

Special Series

the Call of God – Jacob (2)

Prayer

Give us the wisdom to open up our hearts to Your Word, O Lord, so that we may hear and understand all truth and righteousness.

Give us the courage to open up our emotions to Your love, O Lord, so that we may receive and feel Your passion for us, and for those who are lost.

Give us the strength to stand firm in the faith You have inspired in us, O Lord, so that we may not turn away from the great treasure that has been set before us in Christ, our Saviour: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

'Google' a charity you support in order to find out more about it, and pray for its work throughout the day

On-going prayers

- ***Pray for persecuted Christians*** *Pray today about the increasingly pernicious persecution of Christians by secular, 'ex' Christians nations*
- *Give thanks to God for the joy of sight, and how it enriches life*
- *Pray for the UK after months of damaging financial revelations*

Meditation

When your heart is troubled deep inside,
Will you let the Saviour calm your soul
And work to ease your troubled breast?

When your head is confused over what to do,
Will you let the Holy Spirit comfort you
And still your mind to clear your thoughts?

When your feelings churn around within you,
Will you let the Friend of Sinners come
And ease the pain of all your lurking fears?

When your own opinions dominate your words,
Will you give the Lord of All due honour
And let Him be the judge of everything?

When your love for others balks at those you hate,
Will you let the Gracious Father take you back
And remind you of your sins that He's forgiven?

When you really need your loving Saviour,
Will you give Him all the time He needs
To help you change and become like Him?

Bible passage – Genesis 32:22-32

²² That night, Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven sons, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok; ²³ He took them and made them cross the stream, and sent over everything he had.

²⁴ Jacob was left there alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵ When he saw that he did not overcome him, he hit him on the side of his hip, and his hip was dislocated as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, 'Let me go, it is day break.' But he said, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' ²⁷ So he asked him, 'What is your name?' And he replied, 'Jacob.' ²⁸ He said, 'You will not be called Jacob any longer, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with others, and have overcome.' ²⁹ Then Jacob asked, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why do you ask my name?' And with that, he blessed him, right there.

³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'This is because I have seen God face to face, and yet I have survived!' ³¹ The sun rose on him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. ³² Therefore to this day, the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle of the hip joint, because Jacob was struck on the hip near the thigh muscle.

Bible Study

Review

Jacob began his spiritual journey when he was thrown out of his home, and was sent away from the Promised Land in search of a wife (28:10-22). After many years of servitude and struggle with his father-in-law, Laban, he returned to Canaan a different man. After hearing about the approach of his brother Esau, with whom he had quarrelled bitterly (27:41f.), he organised his household to go ahead of him over the Jabbok stream, a minor river on the eastern side of the Jordan marking part of the perceived boundary between Canaan and the north. He made the symbolic crossing alone, but found his way barred by a man, with whom he fought (32:24).

After an immense struggle Jacob was injured, but would not give up. He demanded that his opponent 'bless' him, which probably meant that he should do him the favour of yielding. As the two men spoke, Jacob's opponent demanded to know his name, and when Jacob replied, we discover for the first time that his opponent was more than a man; this was God who had power to rename Jacob, 'Israel' (probably meaning 'God rules'). The fight came to an end as God blessed Jacob and yielded to his desire to cross the Jabbok to rejoin his family, but Jacob limped away in awe of his meeting with the living God, and with the physical scars to prove it (32:30,31)!

There is extraordinary dramatic tension in this compelling story. At Peniel, Jacob faced the God of his fathers alone in a physical and spiritual struggle; this was the climax of his journey of faith begun so many years ago. We cannot easily analyse what happened, because it was a certainly a mystery to Jacob (32:30). As with many Biblical stories such as Creation, the Exodus, or the Resurrection, the physical facts are hard to tie down, yet the consequences are immense. We should surely expect this; for Scripture does not merely record facts for a religious system; it advocates the truth about God and His relationship with real people, and we can never reduce this to the level of who did what in a fight. These things defy our attempts to rationalise them because God is infinitely bigger than we are; we are but observers of what God does in His world and privileged to be His partners according to His will and blessing. Perhaps this is what Jacob learned that night at Peniel.

Some writers describe this passage as little more than an ill-defined wrestling match between two men, one of whom happens to be God. How tragic! This is a deeply spiritual event in which Jacob, a man who knew already what God's purposes for him were, became the true spiritual forefather of God's people Israel; and it happened not because of his strength to withstand, impressive though that was, but by the blessing of God. I will explain the text as much as I can, but the truth is this, through the struggle, Jacob completed his struggle to know God and have a truly personal relationship with Him. Consequently, God was able to use him as the father of the nation of Israel. This may not satisfy our modern desire to know 'the facts', but it helps us find the truth; and the two are not the same.

