

# Chapter 17

## Private Prayer No. 2 January 26, 1997

Last Lord's Day evening we considered the subject of private prayer in general and said that it is essential in the Christian life because there is much that must be honestly and seriously reckoned with, in one's life before God and in conversation with God, that cannot be in public and with others present and listening.

Tonight I want to consider one of the great portraits of such private prayer painted for us in Holy Scripture, viz. Jacob's encounter with the Lord at Peniel.

*Read: Gen. 32:22-32*

- v.23 Jacob sensed the need to be alone; what unfolds seems to be what Jacob wished for — even if he did not know exactly what form his encounter with God would take — and not a surprise.
- v.26 Why does he want to let go *because it is daybreak?* The best idea seems to be that he desires to continue to hide his identity, because being God, he may not be seen, even in human dress the holiness of God poses a danger to man. This is the point Jacob himself draws attention to in v. 30.
- v.27 The name is a revelation of character, in this case particularly, as “Jacob” came from the verb meaning “to clutch” because when he was

born he was clutching the heel of his elder twin brother, but also came to be “supplanter” from a verb with a similar sound meaning “to take by the heel” or “to overtake.” Jacob had supplanted his brother by deceit and so giving his name was, in effect, a confession of his sin.

v.30 Clearly a theophany, a pre-incarnate appearance of God, no doubt the second person. God has done this before (to Abraham, e.g. before the destruction of Sodom) and will again, e.g. to Joshua before Jericho, etc. In the history of salvation this is clearly a preparation for the incarnation and a demonstration of God’s active involvement in the life of his people.

v.31 God withdrew with the dawn so that Jacob would not be harmed by seeing his face directly and so by sunrise Jacob was alone.

Now, I want to dispense with one matter, as something of an aside, here at the beginning of our consideration of this chapter. It is often assumed in preaching that this is the point of Jacob’s “conversion” to real faith in God. Lloyd Jones, for example, is one of many preachers who took the narrative in that way. I am not at all persuaded. Remember Bethel lies far behind us at this point, where Jacob saw the ladder reaching to heaven with the angels of God ascending and descending on it. There he made a vow of loyalty to God (Gen. Gen. 28). And there are certainly indications that when Jacob was in Paddan Aram, living with and working for Laban, his uncle, he still saw his life in terms of God’s faithfulness to him (31:3-5; 10-13; 42, 50 and, especially, 32:9-12). It is speculation, largely based on the fact that we English speaking evangelicals expect such figures to have a dramatic conversion, that we assume that this must be the time and place. There is really nothing in the narrative of Jacob that indicates he wasn’t a true believer when still in his father Isaac’s house. As the Bible makes all too clear, believers can do very sinful things and betray their faith in many ways.

But, now, this account of Jacob’s encounter with God. This is one of the great dramatic episodes in all of the Bible. In a single moment the entire position of the Bible and of the Christian faith becomes clear.

Now, you remember the general outline of Jacob’s life. How he had antagonized his brother Esau, by taking advantage of him when he was tired and hungry and getting him to trade away the birthright that rightfully belonged

to him as the elder brother. To make matters much worse, he stole Esau's blessing, by pretending to be Esau and deceiving his old and blind father who thought he was blessing his eldest son. After that outrage, he had to flee the wrath of his brother and made his way to Paddan Aram where he was to live and work for many years, marry two sisters, Leah and Rachel, and sire eleven of his twelve sons and his daughter. He prospered there and became wealthy, though his conduct was not in all respects commendable, and finally, because of a growing rift with his Uncle Laban, was instructed by the Lord to return to the land of his father.

But as he neared the Promised Land the old problem loomed before him again. What would Esau do to him upon his return? Would the old grudge still be burning? Does Esau still intend to kill his brother, the threat that made Jacob flee his father's house those many years ago? As he neared the territory of his brother he sent messengers ahead to inform Esau that he was coming (no doubt as well to test the waters) and they returned with the alarming news that Esau was coming to meet him with 400 of his men accompanying him. Jacob prayed (vv. 9-12), begging God for help and then he sent gifts ahead to mollify his brother, as we read in vv. 20-21.

Now, through the ages, a great many writers and preachers have gathered from all that has gone before, that we see Jacob here, as we have seen him throughout his life's history, planning and scheming, seeking a way to get himself out of a jam and into some advantage, but finally, here at the Jabbok, with Esau bearing down on him with 400 armed men, coming to the end of all that, realizing that finally he wasn't going to be able to bob and weave any longer, that his own cleverness, his aptness for double-dealing would not be sufficient for this. And, all along this was God's plan and God's doing. That seems to me to be a fair reading of the evidence. I would not say, with Lloyd-Jones, that Jacob becomes a truly religious man at this point and had no true faith in God before this.

But, I would say that it is clear that he needed to be weaned away from his trust in his own wits and cleverness to a true and living dependence upon God. He needed to be brought to the end of himself, to begin to distrust himself more profoundly. His self-reliance and self-confidence must be destroyed. And so God brought him, at last, to a position of utter powerlessness and need. All he could see, humanly speaking, was the complete destruction of his wives and loved ones, his wealth, and finally his own life at the hands of

his avenging brother. He remembered what he had done to Esau, the galling injustice and deceit of his behavior and the grief it had brought his brother. He was left that night to imagine what was going through Esau's mind as he learned of Jacob's return. His sins at last were going to find him out. And now he is ready for prayer. As more than one wise man has pointed out: the rich, the healthy, and the happy seldom pray, at least seldom *really* pray!

