

**The Grappling Pastor:  
Pleading with God. Pleading with Men.**

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## The Grappling Pastor

In 1992, the Gracey family of Brazil issued a challenge to all the world's martial arts forms stating that their method of self-defense was so perfect, they could beat any competitor. In true showboat fashion, they put their \$50,000.00 where their mouth was and organized a "no holds barred" single elimination tournament open to any champion of any form of martial art.

As predicted, Royce Gracey won, cruising past a boxer, sumo wrestler, kick boxer, karate champion and kung fu expert in rapid form. What was his secret weapon? None really, other than good, old-fashioned grappling. The same method of self-defense used by the "Striver" himself.<sup>1</sup>

### Jacob's Grappling with YHWH

When Rebekah urged Jacob to get out of town for "a few days" (Gen. 27:44) to steer clear of his twin's

retribution, she must have had no idea how long he would remain an alien. Apparently the news of Esau's wrath "turning away" never reached Jacob or else he just refused to believe it. Jacob did not return to Canaan, rather he made Paddan-aram in Mesopotamia his new home. He married (albeit oddly), established himself and began to raise a family, but peace did not find him there, either. After at least 14 years of near exile he began to feel the tug homeward, though, and with the confirmation of God's own voice (Gen. 31:3) he set out for Canaan and his brother.

It was on this anxious journey home that the angels of God met him (Gen. 32:1). What happened in this meeting is not disclosed, but perhaps its purpose was to confirm to Jacob that God was indeed with Him, similar to his "ladder vision" on the way to Laban.<sup>2</sup> Still, even with the blessing of such a vision / visitation, Jacob found his heart full of fear at the news that Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men.

Greatly distressed, Jacob split his belongings in two hoping that he might get away with at least half of his stuff, and then he went to prayer. If he had simply ended there, or spent the night in prayer, my guess is that his Ultimate Championship would not have occurred, but his understanding of God was still dim. He did not yet realize the power and sovereignty of the Almighty, thus he was also sure to take matters into his own hand. Jacob stayed up all night doing what he had done all his life... scheming. Manipulative presents and gifts were prepared. Servants were given orders what to speak. The whole parade was mapped out.

Finally, perhaps with the hope of one more encouraging word from YHWH, he crossed back to Mahanaim alone and it is there and then that *God* came to *him*... and picked a fight.<sup>3</sup>

As a covenant child, Jacob had to learn that real change in this world would take place only as he pled with a prayer-answering, all-powerful God. The heel-grabbing, manipulative, conniving man has no sense of God's sovereignty nor His power, and Jacob was given a firsthand, real-life lesson in that regard.<sup>4</sup> God came to Jacob to "learn him a lesson" in an actual, physical battle, symbolic of the actual, spiritual battle Jacob must learn to fight.

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<sup>1</sup>Jacob, was later named "Israel" because of this event. Israel means, "one who strives with God."

<sup>2</sup>Jacob named that place "Mahanaim" which roughly translated means, "two camps." Most likely this meant he viewed the angel's presence as God sending *His* host to dwell with *his* host as a safeguard and protection. See Keil and Delitzsch, 193.

<sup>3</sup>As to whether or not the "man" wrestling Jacob was God Himself or simply an angel of YHWH, most commentators believe the former. My own understanding is that this event would class as a Christophany.

<sup>4</sup>As Hosea describes this match he speaks of Jacob's "weeping" and supplication, and the Lord's "speaking" with Jacob. Clearly this event was no mere dream or vision, as a permanently dislocated hip would often remind our forefather. See Hosea 12:3-5.

The length of this bout is not disclosed, but the phrase "until daybreak" implies that it was of considerable length. Even though he put up a good fight, in the end Jacob discovered he could not rely on his own strength. At the approach of dawn, the Lord instantly dislocated his thigh and it is here the real lesson began. Even when he defeated by the mere touch of the Lord, Jacob refused to release his grip on his God. It would be in weakness, with weeping and great pleading, while his hip dangled out of place, that Jacob's heart would be set straight.

For, it was when Jacob was broken and humbled and could do nothing more than hold on for dear life, that God did allow Himself to be vanquished. It was when Jacob was desperate that he finally began to strive after the right thing with the result that God let Jacob "win." The victory was not gained through his physical strength or cunning, but God is "prevailed upon" through Jacob's broken and helpless pleading and begging. All Jacob could do was hold on and plead for a blessing and God gave just that. Jacob left Mahanaim (renamed Peniel for "the face of God") with a life-long limp and a new understanding of His Lord.

