

HOLD ON

Thirty-three Chilean miners rescued from their tomb of 69 days, and the world rejoices in the good news. We love survival stories.

We love to hear about salvation,..... including the testimonies of faith.

One miner proclaimed, right after getting out of the rescue capsule, "I was with God and I was with the devil, But, God won. **I held onto** God's hand, the best hand, and at no point in time....did I doubt that God won't get me out of there."

Faith stories come from the thank-ful lips of survivors. We cite and celebrate those stories, and even write them down in holy books.

The stories of the silent and the vanquished are rarely heard or repeated.

Nevertheless, we revel in the miners' perseverance.

They didn't give up. All involved didn't give up.

Persistence and focussed devotion is an admired trait, yet.....when is enough "enough?"

At what point does devotion or a "drive" to reach a goal become a foolish obsession or even destructive?

For example, 87 year old Dan Blankenship, in 1965, heard about a buried treasure from 1795 that was supposed to be hidden on Oak Island, Nova Scotia.

He moved there from Florida in 1970, and has been searching there ever since,..... all in vain.

Perseverance is a noble quality, yet sometimes, especially when in an abusive relationship, a radical change of course is necessary.

However, ...when it comes to issues of peace, justice, survival, and of sustaining wholeness, then perseverance / holding on is Essential.

.....And,..... there is more to the process than just the goal at the end.

In the Luke passage, Jesus presented a parable about a lowly, powerless person who was being victimized. In those days, a widow epitomized helplessness and near hopelessness.

She was the victim of an injustice. We don't know what it was. It could have been exploitation, abuse, harassment or an assault against her rights to live in safety and peace. We don't know. Regardless, she had a just cause. She was justified in her petition for legal protection and relief.

Since Old Testament times, it was understood that Judges were under God. Therefore, they must respond compassionately and ethically,.... and ... that included ruling favourably for the powerless.

God has a bias for the weak, and so should judges.

But, this particular judge, acted on his own accord—he based his decisions on other concerns.... that were not dependent on God's understanding of Justice.

Perhaps, he was following the letter of the civil code.... or maybe he was concerned about financial costs... or he feared the threats from the victim's opponent? We don't know his reasons, except they were not based on true justice.

Whatever his rationalization, he ignored the victim. He refused to grant the widow justice. Yet, in spite of his cold indifference, she kept demanding action. She badgered him, and her perseverance wore him down. Wanting to be free from her constant begging, he granted her justice.

She did not give up her pursuit for justice, and the legal system vindicated her. This lesson about her success is really an aside, a sub-message to the point Jesus is trying to get across. Still,.... to be sure,.... it is a good lesson for motivation to victims seeking justice.

However, this episode is really a typical Jesus compare and contrast technique –showing that if even this ungodly, inconsiderate judge responds to devoted petitions, then of course God will too.

Does that mean that we have to harass God with our petitions / that we should cry out to God day and night in order for God to respond?

Is God that aloof and insensitive that we have to badger God in order to get God to act?

Jesus is NOT suggesting that; however, I do believe there is something to be said about the process of persevering.

Moreover, the focus / the goal that persuades us to “hold on” is not necessarily the end of the story. Life goes on.

Just as, it could be said, the rescue of the 33 miners is not the end of their stories, but more than likely it could be a turning point / a new beginning.

They will soon fall out of the media’s spot light, but each of those miners have a long hard journey ahead of them. They’ve been through a lot. They persevered and were saved, yet salvation is merely the beginning. All the energy, torment and passion that swirled and twisted in their souls for 69 days, may have helped keep them alive, but for certain,..... it also forever changed them,... and the affects of that change is yet to be lived out.

The holding on **is** the red iron between the anvil and the hammer.

Think about that image for a moment.

It is better to be malleable than rigid.

The challenge to overcome / the struggle to fight on demands clarity of passion and faith, and invites change,..... NO actually, I think,.... it demands the willingness to change.

In addition, the process of perseverance separates whim from necessity / chaff from the seed and the heart’s desire from our minds frivolous fetishes.

Maybe, God allows us time to sort things out. Perhaps, constant and continuous prayer helps to lead us to understand what we truly hold as dear.

Maybe due diligence is good for the soul,..... YET, even so...

Jesus said that God responds quickly.

From personal experience, while I’m in the midst of praying for a divine response, I sometimes think that God is on that.... one minute is but a thousand year.... mode,..... and that thought is not very encouraging.

But,..... usually, in hindsight, I see more clearly,.... plus..... the story isn't finished, yet..... and neither are we.

Maybe God is responding quickly,..... and we just haven't caught up to that response,..... yet.???

Nevertheless,.....the struggle of holding on.....in and of itself, is very profound,..... and there is more to life than achieving a certain goal, just.... as those miners have a lot more living ahead of them. It remains to be seen how their salvation plays out.

They struggled and so far survived, yet they will forever bear wounds from that struggle..... and from their rescue.

Similarly, Jacob, in the Genesis passage, went through a huge ordeal.

His demons were knocking on his door, and he was trapped in a very dark and lonely place.

His past was catching up to him, including his estranged brother Esau who was approaching with 400 men.

If you recall, Jacob defrauded his brother Esau, and Jacob also was guilty of other injustices, too.

Fearing for his family's safety, he sent them across the river, realizing that Esau and his army of men were closing in.

For whatever the reason, Jacob did not cross the river and remained alone, to spend the night.

Yet, as it turned out,..... he was NOT alone.

