

Jacob at Jabbok

The book of Genesis devotes much space to the patriarchs that God called and worked with. 3 in particular become the focus of God's instruction to us. Abraham is the first, not in terms of time, but in terms of detail. The man that God called and was labelled as the father of the faithful. By being the children of God we are, by extension, the children of faithful Abraham.

Joseph is an exemplar of a person living a godly life in a world of sin. Mr Stepp addresses the life of Joseph with regularity, and with good reason. Occasionally we hear of Joseph and the examples of how to live in this present evil world, that can be drawn from his life.

The third patriarch receives much less attention from us. So I would like to turn the spotlight on him today and provide some timely lessons for each and every one of us. The third patriarch is Jacob.

While 13 chapters of Genesis relate to the life of Abraham, Jacob's life continues throughout 25 of them. In many of those he is the background character to Joseph, but he is still there, and still remembered and considered.

In terms of the book of Genesis, Jacob's life is the most dominant. For that reason it provides many valuable lessons.

There is one section of Jacob's life that I would like to focus upon this afternoon. It is simply 10 verses in length, yet it is a self-contained part of Jacob's story, and a very important part at that. It's one of two very concentrated events of Jacob's life where God has spent time to unpack a lot of material about Jacob, and about His dealing with him.

As such, it demands knowledge of all that has preceded in his life. So let's briefly review the life of Jacob as it is set out in the book of Genesis:

Genesis 25: 21 Now Isaac pleaded with the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived.

22 But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If all is well, why am I like this?" So she went to inquire of the LORD.

23 And the LORD said to her: "Two nations are in your womb, Two peoples shall be separated from your body; One people shall be stronger than the other, And the older shall serve the younger."

24 So when her days were fulfilled for her to give birth, indeed there were twins in her womb.

25 And the first came out red. He was like a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau.

26 Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

The nine months of conception and birth are covered in the space of a few verses. The boys grew. Esau was a hunter. Jacob was a home body.

We move to the next important point as far as God was concerned – the aspect of the birthright. Esau sold his birthright because he was famished.

So this chapter starts with the conception and birth of two boys, and almost immediately we learn of the relationship between Jacob and Esau and the sale of the birthright.

We have to move on into chapter 27 to pick up the story of Jacob. Genesis 27 leaps forward in time and deals with the taking of the blessing from his father, which Isaac had intended bestowing on Esau. Isaac now was somewhat older than 60, very poor of sight, and fearing for his death. He calls Esau to prepare a meal for him so that he can then provide the blessing. Rebekah hears of it and connives with Jacob. The end result is that Jacob takes the blessing from his father. The result was that by the end of chapter 27, Jacob had fulfilled God's plan in terms of his life. His older brother was now below him and the prophecy that God had given to Rebekah had been fulfilled. There was only one problem. Esau was so mad that Jacob had to flee for his life! That was not the normal approach and result of the blessing of God.

Jacob was sent to Laban in what we would call Syria (Genesis 28). He has a vision at Bethel.

In the land of his fathers, he meets and falls in love with Rachel. Genesis 29 deals with the romance and his serving Laban for 7 years so that he can marry Rachel – only to find out, the day after, that it wasn't Rachel he married at all, but the elder, and less beautiful sister, Leah.

So another 7 years are spent working for Rachel. The domestic disharmony is detailed for us in Genesis 30.

Genesis 31 brings us to a point of crisis between Jacob and Laban. An angel appeared to Jacob and tells him that he is to leave Laban.

Genesis 31: 11 "Then the Angel of God spoke to me in a dream, saying, 'Jacob.' And I said, 'Here I am.'

12 "And He said, 'Lift your eyes now and see, all the rams which leap on the flocks are streaked, speckled, and gray-spotted; for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you.

13 'I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed the pillar and where you made a vow to Me. Now arise, get out of this land, and

return to the land of your family.'"

God gives him instructions that he is to return to the land where, in fact, Isaac was still alive.

So we come to Genesis 32, the chapter I would like to spend some time in today. This chapter details a very important part of the story about Jacob, and one that provides lots of interesting details and, by extension, lessons. The particular part of this chapter I would like to focus on is verses 22 – 31, just 10 verses. To put it in its context, the final break with Laban comes, and Laban goes back to his land. Jacob carries on towards the land of Canaan.

Genesis 32: 1 So Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him.

2 When Jacob saw them, he said, "This is God's camp." And he called the name of that place Mahanaim.

3 Then Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom.

He hoped he could assuage his brother from his anger towards him. We don't know how long he spent there, but it was long enough for the messengers he sent to Esau to return and say, "He's on his way with 400 armed men."

