's homeland, Haran where he enslaved himself to his uncle for 7 years in order to earn the hand of Laben's younger daughter Rachel. After the 7 years, Laben tricked the trickster by giving his older daughter Leah instead of Rachel. Jacob agreed to work for Laben another 7 years to earn the hand of Rachel as well. After that time, God spoke to Jacob and told him to return to the land of Caanan. The last words Jacob had heard from Esau before moving to Haran were, "I'm going to kill you!" That brings us up to speed with today's reading...



(SLIDE) This story of Jacob wrestling with God begs more questions than it answers. Who was the man? Was it God? At the end of this episode, the man tells Jacob, now renamed Israel, he has wrestled with God, so, I guess the answer to that question is yes. I noticed Jacob wasn't picking this fight

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with God, it was God or the “Man” who initiated this wrestling bout. God wanted to wrestle with Jacob. I wonder what the issue was. My speculation is they were fighting over Jacob returning to face the music with Esau. God apparently wanted Jacob back in the promised land. We who have read all the way through the book of Genesis know the answer. Jacob would father 12 sons, who would become the 12 tribes of Israel. One of those sons was Joseph who became the administrator over Egypt when the famine hit Caanan. Joseph, who had forgiven his brothers eventually brought the whole family, including Jacob/Israel to live in Egypt. Long after Jacob and Joseph went to sleep with their ancestors, God rescued their descendants, now known as the Israelites, after their father, Israel, from their bondage to slavery.

Getting back to today’s reading... Jacob was afraid of Esau and was certain he would be killed by his estranged brother. Jacob didn’t want any part of that scene. So, he fought all night long with the God of his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham. Like the world of professional wrestling, the outcome of this bout was also predetermined. In the end, Jacob, now dubbed Israel, fought God to a draw. Both of them got what they wanted. Jacob would return to face Esau and God would give his blessing to Jacob. You see, for all his cheating, conniving, and trickery, God’s plan was to give Jacob many children and for his descendants to be as numerous as the grains of sand on the seashore all along. If

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Jacob had trusted that promise, he would have known Esau wasn't going to kill him. There was no need for Jacob to fear his brother. God had already placed the spirit of forgiveness into Esau's heart. If only Jacob had trusted in God's promise, maybe he wouldn't have needed that hip replacement...

Have you ever wrestled with God? I have, many times in my life... I knew of God's call for me to serve him from a pretty young age. After the early deaths of both my dad and my sister Marilyn, who died just 11 months after my dad at the young age of only 25, when I was only 13 years old, I seriously wrestled with God and ran away from that calling as far and as fast as I could. That was only round one in a multi-round, main event. Later I wrestled again with God over God's seeming indifference to the cause of innocent babies being born with what we call birth defects. God and I wrestled over that issue for about 25 years, before God finally gave me the blessing of peace. Part of that wrestling match led me to enter the seminary where a whole new level of wrestling began. I thought the wrestling was finally over and I could rest in the loving arms of my Savior, but God wasn't finished wrestling with me. All through my seminary years I fought the process. I couldn't bring myself to believe we could financially handle the expense of me in graduate school, at the same time as Trevor and Niki both being in college. PJ finally said to either stop worrying about it or pick another career. I used my GI Bill benefits and received several scholarships to help us through those years. It

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was nothing short of miraculous how God provided for us when the money was in short supply. Today, I still wrestle with God over His vision for our ministry.

You'd think I would have learned to trust in God's abundant provisions by now...

That's my story of the wrestling match I have had and still have with God on a pretty regular basis.

I'll bet each of you has a story or two of how you wrestled with God. One day I'd like to put together a book of our stories. I'm certain some of you have much more trust in the leading of God through the Holy Spirit than I do! I tend to get a little stubborn and want my way. That's when God laughs and the wrestling starts all over again. One thing I have learned through all this is that wrestling with God is pretty futile. The outcome is just as predetermined as the outcome of those fake wrestling matches on TV. God always wins in the end. When I say God wins in the end, I don't mean everything in our lives is predetermined. What I mean is God wants to bless us even when we want to go our own way, God still wants to bless us. God's purpose is to bless us. Why can't we trust in the promise that God will bless us? In Jacob's case it was fear that caused him to lose faith. He was afraid of Esau. In my case it was anger at God for losing my dad and my sister whom I loved greatly and later anger at all the heartbreak of watching my precious baby girl have to undergo so much pain and suffering. Fear and anger are only two of the sins that cause God to come and wrestle with us. I can name several more

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off the top of my head. Another top contender is greed. Greed comes between families and between us and God more often than my puppy licks my face. Today, I believe many people fall into another sin category when it comes to their relationship with God. It's called sloth, but really it comes down to laziness. Too many folks would rather just stay home in bed or lounging around the house instead of coming to God's house and Worshiping Him. I hope that last statement doesn't cause you to tune me out, but the truth is you can tune me out all day long, but you can't tune God out forever. You might get away with it for years or even decades, but eventually we all come to the ford of the Jabbok. We all come face to face with "The Man." When that time comes for you, I pray you'll grab ahold of God and refuse to let go until you receive God's Blessing and that you can still walk away with your hip intact.

May the Lord bless you and keep you... May your wrestling matches with the Lord bring you closer to God and better able to trust in God's promises for you to have life and have it in abundance. May your striving with God strengthen your faith to overcome your doubts, fears, anger, greed, guilt or whatever it is that is keeping you from loving the Lord your God with all your strength, all your mind, and all your soul. Amen.