

# WRESTLING WITH GOD

By Jacob Dallas

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Apart from all the good writing we get to read one of the big perks about FOTD is discovering new talent. And when we do we're jumping up and down like chimps in a Chiquita warehouse. We love publishing the emerging writer and we're quite happy to overlook the inevitable rough edges that often characterize the neophyte---as we see it, that's just part of the reading experience. But Jacob Dallas is the exception. It's rare to find a young writer whose voice rings so true and whose easy going prose plays softball with the language. This guy knows how to write a sentence. Any sentence. 'Nah, I'm kidding. I stepped into the damn ring. I got my ass kicked, but I stepped in all the same.' And, I swear I hear the flapping of angel's wings outside my door. Tongues of flame tickle my toes. My little apartment seems to get smaller, my mattress gets lumpier, and my pillows turn to stone.' Watch him. He's got 'Genuine Article' stamped all over. Five stars.*

## Wrestling with God

*...Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."*

*-Genesis 32:24-28 NIV*

Trace the Dallas lineage back as far as you want, you won't find any Jacob's aside from me. On my mother's side (the Guthries) there is one Jacob smack dab in the middle of the 19th century, but nobody even knew he existed until yours truly went digging through old records.

There's no chance *that* guy was my namesake (which is fortunate considering the man seems to have profited greatly off the Tennessee slave trade).

No, Jacob isn't a family name, it's a Bible name. My parents picked my title right out from the ranks of the Israeli patriarchs, and they were so pleased with the fit they proceeded to give biblical titles to all five of my younger siblings (Caleb, Joshua, David, Elizabeth, and Zechariah). Call me a trend-setter!

Here's a fun fact: in its original translation, Jacob literally means "heel grabber", or "grasper of feet". The leading scholarly theory as to the origin of this translation was that the Biblical Jacob was a life-long con-man who was constantly scrapping to get on top, grabbing at the metaphorical heels of his far more successful older brother, Esau. There is an alternate theory that none but I espouse that claims Jacob was the first person in history to have a foot fetish. As of now Biblical scholars are opposed to this suggestion, but I have a strong suspicion they're just kink-shaming the patriarch of Israel.

Regardless of the reasons for his (and my) unique etymological roots, Jacob's name eventually changed. The story goes that late one night before going to war with his twin brother, the one whose heels he was so intent upon, Jacob was attacked by a heavenly figure. Jewish and Muslim scholars alike agree that it was an angel, while most Christian scholars lean towards it being a pre-incarnation vision of Christ Himself. Whoever it's supposed to have been, Jacob wrestled with this fella, and he wrestled *hard*.

I've done my fair share of wrestling (I was on my school's team for 10 years) and I've got to say that I've never known anybody with the stamina to wrestle all night long. I consider myself a pretty tough guy, but even on my best day I wouldn't hold a candle to Ol Heel-Grabber. This man had such a brutal cross-face-to-half-nelson-hold that even after having his hip ripped

clean out of its socket the angel (or Jesus, or God, or whichever celestial power you prefer) couldn't get away from him. Jacob won, and his opponent admitted it.

It was in that moment that this heavenly stranger gifted Jacob with the name "Israel", which roughly translates to "God contends". The guy literally earned the title of God's champion in single combat. Pretty badass. Reading the story for the first time as a kid, I had to pause to ask my parents why I got the name that means "heel grabber" and not "God contends", which of course goes to show that your average 8 year old knows embarrassingly little about global politics.

The story wraps up rather well for Jacob/Israel. He ends up living to a ripe old age in extravagant wealth. He has two beautiful wives with countless sons and daughters. His name is permanently solidified in history as a Judeo-Christian hero. And of course there's the whole having a country named after him thing as well. All in all its quite a bit to live up to when you're a skinny child dutifully doing his morning Bible studies. It terrified me to be honest. My name was Jacob! Did that mean I had to wrestle God too? I couldn't even do a pullup on the backyard monkey bars!

It turns out I didn't need to be so worried. Jacob's aren't specifically targeted to wrestle with God. *Everybody* has to wrestle God at some point, your name is irrelevant.

