

Today we hear 2 stories about struggle. Stories about the journey from dark to light and the transformative power of struggle.

Jacob struggles with the angel of GOD.

An unnamed woman struggles for justice.

To be human is to struggle.

We are not born into a life of effortless ease, everything falling into place.

We are born into a life of struggle.

To be born is to struggle. Giving birth is a struggle. To be human is to struggle.

Before we embark on our journey together, I am going to very gently assume that we all of us here know what it is to struggle, that none of us has escaped life's adversities?

May we simply acknowledge that, without diving deep into our pain, and allow ourselves to be led along the road towards hope!

Along the way, we will see that,

- Struggle is the place where GOD blesses us.
- Struggle is the place where we are transformed.
- Struggle is the place where GOD is revealed.

To struggle is a journey from dark to light.

This is not a talk about answers, but a talk about seeing where we are and finding hope.

First, we turn to the story of Jacob in Genesis 32:

Jacob's past is catching up with him. He finds himself alone at night, about to face his brother whom he hasn't seen for 20 years. His brother Esau whom he cheated, whom he deceived and whose inheritance he stole. Jacob is finally facing up to who he is, who he has become and what the future may hold for him.

In the dark, Jacob encounters his worst fears. An unknown adversary assails him and wrestles with him all night long. He does not know the identity of the assailant. Is it his brother? Is it someone sent by his brother? Is it a robber? A demon?

Is he dreaming? Is this a vision?

Let's follow Jacob's nighttime wrestling.

Let's trace the itinerary of his struggle and see in it all the milestones we pass through when we struggle. There are 8 milestones in all.

1. When we struggle, we are in the dark.

It was nighttime when Jacob faced his opponent. In the darkness, it's difficult to see hazards and dangers. We don't know what's coming at us next. We cannot understand what is happening to us. Struggle is a place of darkness.

2. When we struggle, we face an unknown opponent.

An unknown man wrestled with Jacob all night. Was it a robber? A warrior? A demon? Jacob does not know and cannot name who or what is assailing him. He cannot see what he is up against, only the shadowy threat that demands everything of him. Sometimes we cannot even name our fears.

3. When we struggle, we are alone.

Not only was Jacob alone, but he was '**left alone**' (V. 24). He had sent everyone ahead of him and now alone, he faces unforeseen danger. No other help or resources to draw on. In our struggles, how often do we feel that we have only ourselves to rely on?

4. When we struggle, we get hurt and feel pain.

Jacob was wounded in the struggle. His hip was dislocated by his opponent. Now he is wrestling in the dark, with an unknown assailant, injured and in pain. Jacob is left with scars, or more accurately, with a permanent limp. This is no dream, no vision, but a very stark reality. Struggle undeniably takes a toll on our physical and mental well-being.

Are you still with me? We are halfway through! We've arrived at our turning point. From now on it gets better!

5. When we struggle, we keep going

Jacob refused to let go. To struggle means to keep going, to persevere. If we give up, that's no longer struggling. It's called something else. The definition of struggle is to carry on. To keep on keeping on. Through isolation, uncertainty, disappointment, heartache. Hour after hour. Day after day. Year after year. Not giving into the temptation to give up. Struggling is a process, not an event.

6. When we struggle, we are changed.

Jacob finds his voice and states what he needs, '**But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.'**' (v 26) The struggle transforms him, it changes him. Formerly his name was 'Jacob' meaning 'Deceiver'. Now it is 'Israel' meaning 'One who struggles'. From deceiver to struggler, from cheater to overcomer. The long hours of holding on have changed him. He is formed, he is made, in in the fires of adversity. It's where hope is re-born.

If you were to give yourself a new name, what would it be?

7. When we struggle, we are saved and we receive GOD's blessing.

Jacob's life was persevered (v 30). Struggles saves us from futility, from hopelessness, despair, meaninglessness and going round in circles. Jacob asked GOD and received from GOD the blessing he sought, Verse 29 tells us, '**And there he blessed him**'. The place of his struggle is the place of his blessing.

8. In the place of struggle, we see GOD.

In the face of struggle, we see the face of GOD. Finally, Jacob realises, it was not a bandit or a highwayman, or a warrior with whom he wrestled; it was the LORD!

³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face.'

GOD is revealed. GOD is revealed as the one who struggles, a wrestling GOD. The one who never gives up, until Christ is formed in us. Where is the GOD wrestling today?

On the cross, Jesus was alone, in the dark, with no-one to help, facing an unknown adversary; he was hurt and in pain, he was transformed by suffering and saved. GOD is revealed in Christ on the cross.

Where are we in this itinerary of struggle, this roadmap of faith?

- Where are we in the dark?
- Where are we facing an unknown opponent?
- Where are we alone?
- Where are we hurting and in pain?
- Where are we keeping going?
- Where are we being changed?
- Where are we being saved and receiving GOD's blessing?
- Where do we see God?

To be human is to struggle.

In our second story, an unnamed woman faces the struggle for justice.

Jesus tells a parable about an unnamed woman, a widow, whose neighbour has trampled on her crops, poisoned her well, taken her animals, or moved her boundary wall, we know not what!!

But the woman refuses to go quietly, she refuses to take it lying down. She asserts her rights. She beats on the judge's door, day and night.

As a woman in those times, she had no recourse to justice or human rights, no status in law.

So, she too is alone.

She too has no-one to help her.

But she does not let that stop her! She, **'kept coming to him (the judge) and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.'**

Finally, her persistence pays off:

⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice.'"

What the woman gained through her persistence was not just justice for her own complaint, important though that was, but an open door for all GOD's children!

Her lonely battle will bear fruit in the lives of others!

Her struggle will result in blessing the whole community of faith.

Her story gains from Jesus a far-reaching promise! –

⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?

⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.

Just as Jacob went on to become a father to the people of Israel, so this nameless woman became a mother to oppressed and voiceless people everywhere, to all who raise their voices without giving up.

Jesus closes the parable by laying down the gauntlet, inviting all of us to recognise that life is a struggle. He provokes us to action with a stark challenge:

“And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

He invites us to reply, ‘Yes’!

Every one of GOD’s promises is ‘Yes’ in him!

For if we are faithless, he remains faithful!

Thanks be to GOD for Jesus!