

HOLD ON TIGHTLY AND NEVER LET GO!

Genesis 32:22-30, Luke 24:13-35

November 7, 2021

Faith is key to the abundant life for every follower of Christ – we all come to believe in Christ in faith, and then that small mustard seed of faith that God plants within us needs to grow and mature over time, unfortunately through our difficulties, trials, and temptations. Pastor Greg Boyd wrote a good book on this subject, titled *“Benefit of the Doubt, Breaking the Idol of Certainty”* which deals with how we as believers often misunderstand God’s gift of faith. In this book Greg speaks about his life-long struggles with faith and speaks out about how difficult it can be dealing with certain Christians that seem to have all the pat answers, who don’t seem to struggle, and who think questioning their faith is sinful. These Christians don’t seem to doubt or wrestle with anything written within the pages of the Bible, accepting everything in the Bible as literal, believing it’s wrong to evr question God. It is interesting to note that Greg claims that these kinds of Christians actually have a shallow superficial fluffy faith, with their certainty being the idol they worship instead of God. Greg claims that God wants us to use our minds and reasoning skills when we read our Bibles and should question what we read and struggle with our faith as Job did and many other characters found within the pages of the Bible. God has deliberately put this hunger and longing for more of Him within us, so that we would continuously seek after Him and never be satisfied where we currently are, and that can only come through wrestling with His Word. We can only grow and mature and keep reaching a higher level of faith when we are never content where we are, when we are struggling and seeking more-and-more of God!

This kind of thinking is reassuring to me because I am very much like Pastor Greg Boyd – I also struggle and wrestle with my faith, with God’s Word and His purpose for my life. I especially struggle with all of the health issues we are currently facing in this church and not seeing the healing power of God displayed like I believe we should. In my struggles I often think about verses like **Matthew 17:20**, where Jesus seems to be reprimanding His disciples when they couldn’t deliver a demon possessed boy. Jesus gives them this reason for failing to drive out the demon, *“Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there and it will move. Nothing is impossible for you.’”* And then there’s

James 1:6-7, “But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.”

Is the problem doubt! Is the problem unbelief! And then our natural tendency is to ask these kinds of questions, “*Do I have enough faith, or do I have any faith at all,*” which is un-Biblical, because every Christian has been given a measure of faith? So, the good news for me in reading Greg Boyd’s book is that it’s perfectly OK and healthy to question and wrestle with God. In fact, that’s how we grow and mature! And God wants us to struggle with our faith, so He can keep blessing us with more grace and understanding! So, doubt doesn’t mean disbelief and struggling with our faith doesn’t mean that we have “*fallen away.*” I want to try and show you this morning how doubt and questioning are necessary for us to grow and mature in our faith, while trying to be absolutely certain at all times and not struggle will only give us a shallow untested faith that will cause us to stumble or fall apart when life doesn’t line up with what we are reading in God’s Word!

Greg Boyd tells us that our feelings and emotions are completely irrelevant to our faith walk. The only truth that we can ever be completely confident in is that Jesus is God in the flesh and one with God the Father; that Jesus came to this earth to reveal everything that we need to know about God and everything we need to know on how to live as righteous holy kingdom people; and that our eternal security is secure once we put our faith and trust in Christ and Christ alone, all because Christ is Lord, and for me to live is Christ and Him crucified. So, we need to be completely committed to Jesus and who He is regardless of what we see, what we feel, or what we experience – our emotions and senses can easily lead us astray from the truth, so we can’t always rely on our feelings and experiences. Instead, we need to passionately live each day on the assumption that our faith in Christ is unmoveable, rock solid, and even though this life is filled with endless problems, tragic loss, difficult challenges, pain, suffering, and unanswered prayers, we are never-the-less guaranteed a glorious future with Christ that will never end. That is where we are to put our trust and faith and confidence when our world falls apart!