It's just a fact of life. Sooner or later at some midnight hour we all have to stare our Maker in the face and ask Him what His whole deal is. Some folks might call it an existential crisis, a come-to-Jesus moment, a period of questioning, or even "that really bad acid trip I had in college". Whatever the case, it's gonna happen. Nobody is getting out of this one. This has been our doom since the day our species became self-aware. Questions are the curse of consciousness, and boy do we sure have a lot of them. I don't need to run down the list because

everybody has already got them in their head. These thoughts are ingrained in all of us, bouncing around our skulls like super-heated bouncy balls. I know *you* hear them boinging away in there on quiet nights.

I was born into an Evangelical family that's lived in the Southeastern United States longer than the term "United States" has existed. Needless to say, my home-environment didn't exactly encourage free thought. There *was* an answer to all those deep questions about life and it was *our* answer. Everyone else, bless their hearts, were members of the dead-wrong-hell-bound-unsaved-masses that we ought to pity lots and listen too little. With fear of brimstone brewing in the back of my brain it was damn difficult to wrestle with God. I'd tiptoe around the ring on occasion, sure, but I wasn't sure if I had the guts to step in. I always imagined that if I gave it a try the floor would open trap-door style and I'd plummet downward a couple million miles straight into Hell.

And so I blindly believed what Mommy and Daddy and Mammaw and Grandpappy and Pastor Bill told me for the rest of my life until the day I died. What else was I to do? This was my only option. I never once considered any other option and honestly freedom from choice was freedom indeed. I never wrestled with God because conflict is scary and uncertainty is terrifying. I lived meekly and went with the flow and proceeded to pass onto my own children that they better shape up or they'll get a one way ticket to fiery-Jesus-jail for a trillion and one life sentences without parole.

Nah, I'm kidding. I stepped into the damn ring. I got my ass kicked, but I stepped in all the same.

I guess I was 17 years old, or maybe just barely 18, when I demanded that life, the universe, and everything "square up". I didn't have half an idea of what I was doing or where I

was headed, I just decided to dare to ask the forbidden questions. And by “ask” I mean Google “How was the universe made?” under the covers at 4 AM on a school night and let my eyes wander over page after page of poorly moderated internet forums where wannabe scholars misquoted philosophers and hurled insults at each other in a desperate scramble to find truth. If there was such a thing as enlightenment then I wasn’t exactly getting warmer.

For a year or so I dreamed of Hell, read half-baked philosophy blogs, and fact-checked my pastor. Turns out the world’s *not* 6000 years old like my private school geology class said. Turns out Darwin *never* claimed a monkey had a human child. I was a full grown adult and I was learning what terms like “The Big Bang” meant and what geological periods were. I read about the Crusades and the Inquisition...*surely* Pastor Bill had heard of these things. Surely, surely, fuck, surely they had to have known. Is it a lie to withhold information? Is that why Mom and Dad didn’t let me use the internet till I turned 17?

It seemed like every night I’d dream of Hell. I would wake up screaming, my bed drenched in sweat. Once I’d clawed a couple gases of paint off my wall. My fingernails were bleeding, but I couldn’t feel the pain. I started sleeping with the lights on because the darkness of my room was suffocating. What if one day I flip my switch downwards and I never see light again? What if a doubter doesn’t deserve to see the light. I was a trembling mess, a mass of goosebumps, perspiration, and existential angst. Worst of all, I was completely and totally alone.

Well, not altogether alone. I had some half-baked philosophy blogs I found on the internet, but all those did was confuse me. A Spongebob profile picture social media account named “Nihilist420” isn’t exactly an ideal source of help in a time of questioning and collapse, but who else was there to turn to? I limped my way through every school day. I’d sit in the back of Ms. Nancy’s Physics class, clicking my pen, grinding my teeth, doodling wildly on my lab

notebook. I trembled my way through every end of class prayer Ms. Nancy would recite. Her words slammed my ears like hammers, or perhaps rather like a perfectly executed double-leg-to-mat takedown, a wrestling move I never could quite master. All I know is it stung like hell, and the process would repeat for seven class periods every damn day.