You can see Jacob turning to jelly!

7 So Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies.

8 And he said, "If Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the other company which is left will escape."

In the next verse we find Jacob praying. He says:

9 Then Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, the LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your family, and I will deal well with you':

10 "I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, and now I have become two companies.

"I am a man of considerable substance."

11 "Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and attack me and the mother with the children.

12 "For You said, 'I will surely treat you well, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'"

13 So he lodged there that same night, and took what came to his hand as a present for Esau his brother:

He made up a present for Esau, to go before, to placate him.

16 Then he delivered them to the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass over before me, and put some distance between successive droves."

17 And he commanded the first one, saying, "When Esau my brother meets you and asks you, saying, 'To whom do you belong, and where are you going? Whose are these in front of you?'

18 "then you shall say, 'They are your servant Jacob's. It is a present sent to my lord Esau; and behold, he also is behind us.'"

19 So he commanded the second, the third, and all who followed the droves, saying, "In this manner you shall speak to Esau when you find him;

20 "and also say, 'Behold, your servant Jacob is behind us.'" For he said, "I will appease him with the present that goes before me, and afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me."

21 So the present went on over before him, but he himself lodged that night in the camp.

He had already divided all of his possessions into companies. He sent them on ahead, and now he sends a present over.

22 And he arose that night and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed over the ford of Jabbok.

23 He took them, sent them over the brook, and sent over what he had.

24 Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day.

We know the rest of the story. His name was changed and he ended up limping.

No more than 12 hours elapse within this passage, yet it demands the knowledge of everything about Jacob that God has told us before. Jacob has sent his family and his possessions across the Jabbok. He wrestles with this Man.

When does it end? At daybreak – basically 12 hours in that part of the world. It's a distinct unit in terms of Jacob's life because it brings him to the re-entry into the Promised Land. It not only prepares the way for his entry into the land, but also the reconciliation with his brother, Esau. He had fled the land earlier because he had cheated his brother out of the birthright and blessing, as we can see in chapters 26 and 28.

As his departure was marked by a heavenly vision involving God, a staircase and angels at Bethel, now his return is marked by encountering a heavenly camp, and wrestling with what appears to be a spirit being. It's limited by one night, and it all happens in just one place – the stream Jabbok, a stream that subsequently formed the northern boundary of the tribes living east of the Jordan river. This would have been the entry point into the Promised Land from the northeast, from Syria.

The relevance of this passage spells over into the next chapter and is echoed in Jacob's meeting with his brother, Esau, and also into the rest of the book of Genesis.

Like many other sections of Genesis, we find frequent plays upon names. Jacob's name, in Hebrew, is very close to the river "Jabbok," AND to the word that is translated "wrestle." We also find that the name of the location, Peniel, is a variation on the term "Peniel, meaning "I have seen the face of God."

Genesis 32:31 Just as he crossed over Peniel the sun rose on him, and he limped on his hip.

As in earlier sections of the chapter, we need to understand much of the events of Jacob's early life, especially what happened at Bethel where a concentrated section of Scripture is devoted to the events of another night. Let's read through what happened at Bethel:

Genesis 28: 10 Now Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Haran.

11 So he came to a certain place and stayed there all night, because the sun had set. And he took one of the stones of that place and put it at his head, and he lay down in that place to sleep.

12 Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

13 And behold, the LORD stood above it and said: "I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants.

14 "Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

God reiterated to Jacob the promise that he had made to Abram in Genesis 12.

15 "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you."

16 Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it."

17 And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!"

18 Then Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on top of it.

19 And he called the name of that place Bethel (which means "house of God"; but the name of that city had been Luz previously.

The end result of that night was that Jacob made a vow:

20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on,

21 "so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God.

22 "And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You."

This was a very interesting vow. God says nothing about it! He does remind Jacob of it in chapter 31. He reminds him that he made this vow at Bethel, and that He doesn't want Jacob to forget it.

Let's return to the night in question. We read through this with a certain foreknowledge. These ten verses are not without difficulties, in that the author leaves us guessing in many ways.

Who is this Man that wrestles all night with Jacob?

Why night?

Why wrestle?

Ambiguity is part of what God has intended here. Like Jacob we can easily be in the dark until the end of the encounter. Commentators end up with all sorts of opinions as to why this event occurred. This section raises all sorts of questions. Many commentators want to make this an answer to Jacob's prayer, offered earlier in the chapter (verses 9 – 11).