I don't think we are ever alone. There is more to life than our own personal presence.

Anyways, Jacob was surprised to find himself wrestling with an unknown person.

Wrestling is very intimate. Wrestling involves every part of the body, and it requires constant grabbing on..... sometimes for dear life.

On through the night, all night long Jacob wrestled.

He could have surrendered. He could have let go, but he did not.

His life had reached a critical crisis point. The walls were closing in. His was on the eve of his day of reckoning, and it was all playing out in the twisting and turning dust with muscles screaming and thoughts pounding.

So many thoughts race by when we are in the midst of a collision / when we feel threaten or attacked.

I imagine that Jacob's mind was in hyper mode. He likely was rehashing all his options and his guilt.

Jacob had sensed the need for change in his life. He wanted to reconcile with his brother. He made gestures in that direction, even so Jacob was filled with fear. He did not trust the power of love and grace. He was afraid, afraid of judgment.

Even so, he continued the fight to survive. He would not let go.
What was driving him?

How did he endure the test? How was he changing?
Where did his strength come from?
And,.....Was he discovering his heart's desire?

The approaching dawn signalled the time for the wrestling to end.
Interestingly, this MAN was a being of the darkness.
He had to leave before the light arrived.
This all has a strange "Halloween" feel to it.
What is going on? Was Jacob wrestling with his "demons?"

Daylight was near.

Was it a draw? Was he and his opponent equal? How was he surviving? Jacob was in a struggle for life, and Jacob was prevailing. He had not been defeated. He would not let go.
And then it happened, the unknown man punched Jacob in the hip.
He punched him so hard that it knocked Jacob's hip out of joint.

A dislocated shoulder is one thing; a dislocated hip is much more.

The pain and agony should have pushed Jacob to release his grip / to surrender,..... but there was more to this match than discovering the superior wrestler. Jacob was changing. He wasn't going to run away any more. He was willing to face the consequences, even if it meant his destruction.

Jacob was discovering that this was not just an ordinary, unknown man bent on conquest.
And, why.... if this **being** had such power to dislocate his hip, why did he wait until daybreak to do that?
Or,..... had something changed?

What was going on..... and what was Jacob learning..... and how was he changing?
What / WHO was he wrestling with?

Even in severe pain, his hip out of joint. Jacob held on for dear life.
He was discovering that he was in the grip of something huge / something special /.....something divine.
Things were changing.
Jacob was changing.

At the break of dawn / with the clarity of new light,... Jacob was seeing that he was NO LONGER in a wrestling match with an unknown man.

The struggle of the fight was over. The strange man was no longer wrestling with Jacob, instead Jacob discovered he was left holding onto God.

What happened to the wrestling? Where did the man go?
And, what happened to his demons?

Instead, Jacob was learning that he had a hold of God,..... and for the first time in his life..... he was not going to mess up this opportunity.

He was holding on for God sake..... for the sake of a blessing – the outpouring from God.
He told God, that he wasn't letting go until he received a blessing.

There is faith in that demand.

God responded with, what is your name—meaning who are you?

Jacob instinctively answered he was who he had been.

Yet, he had changed,..... and God new it.

He was no longer who he was before.

The blessing he received from his wrestling with God, was not resolution from his problems, nor was it wealth or material things.

Jacob's blessing / Jacob's awakening..... was a new identity.

He was given a new name,.... which reveals an identity.

He new name was “he who strives with God”, or in other words, “he who perseveres with God.

That name is a bit like being called a Christian. Christian means one who goes down the same path with Jesus. Jacob was told that he was given that name because he had striven / wrestled withGod... **and**.... with humans,... and prevailed.

He had fought all night, and in the morning, at the end, there was only God, and he was holding onto God.

Perhaps, God was in the wrestling match, all along, too?

More than likely, Jacob was never alone. I dare say that God was in the perseverance, holding on to Jacob, **wrestling with** Jacob and not against him.

When the dust settled, Jacob asked God for God's name, but the only response he receive, was “why?” And, apparently, Jacob had grown enough to understand, and that was that, and no need to ask more.

Jacob labelled the site of his encounter, “The FACE of God”, and then he limped away to face his destiny. The battle left him scared, as battles often do, yet... he now had the will and the faith to go on.

It is too bad that our text ends at this point, because we are tempted to think that Jacob's success at persevering is the end – He succeed, after all.

But, this is not the case..... the story continues. The wrestling match was his struggle / his soul searching with himself and... with God, and his invitation to change.

Wrestling and choosing to hold onto God was just the beginning.

This was a turning point in Jacob's life, a sort of rebirth.

He reconciled with his brother Esau, he returned to Bethel,.... and deceit and fraud no longer marked the steps of his life's choices.

Jesus ended his parable, by in essence asking, “Where is your faith?”

What is our heart's desire? What drives us? What feeds us?

What sustains us?

What gets us through the night / through the dark night of the soul?

There may come a time when we will have to wrestle for our life?

True, the nadir of despair and anguish will demand that we beg for our own survival. And, desperation will drive even atheists to God for help.

Yet, release / reprieve is not the end of the story. We do not know how our story ends.

However, it is in the wrestling match / during the struggles that we are invited to decide whether to surrender, negotiate or persevere.

Clarity of our soul's true passion is discovered in our choices and our willingness to change.

Do we hold on, regardless of the consequences?

Do we believe that we will see the face of God holding on to us?

And, when we ask God for more, can we live with "why?" as God's answer back for us.

Life continues and so do the struggles.