

Genesis 32:22-32, No. 54

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“The Face of God”

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Text Comment

- v.22 Only his sons are mentioned; not Dinah, since part of the significance of this episode is its implications for the nation of Israel.
- v.23 After what were probably repeated crossings of the river he was, at last, alone on the northern side of the Jabbok.
- v.24 This “man,” a stranger, who appears from nowhere, initiated the fight. We don’t know exactly how – walked up and punched him in the face or in the stomach, grabbed him and attempted to throw him to the ground? – no one can say. The reference to daybreak indicates that the desperate struggle lasted through the night. The darkness of night was also the reason Jacob had not recognized his attacker. We are not told precisely how Jacob recognized that he was fighting with the Lord. The Lord’s presence is always self-authenticating! There is a world of meaning to ponder in the fact that Jacob is said to have fought this man to a standstill who had but to touch Jacob’s hip to make him lame! God was humbling himself to fight Jacob on nearly equal terms. [Waltke, 446]
- v.25 The term is not technical. Jacob’s hip was strained or wrenched not dislocated; otherwise Jacob wouldn’t have been able even to limp. [Sarna, 227]
- v.26 Only at this point, apparently, did Jacob realize that he was fighting with a supernatural opponent, however it was that he had managed to fight him nearly to a standstill. Why did this “man” want to end the contest before daybreak? Did he wish to continue to hide his identity? Perhaps there is also something of the idea that human beings are not able to look upon God, though here God has taken the form of a man. In any case, it is a disclosure of the supernatural character of Jacob’s opponent. He was not there to chat with Jacob or satisfy his curiosity but to put Jacob to the test, and the test had been passed.
- v.27 The angel of the Lord obviously knew who Jacob was. *The point of the question was to force Jacob to say his own name.* Remember where that name came from and the use that has already been made of Jacob’s name (“the supplanter” or “the cheater”), e.g., in 27:36 when Esau said, “Is he not rightly called Jacob? He has deceived me these two times.” Names in the ancient world names were intertwined with character and destiny. By telling the angel of the Lord his name Jacob was reminded and we are reminded of what sort of man he had been.
- v.28 The new name represented Jacob’s cleansing from the disreputable traits associated with his old name. Remember, both Abram and Sarai were given new names to signify their new position in the plan and purpose of God. Jacob’s old name recalled his underhanded and selfish dealings with others. His new name would recall his having wrestled with God and

prevailed. He prevailed not because he bested his opponent, of course; he didn't; but because he refused to let him go without his blessing. His was the victory of faith!

- v.29 God withheld his name from Jacob. His counter-question amounts to asking, “Jacob, don’t you realize who I am?” [Waltke, 447] In any case, Jacob did not control God. He must live his life trusting in the mysterious, but unseen God. He blessed Jacob and then disappeared into the darkness. This is Martin Luther’s “*Deus absconditus*,” the God who hides himself.
- v.30 “Peniel” means “face of God.” God told Moses that no one can see God and live. The glory of God is a mortal danger to men and women. But Jacob had seen God, if only in the form of a man and if only in the dark, and had survived. Obviously he will now survive his meeting with Esau. If he could survive God, he could survive Esau.
- v.32 Though God had permitted Jacob to prevail in this encounter, he had left his mark on his servant. I used to wrestle with my boys on the living room floor when they were four or five years old. I was a grown man, they were little boys, but they always won! *I wanted them to win!* So it was here. But Jacob walked away from Peniel with a limp, a permanent reminder of this contest with God, which Israel fixed in sacred memory by means of the custom of not eating the sciatic nerve, a reminder of the promise of victory that the Lord has made to those who trust and cling to him. I didn’t realize that it was the sciatic nerve, but all the Jewish commentators tell me that this is what they do not eat.

This episode marked a dramatic change in Jacob and his circumstances. The rising sun as he left Peniel is not a minor detail. The sun was rising on the man as it had set on him as he fled Canaan twenty years before, as we read in 28:11. This is not, of course, the only time that the God appeared to one of his servants in the form of a man. He had so appeared to Abraham. He would to Joshua, later to Manoah, the father of Samson. Whether we call him the angel of the Lord or the Lord himself matters not. It is clear that God appeared to Jacob, which we are explicitly told here in the narrative. This, with other such appearances in human form, are anticipations of the incarnation. God the Son would take a human nature to himself to live, suffer, die, rise again, and reign forever as a man on behalf of men.

