

Face to Face with God

Jacob becomes Israel!

Text: Gen. 32:1-32

Introduction:

1. Genesis 31-33 document Jacob's journey from Haran back to Canaan. His long season of 20 years under Laban has finally come to an end and the next phase of God's gracious work in Jacob's life is opening before him.
2. God was accomplishing some powerful and significant things in Jacob's life on his return journey to Canaan. First Jacob is confronted by Laban (Gen. 31), then he has to face Esau (Gen. 32-33). Through it all, God was working to bring Jacob to the end of himself and turn him into Israel.
3. The lead up to Jacob's encounter with Esau was used mightily in the purposes of God to deepen the work of sanctification in Jacob's life. We will study the events of this chapter that climax at Peniel under four headings.

I. THE VISITATION TO JACOB (VS. 1-8)

A. The Place of the Visitation (Vs. 1a)

1. This visitation from heaven came when Jacob was on the path of God's will.
2. When we are faithful and obedient to step out on the path of God's will for our lives, the Lord grants us the encouragements and assurances we need at key points on that journey.

B. The Persons in the Visitation (Vs. 1b-2)

1. The method of God's visitation – God allowed Jacob to have a second encounter with angels. The first was at Bethel, 20 years prior. God was again reminding Jacob of His power.
2. The memorial of God's visitation – Jacob names the place 'Mahanaim' meaning "two hosts" or "two camps".
 - a. The reference was to Jacob's host and God's host. Jacob's camp was not alone. They had the company and protection of God's heavenly host.
 - b. Note some significant memorials in Jacob's life:
 - i. Bethel – the house of God.
 - ii. Mahanaim – the host of God.
 - iii. Peniel – the face of God.

- c. Illustration: The manifestation God gave Elisha and his servant when the Syrian army surrounded them in Dothan. 2 Kings 6:15-17 "And when the servant of the man of God was risen early, and gone forth, behold, an host compassed the city both with horses and chariots. And his servant said unto him, Alas, my master! how shall we do? And he answered, Fear not: for they that *be* with us *are* more than they that *be* with them. And Elisha prayed, and said, LORD, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the LORD opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha."

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- d. When confronted with an Esau and his army in our lives, let us remember that we have the “Lord of hosts” in our lives to protect us. Psalm 27:1, 3 “The LORD *is* my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? the LORD *is* the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear: though war should rise against me, in this *will I be* confident.”

C. The Problem after the Visitation (Vs. 3-8)

1. God knew that Jacob was about to be faced with a terrifying threat from Esau, hence why God gave Jacob this heavenly visitation. How merciful and gracious our God is to send us the encouragements, assurances and comforts we need to prepare us to face a trial.
2. Jacob is clearly apprehensive of meeting Esau and as he approaches his territory, sends messengers ahead to try and get a sense for how Esau’s attitude was towards him.
3. The messengers returned with distressing news. Esau had already caught wind of Jacob’s return and was already on his way with 400 men. Clearly his intent was hostile at this point otherwise the messengers would have returned with a positive word from Esau to reassure Jacob.
4. Jacob was understandably “greatly afraid and distressed”. He then divides the people and livestock into two companies with the plan that if Esau came and attacked, at least one band would have the chance to escape while he destroyed the other.

II. THE SUPPLICATION OF JACOB (VS. 9-12)

While Jacob’s response to the Esau threat still had a lot of the “Jacob nature” in it, to his credit he does pour out his heart to God in prayer about the situation. Jacob’s fervent prayer highlights the genuine faith he had in Almighty God and the fact he had grown since Bethel. If you lay the two prayers side by side (the prayer from Bethel and this prayer 20 years later), you have to conclude Jacob has grown. We note four qualities of Jacob’s supplication. It was:

A. Reverent (Vs. 9a)

1. He addresses God in a manner which is fitting Almighty God. There is a clear recognition of God for who He is.
2. He addresses God as the God of Abraham and Isaac.

B. Humble (Vs. 10)

This is one of the most touching sayings of Jacob recorded in Scripture and reveals a real humility of heart that had developed in Jacob. Without this growth in humility from the proud, cocky man he was initially, it is unlikely Jacob would have yielded to the Lord at Peniel the way he did. He acknowledged he was unworthy of:

1. The mercifulness of God – “I am not worthy of the least of all thy mercies” (Vs. 10a). This is more than an acknowledgment that he wasn’t worthy to receive mercy from God in general. Jacob is saying he considers himself unworthy to received even one of the smallest of God’s many mercies.

