

God of our Bad Days | Genesis 32:22-31, Luke 18:1-8 | Oct 19 2025 at FPCLC

There is an old story of a kid who finds a caterpillar outside. He takes it home, puts it in a mason jar alongside a stick and a leaf, and watches as it begins to build its cocoon. As we'd expect, the child watches the cocoon everyday and one day, sure enough, a small hole appears in it and the kid can see the butterfly starting to emerge. But, as the kid is watching, he's seeing it take longer than he expected. And he sees the sizable butterfly struggling to emerge from this small hole. So, the kid runs off to the other room, grabs some scissors, returns, and carefully widens the small hole in the cocoon. Sure enough, the butterfly tumbles out. But, oddly, the kid notices that this butterfly has a quite swollen body and shriveled up wings. And, as the kid observes it over the next several days, he sees that it never learns to fly and spends the rest of its admittedly short insect life crawling around the bottom of the jar.

Butterflies, it turns out, need the struggle of emerging from their cocoons. The butterfly's struggle to push its way through the tiny opening of the cocoon actually pushes the fluid out of its body and into its wings. Without the struggle, the butterfly stays earthbound. Which is to say, sometimes one bad day can make for a whole good life. Sometimes the struggle itself is a grace.

Indeed that was certainly the case for Jacob. See, his story really begins with him being born second to Esau in a time and place where being the firstborn was very important. From there, many of you will recall, he actually went as far as to use his father's own deathbed as an opportunity to play a trick and steal the firstborn blessing from his brother; something that, to make a long story short, had resulted in him having to flee to his uncle's, out of town.

But, he isn't out of the woods yet. In fact, just before the struggle that turns out to be a blessing in this scripture reading, we see Jacob go through the opposite -- a blessing that turns out to be a struggle. See, when Jacob goes out to his uncle's, his cousins start grumbling and getting jealous. It turns out Jacob was actually pretty well liked and successful out that way. And that didn't come without its own detractors.

So, that's where we find Jacob in our scripture reading today. He has fled from his home due to his rivalries and stubbornness. He found what was supposed to be a blessing, but that just turned out to be a big old mess. And so now, he is having to flee back into his home for pretty much the same reasons he fled from it.

But, of course, even after all that, Jacob was never far from a scheme. In fact, that's actually the meaning of the name Jacob; trickster and deceiver. And see, there's a lot of truth to that as Jacob stops just a bit of a distance out from his old home. He sends along his wives and children first, puts them in between him and his potentially angry and dangerous brother. Then he starts sending out gifts and personal items to his home, little almost trojan horses, sent one by one about every hour or so. He's testing the field. And so, when he learns that Esau is back there with some 400 men, he starts to think about how he could win this over. He thinks about how to get the upper hand. He thinks about how he'd like to sway Esau with these gifts but that if it comes down to it, he can draw Esau out and find another way to make sure he retains the blessing of the eldest living son. And so on.

And all the while, while Jacob is busy with *his* schemes and *his* plans, and maintaining *his* deceptions and upholding *his* rivalries and retaining *his* status, you know what he's doing all the while? He is praying to God, trying to cover his bases. God, may *your* will be done. May *you* be glorified. All of that. Which is really kinda

ironic because if we were to zoom out on the story, we'd see that Esau and his men were fine. Jacob's wives and children now with Esau, they're fine too. In fact, in the next chapter, they'll all reunite in peace.

But for now, as verse 24 says, everyone has already gone ahead of him and Jacob is being left alone to his schemes. He's crafting and scheming and backbiting and making all sorts of weird one-upmanship plans when a mysterious man comes up to him and, oddly enough, begins to wrestle with him. And this stranger, this angel, God, life, Jacob's conscience -- there's a lot of different interpretations here, he doesn't overpower Jacob but instead just keeps going toe to toe with him throughout the entire night.

Maybe a month or so ago, I was in Target, looking at their Lego sets. That's one of those things I haven't grown out of, I guess. But, I recall a mother and her child in the same aisle. The kid was maybe 5 or 6. And he too wanted a Lego set -- good taste. And I remember admittedly eves dropping a bit, as he asked his mom for it. And I'll say, I was really pleasantly surprised. See, she didn't just shut it all down. She didn't give in or give him an ultimatum. Instead, I got to witness a good, honest, thoughtful conversation between a mother and her son. She spoke with him about why they weren't getting anything that day, and the good things they do have to look forward to, and the nice toys waiting at home. And I could see the kid really seeming to understand. To not just get an ultimatum, but to walk with his mom through the process and really understand things himself.

It takes a patient and powerful kind of grace to not force a way immediately, but to stay present with someone. To work with them. To go back and forth with them and invest in the process rather than just demanding blind obedience. That's what that mom was doing at Target and I believe it's what God was doing with Jacob here.

See, again, we discover that sometimes the struggle itself is a grace. Sometimes, the things we thought we wanted get taken away so God can give us something better. Sometimes we don't end up with a lego set, we end up understanding the way the world works a bit better instead. Sometimes, and I say this only halfway in jest, the greatest miracle God can give us is a stranger knocking us on our rear end when we're in the middle of some wayward scheme. Sometimes, we all need to say "thank you" to God for unanswered prayers. Amen?