However this passage provides an interesting parallel to the account at Bethel. That is without question. Although it is separated geographically from Bethel, the essential elements exist to provide that parallel. One commentator says, about the location:

"Existentially, if not geographically, we are at the point in the journey that corresponds to Bethel. One thing is missing – God. God has not appeared to Jacob at Mahanaim."

As we go along, I think you will see that the answers to Jacob's prayers are given within this section. It was not just what he uttered at

Mahanaim, but more importantly the prayer and the vow that he uttered at Bethel. Jacob had come to this place and he had met the company of angels.

Genesis 32: 2 When Jacob saw them, he said, "This is God's camp." And he called the name of that place Mahanaim.

He had already been to the entrance of heaven in Bethel. Now he is at God's camp. Mahanaim is a plural word relating to the angelic camp and his own camp. Jacob was a man of considerable substance. Throughout the rest of the chapter we find that he stayed at that camp. The events of that night took place very close to that encampment.

This section of Scripture also reinforces the choosing of Jacob and how God accepted him as a patriarch instead of Esau, and as a result, gave his descendants the opportunity to become God's people, instead of Esau and the Edomites.

God also provided a new name by which his descendants would be known – rather than “supplanter,” or “heel catcher.”

The concept of blessings being the results of God's generosity to humanity is well established in the Holy Scriptures. Jacob is asking for a blessing here. We should expect to see some form of interaction between God and Jacob.

Let's just focus upon Jacob for a moment. Jacob has sent all his servants and possessions over the river in attempt to assuage Esau. Looking at the way in which he sent them, I guess we could deduce that Rachel was the last, with Joseph. They went across the most expendable firstly, the most precious, last of all. THE most precious hasn't crossed yet – that's Jacob!

He took all of his possessions and sent them across. He remained alone, separated from everything he had gained over those decades with Laban. He was by himself, just as he had crossed the Jordan many years earlier when fleeing from Esau.

Why did he remain alone? Certainly he was fearful.

Was he hoping to recreate the encounter that he had had at Bethel, and the encouragement that he had received then, especially in light of the presence of angels?

By waiting, did he, once again, hope to encounter the divine, and be able to importune Him for his safety in face of his angry brother and 400 armed men?

Bethel represented the first given stop on his journey from Esau. Mahanaim is now his last stop before meeting his brother face to face. Just as he needed strength when fleeing, so he needs it now. Just as the unexpected happened at Bethel, now he receives something he didn't expect.

Let's ask some questions. We know what Jacob has done. We have a fairly good idea of his state of mind at this point in time.

Who is this Assailant? Commentators suggest all sorts of bizarre ideas – river sprites, demons etc. etc. Nobody seems to want to accept that it may have been the Eternal!

I don't think it was a demon or any other thing of that nature. I think that is clear because of the way that Jacob had already importuned God in this chapter – and God's promise of protection that He gave him at Bethel.

“Assailant” in the Hebrew is simply described as a man – “Æiysh.” The description has been used elsewhere in Genesis to describe the way in which the Eternal or angels would incarnate themselves to appear as humans. The Eternal and 2 angels appeared to Abraham and Sarah at Mamre, as “men,” (Hebrew “Æenowsh” – the plural of “Æiysh”). They simply appeared as men. The 2 angelic beings appeared later to Lot at Sodom in exactly the same manner – as men.

Judges 13 records the birth of Samson. Here is a similar usage. An angel appears as a man to announce the birth and the nature of Samson's life. To Manoah and his wife he is an Æiysh – a man.

Judges 13: 6 So the woman came and told her husband, saying, "A Man of God came to me ...

He was perceived as being a man of God. That is the term that was used of the prophets and the judges of those days. The writer of the book of Judges informs us that the man is, in fact, an angel. It is something that Manoah and his wife were unaware of, until they eventually comprehended by the way in which the “man” disappears. It was not the way men normally disappear!

Jacob's reaction to the event in his own life shows his understanding of who the Assailant really is. He says:

Genesis 32: 30 And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: "For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved."

That same expression is echoed in the account of Manoah and his wife after the angel had been to announce the birth of Samson.

Jacob also realises something else about this “Man.” It is within his power to provide a blessing. This Person has something that human beings or demons do not have. Hosea reinforces that very clearly in his account of this event, in chapter 12.

Throughout the account it is apparent that the Assailant is in control. Although Jacob can hold on, he cannot do anything to control the outcome of the event. He holds his opponent in respect. He makes a request to him:

29 Then Jacob asked, saying, "Tell me Your name, I pray (or please) ..."

We see a sense of courtesy. The New American Bible expresses it:

29 Then Jacob asked him and said, "Please tell me your name ..."

Other translators provide it in terms of an importuning: "Pray, tell me your name."

