

**A Tale of Two Men Wrestling with God and Man  
based on Genesis 32 and Acts 9, David Jahnke, 8/3/14**

So Jacob wrestled all night with a being who is described as both God and a man. Jacob refused to let him go and the God/Man blessed him with a new name-- Israel-- and a hip pointer that sent him limping into new life. Paul too battled God and had a thorn in his side which God would not remove. The God/Man and the wrestling represent how intertwined God and all of his children are. Jacob points to how God wrestles with us when we are really weak in order to teach us how strong we are. Paul points to God wrestling with us when we are really strong to remind us how weak we are without him; how much we need him and his grace and what our strength is for.

I just saw a documentary about perhaps the greatest athlete of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bo Jackson was an all-star in two professional sports early in his career. He weighed around 230, had the strength of a defensive lineman and ran the fastest 40 in football. After being lied to by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, he lost his eligibility in college baseball and fell to the middle of the pack in the major league draft. This I think was the first example of his needing to wrestle with God. Because after sabotaging him in this way, the Buccaneers ended up drafting him #1 in football. But he rightly turned his back on them and decided to play baseball even though it meant starting in the minors. He was not afraid to humble himself.

Some examples of his athleticism in baseball— he once ran down a catch close to the warning track and instead of putting his hands up and banging into the wall, he jumped and climbed up it with his feet, taking three steps up and around and jumping back down. He also threw a guy out at home from close to the warning track on the fly. After one season with the Royals, he decided to play professional football as a hobby, where he averaged 5.5 yards a carry over four years for the raiders.

But just as he was entering his prime, he shattered his hip, due to the power of his own stride being thrown out of whack due to a light tackle from behind. And he never played football again.

So why would such talent be taken from him and from the world? Who knows? But perhaps to show him how much inner strength—how much spiritual strength he had. It was time for Bo to wrestle in the darkness again. After a hip replacement, he went to work in the gym—something he never had to do before—and he managed to return to professional baseball—the first and only athlete to ever return to the highest level in his sport after a hip replacement.

Jacob was broken spiritually and afraid. God came to him and wrestled him all night and showed him how much strength he had! He could face his brother who had vowed to kill him. He showered his brother with gifts and with sorrow over his actions and with love and he found new life with him.

So whatever befalls any of us-- no matter what happens around us or to our bodies, we have resources within to press forward. There are untapped, unrealized, underdeveloped gifts that are not limited by difficult circumstances because they are from God. Now we must be willing to wrestle; wrestle with ourselves, with life and with God. We have to recognize that our life is completely and inextricably entangled with God and that there is no escaping that. When it seems the battle is unfair or He is not on our side, we must refuse to let him go. We demand blessings and trust that God has them in store for us. This is how our fear gradually dissipates. And then we get to work during the day and train—developing the gifts and resources we did not know we had and we shower them upon others.

So when God wrestles with us when we are weak, it is kind of like a gentle headlock we cannot escape. But there are also times when he steps into the ring with us when we are really strong. And if we are not willing to submit to the armbar behind our back, we might have a pile driver coming our way.

Saul is our example here. Saul was a man who had risen to the top of his game. A Jew among Jews; blameless with regards to the Law; righteous and full of strength; ready to take on the apostates from among his own people; that is the Jesus followers. So God stepped into the ring with him on the way to Damascus, blinding him for three days.

The great southern writer Flannery O' Connor said this about Saul, "I reckon the only way the Lord could've made a Christian out of this one was to knock him off of his high horse."

I spent some time earlier this week with a very strong woman. She has had great success in the business world-- enjoying the competition with other companies and even competition within her company between her and her colleagues.

She spoke of how her mind was always working...in creative ways but also even while others were talking...thinking of ways to win arguments and “one up” or manipulate others. And she advanced, she believes, because of this competitive nature and her strong mind. But over time, she came to understand that this was impacting herself, her family and even her company in adverse ways. She was growing more anxious and depressed and tried a variety of self-help tools to improve things, all to no avail.

Finally, she started listening to Christian podcasts and reading the Bible and praying and within a quite short time, her life was transformed. She started seeing everything in new ways—essentially in relationship to God rather than to herself.

So I think this room is filled with really bright and gifted and strong people. So every once in a while, God will have to knock us off of our high horse and teach us how much we need God. And remind us time and again what the purpose of our strength is; that is to go to others and lift them up, especially those who have been beat down by the world.

Someone put a book down on the table at the end of the hall over in the other building. God brought my attention to it the other day and my goodness have I been blessed by it the last few days. It is called “Sometimes God Has a Kid’s Face” by Sister Mary Rose McGeady who is the director of Covenant House which houses runaway and kicked out teens. Here how one of the girls was handling the charge to go back out into the world. [See chapter 2 attached]

Jacob and Paul and Jesus wandered a very dangerous world as well but they had learned the strength of the Lord who filled their lives with meaning and joy. In their wanderings, they all had seen the face of God in men, just as Sister Mary Rose saw it in lost children. Will we follow in their footsteps? Will we so commune with the compassion of God that we wrestle with the pain of God’s children? Will we trust the Lord to provide the strength we need to do so? Will we create space for youth here and in our homes and at missions to get untangled from an often wicked world and get wrapped up in the Love of God? Let us not grow weary or afraid for our God/Man Jesus has already wrestled with everything we will face. To the one who can do far more abundantly in us than all we can ask or imagine; to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, now and forevermore. And God’s people say...