Webster's defines "grappling" as "a hand to hand struggle; to wrestle"<sup>5</sup>. It is using every part of the body to grip and grab an opponent in order to subdue him. There is nothing flashy nor mysterious about this technique and it certainly doesn't make the plot lines of high-cost adventure films, but it does produce results. Rather than seeking that one "knock-out punch," grappling pins and pries until the opponent is unable to escape or endure the pain of the match.

Not every detail is clear in God's strange bout with Jacob, to be sure, but in some strange way it and the Gracey brothers do provide the pastor with a picture of what so much of his ministry consists of. The vivid image of Jacob lying in the dust in the agony<sup>6</sup> of a dislocated hip, clinging and pleading with God, serves as an apt illustration of the two-pronged work of the man of God; wrestling with the Almighty for His blessing and wrestling with men for their souls.

Such has been the lot for the men of God throughout the Scriptures and church history and it is the aim of this paper to prove that fact by briefly examining the key biblical and historical data. In the process we hope to construct a viable paradigm or picture of the grappling pastor which will urge all of us to press on in our quest to realize God's blessing and witness spiritual awakening.

I think the good pastor is a grappling pastor, and here is why.

## PART ONE: PLEADING WITH GOD

The saints of both testaments who were called upon to lead the people of God serve as an excellent instruction to us today of pleading with the Lord.

### Models from the Old Testament

Moses

The humblest man on earth<sup>7</sup> is a model of rare consistency in the skills of grappling with God in prayer.

#### *Exodus 32: After the Golden Calf*

When Moses returned to Israel with the Ten Words and found the people dancing about the Golden Calf, he immediately recognized the heinousness of their crime. In swift retribution he sent out the few loyal men left to him to slay the unfaithful and rid the camp of its sin. Once this was done, Moses immediately fled to God to plead for the people and acknowledge their sin. The words of his prayer illustrate the pleading we have been driving at:

"Alas, this people has committed a great sin, and they have made a god of gold for themselves. But now, if Thou wilt, forgive their sin - and if not, please blot me out from Thy book which Thou has written!" - Ex 32:31-32

This is a desperate prayer by a desperate man. Moses not only intercedes on behalf of the people, but he offers his own life as a ransom for them. He who knew better than any of them the blessedness and joy of communion with YHWH was willing to sacrifice that eternal glory so that they (the sinful, rebellious ones) might inherit it.

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<sup>5</sup>Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield Massachusetts: G & C Merriam Company, 1965)

<sup>6</sup>I had the regretful experience of dislocating my shoulder this summer while taking a break from writing this paper. I can personally testify to the agony of joint dislocation and assume that the 95 year old Jacob writhed with the same helpless pain that I did!

<sup>7</sup>Num. 12:3

And this was no trifling or ancient near-eastern elocution, this was the leader of a stubborn people throwing himself before a Jealous God begging for their souls.

Here then are some of our first lessons in pleading with God. It is obvious from the short account given us of Moses' prayer, that real pleading of God is desperate in nature. Moses understood the sin of the people and the just punishment they deserved. He knew he could do nothing to stop the hand of the Almighty, still he comes to the Lord, lays hold of Him and pleads for forgiveness, even offering up his own life. Not only is this desperate prayer, but it is selfless prayer. It is the determination to see God's hand move regardless of the personal cost or expense. This kind of begging from the Almighty is intense and serious in its constitution, much like the cries and pleadings of Jacob from the dust of Peniel.

#### *Exodus 33: "Show me Your glory!"*

After Moses intercedes even further on behalf of the nation and sways his Sovereign to return to the camp in Person, he launches out in yet another demonstration of pleading. Moses had seen enough of God in Egypt and in the exodus to know that he wanted to see more. As soon as God mentions calling Moses by name, Moses responds with a one sentence plea that perhaps shocks the reader: "I pray Thee, show me Thy glory!" (Ex 33:18).

The shock comes from the fact that Moses had been asking a *lot* from the Lord around this time and one might think God would be offended by such a request. Moses' petition, however, is answered immediately by YHWH in the affirmative and he is later given the privilege of seeing as much of the Holy One as any human could bear.

What a lesson in the value of asking! And this is just the lesson we learn from such an account. Grappling with God is to be done in all humility, yet at the same time it is to include the grandest of requests. As we will see later on, there is a part of God that (speaking reverently) seems to enjoy the challenge thrown at Him by His people. He bids us to come and ask and to ask the things that "are not possible with men."

#### *Deuteronomy 3: Seeking the Promised Land*

One final episode from Moses' life demonstrates a third principle of pleading with God. When Israel drew near to the completion of the 40 years wandering, Moses found his anticipation and desire overwhelming to see the promised land.