What we have here in this turning point in the life of Jacob is one of those revealing moments, both in the life of a human being but also in the history of redemption, in which all becomes clear, in which the nature of faith and the true issue of life are stripped bare for all to see. The history of God’s people is marked by such events, such powerful encounters with God, encounters that transform a man or woman’s life. You and I have had such moments ourselves, or, at least, many of us have had them. It is the mystery of God’s ways that such experiences are given to some in one way and to others in another; some more powerful than others; though such experiences are rare in any person’s life; indeed, the very powerful ones usually occurring but once.

In many cases they are the moment of conversion, of the first meeting with God when new life dawns in the soul; in others they mark a crisis of repentance, or illumination, or joy; a profound realization of the reality of God and of God’s love, of the joy of salvation. As Frederick Faber once wrote, “The biography of every one of us is to ourselves as luminously supernatural, and as palpably full of divine interferences, as if it were a page out of the Old Testament history.” [Cited in

Barbour, *Alexander Whyte*, 649] Very true in the sense that most Christians can think of experiences in their own lives that seem to them very similar to what happened to Jacob here. Not every Christian to be sure and certainly not in the same way in most cases. I admit that I am somewhat confused and troubled by that fact. To have such an experience, powerful, memorable, self-authenticating, ineradicable in its impact and influence, seems to me so important, so wonderful that I am unable to explain why some genuine Christians have not had such an experience. But it is so. We must live by faith and not by sight. I must say that it appears to me that the greatest Christians in the world must be those whose faith remains firm without the benefit of such a dramatic encounter with God, though I think virtually all Christians have *something* of this, and, of course, none of us has the experience Jacob had.

Like Jacob's such experiences are invariably intensely personal, even if one is sitting in a crowded sanctuary when it occurs. We were, in one way or another, alone. And in our solitude, the Lord drew near and showed himself to us and made us feel his presence – maybe not a slap on the face, a punch to the solar plexus, but just as really feel his presence. It was Jacob's fear of Esau and Jacob's troubled mind, and confusion, his inability to sleep that created the opportunity that God then seized to show himself to Jacob and to draw out of Jacob a faith that Jacob himself didn't know he had. "To him who overcomes I will give a new name," the Lord said to the Churches of the Revelation, which is just what he taught Jacob that night by the Jabbok almost two thousand years before. How many times and in how many ways has *this* happened to the saints of God! Think of Pascal's "night of fire," or Augustine's encounter with God in the garden of the villa in Milan, or Calvin's "sudden conversion," or John Newton's desperate dialogue with God as for hours on end he stood at helm of a ship that was near to sinking in a storm at sea.

Years ago we read with our children at the dinner table a little book of reminiscences of his missionary life by Dr. John Taylor, a medical missionary in India for fifty years. Dr. Taylor was the founder of the Bhogpur Children's Home, a ministry well known to us here at Faith which still today cares for and educates the children of leper parents in NW India. But Dr. Taylor began those reminiscences with something of his early life as a farm boy in Kansas in the later years of the 19th and early years of the 20th century. His father, a veteran of the Civil War, had died when he was a teenager and he confessed to an unbounded admiration for his saintly mother who, through difficult times, raised five children, always with an eye to the interests of Christ in their hearts and lives. John himself, however, struggled spiritually after the death of his father. He was a dutiful son, but he knew he wasn't living a Christian life; he didn't have the heart for it.

"Our church young people were having their Christian Endeavor meetings on Friday evening. One particular meeting the girl I liked best was the leader and she appointed me to be the leader for the next Friday. I wanted to be a good leader to impress her! [Most of the men in this room know only too well that for a teenaged boy, the aching need to impress a girl is certainly as great a pressure as Jacob's having to face his brother Esau!] It was the custom that the leader take the opening prayer. This I feared. If I tried to rush through a memorized prayer I knew I would get into trouble; also, it would be evident to all that I was a fake and my heart was not right. I knew well where the trouble was but I did not want to do it.

“Awareness of what I had to do, came to me very clearly that night as I rode, horseback, one mile north of Stafford, Kansas on my way back to my job. [Notice the specific place and time, fixed forever in John Taylor’s memory; like that night on the bank of the Jabbok for Jacob! And notice the language: “it came to me”; like the “man” who appeared to Jacob!] I could neither solve the problems of others nor would I be called upon to answer for them; however I *would* be called upon to account for my own sins. Being at my wit’s end, I had to call for help. At that point I gave up, called on Jesus Christ, and agreed to do His bidding. My heart found rest [Just as Jacob got his blessing, John Taylor got his.] I resolved to do what I could to heal the sores of others. I saw I would have to love the unlovely and serve them as Christ would have me serve and love them. This has been my goal ever since that night. I was given this verse: ‘Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you’ (Matt. 6:33).” [pp. 12-13]

