

Reminiscere

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St. Matthew 15:21-28

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In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Being a Christian, on this side of heaven, is to be Jacob. Or better yet, it is to be Israel. It is to wrestle not with flesh and blood but with God Himself. It is to strive against a God that appears to be trying to harm and destroy you. It is to lie begging at the feet of a Saviour who seems to want nothing to do with you and has every reason to not want anything to do with you. It is to be covered in the dirt and filth and mess of this life, to be bruised and scraped and scratched and refusing to give up until the Lord blesses and forgives.

So often in our lives we are plagued by the thought “There is no hope for me. I am destined to failure and heartache and the only explanation for my suffering is that God hates me and is punishing me for my sin or, worse yet, He doesn’t care about me at all”. And that can only lead to one other very terrifying thought – “Jesus didn’t in fact die for me and forgive me. God isn’t merciful”.

No doubt, as Jacob strained with every fiber of his being to avoid being murdered by his unidentifiable attacker, he thought “There is no hope for me. I am being punished. The Lord has turned against me and all those promises He made are nothing but lies. He has withdrawn His mercy from me for deceiving my brother and my father.” The son of promise was suddenly locked in the fight of his life. There were no mats to soften the falls or referees to break things up. Blood and gravel, dust and sweat and tears caked into open wounds. Every muscle was burning and exhausted. But giving up meant certain death for our father. For what certainly felt like an eternity, Jacob fought physically and verbally with his attacker. Jacob remembered well the sins of his youth as we all do. And it would seem that they had finally come home to roost.

When you stop and consider what exactly that would mean, there really isn't a more terrifying thought – that the word of forgiveness isn't true in the end or, at least, it isn't enough which is really the same thing. What if God kept a meticulous record of the sins of our youth and our adulthood and rewarded us

accordingly? Not a single infraction, no matter how small unaccounted for. You know, what we're so good at doing for one another? Sure, God temporarily gave us a break and doesn't just zap us with lightning but by the time of our expiration date we had better do everything we can to make up for what we've done. Perhaps then we can find some certainty, some peace, and give God some reason for sparing us from eternal pain and judgment. We make promises that we fully intend to keep but know that in all likely-hood will probably be broken by tomorrow. We try to be extra nice and helpful. We try to read our Bibles and pray every night...or are we even trying to do that?

But then suddenly we find ourselves under attack, being tossed to the ground, kicked and punched and clawed at. We are surrounded by threats and reminded of our constant failures, the sins of years gone by or even just a few minutes ago. We lose our jobs, our homes, our families. Even our own lives are threatened. Those promises of God that sounded so sweet, that offered so much hope – the promise to never leave us or forsake us, the promise that not even Satan would be able to snatch us out of our Father's hand, the promise that our sins have been as far removed from us as east is from west, the promise that our Father would give us all good things at the proper time – all of them suddenly seem empty.

And the most terrifying part of it all is that it is God who has come to do battle with us. The same Lord who said "Come unto to me all you who labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest", now seems more like a pitiless mercenary who takes pleasure in our suffering. What could be more awful than to hear from Jesus' lips "Why on earth should I help someone like you? Do you know who you are? I have come to help God's people."

"Lord, have you raised me up and given me hope only to smash me to the ground and harm me? Have you healed us only to inflict more pain us? You, O Lord, are the one who drowned my sin and guilt in Baptism. You are the one who gave me Your Holy Spirit that I might have life. You are the one who shed your Blood on the cross as payment for all my sins. You are the one who said that the word of forgiveness I heard from the mouth of your called and ordained servant was your very own word. If all that is true, what am I to make of this suffering? How am I supposed to understand my pain, my depression, my broken family? Why is everything in my life filled with failure

and difficulty? Why does nothing seem to go right or work the way it's supposed to?"

Faith is the continued battle between what our ears have heard and what our eyes and our flesh see and feel. We have heard that we are forgiven, beloved children of God. How many times have we made the sign of the cross and reminded ourselves that by Baptism we have been adopted into the life of the blessed Trinity? How many times have we stood before this altar and chewed the very Body of Jesus and swallowed His very Blood, taking His life into our own? Yet, for all that we have heard, we see and feel that we are haters, doubters, adulterers, cheats, and thieves. We know and feel in our hearts that we are idolatrous coveters who are never content with our daily bread. Doesn't this make us even worse than the Gentiles, knowing what's right and true and still returning like dogs to our vomit, being invited to sit in house of God and be fed by our Lord, only to trade it for cheap worldly junk? Every day we seem to fight a hopeless battle against the passions of our flesh.