"I also pleaded with the LORD at that time, saying... Let me, I pray, cross over and see the fair land that is beyond the Jordan... But the LORD was angry with me on your account, and would not listen to me; and the LORD said to me, 'Enough! Speak to me no more of this matter.'" -Deut. 3:23, 25-26

It is true that God is honored by our coming to Him and asking the impossible. It is equally true that there may come a time when our begging crosses the line into demandingness and our request becomes odious in the sight of God.

Pleading must never become whining. The grappling we are discussing here is not the clutch and grab of Jacob's first round with the Lord, rather it is the desperate, last hope clinging from the dust of humility and helplessness. It is the kind of clinging that says, "*Whatever the outcome, Lord, I am not letting go of you!*" It is the kind of pleading that we will later see modeled by our Lord Jesus in Gethsemane.

#### *The Psalmists*

It might be well argued that the Psalms provide the practical textbook on prevailing, grappling prayer. Virtually every psalm contains words from the mouth of the humble servant begging the grace of God. Even a quick scan of the basic psalmodic vocabulary suggests this. Words like "arise, save, forgive, answer, give ear, attend, consider, search, be gracious, vindicate, give heed, preserve, rescue, deliver, teach, pardon, hear, restore" and the recurrent "why?" and "how long?" are words of pleading, not mere perfunctory babble. They are the words of the Christian who longs for his God to work according to His power.

The Psalms are the words of the humble, broken spirit that knows only God has enough power and ability to make the situations of life change. Consider these few brief examples:

#### *Psalm 42: The Prayer for Intimacy*

"As the deer pants for the water brooks,

So my soul pants for Thee, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God;  
When shall I come and appear before God?" - Ps. 42:1-2

The pleading here cannot be missed. Here is the cry of the penitent begging God for a greater closeness with Him. The Psalmist may have had the actual temple in mind, but this Psalm takes on greater meaning to the New Testament Christian who appropriates its words to frame his own petition for an increase in that "sensible impression" of God's presence. All the elements of pleading we have listed so far are in these words; namely, earnestness, intensity, petition and desperateness.

*Psalm 51: The Prayer for Forgiveness*

Be gracious to me, O God, according to Thy lovingkindness;  
According to the greatness of Thy compassion blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
And cleanse me from my sin...  
Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from Thy presence,  
And do not take Thy Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation,  
And sustain me with a willing spirit." - Ps 51:1-2, 10-12

Again, the principles here are self-evident. Pleading with God means dying to self and coming to Him with nothing. It is acknowledging His greatness and our dependence and humbly making our entreaty.

*Psalm 109: The Prayer for Deliverance*

"Help me, O LORD my God;  
Save me according to Thy lovingkindness.  
And let them know that this is Thy hand;  
That Thou, LORD, has done it." - Ps 109:26-27

This most prominent theme of the Psalms is demonstrated well in the above reference. The broken one knows that the only help, the only deliverance can come from YHWH.

Models from the New Testament

Jesus

Our Lord offers some of the most pointed teaching regarding grappling prayer. He also serves as the consummate example of the same.

*Luke 18: The Importunate Widow*

In the first parable of Luke 18, Jesus tells a story for the purpose of teaching His followers "that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart..." (Luke 18:1). The characters in His narrative are a wicked judge and a helpless widow. The widow, who will not cease pestering the judge for protection, finally receives her request simply because she annoys the judge to the point that he was willing to do *anything* to get rid of her. Jesus then draws a comparison between the judge and God and says, "now shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them speedily" (Luke 18:7-8a).

The point here is obvious. Jesus promises that answers will come quickly to the *pleading* elect. Those who take the time to actually "cry to Him day and night" will find a quick and powerful answer. It is in line with the

character of God (especially His lovingkindness and mercy) to respond to the earnest entreaties of His people. We cannot expect Him to act, however, if we never bring our requests to His throne.<sup>8</sup>

*Matthew 7: Ask, seek, knock.*

The tri-fold command of Jesus to ask of God in the Sermon on the Mount cannot be avoided. Once again, Jesus draws a comparison between God and a human, only this time the human (a father) is held up as a good example. The father of a boy will not give a stone to his son to eat when he is hungry, will he? Of course not. Parents (generally speaking) will give to their children what they ask for. Jesus continues: "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!"

Notice the principles for the grappling pastor. We are called by God to ask of Him. Not only that, but we are commanded to do so constantly<sup>9</sup> and we can expect that if our prayers are earnest that God will indeed work in our favour. The equation is simple: much genuine pleading of God will bring results. The element we must remember is that this pleading must be *consistent* and *persistent* like that of the importunate widow<sup>10</sup>.

