

Jacob at Peniel
Genesis 32

Introduction

In today's account, Jacob has another outstanding and life-changing meeting with God. It was so dramatic that at this point his name was changed from Jacob, which means "deceiver", to Israel, which means "prince with God". He was never the same again. He really faces himself for the first time, and it is not a pretty sight.

Contrary to those who preach that the Christian should build up their confidence in self, and lose their sense of failure, that the Cross of Christ sanctifies their ego-trip, the Biblical picture is exactly the opposite. There is no getting anywhere with God till we really face up to what we are, with all our sin and ugliness. Jacob had to face the mess he had created by his own selfishness and dishonesty, God had to break him, and bring him to an end of himself. Only then does God pour out His blessing on him.

Many Christians have gone through this experience. The New Testament picture of Christian life is one of steady growth. But within the general pattern there are crisis experiences as a result of which hindrances are removed and rapid advance is made, times when God meets us in a special way. So Jacob's life was transformed from craft and conniving, to one of subjection to God's will and power.

Preparation for God's blessing

Jacob's past had caught up with him. Many years had past since he ran away from home, but he must have always dreaded the day when he might meet up with his disgruntled brother Esau, who might still be intent on murdering him. Firstly angels meet him, and provide proof and assurance that God has not left him, and that God's purposes for Jacob's life would be accomplished.

In passing, the ministry of angels is one of the most neglected but fascinating aspects of Scripture. Angels are the servants of God's people. **The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them** (Psalm 34:7).

Then Jacob was shaken to the core to find out that his brother Esau, whom he robbed over 20 years earlier, was coming towards him with 400 men. His memory and conscience are stirred. **You may be sure that your sin will find you out** (Numbers 32:23). As ever, the schemer and planner got to work. He divided his animals and family into two parties, so that if one were attacked, the other would escape. His native cunning came to his aid in every emergency. He had forgotten all about the assurance the angels had just given him. The first thing he does is look to himself and his own ingenuity.

Finally, Jacob turns to prayer in his panic. This is a model prayer in some ways. He reminds God that he is in His will and obeying orders in returning to the land. Then he confesses that he is not worthy of the least of God's mercies. His mind went back over the deceits and plots of the past years. Do we ever pray this prayer? **So you also**

should say, 'We are unworthy servants' (Luke 17:10), like Jacob. Do you feel this way about yourself? Or do you think God owes you something? Then Jacob gets to the heart of the matter by asking for God's help and protection against Esau.

Yet despite committing the problem to God in prayer, Jacob goes back to his scheming and plotting. He hopes to win and woo Esau with a big present of various kinds of animals. Everything is carefully arranged to impress, appease and pacify Esau. Despite his prayer, Jacob's chief reliance is on himself. Of course there is a place for working and planning to go together with faith and prayer. But the overall impression is that Jacob relied more on himself than on God. Some have labelled Jacob "a belt and braces man" – relying on God, yet relying even more on himself. Planning was more important than praying. Human scheming can all too often take the place of simple waiting on God for His will and provision.

Jacob's problem was himself. God's purpose in this story was to break his pride, self-reliance and self-dependence. This had to be done before God could really work in Jacob's life. More often than we realize, we are our own worst enemies. Like someone learning to swim, we might be moving our arms, and have taken one leg off the bottom, but we are still keeping one foot in place – just in case. Reserve and half-hearted commitment are a big problem. The problem is often revealed in an emergency situation or danger. If we are still carrying the burden of our own life on ourselves, we are not fully trusting in God.

The blessing itself

From all this half-heartedness, self-reliance and uncertainty, God leads Jacob into a new experience of Himself. Jacob had a greater need than wondering how to deal with Esau. He needed to meet with God himself. It was vital that he meets with God first; then he will be fit to meet Esau.

Are you faced with a difficult problem? Do you have an insufferable obstacle? Are you at your wits' end? Learn from Jacob that your first need is not to deal with that problem, but to meet with God and be rightly related to Him. This is the secret of real spiritual power and blessing. You need to get to know God. Then you can be sure of the wisdom, aid and ability to deal with the other problem.

Jacob sent his wives, maidservants and sons across the ford of Jabbok, and was left alone. Now God could deal with him. Many other men in the Bible had to be on their own before God could speak to them – Isaiah in the Temple, Ezekiel at Chebar, Moses in the desert. When we are on our own, unhurried, undistracted, we are able to have a personal interview with Christ, such as we can never get in a crowd, with people looking on.