Perhaps his new name provides God's view of Jacob. He persisted or persevered. He didn't PREVAIL. That is an important point to remember. He persisted or persevered. He didn't prevail – as often translators prefer to state.

The injury is apparently inflicted by Jacob's Assailant, and the blessing is given by Him. It is the Assailant who asks Jacob's name, and Who then refuses to give His name to Jacob.

So we can ask, who really is in control in this situation? It is not Jacob.

Why wrestle? This is a divine being who has the ability to provide a blessing on the one hand, and harm on the other. Why would God wrestle with Jacob?

The night was spent in a wrestling match between Jacob and the Assailant. In the Old Testament the Hebrew term that is translated "wrestle" is only found here. It is found twice in these verses.

In Hebrew the verb is reflexive in form. It means it was happening TO Jacob. Jacob was being wrestled WITH. The term is derived from the word "dust." Lexicographers concede that it probably relates to dust, in that wrestling in that part of the world produces dust. People get dirty as a result of wrestling.

But interestingly this is not the only time that a unique word has been used in terms of Jacob and his action. Rebekah suffered in carrying Jacob and Esau. The twins STRUGGLED in her womb. Once again, this is the only time in the Bible that that particular form of verb is used. In its normal form, that particular verb means "to crush or bruise." It is most frequently used in terms of interpersonal relationships rather than in terms of inanimate objects. It's what we DO to other people.

In other words, Jacob's personal relationships are being foreshadowed even while he is in his mother's womb. The struggle didn't end at birth, but continued throughout the lives of Jacob and Esau.

Jacob wrestled the birthright from Esau (Genesis 25).

He wrestled the blessing from his father.

According to Laban, he wrestled from him control of his flocks.

Jacob was, by nature, a wrestler. His name meant "heel grabber or supplanter." That was based on his action at birth. His human relationships were based upon struggling and wrestling.

The similarity of the sounds of the names in Hebrew of "Jacob" and "Jabbok" and the verb "wrestle" are noted by many. At this place, Jacob ceased to be the heel grabber. In fact, the wrestler was injured in that his hip was dislocated, clearly giving his Assailant the advantage in the struggle and empowering his ability to continue wrestling. The purpose of the struggle is not at first declared, but Jacob finds himself being set upon by what is described as a "Man." For once he, Jacob, did not initiate the struggle! Somebody else did so.

Let's look at Jacob relationship with God. What or how could we describe Jacob's relationship with God? No indication really exists of Jacob having a relationship with God prior to Bethel. When he goes before his father in Genesis 27, and his father says: "You sure got this meal together in a hurry, Esau," how did Jacob respond?

Genesis 27: 20 But Isaac said to his son, "How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?" And he said, "Because the LORD your God brought it to me."

Maybe that is just a matter of culture. One would have thought that if Jacob had had a relationship with God as Isaac did, he may have said, "The Eternal OUR God brought it to me."

If he had said that, he would have given the show away, because Esau had NO relationship with God. I would contend that Jacob didn't have much of one either.

It would have been expected that he knew of the God of his fathers, Abraham and Isaac. His desire to wrestle his father's blessing from Esau was based upon some appreciation of the power of God – either on his part in some measure, but certainly on Rebekah's part, because she was

very much a part of it.

Furthermore, he was able to recognise God at Bethel when He appeared to him in the dream. He also knew enough about God to make a claim on Him to protect him on his way from Bethel and back to the land of promise.

When is the next time that God appears in Jacob's life? It was decades later. He has worked 14 years for Rachel, and he has carried on working for Laban. The next time that God appears in Jacob's life is when trouble starts to arise with Laban. He is then told by God to go back to the land of his fathers. We read about that in Genesis 31:11-13. En route, he encounters the angels of God at Mahanaim. At this point he again prays for protection.

Throughout the story of Jacob's life, how would you characterise his relationship with God? It was passive! It wasn't an active relationship. It seems, on one hand, that the individual who made the relationship was not Jacob. It was God appearing to him. Jacob didn't seem to value any relationship with God. The only activity on Jacob's part is seeking God's help for his own self preservation. He remembers that God has offered him some form of prosperity, but overlooks the elements of God's promise to protect him, to bring him back to his land, and to never leave him.

All he seems to be concerned about is himself! The elements of the enormity of the promises that God gave him at Bethel seem to have gone straight over his head. They had been lost, ignored, forgotten.