*Mark 14: Gethsemane and His Example*

The amount and consistency of Jesus' prayers have been well-documented,<sup>11</sup> but the content of those prayers is largely unknown until we reach the Passion. It is in this final week of Christ's earthly life that we are given large quotations from His prayers and it is not surprising that the grappling, pleading prayer we have sought to describe in this paper serves as the pinnacle of these examples.

It is difficult to conceive of the Lord Jesus grappling with the Father in anything, let alone the consummation of His ministry, but we cannot dismiss our Saviour's humanity in an effort to protect His deity. One never did violence to the other and we witness this perfect accord in Gethsemane. "Distressed, troubled, deeply grieved..." this was our Lord's darkest hour on earth so far. (How could pitiful human words capture the intense agony, lowliness and sorrow of His heart?) And yet somehow, in this moment of intense personal struggle, our Lord manages to give us the perfect example of grappling with God.

"Abba! Father! All things are possible for Thee; remove this cup from Me; yet, not what I will, but what Thou wilt." - Mark 14:36

Jesus fell prostrate with His face to the ground. He begged the Lord to change His mind and abort the planned sacrifice. He then humbly subjected His will to the Father's and confirmed His unswerving commitment to obey and follow regardless of the personal cost.

Did Jesus lay hold of God? We can be certain He did. All the gospel writers use the most intense language available to them to describe the feelings of our Master and the energy with which He begged of His Father.

His body language<sup>12</sup>, his words, the amount of time He took to pray all make it clear that Jesus was in earnest in His request of the Father. But He did not cross the line Moses inadvertently transgressed centuries before. For all His pleading, Jesus was still intent on carrying out the will of the Father. Did He get what He asked for?

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<sup>8</sup>This is what a Brackel calls "fervent prayer." "Fervency is an intense motion of the heart which is engendered by a strong desire, expressed in an understanding and thoughtful manner." a Brackel, W. The Christian's Reasonable Service (Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1994) Vol. 3, 458.

<sup>9</sup>"Ask, seek" and "knock" are all present tense suggesting a continual action as expressed in the NAS note, "keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking."

<sup>10</sup>We can add the Lord's further instruction to "Beseech the Lord of the harvest..." (Matt. 9:38). God is pleased to exercise His sovereignty through the means He has ordained. We cannot expect Him to bring revival and raise up workers if we are not beseeching, even begging Him for it. He may indeed decide to do so, but we cannot expect it. We need the attitude of the godly pastor John Baird who wrote: "I waited for Providence to open the door, and I waited in vain; but, O God, when I went forward in faith, Thy Providence opened up the way as I required. My being blessed, or not blessed, all hinges on my faith." Baird, John. Nearer Heaven (London: J. Nisbet & Co., 1884), 7.

<sup>11</sup>For one brief analysis see, E. M. Bounds, The Complete Works of E.M. Bounds on Prayer (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 244.

<sup>12</sup>Recall that not only did He prostrate Himself but He also began to sweat blood (Luke 22:44).

No. But the tenderhearted Father sent an angel from heaven to comfort and strengthen Christ for the cross ahead.

There are many lessons for us here, but the most important is the principle that even in our greatest pleadings with the Almighty, we must never lose our humility and turn our entreaty into demand. There must always be in our grappling an acknowledgment of the sovereignty of God. As E. M. Bounds wrote last century;

"We must pray against God's will when the stroke is the heaviest, the sorrow is the keenest, and the grief is the deepest. We may lie prostrate all night, as David did, through the hours of darkness. We may pray for hours, as Jesus did, and in the darkness of many nights, not measuring the hours by the clock, nor the nights by the calendar. It must all be, however, the prayer of submission. When sorrow and the night and desolation of Gethsemane fall in heaviest gloom on us, we ought to submit patiently and tearfully, if need be, but sweetfully and resignedly, without tremor, or doubt, to the cup pressed by a Father's hand to our lips"<sup>13</sup>

#### Models from Church History

A thoughtful search of church history will prove that the men of God used of God have been men of humble, grappling prayer. Perhaps even more encouraging to us may be the almost inviolable equation between this earnest pleading and the blessing of revival.

#### *Daniel Rowlands*

During the 18th century awakening in Great Britain the Lord saw fit to use many men of different backgrounds and gifts as the means of proclaiming His gospel. The standout amongst these men in Wales was Daniel Rowlands. He was used by God to the profitable conversion of thousands. He was regarded by his contemporaries as equal to Whitefield in his gifts and ability in preaching, although he never reached the fame of the great itinerant because of his lack of travel outside of Wales and his constant use of Welsh<sup>14</sup>.