Whenever our faith starts to falter it helps to also hear Apostle Paul’s reassuring words to us, **2 Corinthians 5:6-9** (The Passion Translation), “*That’s why we’re always full of courage. Even while we’re at home in the body, we’re homesick to*

be with the Master – for we live by faith, not by what we see with our eyes. We live with a joyful confidence, yet at the same time we take delight in the thought of leaving our bodies behind to be at home with the Lord. So whether we live or die we make it our life's passion to live our lives pleasing to him." We need to remember that this world is not our everlasting home, and we are going to get kicked around a bit along our journey, as we are passing through on our way to our heavenly home, and we can only believe this by faith, never by sight or by feelings, and come to believe that this world has nothing to offer us that will last or satisfy the hunger and longings of our soul. Only Jesus can offer us the peace that passes all understanding and everlasting joy, as we struggle and groan along this journey towards our everlasting home!

Another key to true Biblical faith is based on us being real and honest before God, trusting in His love and grace, as we bare our souls before Him and others. God doesn't want shallow mindless Christians who think they have all the pat answers and don't need to question anything, saying God is in full control. YES, God is sovereign, and YES, God has an eternal plan for us that is good, but we all have a part to play and must stand against the darkness that surrounds us, trying to take us out of God's perfect will. So the world doesn't need Christians who accept everything that comes their way as God's will, or as God's punishment, or as God's discipline. So, just grin and bear it! That's not true biblical faith; instead, I believe the Bible tells us that God wants His people to wrestle with Him on the things that cause us to moan and groan. He wants His people to ask, "Who are you, God?" "What are you up to God?" "Where are you leading me God?" As we struggle, strive, and seek to know who God is alongside of our fellow believers! The true Biblical understanding of faith calls us to wrestle with God because the stories in the Bible are filled with people of faith struggling with God. We find this with Abraham, Moses, Joshua, King David, Jesus's disciples, and in the story of Jacob wrestling with God all night long in **Genesis 32:22-30** – so let's turn there!

Jacob was a rascal – he was a deceiver and an opportunist who ran for his life after stealing his older brother Esau's birthright and blessing, spending 14 years away from home, working for his uncle Laban, who was another rascal just like Jacob. In Genesis 32 we read about the day Jacob returns home to face and reconcile with His brother. Jacob left home with nothing and now is returning home with 2 wives, 11 sons, and great wealth, a caravan of servants and livestock. The day before Jacob meets his brother Esau, he sends everyone on ahead and spends the

night alone, so he thought, but ends up wrestling with a stranger all night. This wrestling incident takes place the night before Jacob meets his brother Esau, who he thinks is still angry enough to kill him and take all of his possessions, and rightfully so!

This story is odd in a lot of ways. A guy miraculously shows up that night and they immediately start wrestling, and we're never told why they're wrestling. It's odd because it's clear that this man turns out to be none other than God. And Jacob seems to realize this according to **Genesis 32:30**, "***so Jacob called this place Peniel, saying, 'It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.'***" Bible theologians believe this man was the second person of the Trinity, the Lord Jesus taking on a human form, and yet the passage says that the man couldn't overtake Jacob. In fact, this man (the Lord Jesus) eventually gives up and cries "*Uncle*" "***Let me go, for it is daybreak***" (Genesis 32:26). They have been wrestling all night and Jacob, a mere human, gets all powerful God to cry out, "*Uncle, I give up.*" That's very odd and troubling, especially if we see God as this all powerful always in control God! It's especially odd because God touched Jacob's hip and it was wrenched out of its socket with just one touch. So, if God was able to easily dislocate Jacob's hip just by touching it, you would think that God could've pinned him within seconds. And yet it says that this divine God/man couldn't overtake Jacob. What is going on here? What is God trying to tell us here? Why is God letting Jacob win?

The first thing we need to conclude is that God came down to Jacob's level, to meet him right where he was as Jacob was deeply troubled and in fear of this life, so right in the middle of His struggle. And during their wrestling match God helped Jacob think that he really overpowered and defeated this guy. It would be like us wrestling with our 2 or 3 year old grandchild and letting them believe they are very strong and undefeatable. I have wrestled with my grandkids and let them think that they are defeating me, so as we wrestle, they get the impression that they are winning even though the reality is that it's an obvious miss-match, I could have overpowered them and pinned them within seconds. The point is that we all enjoyed the wrestling match, it was fun to wrestle with grandpa, as we are bonding through the experience and growing closer together. Because I let them wrestle with me and let them win, our love grows deeper and becomes more intimate!

