

Wrestling



Call: Gracious and merciful God, you hold up those who are falling, and raise up those who are bowed down. In our weakness and weariness, we come before you now. Lift our eyes and broaden our horizons that we may set our minds on things that are above, in the peace and joy of your presence, and worship you with glad and reverent hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Hymn: STF 58 Lord I come before your throne of grace <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bekyy2PG1Cc>

Lord, I come before your throne of grace;
I find rest in Your presence
And fulness of joy.
In worship and wonder
I behold Your face,
Singing what a faithful God have I.
*What a faithful God have I,
What a faithful God.
What a faithful God have I,
Faithful in every way.*

My song in the night.
In the shelter of Your wings,
Hear my heart's reply,
Singing what a faithful God have I.
Chorus

Lord all sovereign, granting peace from heaven,
Let me comfort those who suffer
With the comfort You have given.
I will tell of Your great love for as long as I live,
Singing what a faithful God have I.
Chorus

Lord of mercy, You have heard my cry;
Through the storm You're the beacon,

Robert & Dawn Critchley © 1989 Thankyou Music/Adm Used By Permission. CCLI Licence No. 1085607

Prayer of praise and thanksgiving: Father God, how wonderful is your great love that holds us tight and refuses to let go. Anointed One, you are all righteousness and compassion, holy of holies, King of all kings, yet your love is given freely to each one of us and is never taken away. Your Divine Holy Spirit awakens our conscience, enlightens and emboldens, and never abandons us. How can we ever thank you enough for all that you did for us through your Son Jesus Christ, and for all you continue to do for us? You hate sin but not the sinner. You never give up on us. Your love endures forever. Thank you that you work all things for our good, nurturing us, sustaining us and strengthening us. Lord God we give you thanks and praise. Amen.

Intro to reading: Jacob had cheated his older brother Esau out of his inheritance, and in return Esau had vowed revenge, threatening to kill Jacob as soon as their father Isaac had died. In the meantime, Jacob had prospered in the land of his father-in-law, marrying 2 wives, fathering 12 children, and increasing his livestock to such a degree he had to divide his farms in two. Yet, despite his good fortune, he still lived in fear. After 20 years he decides to return to his homeland, but this will mean encountering Esau. He tries multiple times to buy Esau's favour with lavish gifts of livestock, to the extent that he almost ruins himself with the generosity of the gifts. Esau, however, is not taken in, and responds by heading towards Jacob with an army of over 400 men. Jacob then sends his wives, children and all his livestock across a ford to a safe place, and decides to spend the night alone to contemplate his future.

Readings: Genesis 32:22-31 That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless 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." Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he

blessed him there. So, Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.

Prayer of confession: Eternal God whose compassion is over all that you have made, we need your forgiveness. We often struggle with our conscience, wrestling with negative emotions, weaknesses and imperfections. We hold tight to you, but sometimes we feel our grip loosening. We struggle with dread and worry about what may lie ahead, instead of looking to you and placing our trust in your love. Lord God, forgive our failings we pray, and give us that assurance that comes only from you as we remember all that Jesus did for us as he gave up his life for us on that cross, so that our sins could be forgiven. Amen

Intro to reading: This is the well-known passage of the feeding of the 5000, but what we are looking at today is the lead up to this passage. John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, had been beheaded at the request of Herod's daughter. Jesus needed time to process this devastating news, he might even have feared for his own life. He searches for a quiet place and time to reflect, yet the crowds follow him, and he always does his response is unexpected.

Matthew 14:13-21 When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food." Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered. "Bring them here to me," he said. And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Hymn: STF 636 O love that wilt not let me go <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=biHQVoAUTtU>

O love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee:
I give thee back the life I owe,
that in thine ocean depths its flow
may richer, fuller be.

O joy, that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee:
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
and feel the promise is not vain,
that morn shall tearless be.

O light that followest all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to thee:
my heart restores its borrowed ray,
that in thy sunshine's blaze its day
may brighter, fairer be.

O cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee:
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
and from the ground there blossoms red
life that shall endless be

George Matheson Used By Permission.

Message: Wrestling is one of the ancient combat sports dating back over 1000s of years. The earliest records are in cave drawings in France dating back some 15-17000 years. We read today from Genesis, the earliest book of the bible, the story of Jacob wrestling with a man. The result of that wrestling match is Jacob coming away with a permanent limp, but also with a blessing from God and a sense of his true identity.

My father used to love to watch the wrestling on Saturday afternoon TV – I remember names like Big Daddy and Giant Haystacks. It was all entertainment, and I suspect highly choreographed. Another popular form of wrestling, particularly in Japan, is sumo wrestling. Here the wrestler has to grab or push his opponent outside a circle drawn on the ground, or get his opponent to touch the ground with any part of the body apart from the soles of his feet, and he does this by shoving, grabbing or throwing his opponent down.

In both forms of wrestling grabbing and holding on to the opponent is an important part of the attack but also the defence. You might be able to throw your opponent to the ground by grabbing hold of them, and equally you might be able to prevent defeat by holding on to your opponent and keeping yourself upright.

We often think about holding on to things as a bad thing. We pray that we can lay our burdens down. We ask God to free us from all that we cling to unnecessarily.