Church was worse. Every Wednesday night for youth group, every Sunday morning for normal church I'd be there. The band would play the same bland songs I've sung since I was old enough to sing. The pastor would hammer out a sermon. Sometimes it was tolerable, other times it was a bore, and still more times it was a nightmare.

There was this one Wednesday night we had a guest speaker who decided the Jonathan Edwards was in order for our "lost generation". It was a big man, bald and black-bearded. He wore a leather jacket and a bloody cross T-shirt. Real or manufactured, there was wrath in his dark eyes.

"How can I begin to describe Hell?" he growled, pacing back and forth across the stage. Sixty or so high schoolers sat in the room, silent, listening to him pour out his vitriol into this sermon. "You see," he went on, "Imagine the worst, most awful gut-wrenching guilt you've ever had. That feeling you've been caught in a lie or cheating on a test. Multiply that by billions and billions, imagine feeling that for one minute? Can you? Can you imagine that? Great. Now imagine feeling that way forever! You'll know nothing but suffering and agony and guilt for eternity, and you'll know it's never going to end, and you'll scream and beg and cry for your Mommy as fire and regret crush you, and you'll never escape. And you'll deserve it," he paused for dramatic effect, staring us all down, "You. Will. Deserve it. How does that sound?"

I was squirming in my seat, a vice grip around my empty coffee cup. It did not sound pleasant.

“Come to Jesus!” he bellowed, “Only Jesus can save you from your sins. You are unworthy of his forgiveness, but if you come forth and bathe in his blood he will lift you from the degradation of your own filth into his glorious righteousness. Come kneel before him and be saved!”

I don't think it needs saying that the majority of that room immediately fell to their knees. As for me I had my face on the old carpeted floor, desperately trying not to sob.

It was a whirlwind of soul-crushing months. My Junior year crawled by miserably, and it was all I could do to keep together. I couldn't decide what was real, I didn't know which way to turn. I was in the ring but I couldn't see my opponent, and he was treating me like a ragdoll.

Is this God thing a big trick? Oh c'mon, you know it's not a trick. It's gotta be something oh fuck fuck they're gonna fucking kill me wait it's my turn to pray at the dinner table tonight what the fuck am I gonna say because you can't approach God without a humble heart or He'll give you the Annanias and Sapphira treatment maybe but I wanna be honest and I wanna follow God I just don't want to be wrong, wrong, wrong, Hell is where you go where you're wrong, maybe this is Hell now, no wait this isn't Hell this is 4th period Chemistry class, shit am I fucking crying? **Fuck.**

Sorry about that. I lost control there for a minute. Not literally. My fingers didn't slip on the keyboard or anything. I'm being pretty selective with what I write down and my heart rate is perfectly level, but if I'd summed up that last bit with nice little sentences tied up in bows it would have been a straight-up lie. My wrestling match with God happened to mirror your average wrestling match, a blurry, red-lined haze of sweat and filth where a string of curse words permeated my every action. But wrestling matches wrap up within ten minutes, this lasted the

better part of a year. Or maybe hasn't ended at all? I don't know. There's no referee here. Nobody is keeping score.

What do you do when you have beliefs but don't have a belief system? Do you find the closest possible ideology and then stuff everything you have faith in through its mold and hope it comes out the other side intact? If you're really clever and have the on-hand cash you can start your own movement, I suppose. Or maybe you could decide you're alone in the universe, cry a lot, and drink and get emotional just a few too many days of the week. I'd like to say I didn't do any of these, but you may have noticed the last one was a touch too suspiciously specific. Yeah, that might have been for a reason. Who knows for sure though? I sure do. And now you do too.

I didn't have a big "Aha Moment" because those have never really been a thing for me. I have "Aha Months" and "Aha Years". Chalk it up to me being a slow learner I guess. An angel never slapped me upside the head and told me what's what. A prophet didn't put a hand on my shoulder and give me the rundown of the universe and all its naughty secrets. I didn't make a scientific discovery in my secret lab that sent me hurtling into a transcendent state of Humanist enlightenment.

I didn't win, I didn't lose, but I became comfortable with my opponent. I got used to the wrestling match.

