

One of the first things you come to realize when you practice a martial art is that fighting is hard. As many of you know, I train jiu jitsu, and at 42 I often find myself as the oldest guy in the class among 20 and 30 somethings. We “roll” for 5 minutes at a time, which is the standard time for a round in competition, and it can often feel like 5 minutes is an eternity. Sometimes I get to my most exhausted point and take a peek at the clock, hoping it’s close to time, only to see there’s like 3 minutes left in the round. Think about all the things we do in our lives where 5 minutes passes without us even thinking

about it. On my first night at class a year and a half ago I'll never forget that I got physically sick after just the warmup, and by the end of class I was sore and tired in a way I hadn't been since I was a teenager playing 3 sports in high school. As I've come to connect with jiu jitsu community across social media and gotten close to the other guys in my class I know this isn't only isolated to me either – everyone finds it to be hard. Injuries happen, soreness sets in, classes can leave you feeling exhausted, sometimes you find yourself on a stretch where it feels like all you do is lose or that you're

just stuck playing defense over and over and over again.

And that's just the experience of "wrestling" for an hour and a half class, 3 times a week, in 5 minute increments with breaks for water and stretches and to breathe.

Jacob wrestled all night.

Jacob didn't wrestle with just anyone, either.

Jacob, the Hebrew text tells us, wrestled with *Elohim* all night until the sun came up.

The Hebrew text here is ambiguous in its meaning. The word, *Elohim*, could absolutely include YHWHY who is the God of the Hebrew people... but it doesn't *only* include YHWHY. It's sort of like that old adage from grade school where all squares are rectangles but not all rectangles are squares. In the ancient world there was a prevalent belief, even among the early Hebrew people, that there were other divinities that existed in the world. Powerful beings that were stronger than our mortal selves. Among the Hebrew people the belief was

the YHWHY was the *most* powerful of them all, not that YHWHY was the *only* divinity that existed.

In the creation story, chapter 1, the text says that God says, “Let us created *them* in *our* image” – implying a heavenly host of divine beings, God being chief among them. In the ten commandments the commandment doesn’t say not to *believe* in any other Gods outside of YHWHY – the commandment says, “thou shalt not have any Gods *before me*.”

To the ancient hearers of today’s story it would not have been assumed that Jacob wrestled with YHWY, the God of the Hebrew people and

eventually Israel – what’s most important and most clear is that Jacob wrestled with *something*.

Something powerful and beyond true definition.

Something powerful enough to leave him injured for the rest of his life walking with a limp, but also something powerful enough to bless him in God’s name leaving him with a new name and new identity.

Jacob wrestles with something powerful enough that he’s changed forever. He’ll never be just *Jacob* again... and if we think back to the last few weeks as we’ve followed the story of

Abraham's descendants through Genesis this is important.

Today's text serves as a sort of conclusion to a chapter of Jacob's life that has been less than stellar. Remember, he's born clutching Esau's heel as a first sign of rivalry between the two. Then he deceives Esau so that Esau will sell him his birthright. Then he deceives Isaac, their father, to officially bless him with the birthright. Then he's forced to flee because Esau wants to kill him, and he finds himself in the middle of nowhere – where he experiences the dream seeing God's stairway to

heaven... which is followed by a season of his life where he lives in service to someone even more deceptive and micro-managing than he is.

In this moment Jacob is no longer in control of his own destiny. The scheming and micro-managing won't help him here. He's about to face Esau again, after many years, and he's certain Esau will still want to kill him. His own gifts that he's relied on for his whole life are useless. He's literally reached his limit. He's left to wrestle with his own past and all that's followed him for his whole life as a result.

I imagine in that moment he wrestles with doubt – doubt about what will happen when he sees Esau at dawn, and doubt about whether he's made the right choices. I imagine in that moment Jacob wrestles with regret – regret over the decisions he's made and the ways he's treated people, and even himself. I imagine he wrestles with apprehension – apprehension over the unknown, over the realization that this isn't a moment where he can scheme or manipulate or micro-manage the outcome; it's completely outside of his own control. I imagine he wrestles with worry

– worry over what will happen to his family is he’s killed by Esau.