And clearly, here is the great point and insight and lesson of this history. Jacob, in the pressing circumstances of his life at that moment, was completely mistaken about the fundamental point. He was entirely mesmerized by his coming encounter with the brother whom he had wronged. *That* was his problem; that was the crisis of his life. This was the matter that needed some how to be resolved, the roadblock he had to find his way around. He had made his plans, sent ahead his gifts, he had even prayed to God about his fears and had reminded God of his promises made to him years ago (vv. 9-12). But, everything concerned the threat that Esau posed.

As he paced the Jabbok that night, what might come to pass in the morning, this was all he was thinking about, all he could think about.

But when God comes to him, in a most amazing way, Esau is forgotten, the fear of the morrow fades away. For God revealed to him that Esau was not really the vital problem at all. Through the long struggle with God that night Esau was forgotten and Jacob learned, if not for the first time, at least learned well for the first time, that the true problem and crisis and danger in his life came not from Esau or from Laban or from the circumstances of his life whatever they might be, *but from God himself. God was his problem and his sin and guilt and all that mattered and all that would ever matter was to be right with God and have his blessing.*

There has never been a time in the history of the world when the world worried so much about solving its problems as it does now, or when a society such as ours worries so much about solving its problems. But, invariably, all the attention, all the interest is placed upon the wrong object, all the concentration is in the wrong place. And worry and work as man does, even with all his might, his problems mount instead of diminish. For crime and poverty and injustice and damaged relationships and international tension and the like are not the true problem of the world. That is the relationship of man to God. *That and that alone is man's real and true problem.* All the rest are mere symptoms of that larger problem and man will never have rest,

never peace, never harmony, never lasting happiness until and unless he is right with God and has God's blessing.

Jacob's real danger wasn't what Esau might do, but what God might do! His real problem wasn't getting Esau to be reconciled to him but to be sure that God was! His great need wasn't to avoid Esau's wrath, it was to avoid God's! *And all of this time, he now discovered, he had been pitting his strength and his wiles against God himself, not against Esau!*

And through that long wrestling match, through that long night of struggle, Jacob found himself face to face with God and everything else receded around him, Esau most of all.

The night began with Jacob getting hold of God. These were hours of terrible and desperate spiritual conflict and, as Jacob experienced them, physical too. He wanted God to give him assurances that all would be well with Esau on the morrow, a promise of protection from his brother. But, no such assurance, no such blessing was given him, he could not wring it from his foe. But, the longer he struggled the more conscious he became of his own condition, of his helplessness, his disreputable past, his hopelessness unless God should help him and his utter lack of any claim on God's favor. His self-reliance vanished and with a startling clarity he knew that he was utterly dependent upon God's mercy and help. And knowing that, he simply could not let go; for if God would not help him he and his loved ones were doomed. And so he wrestled on in desperation until at last he obtained the blessing he sought — not specifically any promise of protection from Jacob, simply the promise of God's favor

The Lord made this point the lasting lesson of this event in Jacob's life and in the Bible by "laming" Jacob, leaving him with a perpetual reminder of his weakness and of his need to lean upon God.

Now, remember, we are considering this encounter as one of the Bible's great pictures of private prayer. Jacob is alone, alone in the truest sense, spiritually and psychologically alone before God, which is, we said last Lord's Day evening, the great purpose and advantage of private prayer. And the advantage is that he can meet God deal with him seriously, intimately, directly, and personally, all of which Jacob does.

What is astonishing and extraordinarily beautiful is the striking way in which God's condescension to us in such prayer is pictured here. Verse 25 is won-

derful. God himself can't get loose from Jacob — though he has all power at his disposal, as is demonstrated by the fact that by merely touching his hip he put Jacob's hip out of joint! The divine "inability" is an inability of grace and mercy, an inability of promise and faithfulness, a self-imposed inability for our sakes.

One ancient author puts it this way: "In Jacob, God is stronger than he is in himself!" That is, in Jacob praying, God is stronger, because God cannot deny himself and he has promised to hear such prayers as Jacob prayed!

Here is true private prayer, the prayer of a person who knows that his or her relationship with God and the blessing of God is really the only issue in life. And, knowing that, he prays accordingly, absolutely unwilling not to be heard! Here is the purest "earnest and familiar talking with God." Here is prayer with no distractions, prayer that requires and obtains the total concentration of all one's faculties. And this prayer —with reverence we say it but with this text behind us— this prayer is stronger than God. You fathers know how this is. You wrestle with your little ones on the living room rug and over and over you let them win. You want them to win!

Now, do you know yourself how much there is in your life that is not at all really this issue or that, this problem or that, this person or that, but is all the while and only God himself and your relationship with God, his blessing that you need, his anger that has risen up against you, his distance from you that has hardened your heart or made it cold, his smile that would solve that entire trouble that you now endure. And have you then prayed so that you are wrestling with God himself and prayed with the strength and the perseverance and the determination and the unwillingness not to be heard with which Jacob prayed the night he struggled with God and won? That is true prayer, that is the prayer that makes a Christian and a Christian life, and that prayer must be private, must be prayer apart and alone. And the more of that prayer there is in our lives, the more we will live with one eye always fixed on heaven, one ear always turned toward the voice of God, one hand always holding His. And that, my brothers and sisters, is the life that is worthy to be called life, and that man, that woman will find out why God said and what he meant and how much he meant when he said that a Christian can do *everything and anything* if only he does it through him who gives him or her strength.