

“As Close as Your Heart”

If you were out with a friend having a deep conversation about life and how you find meaning, how would you respond to a question about where God and or Jesus fits into the way you live your life? We might respond, “How about those Dodgers?” or “What lovely weather we have been having. I so love the fall.” Anything to change the topic. We feel our relationship with God is private. Or we are not comfortable talking about God even with a good friend. We are uncertain about our relationship with God, we hope it is good enough.

Some people are very certain of their relationship with God, and it has never wavered. I congratulate them and I pray that they never have to experience the distance or disconnect that others have. Some of us have struggled mightily. We are like Jacob wrestling with the angel at the place Jacob named *Penuel* or “Face of God.” That struggle lasted throughout the night. The angel was so impressed that he changed Jacob’s name, which means “usurper,” to Israel which means one who “wrestles with God.” Jacob/Israel may have struggled mightily that one night, but for others of us it is a lifelong struggle. Sometimes the struggle is playful like two dogs having a friendly tussle. Other times it seems like a tooth and nail cat fight with snarling, hissing, tumbling, and fur flying.

The former is the fun kind of struggle we have when we are studying the word of God. We are seeking out meaning and trying to discern where we fit within God’s Kingdom. We wrestle intellectually and emotionally with scripture and what it is saying to us in our current context. We know that the scriptures were written at least two thousand years ago, but we are certain that they are timeless. We believe that they speak to us in the present as profoundly as when they were first written.

Within this kind of struggle there is our sense of yearning to know God and know God’s hopes and direction for us. We sense God’s love and care is as close as that of a loving mother or father who desires nothing but the best for their child. Our sense of longing may be so strong that we do not realize that God’s desire for us is even more profound than yearning for God.

When we are in a rough and tumble struggle with the Lord, much like Jacob experienced that night long ago, our experience of God can be obscured. The struggle may be only for nighttime, or it may go on for days, months, or years. I think of the early Renaissance saint John of the Cross who wrote so eloquently of his struggle in the *Dark Night of the Soul*. In this work he wrote of the “painful experience required to attain spiritual maturity and union with God.”¹ His writings are considered so profound that he has been named one of the thirty-eight Doctors of the Roman Catholic Church. That is, a saint whose writing is considered to have contributed to the doctrine of the Church.

Another saint who struggled mightily is, St. Teresa of Calcutta. She gave her life to caring for the poor and dying in Kolkata in the name of God. However, she

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_of_the_Cross accessed October 18, 2025.

wrote privately that for fifty years God was silent; so silent that she even questioned God's existence. Despite the silence she labored on. She was loved and admired by so many who could not imagine her struggle with God was so profound.

Then there are regular people of faith who struggle with God. We do not live lives of exceptional faith. These are people who work, pay bills, raise a family, and mostly stay out of trouble. They don't wear their faith on their sleeves. They may go to church on Sunday, donate to the church, say grace before meals, they may even participate in Bible study now and again. But to examine their relationship with the Almighty may feel risky, especially on a weekday.

But there are times of crisis or change when we have no option but to engage in the struggle. These are times when we feel lost like a child in sea of adults searching for her lost parents. We feel surrounded by strangeness and confusion. We cannot see a way out. We wonder how that feeling of security disappeared so suddenly. I expect the Israelites exiled in Babylon during Jeremiah's time might have felt that way. In Psalm 121 the psalmist asks, "I lift up my eyes to the hills; * from where is my help to come?"² It is a good question when our hearts and spirits are tired, and life is chaotic. But the psalmist answers his own question saying, "My help comes from the Lord."

Jeremiah assures us that even as we struggle God is making something new in us. Through Jeremiah YHWH says, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

We may think that we must be like Jacob and struggle to know God. We may feel like St. Teresa that we are distant from the Lord. We may experience a sense of yearning that goes unfulfilled as we strive to be one with God. Struggle, distance, and striving are all parts of the relationship. But we can be assured that God is not so far away. God is within us, and God's teaching has been written upon our hearts. Remember that, oftentimes what is closest to us can be the hardest to see.

To paraphrase Deuteronomy the Word of God is very near to each of us it is in our mouths and in our hearts.³ It is ours to struggle with or to settle into and find comfort in. Like Jacob we may wrestle through the night, but when morning comes, we know we have seen the face of God. We know our wrestling was worth the effort because we wrestled with the one who knows us deeply. The same one who when our struggles are over will welcome us home into the eternal heart of love.

² Book of Common Prayer, Psalm 121:1, p.779

³ Paraphrase of Deuteronomy 30:14