

March 1, 2026

Reminiscere

Texts: Genesis 32:22-32; Matthew 15:21-28

Our Lord does many wonderful things for us. He gives us our daily bread. He watches over us every minute of every day. He blesses us with family and friends. He gives us a roof over our heads. He provides a stable government and a functioning society. And of course, the greatest gift of eternal life through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Many wonderful things, all for our good.

In our readings this Sunday, we see something else that God does, something wonderful and for our good – though it can often be difficult for us to see it as such: God sends us trials. He wrestles with us.

God wrestling with us can be difficult for us because it presents us with a truth that isn't comfortable for us to admit, namely, that God is the one who sends trials and tribulation. We don't like that, perhaps because it makes God appear evil or malicious. We don't want God to be the bad guy. And He isn't! Yet God clearly shows us in His word that He is the one who puts these upon us.

First we have our Old Testament lesson, where Jacob wrestles with God. This is no friendly match, taking place in a public arena with spectators and a referee. No, this is surprise attack. Jacob is sleeping alone in the middle of nowhere. He's been told that his brother Esau is coming to meet him; the same brother whom he cheated out of inheritance and blessing and who had been planning to kill him. Then in the middle of the night, a strange man attacks Jacob. For all Jacob knew, this man was trying to rob and maim him or even kill him.

Who is it who attacked Jacob? It's God – specifically the preincarnate Son, Jesus before He was born of the Virgin. Jesus surprises Jacob. Jesus terrifies Jacob. Jesus makes Jacob think he is fighting for his life.

Consider also our Gospel reading. The Canaanite woman is crying out for help, crying out for the sake of her daughter. She is doing what a loving mother should do. And she's doing all the right things. She has come to Jesus, who has driven out plenty of demons. She is confessing Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of David, even the Lord. She even falls down in worship before him, begging for His help.

But what does Jesus do? He remains silent. Then He gives a reply that sounds at first like a rejection. And then He calls her a dog – this woman crying out for help for her daughter. This is Jesus doing all this. Not a pagan priest. Not a legalistic Pharisee. Not even a believing yet still sinful disciple. This is the perfect, sinless Son of God.

These aren't two isolated instances, either. At the end of the book of Job, we read that Job's friends "showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil (or 'disaster') that the Lord had brought upon him." The Lord also declares in Deuteronomy 32, "See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver

out of my hand.” In the great psalm of repentance, Psalm 51, David confesses to the Lord, “Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice.”

How can this be? How can the God who is perfectly good and perfectly loving, who knows all things and can do all things, do this to us? First, consider the opposite. Let’s say it’s actually the devil who does all this, not God. Sounds nice. But what it means is that, when you are experiencing trouble, you are in the hand of the devil. God has stepped aside – or has been forced aside – and now the prince of darkness is having his way with you.

You have to hope that God either wakes up or gets to you in time or can actually stop Satan before you perish. That is a terrifying thing, because it makes your life, maybe even your salvation, uncertain. You hope you don’t fall into the devil’s power, but who knows what will happen?

Thanks be to God, then, that this isn’t true. You, especially you as Christians, are in the Lord’s hand all the time. Aside from your own rejection or indifference, nothing can separate you from His love in Christ Jesus, as the comforting words of Romans 8 remind us. When trouble comes, you can know that it is completely under the Lord’s control, and that He is sending it for a reason.

Sometimes the reason God sends troubles is to be a form of His discipline. We see this in Jacob’s life, for example. He had stolen from his brother, deceived his father, and manipulated his uncle. And so in return, God allows Jacob to be tricked by his uncle and later on deceived by his own sons concerning the fate of his favorite son, Joseph. Yet this was never to crush Jacob, but to draw him away from those sins and back toward faithfully following the Lord.