Is God a liar? Has He failed to deliver on His promises? Was our baptism a fluke? We are constantly tempted to judge God's faithfulness by our earthly condition. What we are actually doing is judging the Gospel by the Law. "The Law says do this and I haven't so the Gospel must not yet be for me."

There's no question, you haven't done the Law. But the Law isn't the Gospel nor can the Law limit the Gospel. And this is exactly what He is training His children away from. God's power to save isn't limited by your failure, your weakness, your poverty, your sickness, or even your death. Don't trust or fear those things. There is only one thing, ONE THING, that we can trust, one thing that is immovable and untouchable – the promise of God in Jesus Christ. Yes, you are guilty of sin, terrible, awful, wretched sin. Yes, you deserve nothing but temporal and eternal punishment. The Law is true. We are all dogs, wretched curs who should be tossed to the curb. But the Law isn't the Gospel nor can it undo the Gospel.

The Law is a demand. The Gospel is a promise. The Law is what you have failed to do as God commanded. The Gospel is what God has done for you and to you out of His immeasurable and incomprehensible love for you. Everything in your life may scream that God hates you, that He's punishing you, that your life is hopeless and a waste, that you're going to die as nothing more than a damnable sinner, that God has rejected you forever. Do not

despair. Don't listen. Fight God with His own promises. The Blood of the new covenant is the only thing which can overcome the crushing hammer of the old. Flood God's ears with His promises, because He can't deny them or go back on them. He loves to hear them. And it certainly isn't as though He has forgotten them. We have. He is training us to trust nothing, NOTHING, but His promises, regardless of what the devil and our flesh may try to convince us of otherwise.

As it did for Jacob and for the Canaanite woman, it may seem like it takes forever. You may feel as though the battle is far more than you can take. But learn from these two dear saints who have endured this same struggle before you. God is ALWAYS faithful. Hear me say that again: GOD IS ALWAYS FAITHFUL. His will is your salvation. He will see you through the fight. What feels like a life and death struggle to you, is in the eyes of God a gentle teaching and disciplining of a child whom He loves with all His heart.

You are baptized. THAT is who you are – forgiven, redeemed, sanctified, purified. Like your Saviour, your real life is hidden under suffering and death. The Lord loves those whom He chastises. He is purging you of those things that are harmful to you – your sins, your vanity, your love of earthly things, your trust in the Law. He wants you to fix your eyes like a laser on one thing and one thing only – the promise of your salvation that has come to you through the agony and bloody sweat, the precious death and burial of His Son, Jesus, who has endured every pain and even the real abandonment of His Father in your place. There alone, on Golgotha, the true Son of promise wrestled with His Father, with the Law, and all the hordes of hell. And by dying to the Law's condemnation of sinners, Jesus has ensured that you will not die for your sins. He already has.

That is what your heavenly Father remembers – not your sin, not your weakness, only His mercy and His steadfast love. He remembers the stable, the temptation in the wilderness, the Garden of Gethsemane, and the cross. He remembers the day that He reached down and pulled you out of Satan's kingdom of darkness and washed away every blot and stain of your sin. And every Lord's Day, gathered together with all those who wrestle with God, all true Israelites, you remember the sufferings and death of your Lord Jesus Christ and do in remembrance as He has given – you eat and drink the Body and Blood of Jesus that bring assurance to you that your wrestling isn't in vain.

Here is the beautiful thing about this wrestling with God: God wants to be overcome; He wants YOU to win and He has given you the victory already. But He will only be overcome by faith, by clinging to His promises, to His works, and to His faithfulness in spite of everything you see and feel. The death tolling of the Law will only be silenced by the declaration of sins forgiven - not your striving, or promising, or succeeding. He will be overcome by frightened and timid Jacobs who will not let go until they have received God's blessing. He will be overcome by foreigner widows who would gladly be called dogs so that they might receive even a crumb of God's mercy. He will be overcome by you.

Dear Christian, one day your long night of wrestling will end and the Son of Righteousness will rise with healing in His wings. And on that day, He will wipe away every tear from your eye, He will bind up every wound and receive you into the eternal kingdom prepared for you.

In the Name of +Jesus.