Is it not the same way with God! Doesn't God enjoy a good wrestling match with His children that know Him so intimately that are not too afraid or too intimidated to

wrestle with their heavenly Father? And, I get the impression, that's what God's doing with Jacob in this story. *“Come on, Jacob. Let's wrestle awhile. Ooh Jacob, you are so strong!”* It's an odd story, but the main point of it is really profound and important with respect to us growing and maturing in our faith. This story holds up Jacob as this great hero of the faith that is willing to take on almighty God, the Creator of the universe and win. Jacob is one of the forefathers of the nation of Israel, and one of the reasons why he's regarded as a hero of the faith, is because he had the audacity, the courage, and the boldness to take on God. To go to the wrestling mat with God, holding on tightly and not letting go until he got the ultimate prize, God's favour and blessing. Jacob is the hero of this story, and the reason his name was changed from Jacob to Israel, is because he wrestled with God. Jacob means *“deceiver,”* but God changed his name to *“Israel,”* which means, *“One who wrestles with God.”* And from this time on, Jacob's descendants would be called Israelites – those that wrestle with God like a loving grandpa wrestles with his grandkids.

From the time of that wrestling match, God's people were known as Israelites – people who wrestle with God. And when you read the Old Testament, that pretty well tells their story, the Israelites were continuously wrestling with God. And it was mostly their own fault, it was their stubbornness, disobedience and idolatry that caused them to struggle. But what this passage is also telling us here is that there's a good side, a positive side that comes from struggle, from wrestling with God, as we wrestle we are overcome, we grow in faith. This story tells us that it's perfectly okay to wrestle with God. In fact, you're supposed to wrestle with God! God is like that loving grandpa that wants his children to wrestle with Him, showing how much we love each other and trust each other. God says throughout the Bible, my people are called Israelites, those who wrestle with Me, and when they hold on tightly and never let go, right in the midst of their struggles, that's when I will bless them! Listen to this exchange between Jacob and God in **Genesis 32:26-29**, *“Then the man said. ‘Let me go, for it is daybreak.’ But Jacob replied, ‘I will not let you go until you bless me.’ The man asked him, ‘What is your name?’ ‘Jacob,’ he answered. Then the man said, ‘Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.’ Then he blessed him there.”*

Wrestling with God to receive His blessing is God's desire for each one of us – that we would be blessed in every way. God wants to develop our character, God wants to take us to a higher level, to continue to purify and refine us in His refining

fire to get rid of the dross; thereby, making us fit and ready for the kingdom of God that is coming. Our wrestling with God is an important and necessary part of the process that develops a strong unmoveable, solid faith, that gets us equipped to be His victorious kingdom people out in this world. No one likes trials, the testing of our faith, but according to **James 1:2-4** trials are necessary to mature our faith, so that we won't fall apart when tragedy strikes, ***"consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."***

One of the predominant characteristics of God is that He wants to be sought after, and we do that best when we are going through loss, difficulties, trials, and hardships. And during the process, God never hides from us; He wants to be found right in the midst of what we are going through! That truth is revealed to us by the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, in his letter to the Israelite exiles who were defeated by the Babylonians and transported to a foreign land, where they were living in bondage. Here's the hope they were given in **Jeremiah 29:11-13**, ***"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all of your heart."*** This is what Jacob did in his struggle with God. During their wrestling match Jacob refused to let Jesus go because he knew that he had finally met the ultimate source of all blessings. And on the other hand, Jesus wanted Jacob to seek Him so much so that the Almighty, all powerful Son of God let Jacob hold on tightly and wrestle with Him all night long, during the darkest time of his life, so that Jacob would be blessed!

