

WRESTLING WITH GOD

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How were you born? A sinner, a selfish person by nature? Or were you born neutral? Or perhaps, were you born righteous and unselfish? (I have known some people who seem so beautifully unselfish that I have been tempted to think they were born that way!)

We know of one man who was born selfish, and that fact is rather disturbing, because no one is going to get into heaven at last except as one of his “children.” According to Gen. 25:22, while he was in the womb of his mother Rebecca, Jacob was already busy at strife (“and the children struggled together within her” KJV, “pressed hard on each other” NEB, “jostled each other” NIV, “struggled against each other” GNB). And when in vs. 26 Esau was born a few minutes earlier than he, he grabbed his heel as if to pull him back, “wait, I want to be first!” Isaiah reports God saying, “O house of Jacob, . . . thou wast called a transgressor from the womb” (48:1, 8). Hosea says, “The Lord . . . will punish Jacob, . . . he took his brother by the heel in the womb” (12:2, 3).

Bad beginning! But before we say, “Too bad, Jacob! You were worse than the rest of us!” Let’s remember Rom. 3:10, “There is none righteous, no not one.” Even my wonderfully unselfish friends weren’t born that way; they had to learn it. And the Good News is that we *can* learn it from the Savior of the world!

Recognizing that Jacob was born selfish and a sinner in fact does not support the traditional doctrine of “original sin” which says that the guilt of sin is transmitted genetically by the genes. It simply means that Jacob like all of us was born self-centered; and if you don’t know about the principle of the cross, inevitably you do the only thing you know to do—*be* selfish. But we can learn the way of the cross. And that’s the wonderful Good News!

This is intended for people who are not perfect, who have sins to confess, who struggle with temptations, who know what it is to kneel before the Lord in shame, in humble, tearful repentance, day after day.

Well, if you fit the category, here’s an encouraging story: here’s a man who has just told seven despicable lies in his efforts to climb over somebody else in order to get himself to the top. The man’s name? Jacob. He has deceived his poor old blind father and assumed a deceptive identity in order to secure a fabulous inheritance that by law should have gone to his brother Esau, and which his sincere old father had fully intended to give to Esau. But now Jacob has succeeded in place of Esau; but the joy and exhilaration he should have experienced at having reached the top is dissipated by an overwhelming sense of guilt and shame. Forced to flee into exile, Jacob is so loaded with self-condemnation that he lies down to sleep without being able to say a good-night prayer. Exhausted by guilt, he finds relief only by sleep so deep that a stone pillow gives comfort.

be cringing behind some bush, ashamed to walk out in the sunshine and meet Him face to face?

Millions of Christians are right now studying about angels. Go into almost any Bible Book Store and you will find many titles about this intriguing subject. One truth is clear in Scripture: Jesus said that each human being who believes in Him, whose heart responds to His love, is given a special “guardian angel.” He says, “Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven” (Mt. 18:10). It seems reasonable to understand this promise as meaning that God assigns an angel to each of us to be a kind of personal body-guard. But not only physical body-guard, but one who helps us spiritually as well, and sometimes the physical security is less important than the spiritual.

If we make a mistake, does this guardian angel forsake us? Sometimes in our zeal to frighten our children into not going to worldly places, we tell them that if they go, their guardian angel forsakes them at the door. But fear will never produce genuine devotion to Christ.

A good story to remember is that of Jacob. He had sinned grievously (the story is in Genesis 27). He repeatedly lied to his poor old blind father, Isaac; although we don't read that he was put under oath, his lies seem quite equivalent to perjury, lying under oath. He takes the name of God in vain in the course of his lying (vss. 19-22). Feeling guilty and polluted, he leaves home on his way to Mesopotamia. Tired at night, he lies down on the ground to sleep away his exhaustion and his guilty sorrow, probably not daring to pray. “I'm nuthin'

goin' nowhere" he probably thought to himself. You know how when we have sinned, we don't feel like praying. Well, his angel did not forsake him! Young people need to learn that story; he had this dream of a ladder let down from heaven right where he was. Telling youth this story will NOT encourage them to presume against God's mercy; it will melt their hearts to appreciate His mercy. And that's far better than cowering in terror. Angels are our friends, not KGB agents looking for a case against us.