Like Jacob, Dr. Taylor’s Peniel was in the dark of night, when the stimuli that play upon our eyes and ears and distract us from the reality of the divine presence lose much of their force, and we are left alone to be visited by God. (For Pascal it was also at night, “from half-past ten to midnight,” November 23, 1654.) Like Jacob the Lord met John Taylor when he least expected it. He had done nothing to bring such a meeting to pass, so far as he could tell can tell had done nothing even to seek it. As Martin Lloyd-Jones observed in a sermon he preached on our text, there is always an element of surprise, of the utterly unexpected in God’s dealings with his people. But that encounter with God as he rode his horse over the Kansas fields changed his life and eventually brought life and hope to thousands on the other side of the world. Everything was suddenly clear; God had drawn near to him.

Jacob had no idea that the night would bring what it did or that his very name would be changed forever; nor did John Taylor; nor have multitudes of other Christians to whom at one time or another the Lord drew near, suddenly, unexpectedly. Jacob was set upon by some stranger and forced to struggle with him through the night! He had expected nothing like this. If he had known some man was going to come and attack him he would have stayed on the south side of the river with the rest of his family. And so it so often is in Christian life and experience.

Some of you well remember how the Lord met you and turned your life in a direction you never imagined it would take, made you a Christian when you had no plan whatsoever to be any such thing! Others of us can remember how the Lord, in the middle of our Christian lives, visited us unexpectedly and showed himself to us; how our hearts suddenly were full of his glory and the joy of his salvation. It must be so when the Almighty God draws near that our tidy set of expectations is stood on its head! [Lloyd-Jones, *OT Evangelistic Sermons*, 22-23]

There is something common to all such experiences of encounter with God besides their being unexpected, powerful, and transforming. We see this too in Jacob’s encounter with the Lord at the Jabbok. We all tend to see our problems, our entire lives in fact, in this-worldly and temporal terms; all day, most days, that’s how we think about our lives. We judge our problems, our needs, our desires in those terms, things that have to do with this world and this particular moment. So did Jacob.

The crisis that faced Jacob at that moment was the approach of his brother with an armed militia. *That*, he thought, was his problem; that was the issue; that was what dominated his thoughts; that was the real threat to his life and happiness. He could see nothing but Esau; he was afraid of what he might do. But Esau was *not* the real issue. It had never been Esau. Jacob's evaluation of his situation was fundamentally mistaken. You and I live today in a world that, I suppose, works harder and thinks longer and talks more about solving its problems than the world has ever done before. But the problems are never resolved; indeed, they regularly worsen. It is always this Esau or that. If we could just fix this or that. If we could just get people to do this or that. If only I could acquire this or that. But the people of our world have misdiagnosed their problem; they are paying attention to the wrong things. We Christians can do this too. We worry about this or that and imagine that if only we could change solve that problem all would be well.

But, then, God drew near, and in a moment Jacob forgot all about Esau. Suddenly Esau mattered not at all. Jacob realized in a moment of stunning spiritual clarity that all that mattered, all that ever mattered, was that God was with him; *Elohim* was *with* him! That is the name or title used by God himself in v. 28 and by Jacob in v. 30. No matter what his circumstances, if only God were with him, if only he were with God, all was as it ought to be and all would be well. And so he clung to the Lord and refused to let him go; demanded, plead for the blessing of the Lord upon his head.

Writing about his coming to true and living faith in Christ when he was fifteen years of age, John Henry Newman, then a Protestant, later a Roman Catholic, said this:

“When I was fifteen a great change of thought took place in me. I fell under the influences of a definite Creed, and received into my intellect impressions of dogma, which, through God’s mercy, have never been effaced or obscured. Above and beyond the conversations and sermons of the excellent man, long dead, who was the human means of this beginning of divine faith in me, was the effect of the books which he put into my hands, all of the school of Calvin.... I was then, and I still am, more certain of my inward conversion than that I have hands and feet. My conversion was such that it made me rest in the thought of two and two only supreme and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator....”

I love that last line. Ever since I first read it, it stuck with me. “Two...luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator...” At the moment in which that is obvious to you, you are thinking perfectly as a human being. And it beautifully describes Jacob’s experience that night by the Jabbok. He began the night worried about his safety and the safety of his family at the approach of Esau. But in a moment of dazzling, electrifying intuition he discovered that there were two, and only two, luminously self-evident beings alive in his universe: he himself and the living God with whom he struggled. At that moment nothing was more obvious than that God was the only one who mattered and that God’s blessing was all that he needed or would ever need, no matter the circumstances of his life. Without God the greatest success and pleasure in the world was nothing but a dismal prelude to misery; with God the greatest danger and difficulty were nothing but occasions in which God’s power would be made perfect in his weakness. “If God be for us, who can be against us.” That is Christian theology, but only from time to time does that truth penetrate with its wonderful power and effect to the bottom of a Christian heart as it did that night by the Jabbok. And when it does, it changes everything!

