

Do you remember World of Sport? I do. At about 4pm every Saturday and we heard the voice of Kent Walton say "Hello Grapple fans, today's programme is from the Grimethorpe Working Men's Club". Yes, it was this.....

BIG DADDY and GIANT HAYSTACKS

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All that's gone now and wrestling is not so popular in this country. TV wrestling in Britain petered out in the 1990s to be replaced by American wrestling WWE – the World Wrestling Federation, the WWF – which changed its name to World Wrestling Entertainment because the World Wildlife Fund, the WWF thought people might confuse the two organisations! But the WWE is less of a sport and more of a circus. It has a ring that's of course square, and wrestlers doing ever more crazy things to attract and thrill the audience. Usually, things are arranged to make the violence look more horrendous than it actually really is. It is entertainment and the wrestlers have to perform two or three times a week, but it's very strenuous and potentially dangerous and they do get injured badly from time to time. The career of Big Daddy ended after a contender died whilst he was sitting on him! He never got over it.

SUMO WRESTLING

Actually, the mixture of gratuitous violence we call wrestling wasn't traditionally what the sport, or more precisely the martial art was about. In many societies it's a noble art where the wrestlers test their courage, strength and fortitude, where the object is not to knock seven bells out of your opponent, simply to prevail.

WRESTLERS

In the modern WWE the rewards are very great for those who become Superstars. WWE makes millionaires out of good performers. Superstars are known for their fast lifestyles and American machismo, fast cars, pretty girls and a jet-set lifestyle.

TITLE

Our story today is about wrestling. It was a long bout, as at the beginning of the story we find Jacob wrestling all night with a mystery man. If you were here last week you'll remember that Jacob had an encounter with God in a dream he had. It was Jacob's first encounter with God; an astonishing story, with God in His grace making unconditional promises to Jacob. Wonderful, remarkable and Jacob's response - lukewarm - "if you do certain things, and I ever get back to this land, then you'll be my God."

And off Jacob went to his uncle Laban in Haran. Laban was as much of a crook as Jacob. Jacob loved his daughter Rachel but Laban made him work for seven years before he could marry but then only offered his elder daughter Leah. Jacob then had to work another seven years to get Rachel. He had eleven children with his two wives and two concubines and in those years we are not told of any connection of worship with God. But God still blessed him and he did well at the expense of Laban's family. His position became precarious with them plotting against him. And then God spoke to him again - "go back to Canaan". In a sense that was obvious and he goes but he knew he had Esau waiting at the other end. He also burnt his bridges at Haran by cheating Laban of his flocks in a crooked deal. What a mess he'd got in to!

But his return was the first glimmer towards God even though the trickster was doing it his way. That's followed by his first move towards God. As he approached Canaan you'll find recorded in Chapter 32 that in desperation he prays to God that his brother wouldn't kill him and then reminds God of His promises. What a cheek, he ignores God for decades and then expects His help.

But isn't that true of people. God in his grace shows interest, makes promises, Here's His promises (Bible) and we love to speak of them, but do we ignore God most of the time and only call on Him in emergencies, when things go wrong.

But at least Jacob recognised that the original promise at Bethel involved his returning to Canaan, it was his first step of faith in God. Now he was to get his second big encounter with God.

JACOB WRESTLED WITH GOD

It's on this trip back to Canaan that Jacob finds himself alone and wrestling this mystery man. It was a big contest. It wasn't the 15 minute bout on WWE, it went on all night. What it was about and what words were exchanged between them are not recorded – just how it ended.

It's apparent from this passage that Jacob wasn't just fighting anyone. Tradition and traditional art shows Jacob wrestling an angel. But angels aren't mentioned anywhere in this passage as far as I can see. It becomes apparent to us the readers and to Jacob that he's wrestling God.

THEOPHANY

It's one of many examples in the Old Testament that theologians call theophanies – appearances of God in a human form. I wonder at what point Jacob realised who he was fighting?

I'm not sure. Was it in words exchanged as they wrestled all night. Was it when the man did the rather unconventional wrestling move of dislocating Jacob's hip with a simple touch – a miracle? Was it when the man refused to give Jacob his name? By the end of the event Jacob knew: *"I have seen God face-to-face, and I am still alive"*

It was certainly by daybreak that Jacob knew he was wrestling someone special. Who could have dislocated his hip by just a simple touch? Jacob refused to let God go until he gets a blessing.

PENIEL: AN ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

How different this second encounter with God actually was! Central to Peniel is that Jacob was active in this encounter – wrestling with God. In Bethel he was asleep and got an amazing vision. He was passive. Here Jacob was actually grappling with God and then refusing to let go of Him unless he got a blessing.

