

## "The Battler"

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)  
*A sermon for Grace United Church in Brampton*

Genesis 32.24-31

March 21, 2021

But Jacob stayed apart by himself, and a man wrestled with him until dawn broke. When the man saw that he couldn't defeat Jacob, he grabbed Jacob's thigh and tore a muscle in Jacob's thigh as he wrestled with him.

The man said, *"Let me go because the dawn is breaking."* But Jacob said, *"I won't let you go until you bless me."*

He said to Jacob, *"What's your name?"* and he said, *"Jacob."* Then he said, *"Your name won't be Jacob any longer, but Israel, because you struggled with God and with men and won."*

Jacob also asked and said, *"Tell me your name."* But he said, *"Why do you ask for my name?"* and he blessed Jacob there. Jacob named the place Peniel, "because I've seen God face-to-face, and my life has been saved."

The sun rose as Jacob passed Penuel, limping because of his thigh.

Common English Bible

Let's skim the story before that story.

Jacob was born with his dukes up, braced for the next fight.

In the womb, he had battled his twin. Esau was born slightly first, and ever since Jacob battled to never come in second again.

Years later, he'd scammed his old man and ripped off his brother. Jacob came out number one . . . for all the good that did him. He'd swindled the family birthright and blessing for himself, but then had to run for his life with that and nothing else. He'd made himself alone in a world that will tear you apart.

II

Then, God met him, in a dream, a vision. God met Jacob, but not with the scolding that scoundrel deserved. Instead, another blessing. This time, freely given. The Lord promised him land, offspring, global influence, widespread admiration, God's

protection and God's ever-presence.

Why Jacob? I don't know. What's God up to with him?

When Jacob awoke, he said, *"Surely God is in this place! I had not noticed!"* (You might recognize that phrase.)<sup>1</sup>

Still, Jacob wasn't so sure. (Remember, always fighting.) So he built a mini-memorial; maybe it was his way of tying a string around God's finger. He struck a deal, for what God had already promised. *"If You do everything You've said, then You're my kind of god, and I'll give back to you."*

### III

From there, Jacob moved on with life, testing God's promises all the way. He battled to make back everything he'd left behind, and then some.

Jacob almost met his match in Laban his uncle, with whom he'd sought refuge. Jacob quickly took a shine to his cousin Rachel — don't ask. He made a deal with his uncle to marry her, then worked seven hard years to win his prize. But Laban had another daughter up his sleeve, Rachel's sister Leah. When the wedding night came, the old man slipped Leah in with Jacob instead. The next morning Jacob realized he'd married the wrong sisters — don't ask! Laban said, *"That's how we do things around here. No worries. I'll also give you Rachel now, if you agree to work for me seven more years."* Jacob agreed. The scammer was out-scammed.

But it's Jacob. He's not giving up the fight. By the time he's all finished, he owns his father-in-law's best livestock. He has both of Laban's daughters as his two wives, two other sort-of-wives, loads of kids, and probably anything else that isn't nailed down.

It seems God has been keeping God's promise to Jacob. Why Jacob? I don't know. What's God up to with him?

### IV

God's grace has brought him safe thus far. Now God's grace leads him home . . . to Esau. Remember? Big brother, whom Jacob had battled, scammed, fleeced, and fled from.

---

<sup>1</sup> Both Grace UC and my congregations have participated in The Presence Project. The Project's key phrase is *"Surely God is in this Place. Help me notice."* [www.presenceprojectnetwork.ca](http://www.presenceprojectnetwork.ca)

Esau is waiting. What can Jacob expect from Esau? Long-simmering revenge. That's what Jacob would have served up.

They are going to meet tomorrow. Esau's bringing along his own 400-man gang. Jacob can muster a few servants, four wives, a pile of kids, and lots of sheep.

And God's promise! So he prays:

*God, You brought me back here. You've always looked after me, though I haven't deserved it. (That's what you're supposed to say, right.) You've given me so much. Now I'm in trouble. Again. Help me. Remember, You promised!*

It is a good prayer. It's Jacob, though, so you always have to wonder about the sincerity.

God says nothing back.

Jacob sends everything on ahead, with presents to buy off his brother, and hopes for the best.

∨

This is when this episode happens, which we heard read from the Bible.

All we are told, authoritatively, is that it was some guy, a man. I figure it's the Stranger who starts the fight. Then again, you know Jacob. They seem surprisingly well-matched, and have at each other through the long night. The sun starts peeking through, and Jacob is ready to go some more rounds, but the Stranger wants out. So he pulls a rip move and dislocates Jacob's hip.

Still, Jacob holds on, and won't let go until he gets . . . a blessing. Again with the blessing! What is Jacob angling for this time? More wives? More children? More sheep? Land? To survive Esau?

What he gets is a new name. *Ya'aqob* can mean things like "heel," and "trickster," and "over-reacher," and "usurper." Jacob has had to put that at the top of his resume his whole life. Now the battling Stranger says, "*No more 'Ya'aqob.'* Now you are going to be called 'Yisra'el.' *You have battled with God and with people, and you've made it.*" "Yisra'el"

means something like "God rules," "God perseveres," "God protects."<sup>2</sup>

Jacob then asks for Stranger's name. Stranger won't tell him, but blesses him.

It's Jacob who tells us that the Stranger was the LORD God. I think he's right. But then you've got to wonder why God Almighty didn't just throw Jacob to the ground and go for the quick pin. Why did God let Jacob hold on and not let go?

What's God up to with Jacob?

## VI

What's God up to with us? With me? Maybe you?

Before Jacob could deal with his brother — and, by the way, that turned out okay, thanks to Esau — Jacob had to deal with God first. It seems we have to face God too, which is a scary thought. Jacob faced God in the nighttime. Maybe it's best to face God with our eyes closed tight in prayer.

It seems God is quite willing to get down and grapple with us. God values our wrestling. God is willing to let us hold on for dear life, to not let God go.

All along, Jacob battled. He schemed. He cheated. And God worked with him. So it seems none of us is beyond God's work. In fact, from him onwards, God's salvation work for all humanity will unfold through Israel's family. God's People will continue to wrestle with God.

That's how God forms us. God uses our wrestling to shape us into God's People.

Now, don't suppose the battle comes without a cost. Jacob limped away from it, permanently wounded.

In your wrestling, in your battling, I hazard that God will wound you too. Being formed is not always going to be a comfortable process. And God will bless you. And let you hold on.

In fact, it's God who will never let you go. God's proved that. Because when God rose

---

<sup>2</sup> For the meaning of these words, see Walter Brueggemann, Genesis (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 268, and Robert Alter, The Hebrew Bible: Volume 1, Five Books of Moses (Torah): A Translation with Commentary. (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 122.

from the wounding, he bore the permanent scars of nails and a spear.

God is a battler. Maybe that's why God likes Jacob so much! God likes you too.

God battles with you. And, in Jesus God has won your battle, for you.