

A Visit With Barbie
(Genesis 32:22-31)

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Jacob Wrestling

The Story of Jacob Wrestling with God at the River is a great story for a lot of reasons. What I think is most is that it gives us permission to struggle with God.

Usually when we think of relating to our elders or to anyone who deserves respect (let alone God Almighty), we think of politeness as the only acceptable way to address them. I do think that respect and politeness are important. Generally speaking, young people don't have the life experience or the wisdom that comes with it. And so, some modesty and deference on their part is appropriate. And it would follow that this must also be how it should be for all of us when we address God, who is beyond us in every way.

An Exception

But the story suggests something different. There are times when we are struggling with our lives, struggling for a "blessing," in an existential way, as Jacob did at the River. And God, our parent, sees the sincerity of our struggle and rather than demanding that we be his good and polite children and rather than dictate to us what the solution should be

and expecting us to simply accept it, he takes our concern seriously and engages with it.

And by “seriously” I mean that God our father (and mother) is prepared to relent, to give in, if his child is right. And God may even be prepared to do so, not because the child is right, but because his child has fought so valiantly for what he needs.

This story shows us that God also takes us seriously in this way. It is a model for our own relationships with God. And it models a relationship that truly goes both ways.

Part of the deal we have as members of God’s family is that God promises to bless us. God says to us, just as we say to our kids, “I’m going to see to it that you have everything you truly need to live a full and happy life.” And if we, who are God’s children, feel as though the sum of our lives in God’s family has been more like a curse than a blessing, we can drop the politeness and all out struggle with God, for that blessing.

I think another way of putting it is to say that God would rather have an honest relationship with his children, where they feel that they can show their true colors and argue it out with him, than have children

who are outwardly polite, but are inwardly resentful or quietly nursing despair. If, deep down, you feel that life in God's family is a raw deal, then lay it all out there and struggle with God until he gives up the blessing. That is what I believe this is saying.

This understanding is one of the highlights in the Bible for understanding our relationship with God. And God highlights it by renaming Jacob "Israel", which literally means "one who struggles with God." And this name belongs not only to him, but by association to all the members of his family in the generations that follow. It is so important for us to remember that we have this kind of relationship with God, that the name was chosen for today's nation of Israel.

My Struggle

I don't think any of us goes through life without facing this kind of struggle at some point. And lately a struggle with God has been coming to a head within me, when it comes to the life of the church. I feel that the deck is stacked against us, and rightly or wrongly, probably wrongly, I take it personally.

I am at the tail end of a generation schooled in the Christian faith. You and I have read or heard a thousand pieces of scripture, during our lifetimes, some of them many times. For most of us, our faith has

helped us through many difficult times. And although we in the churches have been far from perfect in living it out, our churches have been a source of comfort and strength. They are the inheritors of a deep well of ancient and timeless wisdom. And we know that the relative peace and prosperity we have enjoyed as a nation, is in no small part attributable to the religious commitments of church-goers.

We also know that scandals in churches here and there have deeply damaged the reputation of all our churches whether they deserve it or not. And we see that the schooling of the next generation in our faith is no longer happening.

So the struggle I am having is not really a question of my faith in God. I believe more strongly than ever in the core Christian message of God's love in Jesus Christ. I believe wholeheartedly that it hold a key to a life-saving connection with God, if we are willing to struggle for it.

Instead, the struggle I am having is with the disconnect between the world around us and the core teachings of our faith. I am realizing that that most people have no idea what church is supposed to be about. And I am realizing that I no longer understand what other people are

even thinking today. And most of all I am struggling with the separation this has created between me, between us, and our children.

It seems that the world has changed too quickly for any of us to really understand it. And one of those changes has been a complete rejection of Christianity even among people born into loving Christian homes. Almost none of our children attend church. That includes my own son, who has not even bothered to baptize his own children. He is a busy person, as are most working people, but if it was important to him, he could easily find the time to come to church once in a while. The simple fact is that church is not important to him.

I, on the other hand, feel a strong connection with my own parents through our shared experience as people of faith. And it is hard for me to feel a similar continuity with my own offspring. It is as though a giant butcher's knife has dropped between us and younger generations, even our own children.

A Visit With Barbie

This really came home to me when I went to see the Barbie movie with Sheryl last week. I wasn't originally going to go, but someone told us that it was about Barbie and Ken living in Barbieland, a "perfect" world

where there are no blemishes or cellulite. We were told that Barbie and Ken go on a trip to the real world and are shocked by all its full of imperfections. We thought that sounded interesting. So went to see it.

Now that I've had a few days to think about it, the movie makes me feel sad. On one level, it was pure entertainment. On another level, it was Hollywood making an attempt at doing for people who don't go to church what church is supposed to do; which is, helping them face the big questions in life; such as dealing with change and conflict and death and finding true happiness. But as I expected, it did this while being very careful to make no references to religion; which is totally uncool for young people today.

The movie helped me to see how people younger than myself are experiencing the world around them and how the movie was trying to make sense of life, by analysing the relationship between their generation and ours, the generation that grew up playing with Barbie and Ken dolls.

Although most young people today probably wouldn't frame it this way, it seems to me that they too are struggling with God for a blessing. But

it is the struggle of people who refuse to entertain anything that smells like religion or that even allows for the existence of God.

What the movie gives us is some kind of Hollywood version of “words of wisdom” in the form of philosophical statements coming from mouthpieces like Will Ferrell and Kate McKinnon, who are comedians that started out on Saturday Night Live and behave as though they have Attention Deficit Disorder. For me the whole movie was like an ADD experience.

What I realized, as I watched the movie, is that the moviemakers probably have a better understanding of what many in the younger generations are thinking and experiencing than I do. And that in some ways I probably just don't get it.

So, I am going through a struggle with God to gain a blessing, and the blessing I seek is the restoration of some deeper spiritual connection with my own children and grandchildren and their generations.

I am sad for those people in the younger generation for whom the entertainment industry is their source of wisdom. I think that there will come a time in their lives when they discover that they have lost

something very precious; when they discover that their rejection of the religion of their parents has cut them off from a deeper understanding of who we were, the way we understood life and what motivated us most deeply. How can a person know who he or she is, without knowing where they came from?

And for my part, I also feel tempted to reject their world and the ways they struggle for meaning. To my mind, the Barbie movie is mostly rubbish. I want them to turn and see the light and open their hearts to the faith in a God of love who has given my life meaning. I don't want to take their understandings of life seriously on their terms. And maybe that is where my struggle with God lies.