The mysterious nature of this passage is clear. As we read through verses 25 to 29, we can be unsure who is saying what, and the text of the Hebrew at this point is not as clear as we would like. It is only later, when Jacob limps away and acknowledges that he has met with God that we can go back and try to work out what was happening. Indeed, the 'man' who fought with Jacob is not identified as God until afterwards, just as Abraham only realised he had been speaking with God's angels after they had left (see Genesis 18). By the end of the encounter, Jacob certainly knew he had met with God, naming the place 'Peniel' meaning 'the face of God'.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Jacob, alone, and facing the future
- Jacob's struggle
- The names of Peniel and Israel

Going Deeper

There is more to this text than we can explain. Why did Jacob ensure he was alone to pass over this insignificant river? What does the struggle mean for Jacob or for us? What does the name 'Israel' mean? These may be mysteries, but to where do they point?

Jacob, alone and facing the future

'*Jacob was left there alone*' (32:24) is the important starting point for this story. Jacob had made all the preparations he could in order to face his own 'past' in the person of his twin brother Esau. Although he knew the blessings of God and trusted in them, he also knew that he had to accept personal responsibility for what he had done in the past. He had to deal with the deceit and trickery he had meted out on Esau, which, for all he knew, had severely affected his twin and prevented him from finding happiness and fulfilment.

None of this, however, was the fault of anyone but himself. His own spirit had acted in treachery and his own spirit needed healing from Almighty God, and it was not something that could be put right for him by either good deeds, standing up to Laban, being a good father to his eleven sons and a daughter or even a good husband of two wives! Neither could this spiritual sin be healed by forgiveness from the person who had received its spite, Esau, the man causing panic by approaching his family with four hundred men. God alone could heal Jacob's spirit, and Jacob needed to be by himself for God to do this work. We are not talking about a 'rule of thumb' which we can lift and copy in healing ministry; this was the spiritual logic of Jacob's situation and he perceived it correctly by sending his family and all his possessions ahead of him over the river Jabbok (32:22).

Jacob had prepared for a confrontation with Esau, and yet suddenly stood alone in the dark, facing a man who 'wrestled with him until daybreak'. We do not yet know who this man was, but if we read on in Scripture we will gradually discover the general picture. However, by not telling us, God's Word invites us to experience the tensions felt by Jacob as he fought his way through this strange experience. God was with him, but not as he might have expected!

Jacob's struggle.

There is a close connection between the Hebrew word for Jacob, 'YACOB' and the Hebrew for the stream, 'YABBOK' and the Hebrew verb for struggle 'YABOC'. When we know about this word play within the text, a great deal begins to make sense. Even the stream (because of its name) is caught up in God's purposes, for we should be in no doubt that the future of the world and God's Covenant plan for the redemption and salvation of the whole world was at stake.

The struggle took place in the darkness of the night, which meant that Jacob could not see clearly who he was fighting, and during the struggle, neither Jacob nor the man gained advantage. The difficulty we have in interpreting this lies in our competitive notion of 'wrestling', and although I have used both the words 'wrestle' and 'struggle', they both translate one Hebrew word ('YABOC') which includes spiritual struggle as well as physical; hence the use of 'wrestle'.

One way of understanding this is to focus on the sequence of events, in which one person injured the other on the hip (we discover later that Jacob took the injury) and then the man sought to leave before he could be physically recognised because of the coming sunrise (32:26). With the struggle unresolved, Jacob demanded a blessing before he would release his hold. The man replied by demanding that Jacob reveal his name, and when it was revealed, he then gave him a new name which was both for him and all his descendants; Israel. The name implies victory through struggle, and appears to be like a commendation for Jacob's effort! The wrestling ended when the man refused to give a name, but blessed Jacob as requested!

If you merely read this passage in this way, then it appears that Jacob wrestled with an angelic messenger of God, and despite receiving a permanent injury, won the tussle and with it a new name and the Covenant blessing of God! The trouble with this is that by simplifying it in this way we have almost wholly omitted the spiritual aspects of what was going on, and ended up with Jacob apparently winning the Covenant blessing of God by his own efforts. This is surely at odds with the build-up Scripture has given this great event!

Instead, try reading the passage as if it is a spiritual parable of Jacob's life. Jacob's struggle with the man was like his struggle with God ever since his youth. Jacob chose to go his own way and God would not

prevent him or stand in his way; but He never left Jacob and the spiritual struggle continued unresolved (see 'the man saw that he did not overcome Jacob' 32:25). The physical injury received by Jacob (32:25) was equivalent to the deep pain and hurt he suffered at the hand of Laban. From this time onwards, Jacob began to seek the blessing of God with whom he struggled (32:26), which was the birthright of the Covenant. God's reply to this was the same as the man who demanded of Jacob 'what is your name' (32:27), and by replying, Jacob spoke out a confession of sin, for his own name meant 'one who grasps'. Jacob had grasped and stolen God's blessing through Isaac; that was the problem, and Jacob needed to confess this before he could be so blessed. God's declaration that he would be given a new name was God's acceptance of Jacob's confession of sin, and the words which explain the name of Israel 'you have struggled with God and have overcome' does not mean that Jacob had overcome God; Jacob had, by his own confession and God's grace, overcome his own sin! Once this confession and 'absolution' had happened, then the Lord was free to give Jacob the full Covenant blessing (32:29).