However all of that manifests, the text tells us Jacob wrestles – all night – and that the struggle of that wrestling is hard. And that it leaves him changed – in every possible way.

Recently I participated in a competition for jiu jitsu – something I was certain I’d never do. I faced a 20 year old competitor who stood at about 6’4”. I prepared for months leading up to the event, and I was excited. I was confident that I *could* win, and I’d been telling myself that I was ok with losing if that

happened... but I knew deep down that I *really* wanted to win.

On our way to the competition that day Dani joked with me that she wanted me to win, but she sort of also hoped I'd get swept in my matches so our boys could see an example of how to lose with grace and dignity.

And then that's what happened.

Of course I was disappointed, but just after the last match I'd barely caught my breath when Judah – our youngest – came *running* up to me and yelled, “Daddy, I so *proud* of you!! You did so *good*!” And

then I remembered how I'd heard his little voice through both matches enthusiastically shouting, "Go Daddy, Go Daddy! We love you!" That made that day special in a different way.

I still won, and I was changed in how I approach this martial art I've fallen in love with – and how I approach life really.

Just like our text from a few weeks ago when Jacob sees God's stairway in a dream, God is present with Jacob. YHWHY is there but what we often get wrong about this text is that Jacob didn't wrestle *against* YHWHY. YHWHY was Jacob's

*strength*. YHWHY was Jacob's *inspiration*. YHWHY was Jacob's *motivation*.

YHWHY was all of the things Jacob needed most in order to prevail over this powerful force that was assailing him and testing him.

And it was enough.

The text tells us that Jacob's mysterious challenger seems to want to quit as the sun comes up, and that's when Jacob won't let go until he's received a blessing. YHWHY didn't confront Jacob in that moment; and Jacob didn't wrestle YHWHY into

near submission and just get some sort of generic blessing out of it.

YHWHY was present with Jacob and, through all of these provisions, helped Jacob to *wring out* a blessing from a force that might have otherwise overwhelmed him. God's provision is often subtle, and we're often left to feel like we're the ones doing all of the striving and fighting just to get by – but God's provision is what makes up the deficit in us to get us through to a place of blessing.

The promised land for God's people would be named for who Jacob becomes in all of this – *Israel*.

In Hebrew Israel means “One who struggles with God.” *With* God. Not *against* God.

We all have a struggle we’re facing, or that we *have faced* at some point. That’s just a reality of life – that we will struggle and strive and wrestle and sometimes just plain old fight for our own existence. What we often get wrong about this text is something that gets our perspective wrong in those moments. When we believe God wrestled against Jacob, just so that Jacob could be tested and hardened, that leaves us believing in an antagonistic God who is constantly needling us and messing with

us just to see how we'll respond. That's not a God of love and grace.

That's a petty and manipulative God.

When we see that God wrestled *with* Jacob – meaning God wrestled *along side* Jacob against whatever powerful thing it was that Jacob faced – we see that God does the same with us. It doesn't mean we will crush the challenges we face, or that the help will come in dazzling divine pageantry. But it will be there and it will get us through.

Lately my jiu jitsu coach has challenged me to focus on something I didn't really expect to be

challenged to focus on. We're always worried about technique and new moves in jiu jitsu – but my coach recently told me to stop worrying about so many of those things and to simply focus on *breathing*. On being more *relaxed* and *fluid* as I train. This helps to be present, to be able to see and feel what's happening so that I can better respond. It forces me to lean into one of the most basic tenets of jiu jitsu, and life really, which says that there's no such thing as a bad position if you remain present... just that we'd *rather* be in some positions more than in others. That's how I imagine God was present for

Jacob. In something as simple as breathing and being present.

Whatever it is you're facing, trust that the same God who wrestled alongside Jacob is wrestling alongside you. Trust that the powerful thing you're facing is no more powerful against God's provision than the thing that Jacob faced. Trust that it's OK if it feels bigger and more powerful than you are – because it might be... but that doesn't diminish the fact that God is there. Wrestling along-side you... all the way until the light of the next day has come and is shining upon your face. Amen.