Much has been said of this faithful pastor,<sup>15</sup> but it is in Ryle's account of his usefulness that we read of his passionate prayer life:

"It is said that he used often to go to the top of Aeron Hills, and there pour out his heart before God in the most tender and earnest manner for the salvation of the numerous inhabitants of the country which lay around him. 'He lived,' says Morgan, 'in the spirit of prayer, and hence his extraordinary success.'<sup>16</sup>

There is no doubt that God blessed Rowlands in his ministry in correlation to his pleading and begging of God.

#### *The Revivals of Early America*

In Iain Murray's convincing work Revivals and Revivalism he makes the case that earnest pleading of God is always an attendant characteristic to legitimate revival. He lists as part of "all the classic marks of true spiritual awakening" such items as, "hunger for the Word of God, for *prayer* and for serious Christian literature."<sup>17</sup> Murray is careful, however, to keep the relationship quite clear between grappling with God and His sovereign response. His analysis of how the two interacted historically in the Great Awakening is lucid and helpful.

"...true prayer is bound up with a persuasion of our inability and our complete dependence on God. Prayer, considered as a human activity, whether offered by

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<sup>13</sup>Bounds, Complete Works, 278.

<sup>14</sup>No offense against the Welsh is intended, but if you have ever tried to pronounce a Welsh word (try "Llandewibrefi" or "Ystradffin!"), let alone understand what it means, than you will grasp why his preaching was not listened to outside of his native parish!

<sup>15</sup>Read almost anything by Dr. Lloyd-Jones and you are sure to come across the name and an anecdote.

<sup>16</sup>Ryle, J.C. Christian Leaders of the 18th Century (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1978), 212.

<sup>17</sup>Murray, I. Revivals and Revivalism (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 348. (Italics mine.)

few or many, can guarantee no results. *But prayer that throws believers in heartfelt need on God, with true concern for the salvation of sinners, will not go unanswered.* Prayer of this kind precedes blessing, not because of any necessary cause and effect, but because such prayer secures an acknowledgment of the true Author of the blessing. And where such a spirit of prayer exists, it is a sign that God is already intervening to advance his cause. One thing that can be said about the 1790's... is that there was a growing concern among Christians to pray."<sup>18</sup>

History confirms what the Scriptures teach. The kind of prayer that God expects from His people is an earnest, heartfelt grappling with Him.<sup>19</sup>

### Concluding Thoughts on Pleading with God

All of the above has proven that it is the duty of every Christian to seek the Lord earnestly in prayer. That prayer is to be grappling prayer, gripping and grabbing on to the Almighty in desperate begging for His blessing. It is the kind of prayer that acknowledges we are nothing without Him and that our work is void without His strength.

It is doubly true, however, that grappling prayer is the lot for God's leaders of His people. The men chosen by God to lead His flock throughout the history of both testaments and the church have been men who have pled with God. We have only scratched the surface of examples. To our list we could easily add men like David, Elijah, Peter, Calvin, Luther, Wesley, and Spurgeon. Thus, if we are genuine about our desire to witness revival in our days we must be men who regularly wrestle with God in prayer. God's pastor is a grappling pastor... pleading with Him for blessing.

### PLEADING WITH MEN

Jacob's tittle bout with the Lord serves not only as an example of how we must approach our God, but also as an image of the methods we must use with men. The Scriptures give us many examples of the men of God pleading with their fellow humans to turn from sin and trust in Christ.

### Models from the Old Testament

Moses

Moses is our first example because he shows so well this relationship between grappling with God on the one side and wrestling with men on the other.

#### *Numbers 14: Pleading with the Unfaithful*

When the 12 spies returned to Moses and the people in the wilderness of Paran and offered their mostly negative report, the Israelites exposed their true colours again and decided amongst themselves to return to Egypt (Num. 14:4). Moses recognized this decision as outright rebellion against the Lord (14:9) and together with Aaron fell on his face before all of the people begging them to reconsider. The response of the people to this pleading was to make stoning plans, but at the last minute the glory of God appeared at the tent of meeting and Moses was spared.

What is of particular interest to us is the immediate response of Moses to plead with the people. He recognized the danger of their intentions and showed ultimate humility in crying out to them to change, rather than running for cover or calling upon God's judgment.

Here is a lesson for the grappling pastor, that pleading is not just to be made on behalf of those who support us or follow us, but especially on behalf of those who are in rebellion against God and perhaps even us.

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<sup>18</sup>ibid., 129.

<sup>19</sup>It is difficult to press ahead without at least giving mention to David Brainerd. "His life," says Edwards, 'shows the right way to success in the works of the ministry. ... how did he labour always fervently... in prayers day and night, "wrestling with God" in secret, and "travailing in birth" with unutterable groans and agonies! "until Christ were formed" in the hearts of the people to whom he was sent!' "...like a true son of Jacob he persevered in wrestling through all the darkness of the night, until the breaking of the day." Quoted in C.H. Spurgeon's Lectures to My Students (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1954), 49.