But, church, as we turn to our New Testament reading, I want to complexify that. Because I really do believe it. I see in my own life and have heard a good number of stories about times when God has redirected us, times when we struggled with something and that turned out to be a grace in itself, and times when what we thought was some kind of curse turned out to be a blessing.

But, see, other times, honestly, times can just be hard. We see that in the book of Job -- a good man who just gets put through it. We see it in the spiritual classic, *The Dark Night of the Soul* by St John of the Cross -- the story of a frustrated wrestling with God, a sense of soul weariness, helplessness, a stubborn and persistent dismay with self, with others and, ultimately, with God Himself. We see that even in the life of Mother Teresa who often wrote in her memoirs about some 50 years of just feeling a deep disconnect from God and not understanding why.

And certainly, we all just simply know that already. I don't have to do a deep dive on spiritual classics to tell you all that, church. We all know that life can just be hard sometimes and in the midst of a struggle, we can look up and just want to say "God what are you doing? I don't think this struggle is teaching me anything, it's just kinda unpleasant." We've all been there, I'm sure.

Well, let's see if we can figure out what God is doing in those times too. After all, we see that same pattern in the parable of the persistent widow. See, briefly, this story here in the New Testament is one that echoes Jacob's own story but with a twist. Whereas Jacob had a messy life and some messy priorities that God needed to straight out, this widow just lived in a messy world.

It's almost like a story from Franz Kafka. Someone is accusing this poor old widow of something. We don't know what. And she goes to the judge and he doesn't care. And she tries to find support but no one wants to touch it. And so every morning, she goes down to the courthouse and she says "I need justice against my accuser." And they shuffle her around and treat her like a dog and tell her "Go stand in that line over there and fill out form 88F." So she spends all day standing in line and filling out that form. And then, of course, they say, "no, no, no; you needed that line and form 539-P." So she does that the next day. And then she gets an appointment with the judge but he moves it to the following week. Then that week he's out to lunch when she arrives. And so on and so on.

But, and we don't know exactly how long this took, but eventually the widow persists. Eventually the judge has to relent because she just keeps coming. And he realizes he's doing a lot more work trying to not do his work than if he just showed up for once. And so, her case is finally dismissed.

Do you see what I mean about her story being an echo of Jacob's story but with a twist? Both struggled. Both needed persistence and endurance to keep up a long battle. But, whereas Jacob had a messy life that needed sorting out, this widow really just had a messy world. That is to say, there really wasn't a lesson for her to learn or a redirection she needed. Instead, it was really her who was the lesson for others.

And what I want to emphasize this morning is that that's true too. Yes, it is true that sometimes there are struggles that turn out to be a grace. But, sometimes there are just struggles where the grace is it all finally ending. Sometimes the miracle is that God just stuck by our side through it all because nobody else did.

Sometimes, we look around and have a hard time finding God's grace because in that situation God had elected for you to primarily be where God's grace is. Sometimes, like the persistent widow, the good gift God brings into a hard situation is just one Christian, and that's you, who just keeps acting like a Christian even as they get put through it.

Sometimes a struggle is a redirection. It's a grace. Sometimes a struggle is an opportunity to witness. It's you walking into a situation where you're going to be where Jesus Christ is most present. Both of those are true sometimes. But, always church, and this will be my last thing this morning; always, a struggle will be seen and remembered by the God who is just, who does care for righteousness, and who is making all things new.

See, in a similar way to how we could zoom out on Jacob's story this morning and see that all his scheming and worrying and the like was a little silly given all the good news and all the reunion and blessing and grace he will receive, Jesus kinda does a similar thing to us in this story of the persistent widow too.

Jesus closes out his parable with an appeal; will he find faith when he returns? Will he find folks who persisted through the struggles, who stayed good Christians even when the world around them wasn't acting very Christian? Will he find folks who walked in the way of selfless love even when it got hard? He's trying to give us eternity in peace, can we withstand a few bad days first?

I wonder, whether it's later on in this life or in the next life, how many things will there be that we struggled with only to learn God had good plans on the other end of it all? I wonder, how many smiles will we see in heaven and how many folks will get to share that when everything was upside down in the world, you were the person who kept things right side up. I wonder how many folks will be able to really see our Christian character as it comes out in the difficult seasons of life.

See, both these passages teach us a few things about where God may be at work on our bad days. The truth is, sometimes the struggle is a grace in how it redirects our paths. Other times, the struggle is our opportunity to be a good Christian witness. But, always, always, God is watching over us and is so excited for the day when He gets to make it all right, if only we persist for a little while longer.

Let's pray...

Just and listening God,
ever more ready to hear us than we are to pray,
meet us where we are,
lest we decide that you are beyond our reach.

We bring our disappointments and complaints,
All our bad days,
our cries for justice,
our concern for the needy,
asking for Your strength and Your courage.

We ask that you would renew our understanding of your grace
and see that today, right now, especially for folks who are having a hard time, you are at work.

Whether you are redirecting us, reproving us, refining us, or simply making use of us as a good Christian witnesses,

Lord, we ask that you would center us not on how we're feeling day to day.
Center us, today and always, on how deeply we are loved by you
And how majestic sure your plans are, even if we do not see them just yet

May we have confidence in your plans for the world
Even as we go through both the good, the bad, and sometimes the ugly too
Knowing that Jesus Christ still reigns
And he will bring it to completion.
Amen.