Well then in a dream, the Lord God gives Jacob a message: there's a ladder reaching from where he is up to the top of heaven and there above it stands God. (Note: Jacob doesn't "climb" that ladder! Angels do, up and down). And what does God say to poor Jacob who feels like nuthin' goin' nowhere? "You rascal, you liar, you thief! How do you think I could ever bless YOU??!!" No, a thousand times no! God repeats the seven fantastic promises He had made to Abraham previously, renews them all to Outstanding Sinner Jacob, and DOESN'T ASK JACOB TO PROMISE ONE BLESSED THING IN RETURN. Read it in Genesis 28:11-22. Does that mean that God okays telling lies? Also, a thousand times no! But the gratitude Jacob experiences at knowing he is forgiven, cleansed, redeemed, accepted in Christ, chosen by God to salvation, changes his heart and saves his soul from ruin and despair.

And you, who are you? By grace, a child of Jacob. Identify with him, please.

between Christ and Satan. What a destiny! If Jesus' promise makes sense, it can mean nothing less.

It is Satan's accusation in the great controversy with God that sinners are incapable of coming into harmony with God's law. There is an enmity against God that prevents this. The executive authority which Christ gives to His saints in the time of trouble is grace to live in temptable flesh; nevertheless, they would rather be laid in the grave than to disgrace their Saviour by choosing to sin. They will not be conscious of their purity of love and devotion. They will not boast of perfection. In fact, they will see themselves as unworthy sinners. They will cling to Jesus all the more in their trial of faith. Jesus' gospel triumphs in them and thus He grants them executive authority in overcoming Satan's last fling—his farewell party to the 144,000, the time of trouble.

If anyone's heart responds, "No, I don't want that close a fellowship with Christ, living in the time of trouble; rather let me go to heaven by the underground, subway route," he is in fact rejecting Christ in rejecting full fellowship with Him. If we have the choice between (a) the comfortable, peaceful sleep in the tomb that we call death (with the hope of the first resurrection), or (b) living through the time of trouble and actually welcoming Christ's personal second coming, we dare not avoid that final intimacy with Him.

If we accept Christ, we must accept Him like He is, cross and all. How else could we ever find the courage to face Him in His kingdom? Would we not

saints of God. It will be brought on entirely by the machinations of the wicked who let their hatred of God erupt into a final frenzy of rebellion. Christ will meet this head on as “Michael,” the Son of God to be sure but also the Son of man “not ashamed” to call us “brethren” (Hebrews 2:14-18).

James and John once naively asked Jesus for the highest places in His kingdom. Jesus asked if they were able to drink of His cup and to be baptized with His baptism. They childishly assured Him, “We can.” Mark 10:39. But the Lord could not give them the place of honor they asked for. That is reserved for those who in an unusual sense taste of Christ’s cup of loneliness, and by faith conquer its bitterness. This will be their privilege during the time of trouble, when they live in the sight of a holy God without a mediator or intercessor, and wrestle with the temptation to feel themselves as forsaken as Jesus felt on His cross.

But they will have already learned how to say “No” to temptation. Therefore, they will conquer that final temptation to ultimate despair. There is royalty inherent in such a victorious faith! As no other group in all history, they will realize Christ’s special promise: “To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in His throne.” Revelation 3:21. That honor is not a mere token, like sitting in the Queen’s chair for a moment to have your picture taken. It is an invitation to share executive authority in God’s government, to be a member of His responsible committee that directs the successful conclusion of the great controversy

During my long lifetime I have met only one person who said she thought she did not have enough trials and tribulations. Her husband was wealthy and she had a new Cadillac every two years; and she gave of her time and strength and money to help the Lord’s work wherever she saw a need. But most people I know feel they have more than enough trials and troubles.

Young people especially wrestle with the constant temptation to doubt and fear for their future, afraid that they are not accepted by God, conscious of their sinfulness and hesitant to believe that God can really bless them.