## The Prophets

Much like the Psalms serve as a textbook for pleading with God, we might say the prophets give us a primer on pleading with men. Several brief examples should suffice.

### *Zephaniah*

The "day of the LORD" prophet is a prime example of how to plead with men.

"Near is the great day of the LORD,  
Near and coming very quickly;  
Listen, the day of the LORD!"  
In it "He will make a complete end,  
Indeed a terrifying one,  
Of all the inhabitants of the earth...  
Seek the LORD,  
All you humble of the earth  
Who have carried out His ordinances;  
Seek righteousness, seek humility.  
Perhaps you will be hidden in the day of the LORD's great anger."  
- Zeph. 1:14,18c; 2:3

Having his mind full of the dreadful judgment awaiting sinners in the day of the Lord, Zephaniah could not help but cry out to them to turn from their sin and seek the Saviour. His is a "fire and brimstone" message that is intended to jolt jaded consciences into the reality of their despair without YHWH.

We are given here both a motive and a method for pleading with men. The sheer weight of the reality of judgment to come ought move God's man to cry out like Zephaniah for their repentance. And what better message is their to preach in such a regard than the great and coming day of the Lord?

### *Isaiah*

The familiar gospel call in Isaiah 55 is also a worthy example of grappling with men.

"Seek the LORD while He may be found;  
Call upon Him while He is near.  
Let the wicked forsake his way,  
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;  
And let him return to the LORD,  
And He will have compassion on him;  
And to our God,  
For He will abundantly pardon." - Is. 55:6-7

Here again is the pleading of a desperate man for the souls of his people. This is no mere sentiment, but the honest and forthright call to repentance. Isaiah chooses to woo rather than warn in this passage, laying out the deep forgiveness and compassion of YHWH as an enticement to turn to Him. This is just another hold to be used by the grappling pastor in his wrangling with the lost and errant soul.

### *Jonah*

An unlikely model, even Jonah serves as an illustration of pleading with men in his one-line prophecy: "Yet forty days and Ninevah will be overthrown!" Apparently, this was the extent of the reluctant prophet's message and yet God saw fit to use it as the means to a city-wide revival.

What a humbling lesson to the pastor, that God can use the voice of any man to proclaim His message! And yet, what an encouragement to the grappling pastor, that if God can use a man like Jonah, what might He choose to do with me?

## Models From the New Testament

### *Paul*

The apostle is a vivid example of Jacobian grappling for the souls of men. His reasoning and persuading of men took him from the synagogue of Jerusalem to the Areopagus in Athens. Throughout this itinerant ministry he faced the threats and disbelief of men with the constant plea for their obedience of faith.

If we assume his work in Ephesus was typical of his entire ministry, we can see how it was that Paul came to be the spiritual father to so many in the known world. The words he used to describe his ministry while in their city show a man intent on winning the lost and encouraging the found. "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house" "...solemnly testifying... of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" "...declaring to you the whole purpose of God" "...night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears."

This is the vocabulary of the grappling pastor. Paul was expending himself for the purpose of loving others. He saw it as his duty to call men to God and he used all of his energies and abilities to do such. The lesson here is too obvious and too humbling to dwell on much further.

### *Jesus*

Our Lord models His entreating of the Old Testament in His plea to sinners to come to Him. From the unending well of His love, He cries to all men:

"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My load is light." - Matt. 11:28-30

Having just affirmed the necessity of an effectual call, Jesus could in all sincerity turn to the throngs around Him and genuinely invite them *all* to repent and believe on Him. There was no inconsistency in His mind and neither should there be in ours.<sup>20</sup> The grappling pastor must follow the model of the Chief Shepherd and be willing to *invite* as well as warn and woo. Jesus receives sinners - this is our message and we must do everything in our power to plead with *all* men to flee to such a Saviour.

### Models from Church History

It is of little surprise that the godly pastors of generations past should clearly model this pleading with men.