## Chapter 2

*"Is it OK if I stay an extra night?" she asked.*

"I'm not afraid because I don't know what's out there, Sister.

"I'm scared for a different reason," she said.

"I'm scared because I *do* know what's out there. I know ... and I'm scared. That's why I can't leave. I just can't."

Kathleen stood in the doorway of her room at Covenant House, with her hands planted squarely on either side of the doorframe as if she were afraid I was going to try to physically drag her from the room.

Her bright blue eyes were wide with fear and determination.

"Kathleen, it's OK. Someone will go with you. You won't be alone. You said you wanted to do this."

"I know. I know I did. And I do. I know I need to be on my own. I mean, I know I can't live here forever. But can't I stay a little longer?"

"You know, I always thought things were bad at home. When my dad would get drunk and beat me and things like that. Or when my mom would be drugged out and scary.

"But it was even worse on the street. I mean, everyone was drunk or drugged out. And they all wanted something ... know what I mean?"

"I don't know if I can describe it, but I don't think

*Run Away*

*Scared and cold,*

*first night on the streets*

*Your body hurts*

*from your head to your feet*

*You miss school,*

*not the work — it's the friends*

*Thinking what you'll say*

*when they ask*

*where you've been*

*Gota dollar-fifty,*

*every penny gotta spend*

*Make a wrong move ... Boom —*

*your life comes to an end.*

*Daniel, 16*

*a kid on the street*

I was ever, even for a second, NOT scared when I was on the street."

She paused to look deep into my eyes. She wanted to make sure I was following her. That I understood. That I knew — absolutely knew — the incredible fear she felt inside.

I looked into her eyes and tried my best to comfort her. I could feel my mind racing a mile a minute, imagining what was causing the terror bubbling inside her.

It wasn't too hard imagining what those once innocent eyes had seen on the streets.

I've seen those eyes a thousand times before....

Like so many of our kids, she had run to the streets to escape a wretched and dangerous life at home. At first, I'm sure Kathleen's eyes could only see better days ahead — a life finally freed from the day-to-day abuse and terror that was slowly killing her at home.

But then reality of the street caught up with her. It always does. Always.

After only a couple of days, she began to realize that she was now utterly and completely alone. What had once been the world's simplest questions became impossible to answer...

"Where am I going to sleep tonight?"

"What am I going to eat?"

"Can I make it on my own?"

"Is there anyone in this world who cares?"

Her world — her entire huge world — was now suddenly empty of even one person she could lean on.

Can you imagine what that must be like? Can you imagine how that might change the way you would see the world?

Her eyes began to see trash cans filled with old food — and now she began to wonder if she should just take a bite. Her stomach ached, she was so hungry. Maybe just a bite.

Her eyes saw old men asking for unspeakable favors — and she suddenly began to wonder if maybe, just maybe, she could close her eyes for a moment and give herself up. Her pockets were empty, she desperately needed money, she had to do something.

Her eyes suddenly began to see a world no decent person — let alone a kid — should ever have to see and face. A world that was dark, and dangerous, and unforgiving, and unfriendly and unrelenting. A world that literally chews up and devours innocent kids.

That's what I'm sure Kathleen's eyes had seen on the street.

And it's precisely why they were laced with fear now. The very idea of leaving Covenant House — and maybe one day seeing any part of that awful world again — froze her with terror.

It happens to all our kids. Some of them, the strongest ones, can somehow forget about it, or at least put it back into an airtight part of their memory, where they never have to revisit it again.

For a lot of the others, kids like Kathleen, it's harder to forget. One of the biggest lessons we all learn at Covenant House about saving kids is that we first have

to somehow save them from their fears.

That's what Kathleen needed most of all.

"I know why you feel this way, Kathleen," I said.

"I know how tough it can be going back out there.

"We can take it a little slower, if you'd like."

Her eyes softened for a moment, and seemed to relax.

"But I want you to realize something very important," I said. "It's different now. You're different now. You're entire support system is different now," I said.

"When you go outside these doors again, it will not be the same world, and it will not be the same you. You'll always know that we're here for you," I told her. "You didn't know that before."

She nodded her head quietly to say she understood. Pools of tears were beginning to form in her eyes.

"And you have someone else you can rely on more than ever, and that's you," I said. "You know now how good you are, and how smart you are, and how much you have to offer this world," I said. "You know how much we all believe in you."

"You're right," she whispered very softly. "I didn't really know that before."

She wiped away the tears that were now streaming down her face. I could see she now understood that her time at Covenant House had truly changed everything in her world. And inside her, too.

"Is it still OK if I stay an extra night?" she asked.

"Just one more," she said. "Then I'll be all right."

"I'd like that," I said.

"Thanks," she said.

She turned for a second to leave, but then turned back and gave me a quick, self-conscious hug. "Bye," she said.

Tomorrow, her new life begins.

I'll be praying for her extra hard.

Just as surely as she couldn't be beginning a new life without Covenant House, she wouldn't be starting a new life without your help, too. Please ... will you pray for her if you can?

Kathleen hasn't been outside of Covenant House since she came to us. I'm worried about her, but I think she's going to do OK. She has a long way to go and she is really terrified of being alone again, but I think she will make it.

Thank you for praying for her too, and for doing all you've done to help her so far.