The Lord would continue to send troubles to Jacob’s descendants throughout the ages: droughts, famines, enemy armies. Yet these were always accompanied by God’s word calling the people to put away their idols, to stop their abominable practices, to walk in the way that God has set before them. And when the people would repent and return to the Lord, He would bring whatever affliction He had sent to an end, replacing it with His blessing and favor.

When we are facing trials, it is always a good time to stop and take a good look at our lives in the mirror of God’s Law. Is there something we should not be doing? Are we sinning against the Lord and trying to cover it up or make excuses for it? God knows the heart; we’re not going to fool Him. God’s Law is perfect; we’re not going to find a loophole. We need to repent, to return to the God who loves us and guides us in right paths. This is clearly what is best for us, and so the discipline of the Lord that brings us to repentance is therefore a good thing.

But what about when there isn’t a sin, or at least one that we can figure out? What if we seem to be in the position of the Canaanite woman, where – as far as we can tell – we’re doing what we’re supposed to and yet we’re still suffering? Here, the trials sent by the Lord aren’t discipline for our sins, but rather exercise for our faith.

The woman had faith in Jesus; she confesses Him as Messiah and Lord in her pleas. But the Lord knew that her faith also had room to grow, to be strengthened. And so He put her through the trials that He did. He pushed against her with silence. He set obstacles before her with questions.

Yet He was never seeking to crush her faith. Rather, Jesus was like a coach pushing an athlete to go a little further, a little faster, a little harder, so that the athlete becomes better. With each test, the woman was forced to trust more and more in Jesus and in the promises of the word. And when Jesus knew that she had gained what He'd set out for her to gain, He removed the pressure and gave her the reward.

Our Lord pushes us like this as well. He puts us under pressure so that we might increasingly look to Him for strength rather than our own. He sends storms in our lives so that, as we watch our idols wash away, we might realize all the more how only He is the Rock that provides true security.

St. Paul writes in our Epistle reading, "we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame." God uses suffering to grow us in the virtues of endurance, character, and especially hope!

It isn't only for the sake of the person suffering that God sends trials. It can also be for those around them. Remember, it wasn't the woman who was afflicted by a demon; it was her daughter. Why would God do that? If I am afflicted, I may very well decide to just "grin and bear it" rather than calling out to God and wrestling with Him. "This too shall pass." But if it's one of my children, then it's simply my instinct as a father to keep asking, to keep praying, to keep wrestling, until God helps.

When our loved ones suffer, that can be one of the heaviest burdens, the greatest challenges, to our faith. And yet through that, it can also provide the greatest growth. The woman's faith is increased so that she can be a witness in a wicked land – the land of Tyre and Sidon brought us such infamous figures as Jezebel – and also so that we can learn from her example in our own trials. When we bear up under suffering, it gives an example to those around us that we believe in something more than this life, that we are seeking something beyond what this world has to offer.

Because these trials come from God, we can take comfort in the fact that He will not let them overwhelm us. As God wrestled with Jacob, He wasn't going to accidentally crush him or work him into a heart attack. No, the Lord knew exactly how hard to push Jacob, and when His purpose was accomplished, He ended the match then and there.

Likewise, Jesus knew exactly how far He could push the woman's faith in order to strengthen it. He wasn't going to drive her into despair and unbelief, but instead was bringing her even closer to Him than she was before. And all the while, the Lord knew that He would be delivering the little girl from the attacks of the demons. The fate of the woman's daughter was never in doubt.

In the trials we endure, in our own lives or the lives of our loved ones, God is in control. He will never send too much, or bring relief too late. It may be hard to bear, but He will give us the strength to bear it.

In His word, God shows us that the trials we endure are not attacks that are out of His control or knowledge, nor are they there merely to cause us pain. Rather, they are sent for our good. Like Jacob, and like the Canaanite woman, our God wrestles with us, pushing us so that we cling to Him all the more. He drives us away from boasting and into prayer. He pulls us away from idols and into His word. And when the time is right and His will is done, He will deliver us.

In the name of Jesus, amen.