This begins, but only begins, to uncover the surface of the spiritual significance of this passage. Once this very physical struggle is explored from a spiritual perspective, much is found.

The names of Israel and Peniel

There is enormous debate about the meaning of the name 'Israel'. The Scriptures themselves here say that Jacob is called 'Israel' because of Jacob's spiritual victory granted by God, after years of struggle. But what does the word really mean? Linguistically, the options are 'God fights', 'God is just', 'he struggles with God', 'God rules', and 'God struggles'. None of these seem satisfactory, and though few scholars agree, the interpretation 'God rules' is probably best. In the light of this, we are wise to keep close to the spiritual meaning of what happened to Jacob when he was given the name. The people of Israel are the people with whom God struggles to achieve His purpose to bless both them and through them, the whole world. More than that, despite the pains of the struggle, God does it victoriously!

You may not like this, preferring to find a few single words for a definition. However, this spiritual understanding cannot be set aside for the sake of our desire for a few words. When understood like this, Israel is the name of God's people and which contains their humanity, God's blessing, and the salvation of the world through His Covenant! In that light, we may be proud to be part of the New Israel in Jesus Christ, His people, the Church!

At the end of the day, Jacob named the place where this mysterious spiritual experience happened, 'Peniel', which means 'the face of God'. Within the strange circumstances of this day, Jacob became one of a number of people in the Old Testament who could say that he had met God (Moses, Ex. 24:9f.; Gideon, Judges 6:22 etc.). Each of them anticipating the time when God's Covenant plan would be completed in Christ and we would all have access to the Father through faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1-6). The naming of the place 'Peniel' was a reminder of the spiritual truth that Jacob had witnessed.

Application

There is a great deal more that could be said about this great text from God's Word. I have limited myself to focussing on the struggles of Jacob to be the man God intended Him to be; and although he did not give in physically, he submitted to God spiritually in this struggle, declaring his sin and dealing with it before God. Perhaps what really happened between God and Jacob on that day will never be truly known by anyone. Scripture tells us only what we need to know, and here, we are told what is necessary to understand the origins of the new name of Israel given to Jacob. This name was untainted by his past sin, and it indicated the Covenant purposes of God to do His will through His people, and that will is the Salvation of the whole world.

This passage contains a certain amount about the confession of sin and the forgiveness of God, but at the heart of it is Jacob's obedience to the Lord, something that led him to the right place to deal with his sin. We are mistaken if we think that God's forgiveness of people's sin is something that can be done according to formulae. Church prayers and liturgies which talk of these things are aids, which remind us of the spiritual truths of the Christian journey we travel, but they can never replace the need for us to be obedient to the Lord's call to sort out the consequences to our past sins.

Finally, there is every reason for all of us who read this to feel empowered and encouraged because it explains to us the name of Israel by which all who are God's people may be known. It is, perhaps, a shame that we live at a time when people commonly use the word 'church' to mean a building, rather than a gathering of God's people (its proper meaning), and the name 'Israel' is tied to a modern state which is largely, but by no means completely, made up of the historic Old Testament people of God. This should not prevent us from knowing how to use both words properly and glorying in them, particularly the name 'Israel'; for all God's people are His 'Israel', because God rules in this world through us, because of Christ.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group the sequence of events of the 'wrestling' of Jacob. Who gains most from the outcome? God or Jacob?
2. If you have Biblical resources, look up the meaning of the name 'Israel' and discuss what it means.
3. How was Jacob a different man after the experience at Peniel, and what difference did this make to the future of God's people?

Topics covered by this text

- *The mystery of personal contact with God*
- *Struggling with God and yielding to Him*
- *Confession of sin and its consequences.*
- *The meaning of names, especially the name of Israel*

Personal comments by author

It is hard to write about someone else struggles with God! Each of us has a personal relationship with our God, and there are some things about it that are very personal and we do not feel that others should know. Yet Jacob was a man who God chose to be the forefather of the Israelites, so the details of his personal relationship with God are important to us, and Scripture allows us to pry! We will not find complete spiritual answers in any single passage of Scripture of course, but only in our wider reading of its treasures.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Think back through your own experience of Christian faith. When have you confessed sin? At church on Sundays? On special occasions when God has called you? When other people have confronted you and challenged you? As you think about what has happened, ask yourself whether there are things you ought to confess. God will lead you on from there!*
- *Pray for the church as it struggles to help people deal with sin properly. Pray that God's people will become a witness for the truth against the forces of sin in the world*

Final Prayer

Jesus Christ, You struggled with people throughout Your ministry as You sought to explain the truths of God and His eternal purposes. May we be prepared to be submissive to Your will and therefore able to hear Your Word, to receive it, and to put it into action; in Your name we pray, AMEN