In one manner the story of Jacob's relationship with God appears to continue in this passive manner. God tells him to return to Bethel in Genesis 35.

Later, in Genesis 46, God appears to him in a vision, to assure Jacob that he should go to Egypt, after Joseph was found alive in Egypt. It's only on his deathbed that we see Jacob invoking the name of God (Genesis 48). We will return to this aspect later because we don't want to leave it on a negative note.

In his fear, Jacob found himself alone on the banks of the river Jabbok. This was a situation he had been in previously at Bethel – alone and frightened. Here was a destitute fugitive. He saw his brother threatening his life from behind.

In that situation God appeared to him. God promised that He would never leave Jacob. He gave an unconditional promise to him at Bethel to protect him wherever he went. He promised to bring him back to this land. He said, "I will not leave you until I have done what I promised to you."

Genesis 28: 15 "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you."

Now he appears alone again – and potentially destitute, just the same as he was in Bethel. He would certainly be destitute if Esau either accepted or destroyed his gifts. Now, though, he is surrounded by people who are his adversaries – adversaries of his own creation. Laban is behind him. His brother, Esau, is in front of him. But we know the end of the story. God is going to make sure that his promises to Jacob are fulfilled.

Jacob is alone, yet as God said in Genesis 2, it is not good for a man to be alone, especially in a time of trouble. To overcome this loneliness Jacob clutches to the Man who appears. Did he stay in this place expecting God to appear? God leaves us in the dark on that point.

Whether Jacob realised with whom he struggled at first is not known. God leaves us in the dark – just as Jacob was in the dark! When the Assailant asked to be released before the break of day, Jacob must have been aware of the nature of his challenge. All of the previous encounters with God had been at night, in dreams – at Bethel and while with Laban. But this was not a dream. This was reality.

For Jacob, it was a life and death struggle. The Divine Being had the power to inflict an injury on Jacob at any time, but delayed so doing. It's questionable as to whether this was a display of enormous strength on Jacob's part, or restraint on the part of the Divine. Maybe it doesn't matter.

Obviously, the Assailant had not intended harm to come to Jacob. We have already looked at some of the aspects of the way in which the Assailant controlled the situation. In recognising the power of his Assailant Jacob asked for a blessing as a precondition to releasing the Man. If any positive change came to Jacob as a result of this struggle, one particular area in which it is apparent is in this aspect of the blessing. Blessings tend to be very central to the stories of Abraham and Jacob. Isaac slips in the middle. God promised Abraham a blessing when he was still in Haran. It consisted of land, wealth, power and prestige. Yet the blessing as recorded for us had an ambiguity to it. What was the final aspect of that blessing in Genesis 12?

Genesis 12: 3 I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Were all nations of the earth to be blessed through Abraham? Or were they to use his blessing as a standard to compare their blessings? People debate that.

Abraham had to learn that the blessing was not one for his lifetime, but had a larger, international significance in which God was going to be greatly involved. Abraham had to learn that the promise could not be improved or upstaged by going to Egypt. It was within God's power, when, where and how the promise was fulfilled. Abraham had to learn to be steadfast.

Jacob had to learn about blessings as well. The promise of the blessing given to Abram, was repeated for Jacob at Bethel. He seemed to miss it. It

didn't seem to register with him.

The blessings he sought from God at Bethel and Mahanaim were puny in comparison with what God had offered! (You can check this by looking at Genesis 28, and reading what God says to Jacob on the one hand, and what Jacob asks in return.)

If he really understood what God was offering to him, he would never have had to ask for what he did. It was a given that God was going to do that.

He even went so far as to utter a vow to God. It was an indication of how little he understood and appreciated the promises that God was giving to him at that point in time.

Consider the differences. God was offering to bless all people through him, to make his seed as the stars of the heaven and as the sand of the earth – and through his seed all the kingdoms of the earth would be blessed. What an incredible offer! What an incredible promise!

What did Jacob ask for? He wanted protection, safety for his life, and hopefully his descendants. His ability to understand what God was offering was hindered by his fears and his self interest. For Jacob, the blessing to date had amounted to a string of human actions, undertaken on his own part, or with the aid of his mother, using his own williness to accomplish them.

To this point, Jacob's attitude to the blessings reflected his lack of appreciation of the power of God. God was there for the bad times, and the times of crisis. Yet even at these times, he appeared to overlook the nature and the reality of the promise of protection given to him. At this point, Jacob had put every blessing that God had allowed him to accumulate in front of him as a means of seeking to appease Esau's anger.