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2. The faithfulness of God – “and of all the truth, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant” (Vs. 10b). God had revealed precious promises to Jacob and had been faithful to those promises.
3. The goodness of God – “now I am become two bands” (Vs. 10c). God had been good to Jacob and had blessed him abundantly.
4. We would do well to cultivate the same humble heart attitude in our lives. The only thing we deserve is hell for our sins against a Holy, Righteous and Good God and yet we have experienced the infinite oceans of his love, mercy, grace and goodness towards us through salvation and a myriad of other undeserved blessings.

C. Fervent (Vs. 11)

1. Jacob pleads with God for the specific need at hand in this crisis, namely, protection from Esau.
2. Jacob was fearful at this time but at least he was pouring out his heart to his God about those fears. It is true that God wants us to choose faith over fear but if you find your heart gripped with fear, take those fears to the Lord in prayer and give them to Him.

D. Anchored (Vs. 9b, 12)

1. Jacob commences (Vs. 9b) and ends (Vs. 12) his prayer with an appeal to the promises of God. Jacob knew that being wiped out by Esau did not fit God’s promise to do him good and make of him a great nation.
2. Effective prayer is not about trying to force God to do what you want but about pleading with God in line with His own purposes and promises. The Word of God forms a vital foundation for effective prayer.

III. THE REACTION OF JACOB (VS. 13-21)

These verses record Jacob’s response to the report about Esau. At this time, we still see a real mix in Jacob of faith and self-reliance. Jacob’s prayer to God was commendable but on the balance of things, he is still leaning too heavily on his own scheming and planning to fix the situation.

A. The Plan of a Gift for Esau (Vs. 13-15)

1. The magnitude of the gift – this was a sizable and generous gift on the part of Jacob. The gift consisted of:
 - a. Two hundred and twenty goats (200 female, 20 males).
 - b. Two hundred and twenty sheep (200 females and 20 males).
 - c. Thirty milch camels with their colts (so 60 camels total – 30 mums and 30 babies). The word ‘milch’ means “giving milk”. Camel’s milk was a prized and valuable resource in an arid land as it still is in some countries in the world today.
 - d. Forty cows and ten bulls.
 - e. Twenty female asses and ten foals.
 - f. Total = 580 livestock.
 - g. Jacob hoped that this generous gift would help ‘appease’ (Vs. 20) Esau.
2. The makeup of the gift – you will notice that what was considered to be the ideal ratio of males to females at that time.

B. The Presentation of the Gift to Esau (Vs. 16-21)

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1. To maximise the impact of the gift, Jacob decided to send the livestock in droves with a space in between each drove. Presumably there were 5 droves if the animals were grouped according to their kind (goats, sheep, camels, cows and asses).
2. While this action of Jacob's was not sinful,¹ it serves to again highlight the bent of Jacob's nature. He is 'Jacob', the supplanter, the schemer the planner. When his back is against the wall, his natural tendency is to rely on his own wisdom and cunning. Thus, we see the self-life of Jacob again on display.
3. This is why God was going to use this crisis in Jacob's life to bring him to the end of himself. God would deal a powerful blow to Jacob's self-reliance at Peniel.

IV. THE TRANSFORMATION OF JACOB (VS. 22-32)

We come now to the climax of this account where God meets Jacob in a dramatic and special way. There are three discernible phases in this encounter between Jacob and His God – Wrestling, Clinging and Blessing.

A. Wrestling (Vs. 22-25)

1. The place of the wrestling (Vs. 22-23)
 - a. Jacob guides his family over the Jabbok River during the night at a place where it was fordable (crossable). Which way he crossed we are not told but it may be Jacob was taking a further safety measure by putting the stream between himself and Esau.
 - b. Jacob helps his family across then remains alone on the opposite bank. Given the seriousness of the crisis he found himself in it was going to be one of those sleepless nights and he wanted to be alone with his thoughts. Perhaps he intended to pass the night in prayer to God.
 - c. What an unexpected answer to prayer he received that night! Jacob was primarily looking for deliverance from Esau but God was interested first in delivering Jacob from Jacob. "Jacob must meet God before he meets Esau, and the one meeting will be the only and sufficient way of preparing for the other." (Thomas)
2. The Person in the wrestling (Vs. 24a)
 - a. The intrusion of the Heavenly Man. Can you picture the scene? There's Jacob standing alone in the darkness. Perhaps there is a little light from the moon and stars filtering down gently illuminating his fear lined countenance. The Jabbok brook babbles and chatters by in the background. All of a sudden Jacob's thoughts are interrupted by the sound of footsteps coming in his direction. Fear grips Jacob as he peers through the darkness trying to identify his intruder. Was it Esau? No this was not Esau. The Mysterious Man continues the approach and takes hold of Jacob. Jacob begins to fight back in terror!
 - b. The identity of the Heavenly Man.

¹ Proverbs 21:14 "A gift in secret pacifieth anger: and a reward in the bosom strong wrath."