The Bible says that everyone who will be saved at last is a child of Jacob; frequently the Lord addresses His people as “O house of Jacob” (cf. Isa. 2:5 etc). I don’t know that any of us are better than Jacob, whose name was Supplanter, someone who was so self-centered that he wanted to get ahead even from his birth. If you think you were better than that from your birth, well, you probably don’t know your own heart. The life story of Jacob will be encouraging for you to study. Here was a man who felt God-forsaken that night when he tried to sleep with a stone for his pillow (Gen. 28:20-22). He knew he had sinned; he was keenly conscious of his unworthiness (we are, too!); yet the Lord tried to assure him of a ladder from heaven to earth right where he was, with angels of God ascending and descending on it to help him.

But who is your “father”? His name is Jacob, yes, the grandson of Abraham. His life, his experience, is yours. Please accept some encouragement from

the story of your “father” Jacob. And in a special way, Jacob is the “father” of those who will prepare to meet Jesus at His second coming—people who were born sinners, people who have sinned, who have often failed, have wrestled with unbelief, have struggled to understand why they have so many troubles, have been tempted to give up in despair, and yet who have chosen to hang on by faith until they experience the victory that changed their name from Jacob to Israel, the prince who has prevailed with God, who has won a wrestling match with Christ!

Jacob’s life-long problem was learning to believe the simple promise the Lord made to him: God had chosen, elected him, to receive the birthright, promised to bless him as He promised to bless Abraham. And all of Jacob’s heartaches were the direct result of his doubting that promise when he looked at his deep sinfulness and had a hard time believing that God could actually bless such a sinner as he knew he was!

Seven times that haunting phrase is repeated in the awe-inspiring Book of Revelation: “He that overcometh . . .” The idea is one of combat, hand-to-hand wrestling like Jacob’s struggle with the Angel (Gen 32:24, 25), like swimming upstream against a strong current, climbing a mountain, defeating a tenacious foe. Does that idea of “overcoming” frighten you? You don’t have the stick-to-it-iveness, perseverance, basic “strength,” to win the battle? Like weary refugees on foot who can’t summon the energy to take another step, who drop down and die, the temptation to give up the

made herself ready” (Revelation 19:7). There is an intimacy in marriage that no other relationship can approach. And a bride not only loves her bridegroom; she can’t help but respect and trust him implicitly. She is ready to go with him anywhere, even to the perils of the Kalahari. She will gladly share all his future experiences. She is jealous to share his sorrows and pain.

No way will the Lord allow this coming time of trouble to take place until His people collectively “marry” Christ in that capacity as a bride. And this means for them a growing-up “unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13) like a bride is grownup to be able to stand by the side of her bridegroom at the wedding. I don’t know what kind of a wedding Mark and Delia Owens had, but I am sure that no little flower girl at the wedding would have been ready to go to wild Africa with him.

A wedding means that now the bridegroom and bride will begin sharing life together. This explains how the coming time of trouble will be the “honeymoon” for Christ and His bride. They will get to know each other intimately as they share the excitement of that time. And if there is to be any pain and sorrow endured by God’s people in the time of trouble, you can be sure that Christ will suffer it as much as they.

He is not the one who brings on the time of trouble; He will not cause it in any way. He would love to return the second time in perfectly peaceful circumstances; the time of trouble was never His idea. It is Satan’s idea of a farewell party for the

with the lions or at least she knew he was on his way in the jeep the time when she was alone in the tent. Being married to the right husband made all the difference in the world.

Is there such a thing as being “married” to Christ so that we know He is closer to us during the time of trouble than Mark was to Delia? If so, all our fears could be automatically de-fused. This time of trouble that we have dreaded so much turns out to be the honeymoon when Christ and His bride get to know each other more intimately than ever before.

Don't forget that Daniel adds some tremendous “good news” about this time of trouble: “And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: . . . and . . . thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book” (Daniel 12:1).

Michael is another name for Christ which means, “Who is like God?” The angel who was talking with Daniel probably used the name to emphasize the divine-human character of the mighty One who steps forward in the final crisis for the defense of His people. To “stand up” is an idiom to describe how a king takes over his throne and assumes complete control. The idea is clear: Jesus won't be asleep during the time of trouble!