Only the promise of blessing remains with him. As he lamented to God in his earlier prayer at Mahanaim, he had left the land empty and only with his staff. Now, rather than re-entering with 2 camps, he was re-entering by himself. Or was he?

In asking for a blessing from his nocturnal opponent, he received something that he didn't expect. The nature of the blessing that Jacob receives is not a matter of safety or well-being in the first instance. He receives a new name when the very continuance of his own name appears bleak! If his brother is hostile towards him, he may be dead on the field of battle the next morning. Yet this Assailant gives him a new name.

Esau, with 400 men on the other side of the river, is a chilling thought for him.

The importance of names has been repeated throughout the patriarchal section of Genesis. Starting in chapter 11 with the building of the Tower of Babel, the desire was for the builders to make a name for themselves. God came down to see their activity and confused it, so that it came to nothing.

We then find Abram introduced. What is it that God offers to Abram? A new name! He will make a new name for him. His name was promised to be so great that all the nations of the earth would be blessed. God eventually gave him a new name, no longer Abram (meaning "high father"), but Abraham, "father of a great multitude."

Isaac had a name provided for him at the time of the promise of his birth – otherwise known as "laughter."

Jacob, whose name means "heel catcher" or "supplanter" was asked for his name by his blind father when he deceived him into giving him Esau's blessing. He lied on that occasion and refused to reveal his true identity.

Now Jacob is once more asked what his name is. This time he replies truthfully to the request and in so doing, acknowledges the nature of his character. When he replies he is told that he is not a supplanter or heel catcher any more – but "Israel" – or as it is translated, "A striver with God and with men." His name is a combination of the word, "to persist," or "to exert oneself," coupled with the shortened form of "el."

The exact meaning of the name would be "El persists or perseveres." Some of the more recent translations of the Bible now offer that as a marginal note. One wonders whether in fact translators of God's word have not had the name back to front all the way along.

Jacob's name changes from one which represents his human character to one that represents God's relationship with His creation. In a particular way, the name reflects God's relationship with Jacob. God has spent years persisting with Jacob, and likewise with the rest of those that He calls.

We now have an interesting situation in which the patriarchs have each been personally named by God with names that are appropriate to their roles and functions. The providing of a new name, or the act of renaming, means that the person who is renamed loses some of their power to the person providing the new name. In the process of naming, they all become the servants of God.

Jacob is concerned about the name of his Assailant. Jacob asked His name, and was asked why he wanted to know. Some of the translations make the reply very blunt. "It's none of your business."

Knowing the name of the person is a means to exercise some control over them. Jacob is denied that knowledge and power. The name of the Being that he wrestled with cannot be contained within a name. The Eternal's response on that occasion is comparable with the account of Moses and Yahweh at the burning bush. Moses was told that the name of Yahweh was: "I AM WHAT I WILL BE." Commentators have spent the last 31/2 thousand years trying to work out what the Tetragrammaton really means.

For Jacob this marks a high point in his life. This is the first blessing he has asked of God without conditions! To date the only blessings he has

appreciated in his life have been those he misappropriated from others – such as those that he stole from his father and brother under false pretences.

The blessings he had received while with Laban had been in spite of Laban. Laban sought to take from Jacob, not give. Jacob outwitted him.

Jacob realises it is within the power of his Assailant to provide a blessing, and so requests one. Who else is able to provide? Only God has provided so far! Even the blessing from his father was ultimately a blessing from God.

So Jacob clearly considers the Being to be a messenger from God. This is one of the last references to blessings for Jacob until we come to Egypt.

Let's ask another question. Why should God have been so secretive about Jacob's opponent? Why not just label him a "man," an *Æiysh*?

To this point, who has Jacob ever feared? Did he fear God? I don't think that entered into the equation. He feared his father finding out about his deception. He feared his brother's wrath. He feared being alone at Bethel. He feared Laban, and still fears Esau. All he has ever feared has been men.

This says nothing about his relationships with the women in his life – which were as troublesome as his relationships with men. All Jacob fears are contained within human relationships. He has countered his fears by using his skill in wrestling. His fear is based upon the guilt from his deceit. He has never shown any fear of God – the Being he should have feared all along.

His prayer to God at Bethel was revealing of his fear of man. He asks God to deliver him from harm. Who was going to harm him? God had already promised him all of these blessings that he had promised to Abraham. Was God going to harm him? No. Then who could harm him? Man.

So he enters into this vow with God at Bethel saying, "If You will bring me back safely and protect me ..." from whom? Not from God, but from other human beings.

He said if God would deliver him from harm from human beings, and bring him back safely, then he would serve God.

