

Jacob Wrestles With God

HN 4/04/04 pm

Reading: Gen 32, Hosea 12

Study: Gen 32:22-32

Psalms 124, 37:1-6, 37:22-27, 37:29-34

On the school bus was this group of boys who always sat up the back and misbehaved. The driver used to tell them to be quiet – again and again. One day the driver stopped the bus. He called this fellow to get off the bus. To my shock and I am sure the shock of the boy who was the ring leader of this group, as he got off the driver took him and started to wrestle and fight with him. Were these the good old days! I suppose the driver thought he would teach this fellow a lesson.

Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him until dawn. What an amazing story this is. Jacob had taken all his family and things across the river that night. He acted in haste because Esau was coming with 400 men. He was left alone, having finished supervising the crossing. A man suddenly appeared and they started to struggle or wrestle. It was a desperate struggle – a matter of life or death as far as Jacob was concerned.

Who was this man? That is the question. Jacob wanted to know just as much as you the reader. When his hip socket was put out of joint Jacob seems to have realized he was not wrestling with a normal man. He asks that man for a blessing and received one. He asked for his name but was not told. After the man disappeared Jacob realized that he had been struggling with God himself. God had come to him in human form and wrestled with him.

So Jacob found that he was wrestling with God. But what was it all about. Why did God come to him in this manner, in this place and at this time and wrestle with him? We need to look carefully at the context and the outcome of this encounter.

Jacob was born grasping the heel of his brother. He was called Jacob, which means to grasp or deceive. He lived by his own devices – devices that included deception. At this point in time he was in great distress because his brother whom he had deceived was coming with 400 men. Jacob prepared to meet Esau as best he could and he also turned to the Lord in prayer.

Is this struggle like an answer to that prayer? God came to Jacob and blessed him, but not before Jacob learnt a lesson. Jacob had struggled against men all his life. He struggled against his brother, striving for the birthright. He struggled against Laban for 20 years. He struggled and prevailed.

But his greatest struggle he learnt this night was with God. Calvin goes so far as to call God his antagonist – and our antagonist. If we consider the natural man, if we consider the man born in sin this is true is it not. Sin is rebellion against God. Sin is refusal to submit to the rule of God.

The apostle Paul describes the natural man in Romans 7. He said *I see another law in my members warring against the law of my mind (7:23). O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death (7:24).* God had to deal with Jacob, he had to deal with Paul and he has to deal with you because you like them are a rebellious sinner before God.

This encounter, this struggle with God was the turning point in Jacob's life. Jacob who was a self-made man, a man who depended on his own strength, his own ingenuity, emerges with a new name and a blessing. He also emerges as a broken man, a man humbled by God, a man totally dependent on God.

Broken

Who was the victor in this struggle? Jacob *prevailed* we read, but we also read that he left limping because of his disjointed hip. 'It was defeat and victory in one'. He was about to face his angry brother so he thought. He felt weak enough as it was but now he limps, his body broken – and his spirit also? Was this not what God wanted? He wanted a broken man for it is broken men that the Lord uses.

Hosea gives us a very brief commentary of this encounter. *He struggled with the angel and prevailed; he wept, and sought favour from Him (12:4)*. In Gen we do not read that he wept but we can certainly imagine this to be the case. This once strong independent man found himself limping off into battle.

Apostle Paul was once a proud Jew, zealous for the law and excelling above his fellows. The Lord met him on the Damascus road. As he picked himself out of the dust he found himself blind. He was chosen to *bear my name before the Gentiles (Acts 9)*. Conversion is an encounter with God. It is a realization of our own weakness/helplessness before the Almighty God. By ourselves we are not able to stand in battle before the enemy, before Satan. God breaks us that we might stand in Him and have the victory.

And sometimes God has to keep us broken, for the lingering old nature in us raises its ugly head from time to time saying 'I can do it by myself'. I know how, I am clever or I am experienced. Even as an apostle the Lord kept Paul broken, he kept him humble. *I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me* Paul said referring to his thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:8). But the Lord wanted to keep him humble, to keep him broken, for as a broken man he could use him.

He said to me my grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). Is that not what Jacob learnt in his encounter with God? He went away limping, he went away broken, but he went away strong in the strength of the Lord.

Blessing

Even with his disjointed hip Jacob clung to his opponent demanding a blessing. Realizing this was no ordinary man he was wrestling he sought a blessing. He persevered and he prevailed. He was blessed with a new name, a name change describing or maybe prescribing his change of nature and of destiny.

Isra-el literally means 'God fights' or 'God rules'. But in the context here the meaning is slightly different. We are told what it means – Jacob *struggled with God and with men and prevailed (32:28)*. Some versions include the word 'prince' in this verse but the Hebrew is just one word – *struggle/strive/contend/persevere*. No longer was he to be Jacob the deceiver. He was now Israel the contender, the contender with God.

This new name became the name of the people of God, Israel. Down in Egypt God formed them into a people, a nation under Him. They would be a people who indeed struggled with God on many occasions, with the meaning against his rule. But they would also be the nation that struggled with God **for** his kingdom. They were indeed called to be a holy people, a nation sought out by all people.

God would not reveal his name to Jacob but he did bless him. As dawn broke, the Angel disappeared just as suddenly as he came. In the night Jacob would not have seen his face clearly but still he realized that he has been struggling with God and exclaims *I have seen God face to face and my life is preserved*. So he called that place Peniel.

Jacob had a heavenly encounter, an unforgettable encounter with God. Paul also had a heavenly encounter which he could not tell about. Great blessing brought great responsibility to these men of God, responsibility to trust God totally and lead his people, Israel, the people of God.

What about us. What is the lesson for us today? We live like Paul of course in the last days, between the Cross and the Lord's second coming. We are those who behold the glory of God in Jesus Christ. Yet we were born in sin, in rebellion to God like all humanity since Adam. Therefore we wrestle with God. God continues to deal with us all our life, encouraging us to press on, to persevere, yet at the same time molding us, forming us into men and women fit for his kingdom.

Our faith will be tested and tried. We will be tempted. Believers 'in their temptations find it necessary to wrestle with God' wrote Calvin. The struggle of Romans 7 is very real. You are trying to keep the law are you? Paul found that impossible. It was a trial and temptation to him. He said *I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said you shall not covet (Romans 7:7). Sin taking occasion by the law deceived me and by it killed me. Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death. I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Let us struggle on dear friends. We are being purified like gold in the fire. The genuineness of your faith will be tested. Struggle on, persevere as Jacob did. You will be broken, you will be humbled but at the same time you will be blessed by God. Defeat and victory go together in the kingdom of God. When I am weak then I am strong.

Amen.

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