For Him to “stand up” means that He will enter into a new nearness with His people, something never before realized. He will become a Bridegroom and they will become His bride. Revelation pictures the sublime excitement of this new relationship: “Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honor to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath

struggle to “overcome” causes some to drop out of the Christian “race.” They give in to their long-established habits of alcoholism, or drug use, or pornography, or . . . whatever. Apathy is the last of the vices that we are invited to “overcome” in the famous “seven” struggles of Revelation: “Because thou art lukewarm, . . . I counsel thee, . . . Be zealous, . . . repent. . . . To him that overcometh . . .” (3:14-21). Lukewarm apathy is spiritual weariness, loss of hope, boredom. It is the fundamental characteristic of Christ's true church in the last segment of time. The will seems paralyzed; it's the almost irresistible drowsiness that induces sleep at the very Gethsemane—time when the Master says, “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation” (Mt. 26:41). Have you ever fought to stay awake when every cell of your being cries out for sleep? We have come to that time in world history, right now! Spiritual sleep was “Christian's” problem when he was trying to traverse “the enchanted land.” He saw “pilgrims” snoring away by the side of the path that leads to eternal life, overcome by a stupor like nerve gas; it took every ounce of his spiritual energy to stay awake until he got out of the devil's enchantment. But he did get out, and you and I can “overcome.” A wise writer said, “Those who decline the struggle lose the strength and joy of victory” (*Ministry of Healing*, p. 500). Here is the “how” of overcoming: look again at that last of the seven promises to the “overcomer.” “To him that overcometh . . . EVEN AS I OVERCAME,” says Jesus. Immerse yourself in the story of Jesus' overcoming, His battle, His victory.

Ponder His struggle in the wilderness of temptation (Mt. 4:1-11), His Gethsemane blood-sweating ordeal (Mt. 26:39), the unspeakable battle with self as He hung on His cross (Ps. 22). Let His experience be your icon to look at, rather than the endless photos of the latest Hollywood stars. Yes, the battle is intense, but the means of victory is simple—"look." You can overcome the stupor of unbelief.

In that climactic wrestling match by the River Jabbok, Jacob broke at last through the clouds of unbelief and doubt and knew by faith that God "receiveth sinners." He learned at last that salvation is not dependent on his works, but on the grace of God and His promises. Read the seven great steps in Jacob's experience in Genesis 25 to 42, and learn with your "father" how to believe.

Daniel says, "There shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time" (12:1). Will it be worse than the Iraq war? Psalm 91, while trying to comfort us, tells us of "the terror by night, . . . the pestilence that walketh in darkness" and "the destruction that wasteth at noonday. A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand" (verses 5-7). And Jesus adds to our dread of that time: "Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another" (Matthew 24:9, 10). Is it any wonder that some people who say they believe in Christ's second coming add

rather ruefully, "I hope He doesn't come in my day, if it has to be all that bad."

Could there be something about the time of trouble that we haven't yet understood? The news may be much better than we have thought. Consider the story of Delia Owens.

It was bad enough for Daniel, the brave prophet, to be thrown into a den of lions. That was his "time of trouble," an ordeal as frightening to him as our facing the time of trouble is to us. Can you imagine a woman facing the terror of spending a lonely African night out in the open with wild lions?

If you had asked Delia Owens when she was a girl how she would like to spend the night in Africa on the ground in a sleeping bag with wild lions milling all around her, she would probably have shrieked in horror at the prospect.

But here she is under the stars in the distant Kalahari Desert, with a nine foot lioness nibbling at her toes in her sleeping bag and another breathing hotly down her neck, and eight more sniffing in a circle around her. Delia is a hundred trackless miles away from any help. And on another occasion she crouches alone in her flimsy tent with aggressive lions padding all around, uprooting the stakes, pawing at the canvas while she frantically empties her trunk so she can climb in it and take refuge.

Most of us would dread such a nightmarish experience as much as we dread going through the time of trouble. What led Delia to endure this ordeal?

She loved a man, her husband Mark Owens, and he was either with her as she slept on the ground