In **Luke 24** we read another story, the story of two disciples travelling with Jesus on the road to Emmaus that illustrates this same truth. This incident takes place after Jesus' resurrection. These two un-named disciples know about the resurrection from the accounts of a group of women who encounter two angels at the empty tomb, telling them the Lord had risen as He said He would. As well some of the other disciples were also witnesses to the empty tomb, but these two travellers didn't catch the significance of all that had happened. They were struggling with this news as they were leaving Jerusalem and heading home, most likely returning to their old way of life without hope. Then, a stranger along the

road enters their conversation and pretends to know nothing about the events they were discussing. So, they fill in this stranger on what had happened over the last few days to Jesus of Nazareth, claiming this about Jesus in **verses 19-21**, ***“He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more this is the third day since all this took place.”*** These disciples had lost all hope, their faith in Jesus as the Messiah was close to zero!

Then the stranger started to quote from Scripture and explain to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself, and they must have been greatly encouraged, because they urged this stranger to stay with them once they reached their destination. **Verse 28**, ***“As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he was going further. But they urged strongly, ‘Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.’ So he went in to stay with them.”*** What is key here is that these two disciples refused to let Jesus go on! They insisted that Jesus stay with them overnight and then continue on His journey the next day. That evening, as Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and began to give it to them – a portrayal of the Last Supper at which they may have been participants days earlier, their eyes were opened, and they recognized their Lord and Saviour as the stranger that travelled with them. Jesus immediately vanishes and they ask each other – **verse 32**, ***“Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”*** They immediately rush back to Jerusalem filled with joy as their weak faith was renewed and strengthened after spending time wrestling with the Lord Jesus over their misunderstanding of what had taken place over the last few days. And as they struggled and wrestled with what had taken place to their Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, they were greatly blessed. Their faith skyrocketed to new heights!

The point of this story recorded in Luke 24 is that Jesus pretended as though He was going to leave these disciples and continue on His journey, and if these disciples would have let Jesus go on, then their blessing would have vanished. Their faith would have remained close to zero! But thankfully, they held tightly onto Jesus and wouldn't let Him continue on. As well, Jesus didn't want to leave them, either. Jesus wanted them to pursue Him and restrain Him, and only when they did, could they receive a great blessing!

The same truth is a reality today in our modern day churches. Are we willing to hold on tightly to what Jesus wants for us and pursue Him with all of our being, heart, mind, and soul, or are we content in spending just a few minutes of the day with Jesus in our devotions, or an hour or so attending a Sunday morning worship service? For those believers and churches that only want a little bit of Jesus, He will take His glory elsewhere, all because they are not willing to pursue Him and fight to keep His presence burning strongly. So, for those believers and churches who are willing to let the manifest presence of the Holy Spirit go, He will leave and continue on His journey to find another place where He is welcomed in and strongly urged to stay with them and dine with them. So, for those like these two disciples who will fight and refuse to let go of His presence, desperately wanting more, He will pour out even more of His presence and bless them abundantly.

Jesus gives us the choice on how much of Him we want, and at the present time, I believe that God is separating those believers and congregations who can live just fine without Him, from those who are desperate for more-and-more of Him, not wanting to live without His constant presence. For those who can live without His presence, they will be able to and slowly fade out of existence, their hope and faith remaining close to zero, but for those that can't live without His glory, they will be greatly blessed and taken to higher-and-higher realms of His presence, from glory-to-glory. The Lord's desire is for His church is to be like Jacob and those two disciples on the road to Emmaus, to hold on tightly, refusing to let Him go until the blessings come. So, the Lord is currently searching the world over for people who are desperately seeking after Him, wanting more of His presence and power, and when the Lord finds them, He will reveal Himself powerfully in their midst and bless them abundantly!

The point to our faith is this – God wants to bless us, and it seems like the greatest blessings in the kingdom of God, come only as we struggle and wrestle with God during those dark times of loss and suffering, when our hope is close to zero. And God invites us and welcomes us to do that, He wants us to wrestle like a loving grandpa, and there's a purpose in doing that to grow closer in intimacy and love, and then there's always a blessing in store for those who persist to the end and hold on tightly and never let go. Their faith skyrocketing to new heights!

Benediction: **Hebrews 11:1** (The Passion Translation), ***“Now faith brings our hopes into reality and becomes the foundation needed to acquire the things we long for. It is all the evidence required to prove what is still unseen.”***