However, here, in this context, in our bible readings about Jacob wrestling with the man, and with Jesus and the crowds who hold on to him, this holding on is seen in a positive light. The persistence of God in holding on to Jacob, and in Jacob holding on to God; and in the people holding on to Jesus and he in turn holding on to the people.

Let's look at these two passages.

Jacob is filled with fear and guilt. He has recognised and acknowledged that he had sinned, he needs to reconcile with his brother and seek his forgiveness. He prays to God in earlier verses 9-12: "O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, LORD, you who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,' I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'"

Jacob recognises that it is God who helped him prosper, it is God who has granted him his large family, and it is only God who can now help him. Jacob cannot buy his way out of trouble.

Yet despite having uttered this prayer Jacob still wrestles with his doubts and fears.

How often do we go to bed, worries going round and round in our heads, tossing and turning and wrestling with those things that trouble us? We wake up and perhaps are relieved that it was all just a bad dream, or perhaps we come up with a solution for what we were worrying about.

In Jacob's case, the man, we now know was God, realised that Jacob was not going to let him go and so God held on and with a mere touch, dislocated his hip.

God held on to Jacob and Jacob held on to him. In the end Jacob was a changed man, even his name was changed. Jacob the ambitious schemer, who thought he could buy his way out of trouble becomes Israel the one who struggles with God and overcomes.

We may struggle with God. Do we have doubts, frustrations, feelings of guilt or unworthiness? These are natural feelings we may all have at times. But God does not let us go. He holds on tight, he may even change us as a result. There may be a cost – Jacob had a lifelong limp.

God never lets go. We may be tired, our grip on God may slip, but he holds on tight.

Jesus was tired, he was grieving, he wanted solitude, peace and quiet, yet the people would not let him go. And his reaction is not anger or frustration, it is compassion. He puts aside his own problems and heals the sick, feeds over 5000. Jesus does not let go, he holds onto the people who need him.

Jesus never lets go. He was tired, yet his compassion for the people was greater than his own personal needs.

There will of course be times in our lives when we have to put our own needs or those of our loved ones first. There will be times when our grip on God may slip, however we can know that God holds onto us, whatever we are growing through. He never gives up on us, he never stops loving us, even when we wrestle with sin and guilt, or when we are tired and need refreshment.

Let us hold onto God, let us be persistent in our Christian witness and in our prayers, for he is always faithful, always loving, and always forgiving.

Reflection: Stones

Hold onto a pebble or stone. Grip it tightly in your hand. Feel the coolness of the stone, the contours and the shape. Think of those things in your life that you regularly hold onto – someone else's hand, a stair bannister or a walking stick, a knife and fork, or spoon. Think about what it is of God that you need to hold onto – the coolness of his peace, that faithfulness in life's ups and downs, the forgiveness given freely through Jesus Christ.

Hymn: S of F 423 O Lord hear my prayer <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQ5fBYTW8Rw>

O Lord hear my prayer
O lord hear my prayer
When I call answer me

O Lord hear my prayer
O Lord hear my prayer
Come and listen to me

Prayer of Intercession: Like Jacob crossing the Jabbok, we come before You acknowledging our fears and my deep need for Your protection. We are not worthy of the least of all Your steadfast love, yet we claim Your promises over our lives. Lord, we bring our anxieties, our broken relationships, and the things that feel entirely out of our control. Just as You commanded Jacob to return and promised to do him good, we hold fast to Your word that You will never leave us nor forsake us. We pray for parts of the world at war, for our politicians and leaders that they can govern with integrity and a steadfast desire to serve. Give us the courage to wrestle through our doubts and struggles. We pray for all those struggling in mind, body and spirit, that you will hold them tightly and that your touch will bring healing. Like Jacob, our prayer is: "I will not let You go except You bless me!" Transform our lives, renew our identity, and strip away anything that relies on our own striving rather than Your grace. Grant us the faith to let go of our past and to walk forward in the confidence of Your victory, Your peace, and Your enduring presence. In Jesus name we pray. Amen

Hymn: STF 615 Let love be real <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GfRN5dDkym5>

Let love be real, in giving and receiving,
without the need to manage and to own;
a haven free from posing and pretending,
where every weakness may be safely known.
Give me your hand, along the desert pathway,
give me your love wherever we may go:
as God loves us, so let us love each other,
with no demands, just open hands and space to grow.

Let love be real, not grasping or confining,
that strange embrace that holds yet sets us free;
that helps us face the risk of truly living,
and makes us brave to be what we might be.
Give me your strength when all my words are
weakness,

give me your love in spite of all you know:
as God loves us, so let us love each other,
with no demands, just open hands and space to grow.

Let love be real, with no manipulation,
no secret wish to harness or control;
let us accept each other's incompleteness,
and share the joy of learning to be whole.
Give me your hope through dreams and
disappointments,
give me your trust when all my failings show:
as God loves us, so let us love each other,
with no demands, just open hands and space to grow.

Michael Forster © 1995 Kevin Mayhew Ltd Used By Permission. CCLI Licence No. 1085607

Blessing: Lord God, we have chosen to follow you no matter how difficult the road. Bless us now, we pray, so that we may face the next steps on our journey. Amen