Jacob/Israel/Heelgrabber dominated his match fair and square. He gave his opponent a true ass-kicking like only a legendary hero can do. Jacob put that angelic rascal in a chokehold and wouldn't let him hit the showers and go home until he got the blessing he was owed. My namesake must have spent a lot more time hitting the weights than I ever did, because I never stood a damn chance. I scrap like a trooper, sure, but I'm not the sort who gets named a champion of Heaven.

Nevertheless, I'm not the sort to give in. I let our duel reach a more comfortable pace. I circle the opponent for as long as he lets me, dodging and side-stepping attacks. I take long breaks in between bouts, I get better every day at popping back up when he sends me crashing to the mat. Occasionally I even manage to trip him up. I'm getting stronger as I go.

I'm stronger, but I'm not perfect. My stamina wanes at time. Now and again a sermon from my childhood worms its way into nights where it's hard to fall asleep. I swear I hear the flapping of angel's wings outside my door. Tongues of flame tickle my toes. My little apartment seems to get smaller, my mattress gets lumpier, and my pillows turn to stone.

On nights like that I just want to scream, "No, man, you've got the wrong Jacob. I'm not *that* Jacob. I'm *just* Jacob, no Israel's attached. I'm doing my own thing. I like to think and write, not to fight!"

But the fight is in the thoughts. The war is in the mind or potentially the soul if there is such a thing, and the battleground is on a plane of existence I don't actually believe in all that much. This wrestling match has gone on far too long, somebody ought to be blowing a whistle by now.

Is it possible I will never have peace until I know everything about everything?

I will never know everything about everything.

But does that mean I can't know peace? I have to know peace. I *do* know peace. I know it all the time. It's not like I have an existential crisis every second of every day. I only have three on a good week and they never last longer than an hour or four. I make it work.

I'm not an unhappy person. I smile a lot and laugh plenty. I do well in school, alright at my job, and feel secure in my relationships. Even in the deepest pits of angst I do just fine for

myself. Maybe that's it, right? Maybe that's the goal. To do the best you can with what you've got and to grit your way through the shit and seize the joy when it lands in your lap.

I'm figuring this out as I go along. Some people say that life is about the journey, not the destination. I have come to different theory: life is a journey *without* a destination. Sometimes there just aren't answers, only roadside attractions. If there's nowhere I'm going then I ought to do my best to weather the path with a smile and learn what I can when possible. The wrestling match continues forever, and that might be fine. Hell, maybe I'm addicted to the struggle.

I'm a Jacob alright, through and through. Wrestling by night and grabbing at the heels of concepts I'll never reach by day. I'm seeking and seeking and I'll find what I can when I can. Just know that when I fail to find out all the answers it won't be for a lack of trying.

Things will be just fine. Whether I win or lose, pin my opponent, get pinned, or simply run out of time to wrestle, I'll have given every molecule of my being to this fight. When it all ends I'll collapse in a sweaty heap on the mat, and as I close my eyes I hope I'll be smiling, clutching at the heels of truth.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *When you read about existential struggles and religious doubting, it tends to be written in such frilly language that you lose the grittiness of it all. I wanted to give an alternate view in "Wrestling with God". These kind of struggles are fucking dirty. They're brutal. Sure, there's some abstraction and high-mindedness to it, but a lot of it is fear and cold sweat and animalistic confusion. This isn't a story for people who consider themselves philosophers, but for people who are scared shitless by the universe and its enormity, especially if you come from a religious/spiritual background you just can't jive with. Hopefully someone out there reads this, relates to it, and can feel less alone. If not, I hope the ones who do read it at least learn something from it!*

**BIO:** *Jacob Dallas is an undergraduate creative writing student at Georgia College and State University. This story is his first publication that wasn't affiliated with his own school. Jacob is obsessed with writing of all genres that exposes the honest nature of life and humanity, no matter how weird, unconventional, or uncomfortable the path to that true reality might be. He believes that through honest and deep exploration we can all learn to understand and love each*

*other in ways we never thought possible. His inspirations are Isaac Asimov, JRR Tolkien, Dave Eggers, Laurie R. King, and just a dash of Terrance Hayes. When he's not writing, he's wasting time sharing his garbage opinions on Twitter @Jacob\_B\_Dallas*