

# Rolheiser: A Magnificent Defeat

Where's the fairness in life? Why are some people so undeservedly blessed in this world while others are seemingly cursed? Why are craftiness, self-serving ambition, taking advantage of others, and dishonesty so frequently rewarded?

This has no quick answer.

In his book *The Magnificent Defeat*, the renowned novelist and preacher, Frederick Buechner, takes up this question by focusing on the biblical character, Jacob. He, as we know, twice cheated his brother, Esau. Catching him hungry and vulnerable, Jacob buys his birthright from him for a meal. More seriously, he poses as Esau, tricks their father, and steals the blessing and the inheritance that was Esau's by right.

Everything about this seems wrong and calls for retribution, yet Jacob's life seemingly teaches the opposite. In contrast to his cheated brother, Jacob lives a very richly blessed life and is favored by God and by others.

What's the lesson? Are God and life really on the side of those who do this type of thing?

Buechner builds his answer by moving from the pragmatic and the short-range to the spiritual and the long-range.

First, from a pragmatic point of view, the story of Jacob teaches its own lesson, namely, that as a matter of fact in this life people like Jacob, who are intelligent, crafty, and ambitious often do end up being rewarded in ways that people like Esau, who are slower on the draw, don't.

While clearly this isn't the moral teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, other parts of scripture, including some teachings of Jesus, do challenge us to be intelligent, to work hard, and indeed at times to be crafty. God doesn't necessarily help those who help themselves, but God and life seem to reward those who use their talents.

But there's a fine moral line here and Buechner draws it out brilliantly.

He asks: when someone who does what Jacob did and it brings him riches in this life, where is the moral consequence?

The answer comes to Jacob years later. He is alone one night when a stranger leaps upon him and the two of them end up wrestling silently with each other throughout the entire night. Just as dawn is breaking and it seems Jacob might win, everything is suddenly reversed. With an infinitely superior strength that he seems to have deliberately held back until now, the stranger touches Jacob's thigh and renders him helpless.

Something deeply transformative happens to Jacob in that experience of helplessness. Now that he knows that he is finally defeated, he no longer wants to be free of the stranger's grasp; instead he clings fiercely to his former foe like a drowning man. Why?

Here's Buechner's explanation:

"The darkness had faded just enough so that for the first time he can dimly see his opponent's face. And what he sees is something more terrible than the face of death – the face of love. It is vast and strong, half-ruined with suffering and fierce with joy, the face a man flees down all the darkness of his days until at last he cries out, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me!' *Not a blessing that he can have now by the strength of his cunning or the force of his will, but a blessing that he can have only as a gift.*"

There's an entire spirituality here. The blessing for which we are forever wrestling can only come to us as gift, not as something we can snatch through our own talent, cunning, and strength.

By his wit and cunning, Jacob became a rich, admired man in this world. But in struggling for all those riches he was wrestling with a force he unconsciously perceived as someone or something to be overcome.

Eventually, after many years of struggle, he had an awakening. Light dawned, through a crippling defeat. And in the light of that defeat he finally saw that what he had been struggling with for all that time was not someone or something to be overcome, but the very love he was wrestling for in all his efforts to achieve and get ahead.

For many of us, this will also be the real awakening in our lives, waking up to the fact that in our ambition and in all the schemes we concoct to get ahead, we are not wrestling with a someone or something to be overcome by our strength and wit; we are wrestling with community, love, and with God. And it will undoubtedly take the defeat of our own strength (and a permanent limp) before we realize what we are fighting against.

Then we will give up trying to win and instead cling like a drowning man to this face of love, begging for its blessing, *a blessing that we can have only as a gift.*

Believing that our blessing lies in winning, we strive to wrestle our lives away from others until one day, if we are lucky enough to be defeated, we begin to beg others to hang on to us.