God appears as a Man to show Jacob how futile it is to fear a man!

Not only does He appear as a Man, he uses Jacob's supposed skills to teach him a lesson. Furthermore, God now stands, not only between Jacob and Esau, but between Jacob and the blessings he has accumulated. God stood between him and all of those things that he thought he had done so well with. Clearly the lesson to be learned by Jacob was the need to fear God – a Being that can really come between a person and the fulfilment of the promises and blessings; a Being that can be a shelter from trouble, but also a Being that can cripple or disable Jacob in a wrestling match.

That type of fear, *THE AWESOME FEAR OF GOD*, has been totally absent from Jacob's life to this point. That awesome type of fear is essential to any relationship with God.

Jacob's fear is so great that he has offered up everything to Esau – wives and children included. The blessings he has accumulated, God had put at Esau's disposal. Once more, the blessing comes between Jacob and his brother; this time as an act of contrition or propitiation.

Jacob alone is left at the camp on the banks of the Jabbok. In the next section we see him facing up to the challenge before him, in meeting Esau. Rather than hiding, he now goes ahead of his wives and children, to meet his brother.

This event should be seen as a turning point in Jacob's life, in his relationship with God. You might say, a form of conversion – a new being leaving the scene.

Yet what has changed? We can be sure of some things. Jacob has a new name, and he limps on a dislocated hip. If his character changes the text in the rest of the book of Genesis can be very quiet about it.

We see him dealing with Esau in the next chapter. We see him dealing with the tragic case of Dinah, and suffering from the consequences of his past actions as he, himself, becomes the object of deceit on the part of his sons. The rest of Jacob's account could be described as one of tragedy, until the final reconciliation with his son, Joseph, in Egypt. There is another lesson.

Nowhere do we directly read of the way in which God blessed him as a result of that night. Yet God poses questions for us. Where did Joseph learn of the relationship with God that he experienced? What was special about the relationship of Joseph and his father?

Certainly, he was the first-born of Rachel, whom he loved, but was that all? Was it based on the fact that Jacob was able to teach Joseph the lessons he had learned as a result of that encounter with God?

Even Judah, who was subsequently presented as a cad, shows some godly concern in offering his own life for Benjamin in Egypt. Some of the most reprobate of Jacob's sons do get to learn something about godly mercy and justice.

Jacob learned that blessings come from God, that He was the giver of blessings, rather than human beings being the takers of them. Jacob did not

receive the blessings as a matter of course or right. He had to ask for them. He had to see blessings from God's perspective.

The blessing he received was probably the last thing he expected, but it was sufficient to the occasion. He had to realise that the blessings God gives are for a different purpose than the blessings humans desire – a greater purpose and a greater end. Jacob, in part, experienced something on this occasion. Did he, like Job, come to see God more completely than he had to date? Job made the comment, "I have heard you with my ears, but now I see you with my eyes."

Jacob's comment on having seen the face of God at Peniel, and the resultant naming of the city as Penuel indicate this. At Bethel, God stood beside him in a dream. Here He is, face to face in real life. He has promised to be with Jacob but those promises have meant nothing to Jacob until now. Now He is beside him physically.

How close does God have to be to me so that I realise that He is with me? The promise of God being with us is available to you and me as it was to Jacob. Is that promise adequate of itself or do we need to hold onto God physically to be satisfied? The aspect of KNOWING enters here as well. God wanted to KNOW Abraham. He wanted to KNOW Job as well. Jacob had a problem with knowing.

Genesis 28: 16 Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it."

We might ask ourselves, did God and Jacob come to know one another better as a result of this encounter? Jacob, on his part, provides an answer. He has seen the face of God despite the dark. God gave Jacob a name that was representative of the encounter. Could we see that they both came to know one another more completely?

How do you and I see the account of Jacob's life? Who do we see in the struggle?

James 1: 21 (Jewish New Testament) So rid yourself of all vulgarity and obvious evil, and receive meekly the Word implanted in you that can save your lives.

22 Don't deceive yourselves by only hearing what the Word says, but do it!

23 For whoever hears the Word, but doesn't do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror,

24 who looks at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

25 But if a person looks closely into the perfect Torah which gives freedom, and continues, becoming not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work it requires, then he will be blessed in what he does.

James introduces the idea of a mirror. People look in a mirror, then walk away and forget what they saw. Where was that spot? Where was that cut on my face, from the razor?