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- i. At the end of this encounter Jacob believed he had come face to face with God (Vs. 30), therefore we believe it was a Christophany – a preincarnate appearance of Christ.
 - ii. It is true that Hosea 12:3-4 refers to this incident and refers to the Personage as “the angel”. The word ‘angel’ means ‘messenger’ so this is not a created angel but the Angel of the LORD, the Divine Messenger of Jehovah God.
 - iii. Jacob prays to this Mysterious Person and receives blessing from Him. Only God can answer prayer and dispense Divine blessing.
- c. The initiative of the Heavenly Man
- i. Some see this as a picture of prevailing prayer. That may be a nice application but it is inaccurate. Jacob would prevail in prayer at the end of this encounter but for a significant amount of time he wrestled in resistance against the Heavenly Visitor. We should also note that it was God who took the initiative to wrestle with Jacob, not the other way around – “there wrestled a man **with him**”. “The attack, so to speak, begins with his mysterious antagonist, not with the patriarch. The man seeks to overcome Jacob, not Jacob the man.” (Maclaren)
 - ii. “The wresting was an endeavour on God’s part to break down Jacob’s opposition, to bring him to an end of himself, to take from him all self-trust, all confidence in his own cleverness and resource, to make him know that Esau is to be overcome and Canaan obtained not by craft or flattery, but by Divine grace and power...the self-life in Jacob is to be overcome, the old nature is to be conquered, the planning is to be rendered futile, and the resourcefulness made impotent. Instead of gaining Canaan by cleverness he must receive it as a gift from God. Instead of winning he must accept it from Divine grace.” (W.H. Griffith Thomas)
 - iii. Little did he realize to begin with that these were the hands of the Heavenly Man Himself. These were not the hands of an evil aggressor but the Hands of a Loving God, a God who was too wise and too loving to let Jacob go on living the Jacob life. And yet Jacob is resisting rather than yielding. How often we do exactly the same thing in our lives. We fail to recognize that the loving hands of our Heavenly Father are seeking to shape and mould us and we **struggle** rather than **submit**.
 - iv. Principle: God has to work against us (our Adamic nature) before He can really work through us. God works to bring us to the end of our selves that He might be our life. “At the cross I see that I am ended, not mended”.
3. The Period of the wrestling (Vs. 24b)
- a. Jacob keeps up this resistance until the day begins to dawn. Jacob had been wrestling for hours with this Heavenly Visitor.

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- b. This highlights how strong Jacob was and that was his very problem. Self was far too strong in Jacob. This is so often the same problem in our lives. We are too strong for God to use in any significant way and so in love He breaks us that we might learn that we serve not in our strength but His.

B. Clinging (Vs. 25-26)

A change takes place and now all of Jacob's strength is focused on clinging instead of resisting. "From cunning to clinging, from resisting to resting – this was the literal and symbolical experience of the crafty but now conquered Jacob." (Thomas)

1. The Touch that occasioned Jacob's clinging (Vs. 25)
 - a. "And when he saw that he prevailed not against him" = this does not mean that God didn't have the power to overcome Jacob but rather that God saw that Jacob was not going to voluntarily yield. God could have totally overwhelmed Jacob with His Mighty Power but God desires voluntary submission from His children. Seeing that Jacob was determined to keep on with the struggle, God wounds him by putting his thigh out of joint. The "hollow of his thigh" refers to "the socket of his hip" (Whitelaw).
 - b. Without the use of both legs, Jacob is powerless to continue the struggle and begins to flounder. In order to stand upright, he must now cling to the Heavenly Antagonist. As the power of God surges through Jacob's hip joint, rendering it dislocated it suddenly dawns on Jacob that this is no ordinary man he is wrestling with! He had come face to face with the God man! God knows just how to touch our lives to bring us to the end of ourselves. Sometimes that touch hurts but oh that we might recognize all the love that is behind that touch!
 - c. "That laming of Jacob's thigh represents the weakening of all the life of nature and self which had hitherto been his. He had trusted to his own cunning and quick-wittedness; he had been shrewd, not overscrupulous and successful. But he had to learn that "by strength shall no man prevail," (1 Sam. 2:9) and to forsake his former weapons. It is the path by which we must all travel if we are to become princes with God. The life of nature and of dependence on self must be broken and lamed in order that, in the very moment of discovered impotence, we may grasp the hand that smites, and find immortal power flowing into our weakness from it." (Maclaren)
2. The Tears in Jacob's clinging (Vs. 26; Hos. 12:3-4)

Jacob now begins to sob and supplicate. He is clinging and pleading! This is just where God wants Jacob.