In the loneliness and darkness, a man (was it a pre-incarnate appearance of the Son of God?) wrestled with Jacob until daybreak (Genesis 32:24). Note that the conflict did not originate with Jacob, but with God. God's purpose was to take from Jacob all his pride, self-sufficiency, and all that hindered his trust-life. God's purpose was to break him. Jacob wrestled and fought back. Jacob's hip was put out of joint in the fight, taking away all his power. He was at the end of his resources, rendered powerless, helpless.

Then from fighting and wrestling, Jacob turned to clinging and leaning. His prayer goes up: "**I will not let you go unless you bless me.**" (Genesis 32:26). He knew God wanted to bless him, and he wanted all that God had for him. God had broken down all Jacob's opposition, self-trust, and confidence in his own plans and schemes, his own efforts. God had brought him to an end of himself. The problem of Esau was not going to be dealt with that way. God's power and grace was going to be the solution to that problem. But God's grace was only available when his own self-confidence was ended. Jacob has to become like a little child, and cling, rely, depend on God alone.

While we are something, God cannot be everything. When self is still important, God cannot be all to us. God has to wrestle with us, through outward circumstances, perplexities, sorrows, situations where we do not know which way to turn – all part of divine discipline to bring us to an end of ourselves. While we insist on our own way, the end will always be frustration and defeat. When we stop fighting with Him, and submit to Him instead, His way, His purpose and His power, we will have success. God is concerned to bring us to the point where He has His way in life and we draw all from Him.

Has it ever occurred to us that we are too strong for God to bless us? We pray, but are we really looking to self? Are we truly placing every matter in His hands? Have we realized that God has to break us before He can make us? Our extremity is God's opportunity.

*"Lord, bend that proud and stiff-necked I.
Help me to bow the head and die."*

"Pray for the deepest sense of utter weakness. 'I feel it is not safe to renounce all indwelling strength.' - this is a delusion of the devil. My only safety is to know, feel and confess my helplessness in order to hang on the arm of omnipotence." (R.M.McCheyne).

*"Force me to render up my sword,
And I shall conqueror be."*

The results of blessing at Peniel

Then he blessed him there (Genesis 32:29). Several important things followed from this blessing which God gave Jacob. Everything came new because of this blessing. Jacob was given a new name, which indicated his new relationship with God. "Jacob" meant deceiver, cheat, supplanter, rogue. "**Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.**" (Genesis 32:28). "Israel" means "Prince with God", so from rogue and cheat Jacob was exalted to princely status. He had a new commission and relationship with God. He now had the resources of the king behind him. He entered a life of limitless privilege. Life was on a new plane now.

This led to new power in life. His prayer life took on new meaning. When God touches a heart, prayer is no longer just a formal orthodox going through the motions.

It becomes real and vital, from the heart. Someone who is in touch with God is someone to whom God listens. He has new faith to lay hold on God.

Jacob, or rather, Israel, had new courage and insight. He had previously been fearful of his meeting with Esau, but now that things were right between him and God, Israel stepped out without fear to achieve a new relationship with his brother. Reconciliation was achieved. Being right with God meant he was calm and patient, and dealt with people the proper way. He had new courage to face difficulties. His old nature was still there, and in time he fell again. He still had family troubles. He was not in heaven yet. But he was a changed man. He had new resolve in his heart and a new dependence on God. He had seen the face of God and had been transformed.

The story ends with the sun rising on this limping man. His physical strength was broken, but his faith was renewed and his personality changed. What it took was for him to come face to face with himself, stop pretending, admit, and submit to God, letting Him have His way. "I first saw clearly the blessedness of full consecration. What you see you can never unsee. There must be full surrender before there can be full blessedness." (F.R.Havergal, on Advent Sunday 1873).

Conclusion

How does this message speak to us? Do we need a fresh touch from God? Do we need to be lifted to a new level in our relationship with God? We can meet with God here and now. God longs to meet with us.

The answer to blessedness in the life is letting God have His way. Give up running your own life. Stop arguing with Him. Come to that position of brokenness. Start submitting and clinging. You will gain through loss. The way to the throne is via the cross. Let go, that you may receive.