DISLOCATED HIP

It was an no holds barred competition and Jacob still hung on even when his hip was in pain. He must have been in agony when he was hanging on to God preventing Him from leaving. My wife can tell you about hip pain as can any here who have had problems with that joint. Yet in his agony Jacob refused to let go of God.

I'm sure in his mind must have been the memory of the vision at Bethel and that God had been faithful to his promise. Last week we considered that we have a God who is gracious, who has sought to bring blessing to us even though we don't deserve it. On that first occasion Jacob blew it. He understood the grace but then just went and continued to be his dodgy self in his equally dodgy family. Jacob was remembering his promise "you will be my God if you keep me safe and bring me back to Canaan." He'd blown the first occasion, now he was going to hang on to God whatever the cost. For Jacob it was a test of his courage and commitment. He was not going to let God go without a blessing.

DEMANDING THE BLESSING

Last week I believe God was challenging us as to what we have done with the grace that He has shown us in Christ. We can be so much like Jacob at Bethel. We love the message but we make conditions and then do our own thing without Him. And then we have the cheek to ask Him for things even though we've ignored Him the rest of the time. Jacob may have picked up a two wives and two concubines and eleven children in Haran, but without God it was all a mess. Now here at Peniel he wasn't going to make the mistake again. He wasn't going to let God leave as it were.

Perhaps you heard the message last week and even if you didn't, you know you don't take God seriously. Maybe there is something in your life you know before God is wrong. Maybe you just put God second, third or fourth behind other things. Maybe you only recognise and follow God as it suits you.

Maybe like Jacob, you're wrestling with God already. Wrestling with understanding Him. Wrestling with understanding His word. Wrestling with understanding His ways. Wrestling with faith despite our doubts, our depressions, our fears, our weaknesses. And like Jacob we can find that wrestling with these things before God can just seem to go on and on. Sometimes holding on to God in these circumstances is difficult even painful and we just want to let go. God wants us to hang on to have the blessing!

There's a message in this passage if we feel like that – don't let go! Hang on and like Jacob demand the blessing. Yes you heard it, demand the blessing. Jacob had the promises from the previous occasion. He knew who he was grabbing on to.

If you are a Christian this morning, you have trusted Jesus, then you are the recipients of God's promises. The bread and wine remind us all about that. Grab on, recognise your weakness, your sin, but recognise those promises. You are a child of God, you have the Holy Spirit in you. Demand the blessing. Hang on whatever the cost. God wants you to wrestle with Him because He wants to give you the blessing. Allow God to change you, transform you, remake you. Jesus makes us new. Follow Him, go His way.

Never say you can't be changed or things can't change. By the power of the Holy Spirit all things can change. Jacob was a changed man after this. He was by no means perfect – he wasn't much of a father like his father wasn't to him. He had a weakness in his hip after the wrestling match with God. But he got the blessing: *Your name will no longer be Jacob. You have struggled with God and with men, and you have won; so your name will be Israel.*" (he struggles with God).

We have a God who doesn't just make us promises but who desires to bless us. As we come before Him this morning, we are going to come recognising our weakness and sin, we are going to recognise the grace

of God as we consider again the broken body and shed blood of Jesus. Let's use it as an opportunity to demand the blessing, affirm our commitment to follow His ways and ask for His Spirit to fill us and use us to His glory.

Maybe you've never even had an encounter with God before. Maybe you've heard the message that you can know God because Jesus has died for you, but have ignored God. Maybe it's time you grappled with Him and found that he brings blessings to you when you trust Jesus as Saviour and Lord. To help you with this, here's a brief video about a wrestler called Shawn Michaels, who was one of the bad boys of wrestling, until he wrestled with God..

SHAWN MICHAELS

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Have you accepted Jesus? No? Then there is no better time than now to accept your failure, your sin. You've been trying to grapple with God. All he wants you to do is ask for the blessing: call on Him for forgiveness because God loves you and Jesus has died for you. *"If you'd been the only person that needed saving, Jesus would have died for you"*. Take this opportunity to follow Jesus and find the same change, transformation as Jacob did.

Prayer

I said earlier that the table is a place where we recognise our own weakness, failure, sinfulness, but we realise as we see the bread and wine that God in His grace has come to us – without merit on our part, simply because He loves us.

God is on control ... He's working for my goodit doesn't mean that everything is going to be smooth .. but there's light at the end of the tunnel. Shawn Michaels

As we come to communion, we find it to be a place of promises. It stands for the promises of God that have already been honoured in Jesus Christ dying for us, and it points us to all the promises God gives us for the future. Let's reflect on that in prayer when we confess our own weakness, and the wonder of what Jesus has done for us. Our prayer is a song.... *Jesus Christ, I think upon Your sacrifice.*

Communion.

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