 - a. Jacob sobs – "Yea, he had power over the angel, and prevailed: he **wept**, and made supplication unto him" (Hos. 12:4).
 - b. Jacob supplicates – "Yea, he had power over the angel, and prevailed: he wept, and **made supplication** unto him" (Hos. 12:4).
3. The Tenacity of Jacob's Clinging (Vs. 26)

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- a. The Lord tests Jacob's resolve and says "Let me go, for the day breaketh" but Jacob has now assumed the position of prevailing prayer. He will not cease clinging until he has the answer from God.
- b. It is fascinating to see that Jacob requests blessing from God. Jacob had been blessed materially (Vs. 10) but now he is more conscious than ever for the need of spiritual blessing in his life.

C. Blessing (Vs. 27-32)

The answer is now given and Divine blessings are poured into Jacob's life. There is:

1. A New Name (Vs. Vs. 27-28a)
 - a. The Question (Vs. 27). The purpose of this question was not to get information – God knows all things and He knew Jacob's name. It was in order that Jacob would admit the reality of who he was in humility. Jacob met the Lord that night and he also met himself! He was brought face to face with Jacob and all the ugliness of his Adamic nature. Before we can begin to be like the Lord, we have to face ourselves and admit what we are in ourselves. "The Lord didn't ask this question because he didn't know Jacob's name. The question was designed to make Jacob face himself in honesty and to decide if he was going to keep going the Jacob way or yield to the Lord's way in his life. A new name in the Bible signifies a new beginning." (Wiersbe)
 - b. The Designation (Vs. 28a). The new name is symbolic of the new nature. Jacob did not become sinlessly perfect at Peniel. The work of sanctification was not finished and there are times after this point where he is still called Jacob but Peniel did mark a major turning point in Jacob's life. To use New Testament language, Jacob learned the truth of "not I but Christ" in a deeper way at Peniel and this stayed with him the rest of his life. "From this time onward there was a very distinct change in Jacob; and although the old nature was still there, Peniel had its effect and exercised transforming influence." (Thomas)
Maclaren adds, "The change of name indicates a new epoch in a life, or a transformation of the inner man. The old nature remains but its power is broken and Jacob has learnt that He does not have to live by the power of his corrupt nature but by the heavenly power of God."
2. A New Power (Vs. 28b)
 - a. Power with God – Peniel reveals the pathway to the power of God. God's power works through yielded, surrendered men who know what it is to die to self. Note the word 'prevailed'. From the human perspective, Jacob had lost the contest and yet from God's Divine perspective, He had prevailed. Victory comes through surrendering and strength comes through weakness. It doesn't make sense to the natural man but it is the wisdom of God. Illustration: The Apostle Paul's testimony (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). "Prayer is power. It conquers God. We overcome Him when we yield. When we are vanquished, we are victors. When the life of nature is broken within us, then from conscious

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weakness springs the longing which God cannot but satisfy.”
(Maclaren)

- b. Power with men – note the order. All his life, Jacob had sought advantage over men. Now he found himself in a situation where he was powerless against Esau but through brokenness, he would have an influence that would never have been possible through his own strength. “Power with man comes from power with God. **Power with God came by surrender.** Self is the greatest foe to blessing from God or influence with men.”
(Thomas)
3. A New Blessing (Vs. 29). Jacob had been abundantly blessed of God in multiple ways but there was a fresh blessing to be experienced through brokenness. Jacob knew that he could not go on without God’s blessing in his life. Over 20 years prior, Jacob had been focused on getting the blessing from his father Isaac. Now he longs above all for blessing from heaven!
4. A New Memorial (Vs. 30). This location became a special place to Jacob and so he named it ‘Peniel’ meaning “face of God”. As we walk with God, we will come to our own Peniel’s where God meets with us in a powerful and special way.
5. A New Walk (Vs. 31). Jacob’s walk was never the same from that day forward. For the rest of his life, he would walk with a limp. His infirmity would be a constant reminder of Peniel and what God did in his life. The Bible sets the scene as the rays of the rising sun shine upon Jacob as he limps into view. He would never be the same again.
6. A New Legacy (Vs. 32). So significant was this event in the consciousness of Jacob’s descendants, that they refrained from eating a certain portion of muscle.² This was not commanded by God but reveals how important this event was to the nation of Israel. The self-life will leave nothing of any value behind for the next generation but a life of selflessness and surrender to God will!

Conclusion: Hebrews 11:21 “By faith Jacob, when he was a dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph; and worshipped, **leaning upon the top of his staff.**” Here we see Jacob at the end of his life and the writer to the Hebrews notes that he is leaning on his staff. Jacob was still living in the power of Peniel. He wasn’t standing in his own strength but in dependence upon his God.

Are you wrestling against your God or clinging to your God? Will you submit to what God is seeking to accomplish in your life?

² According to Henry Morris, “probably the portion of the hindquarter containing the sciatic nerve”.