### *Richard Baxter*

Richard Baxter's monumental treatise on The Reformed Pastor is an excellent account of how to persuade men. Baxter understood that merely mounting the pulpit once a week then disappearing into the study for the rest would not bring about much change in this world. He considered it a part of the pastoral duty not only to study the Word of God, but to study *men* for the purpose of determining how best to convince them of the Truth. "We must study how to convince and get within men, and how to bring each truth to the quick..."<sup>21</sup>

Once we have done this, says Baxter, we must rush to the battle. "Satan will not be charmed out of his possession: we must lay siege to the souls of sinners, which are his garrison, and find out where his chief strength lieth, and lay the battery of God's ordinance against it, and ply it close, till a breach is made; and then suffer them not by their shifts to repair it again."<sup>22</sup>

Baxter practiced what he preached. There were few, if any, converts in Kidderminster when Baxter arrived there in 1641 and few, if any, unconverted in the town of 2000 when he left. His classic model of visitation had as its backbone the pleading, persuading, begging grappling ministry we are attempting to describe in this

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<sup>20</sup>"However much it is beyond the power of reason to reconcile the command to sinners to believe on the Son of God for salvation with the truth that only grace can enable them to do so, there is no conflict between the two things in Scripture." Murray, I. The Forgotten Spurgeon (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 100.

<sup>21</sup>Reformed Pastor, 145.

<sup>22</sup>*ibid.*, 149.

paper. He knew what it was to wrestle with men for their souls and it was a regular part of his work from beginning to end.<sup>23</sup>

#### *C. H. Spurgeon*

Our Baptist hero, Spurgeon was a master grappler. His command of the English language, oratorical abilities and deep understanding of the true gospel combined to make him a man of singular ability in convincing sinners of their need for Christ. Dallimore notes:

" he regarded himself as responsible to preach the gospel to them all - 'to every creature' - and to do so as zealously as if the outcome depended entirely on himself. He knew that 'salvation is of the Lord' and that as he went on with the mighty task he could be confident that the Word would 'not return void' but that God would use it to bring about the salvation of souls.... above all, sinners were pleaded with to come to Christ"<sup>24</sup>

Murray agrees and offers a specimen from one of Spurgeon's sermons to validate the point:

"I charge you by the living God, I charge you by the world's Redeemer, I charge you by the cross of Calvary, and by the blood which stained the dust at Golgotha, obey this divine message and you shall have eternal life; but refuse it, and on your own heads be your blood for ever and ever!"<sup>25</sup>

Have we ever pled from our pulpits with such earnestness? The grappling pastor knows the extent of depravity and offers up all he has and is to be used by the Spirit of God to bring the truth of the gospel to bear on the sinner's soul. He reasons, implores, begs and uses a hundred other grabs and holds to lay the claims of Christ upon the spiritually dead.

#### *George Whitefield*

What preacher in church history has better exemplified a passion for souls and a willingness to do whatever he could to save some? Whitefield is described as a man who preached "like a lion," meaning that he was out for prey. His whole ministry centered around pleading with men for their souls in the true spirit of grappling - he clutched and grabbed at whatever he could to gain some strong grip on a sinner's conscience and turn it against him to bring conviction and, Lord willing, conversion. Ryle says of his preaching:

"He succeeded in showing people that he at least believed all he was saying, and that his heart, and soul, and mind, and strength, were bent on making them believe it too... There was no getting away from [his sermons.] Sleep was next to impossible. You must listen whether you liked it or not. There was a holy violence about him which firmly took your attention by storm."<sup>26</sup>

Whitefield preached with his whole man. Tears often flowed freely down his face as he looked with reality upon his hearers. His messages were always direct and current, aimed at setting forth the truth of the gospel in a way which could be understood and appropriated. He bore the weight of eternity on his shoulders and it regularly broke forth in his cries for men to repent and believe. Here is impassioned and genuine pleading with men. Would that we pastors today might have a shred of his zeal.

#### Concluding Thoughts on Pleading with Men

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<sup>23</sup>An obvious proof of his ability is the entire Reformed Pastor. He simply took his master moves and used them to wrestle the hearts and consciences of the existing church leadership. If we want to know what it means in a practical sense to grapple with and for men's hearts, we need only read a few pages of this book to get an idea.

<sup>24</sup>Dallimore, A. Spurgeon (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 79.

<sup>25</sup>Forgotten Spurgeon, 101.

<sup>26</sup>18th Century Leaders, 53.

We have hopefully proven by now that it is the duty of God's undershepherds to be faithful in their responsibility to plead with men for their souls. Whether by threats, invitations, warnings, solemn entreaties or any other legitimate method, the grappling pastor must use all the gifts and abilities at his disposal to call men to Christ.

### Application

The first point of application is to note the vital unity which must be kept between these two duties of pleading with God and pleading with men. "How dare we pray in the battle if we have never cried to the Lord while buckling on the harness!"<sup>27</sup> "He preacheth not heartily to his people, that prayeth not earnestly for them. If we prevail not with God to give them faith and repentance, we shall never prevail with them to believe and repent."<sup>28</sup> "None are so able to plead with men as those who have been wrestling with God on their behalf"<sup>29</sup> Prayer without pleading results in ultimate frustration for the preacher. Pleading without prayer creates dangerous self-reliance in the preacher. The two must go together.

