

JACOB WRESTLING WITH GOD – Roland Burrows

(Sermon Summary)

Reading: Genesis 32:1-32

Jacob has now returned to Canaan. He is in a state of perplexity and anxiety. Ahead of him is a meeting with his brother, Esau. How will Esau react? Jacob is in part looking forward to seeing his brother again after many years, but he is partly in anxiety, given the wrong he, Jacob, had done to his brother.

He had the encouragement of meeting with the Lord's hosts, His angels. There were two companies of them, one to protect him at the rear from Laban, and the other to protect him at the front from Esau. He called the location 'Mahanaim', (meaning 'two hosts'). Angels are ministering spirits sent to help the Lord's people, a subject that is well developed in Richard Baxter's 'Directory'.

Jacob sent messengers ahead of him bearing gifts for Esau. It was a sign of the guilty conscience that Jacob had for how he had treated his brother. Our conscience is given to us by God who has given us a mind and a soul as well. To have a guilty conscience is not necessarily a bad thing as it shows that we are troubled about our sin. Even the most wicked people have a conscience and are aware that there is a God and that they will have to answer to Him.

The first recorded prayer

Jacob is anxious when he hears that Esau is coming with 400 men towards him. He does two things. Firstly he divides up his people into two groups and sends one group ahead of the other, so that if there is violence, then at least some of his family will survive. This is Jacob acting like his old self with cunning, and also with heartlessness. The second thing he does is to pray (vv 9 – 12). This is the first recorded prayer in the Bible and, following the 'Law of First Mentions', that where something is mentioned for the first time in Scripture, we are to pay particular attention to it as it will teach much about the subject of, in this instance, prayer. In v9 Jacob remembers that God has been with him and his family, although he recognises that he is not worthy of the help that the Lord has given to him. In v11 there is a prayer for deliverance that is direct and very practical. It shows us how we should make our needs known to God. Then in v 12, he reminds the Lord of His promises to him.

The Lord meets Jacob at the brook Jabbok

The place where Jacob meets with the Lord, Jabbok, means 'wrestling.' Did it receive its name after Jacob has his meeting with the Lord or after it? There is good reason to think that the stream or brook already had the name because, at this location, there are a lot of rapids in the water course. So the water has to 'wrestle' its way through. It is a place too of thickets and this reflected the state of Jacob's mind, full of hindrances and obstacles as he wrestled with his guilty conscience while at the same time much wanting to meet his brother. Like the footprint in the sand that Robinson Crusoe found in Defoe's story, it could be a sign of hope or of danger. Which would it be? We are often moved rapidly from a state of anxiety to one of hope, and vice versa.

So it is in the midst of Jacob's personal wrestlings that the Lord meets with him. We think that this angel of the Lord who comes to him is actually a pre-incarnation appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ (we call it a theophany). It is through this that Jacob, the 'supplanter', becomes 'Israel'. Arguably one of the finest hymns, 'Come, O Thou Traveller unknown' tells us about this experience. This is actually Jacob's second great experience of meeting with the Lord. The first one is the moment when he sees the ladder reaching down from heaven and the angels ascending and descending on it. This was his conversion experience and we might say that it was a pleasant experience. We might, perhaps, have expected his first experience to have been the harder experience and his second one the more pleasant one. But the order is reversed here and it is the second experience that is the harder one. Jacob receives knowledge in this second experience of something of the severity and judgment of God.

We need to know that we are in a fight as Christians. It is a warfare and we are on the narrow road. We can at times even feel that God is against us. We might feel that all these things are against us but we must not give up. Like Paul, we must run the race and finish the course. We should not go with the words of Thomas Carlyle, a writer from the Nineteenth Century who, when asked 'Why doesn't God do something', replied 'He does nothing.' We can feel it is all hopeless, that people do not change and feel ready to give up. But we should not for we will prevail.

Who was it that wrestled with Jacob, and who won?

The man who wrestled with Jacob, the Lord Jesus Christ, is referred to in Hosea 12:3ff. We might ask ourselves some questions. Who wrestled with whom? Who won? Did Jacob conquer God? God won but we can also say, in a sense, that Jacob won too. Jacob, in the power of God, won against himself. Jacob's self-will, self-reliance and trickery were overcome. God's grace is able to overcome people in this way. The higher element of his nature gained ascendancy over the lower element. God is the real antagonist as He is the one offended by the people that we are. He has great tenacity of purpose and blessed Jacob after his natural self had been made powerless. There had been a great change in Jacob's life in who would now be in control.

We might wonder 'Did Jacob actually see the face of God?' He did see the Lord Jesus Christ whom, later, others would be able to see. But Jacob's experience was in the dark. The Lord did not reveal His fullness to Jacob in the daylight. One day we will all see more when the day breaks.

In changing Jacob's name to Israel, we can see that here are the birth pangs of a nation, of Moses, of David, of Isaiah, of the Lord Jesus Christ. So we can see that trials that we undergo have more significance than we realise at the time.

We might also note that the name of the place, is spelt two different ways. It is both 'Peniel' and 'Penuel'. This is not a mistake. Peniel is the name one would give to a rocky outcrop which resembled a face, the like of which you could find in this area by the Jabbok brook. Penuel means 'the face of God.' So the face is now made specific in the light of Jacob's experience.

Finally we read in v 29 that the Lord blessed him there. Jacob had known agony of soul but the Lord then blessed him. When we catch a glimpse of the face of God it changes us. We receive strength to carry on and do exploits. We get those glimpses in the Bible and these change us and strengthen us. Someone once said to C.H. Spurgeon, regarding the martyrdom of Stephen, 'God didn't do much there.' Spurgeon replied that when Stephen prayed, 'Lord lay this not to their charge,' this was extraordinary. God had done a lot in Stephen for him to say that!