

Gods 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 this (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 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 on earth. Scripture tells us only what we need to know to understand the origins of the new name given to Jacob. It was untainted by his past sin, and indicated the Covenant purposes of God to do His will through His people, and that will is the Salvation of the whole world.

We can take a certain amount from this story about confession of sin and the forgiveness of God, but at the heart of it was Jacob's obedience to the Lord which led him to the right place to deal with the 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 in sorting out anything to do with our past lives.

Finally, there is every reason for all of us who read this to feel empowered and encouraged by this text 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', through Christ.

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. Look up in your Bibles concerning the meaning of the name 'Israel' and discuss what it means.
3. In what ways was Jacob a different man after the experience at Peniel?

Discipleship

Think back through your own experience of Christian faith. When have you confessed sin? At church on Sundays as part of the liturgy and prayers of your church service? 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 that ought to be done that have not been done. God will lead you on from there!

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 and receive it; through Your name we pray, AMEN

Prayer

When Your Word comes to us, may we open our hearts to hear it, Lord God. May we also open our minds and emotions so that we respond to You with the whole of our being. Forgive our half-heartedness, our prevarication and our hesitancy when faced by Your challenging Word, and help us to trust in You and Your provision for us. Thank You, Lord; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Young families and the Church

Pray today for holidays! Lasting family memories are often made on holidays, so pray for the young families you know and ask the Lord to bless them in the holidays they have this year. Pray for those who find it hard to raise the funds for a good basic holiday, and pray especially for the poorer families you know who may need financial help for this.

Meditation

When your heart is really troubled deep inside,

Will you let the Saviour calm your soul and work to ease your troubled breast?

When your head is confused about what you should do,

Will you let the Holy Spirit work within your mind to clarify your thoughts?

When your feelings churn about inside without control,

Will you let the Friend of Sinners ease the pain and calm your lurking fears?

When your own opinions dominate your conversation,

Will you let the Lord of All remind you that humanity is broader than you think?

When your love for others baulks at someone you don't like,

Will you let the Gracious Father remind you of your sins, which He's forgiven?

When you do not know what is right and what is wrong,

Will you let the Creator of the World respond and speak discernment in your ear?

When you really need your Saviour, will you really give Him time and let Him in?

Bible Study - *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.

Review

There is extraordinary dramatic tension in this compelling story of Jacob's struggle with God. Here at Peniel, Jacob faced the God of his fathers alone in a profound struggle that was as much spiritual as it was physical; it was the turning point of Jacob's life and had a profound effect upon him and consequently upon the history of all God's people. It is not an event which we can analyse and say 'that's it', as if we can arrive at a definitive understanding of what went

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on. As with many crucial stories in the Bible (Creation, the Exodus, the Resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit), the details are shrouded in mysteries which have proved impossible to penetrate over the thousands of years in which it has been studied. But surely, this must be the case, for Scripture does not record a list of mundane facts around which we must build a religious system; it describes the truth of God and His relationship with real people and this is something we can never reduce to the level of our own simplicity. It defies all our attempts to rationalise it because God is infinitely bigger than we are, and we are but observers of the amazing story of our Lord's relationship with our forebears.

This passage of Scripture is not, as some commentators would have it, a wrestling match between two men, one of whom happens to be God, in which we must sort out who did what to whom, and why, in order that we might ascertain who was the victor! What is described is a deeply spiritual event in which Jacob, a man who knew already what God's purposes for him were, truly became the spiritual forefather of God's people Israel; and in the end, it happened not because of his efforts but by the blessing of God. I will try to explain the text as much as I can, but the truth is that God's purposes were served by all that happened as a consequence of this struggle, and the record of it is strongly coloured by the generations of discussion of it that followed as much as the details of the event itself. This may not satisfy our modern desire to know 'the facts', but it will help us find the truth; and the two are not the same. Through Scripture, God teaches us the truth needed by our souls, and sometimes 'the facts' are only partially helpful in guiding us there.

The mystery of this passage is clearly exemplified in verses 25 to 29, where the Hebrew only ever says 'he' did this, then 'he' did that etc. and it is entirely unclear who is being spoken of at any moment, the man, or Jacob. It is only later, when the text tells us that Jacob was limping, that we can go back and partially establish who said and did what. Equally, within the text describing the struggle, there is no need for us to think of 'the man' as God. It is only afterwards that we realise (with a gasp!) that Jacob has realised that he was struggling with God (32:30) because he named the place where it happened 'Peniel' meaning 'the face of God'. All this explanation comes after the event, and it is profoundly mysterious. This is not surprising, because this is the Scripture in which the nation of Israel, through Jacob, is born.

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

'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. Jacob's spirit could be healed by God alone, 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 in the way he might have expected!

The 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. It is best 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,