That being said, it is doubtful that either one of these actions *can* exist by itself. If a man is truly grappling with God in prayer for the souls of the lost around him, how can he *not* open his mouth and plead with them for their salvation? And if a man is engaged in the task of wrestling with men for their souls, how can he sleep at night without pleading with God for their conversion? In other words, if we fail in one of these categories, it is most likely we fail in both.

That being said, let us take a moment to examine ourselves individually in each of these two categories.

#### *Pleading with God?*

Am I a grappling pastor? Am I regularly wrestling with God in prayer? Am I begging Him for victory over sin, for protection from the Enemy, for the salvation of the lost in my flock and family? Am I wrestling with Him long enough to be broken over my sin, humbled into the dust so that my only recourse is to cling to Him and beg His blessing?

Is it easier for me to talk about blessing than to plead for it... to daydream about conversions, than beg for them... to exaggerate ministry rather than acknowledge its dismal lack of spiritual profit? Do I find myself filling my life with public activity that is robbing my time with the Master in private, all the while believing that, since it is "ministry," it somehow atones for my loss of spiritual power?<sup>30</sup>

"You have not because you ask not," says Jesus. Will we continue in our self-reliance or will we act on what we know is true and make ourselves men who "pour out their hearts" to God, begging Him to work to the glory of His grace?

Are we willing to take the risk of asking great things of God, or would we rather keep things simple and predictable, not "setting ourselves up for disappointment?"

Are we willing to be fervent in our prayers, not buckling under at the first sign of interruption or distraction, but holding on to the Master until He is prevailed upon?

Are we willing to simply cry out to Him for help and to ask Him to make us this kind of pastor of His sheep?

Perhaps our hearts are filled up with a desire to do so. This would be wonderful, but we must caution ourselves at the same time. Our deceptive hearts could easily jump with guilt to pursue a mock earnestness or a manipulative pleading that carries all the outward marks of grappling prayer but none of the spiritual reality. This is not some "way of praying" that we are describing here; this is a condition of the heart. Neither is this some thermometer of spirituality. It might be argued that many of the most earnest prayers have been offered at the very time a saint was in the least spiritual health. Likewise, we cannot create genuine grappling prayer. We are just as dependent upon the Spirit as we were when we woke up this morning. We can as much decide to be earnest as we can decide to be revived! Still, being earnest is what we must pursue.

We must follow the instructions of Jesus and start in our closets with this kind of prayer. It must begin in private; coming to Christ with the humility and selflessness of Moses, the longing and openness of the Psalmists, the zeal and willingness of Jesus and the faith and devotion of the men of God gone before us. Lord willing, God will hear our pleadings for help and see our earnest zeal for Him and grant us those seasons of broken clinging to Him. It would be only natural then that this earnestness would follow us out of our closets, to the family table, into the pulpit, beside the sickbed and from there into the streets of our neighborhood, building in us the desire and the dependence necessary to speak to men about their souls. May it be so!

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<sup>27</sup>Lectures, 45.

<sup>28</sup>Reformed Pastor, 122.

<sup>29</sup>Lectures, 45.

<sup>30</sup>See, Bridges, C. The Christian Ministry (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 150.

*Pleading with Men?*

This takes us to our final point. Are we pleading with men? Let us feel the weight of our responsibility in this category as well.

When is the last time we cried (either literally or in our hearts) for a sinner? When is the last time we plainly laid out for some lost soul the truth about heaven and hell? When is the last time we "stood in the Areopagus" proclaiming to whoever would listen the need for repentance and faith?

Do we give thought as to how to dig the truth into the hearts of the lost? Are we willing to stop a message or conversation to thrust the reality of judgment to come into the face of the disobedient? Have we laboured all the more to ensure the salvation of our flock? Are our hearts broken by the sin and disobedience of sinners in this world to the point that we are willing to beg with them to turn to God? Do we see ourselves as ambassadors of Christ, sent to fall on our faces before His enemies to plead with them to turn off their course of self-destruction? Do we grasp the gravity of men's damnation outside of Christ and seek to bring as many into the fold as possible? Are we taking all we are and all we have to teach, reprove, correct and train in righteousness? Anything short of this misses the mark.

*Conclusion*

Brothers, the time has come for this kind of ministry. We need men who are willing to enter into the reality of this world and face it head on with the Truth about Jesus. We need pastors who will follow in the footsteps of those "greats" who have gone before us, being faithful in the things which God has called us to. We need ministers who inhale devotion to Christ and exhale the call to love Him.

We need grappling pastors.