James says we are supposed to look into something – into the perfect Torah. By extension, we will be able to rid ourselves of all vulgarity and obvious evil. He uses the aspect of the Torah being a mirror, something that we have got to keep looking into. Why? Because it shows us our shortcomings.

How do we read the story of Jacob's life? Many people, many commentators read it as though it were a window through which they see another person – someone detached upon whom they can pronounce judgment.

A copious amount of ink has been spilled in terms of books being published, that criticise the people that God worked with in the Old Testament, the patriarchs etc. Why do people do that? Because they see God's word as a window through which to look.

God's word, in part, is a window. God gives us windows into the future. But most times when God gives us a window into the future He puts a little mirror in there as well – to help us appreciate what type of person is going to be on the other side of that window. He talks about the character that is required to be on the other side of the window.

The majority of God's word is a mirror, for us to see ourselves in. Can we use the word of God effectively as a mirror to see and remove those evils, those obvious and vulgar evils that James speaks of?

In light of that instruction from James, do I see eye to eye with God? Do I see my life from His perspective?

During the Days of Unleavened Bread we eat something different – to remind ourselves of our responsibility to put that which is sinful out of our lives.

Do I seek what God wants for me? Or do I seek my own ends, and the blessings I want?

At Bethel, Jacob thought he could serve God on his own terms.

Genesis 28: 22 "And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You."

"God, You do this for me, and I will serve you. You take care of me and then I will serve you."

Is that the basis upon which we serve God? I'll never have a relationship with God based upon that mindset!

Jacob thought he could serve God on his own terms. He simply wanted an easy passage.

God was not ready to answer him then. God did not respond to Jacob's foolishness at that point in time.

At Jabbok God answered him and showed Jacob that he could not have blessings on HIS terms. The real battle lay, not with his brother or other humans, but in his relationship with God! God was the One Who could stand between him and the fulfilment of those promises. He could take his life as easily as cripple him. That concept was repeated by Christ:

Matthew 10: 28 "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

Jacob had to learn that lesson.

The awesome fear of God should have motivated Jacob as it had his grandfather, Abraham, rather than the fear of other people.

The account also portrays an element of no gain without pain. Jacob had to realise that he was not going to receive the promises easily. What God was offering to him, as to Abraham before him, was something far greater than he could appreciate. It was for the benefit of ALL humanity, not just himself!

Such blessings were acquired through a fiery trial, with the way to the Promised Land being through a dark land. The history of Israel, as preserved for us, clearly shows this principle. God brought them out through a fiery trial. The race is not to the swift, nor to the strong.

So we might ask ourselves, how do we see the blessings that God has for us? How much do we limit them? Are those blessings that we perceive for the here and now to be consumed upon ourselves, for ourselves – or are they something far greater? What are they about?

How do I perceive God? Is He someone that I can barter and haggle with? "You do this for me and I will do this for you."

Jacob had to learn the lesson that God is not a pushover Who will give him everything he asks for, nor is a Being that cannot place demands upon us. The plan and the purpose that He has for us is far greater than any of us can possibly envisage.

He IS going to place demands upon us. He is going to require things of us, because He wants to know us – just as much as he wanted to know Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

God wants me to see life and opportunities from His perspective. That means I have to come to know Him as well – just like Jacob.

Another lesson we can learn is that gifts don't buy our way out of trouble in life. Our troubles are not with other people as much as they are with our relationship with God. When Jacob's perception of God changed, his relationship with his brother changed. God promises He can make even our enemies to dwell at peace with us – if we get our relationship with God right.

How often are our interpersonal relationships distorted because our relationship with God is not what God desires?

To put it another way, are our relationships with others a reflection of our relationship with God? WHAT REALLY MATTERS IN LIFE IS THE QUALITY OF OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD. That will change our relationship with others.

As a reflection of our relationship with God, we need to realise that WHAT GOD THINKS OF US is more important than anything else. What will God name you or me? How does God perceive us? What does He want to call us?

That name which God wishes to bestow upon us should mean more than anything else in this physical life. Are we willing to hear the answers God has to our prayers, or are we so consumed with our self interest that God has to wait in silence until He has our undivided attention to give us the answers we need?

Jacob exists in the foreground or the background of half of the book of Genesis. His faults and weaknesses are laid bare for all to see. Why? Because he was a human being just like the rest of us, and God saw in his life the opportunity to teach each of us what needs to be changed.

We may find the stature of Abraham to be so far above us, or the devotion of Joseph to be beyond of us, but we can all identify in some way with the abject humanness of Jacob. He is a mirror by which we can judge ourselves, and learn of the relationship God so desires to have with us.

*...Peter Nathan
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