What is true faith, after all, but just that state of mind in Jacob that caused him cling to the Lord and then to say, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” It is what a man says who realizes that he needs nothing but the blessing of God. Throw caution to the wind, for what else is there?

“Christianity is not for the well-meaning,” someone has wisely said, “it is for the desperate.” The other religions of the world may well be for the well-meaning, but the infinite-personal God who reveals himself to sinful men and women, *he* is for those who know themselves hopeless without him and who desire nothing beside him.

It was, after all, a daring thing for a sinful man, for Jacob, deceiver and cheat that he had been, to say that to God: “bless me or I will not let you go.” But it is a gracious and merciful God, a tender-hearted and compassionate heavenly Father, who allows himself to be vanquished by such a faith, like a father being pinned on the living room floor by his four year old son! What brashness on Jacob’s part: to demand a blessing from the Almighty; to threaten – the little worm – not to let the Lord go, as if he could prevent him leaving, limping as he was from one touch of the divine finger. But it is the faith that God approves and loves, the faith he condescends to reward and bless.

I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
 My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
 Swear by thyself, that at my death Thy Son
 Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
 And, having done that, Thou hast done,
 I fear no more.

Like Jacob, with his brash demand, John Donne in his famous poem asked God to swear an oath to him, as if God couldn’t be trusted or as if Donne himself had a right to such a promise from God. But the Bible itself teaches us to demand this of the Lord, who swears by himself again and again in Holy Scripture, precisely to encourage and to strengthen the faith that his people have in him. And why should we not be at our most urgent, our most determined, our most demanding when we are before God in prayer (and what is Jacob at the Jabbok wrestling with the Lord but one of the great pictures of prayer in the Bible). For if we have the Lord and his blessing, we have everything; everything for now and everything forever!

Years ago on a visit to Marion Paist in her home in Olympia, she showed me, written in a little notebook, a confession of faith written by her husband more than a year before he died in October of 1986. Only some of you will remember Jack Paist, who came to us years ago with his dear wife, after retiring to Panorama City in Olympia. Their coming and Mr. Paist’s being elected and serving as an elder here was one of the Lord’s great blessings to this church and a means by which he effected its renewal. What a superb man and elder he was! I owe more to Jack Paist than I can possibly say and perhaps no one else knows, as well as I do, how much this congregation owes to that faithful man, now so long dead.

In his reminiscences, Dr. Taylor recalls his mother saying many times to her children of their father who had died while some of them were still quite young: “Oh, how I wish you all could have known what a good man your father was – his love, his integrity, his faith: he was such a fine man!” Well, I wish all of you could have known Jack Paist and what a good and fine man he was. Here is what Mr. Paist wrote in that little notebook one day in March of 1985:

"It seems to me to be an appropriate time to set down in writing some thoughts of my God. The one whom I desire to honor and to serve, yet whom I fail so miserably day by day.

"My God is Jehovah the one who, out of nothing, brought into being everything that is. He is the one also who sustains and holds together the whole creation. He is a personal God who knows the mind and heart of everyone. He has absolute control over everything infinitely and eternally. He has all wisdom, all power and is perfect love. All praise is due to Him.

"I have committed my life to Him and pray for His grace to think, speak, act, and desire that He will be served, honored, and adored. I pray that I will love Jesus, God the Son, my Lord and my Savior more and more each day. My love seems so cold to me but maybe it is that I am not a warm and emotional person.

"I ask the Lord for grace to grow warmer and more loving during the next year that He may be glorified in me." Jack Paist [March 3, 1985]

There is it again. God and the believer, the two luminously self-evident persons in the universe – the knowledge of the Lord and his salvation, my dependence upon him, and the greatness of his salvation: these are the bottom facts of life, the facts that give meaning to every other fact of life. Mr. Paist had a wife to love and adult children; he had an interest in this church; he had many friends. But if God were with him and he was with God, all of that would be as it ought to be. "I will not let you go unless you bless me." "Lord, to whom else shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." Whenever someone sees the face of God, as Jacob did at Peniel, as the Lord's disciples did in the face of Christ, whenever anyone encounters God and God's presence as Jack Paist did, it is always the same: "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

In the experience of life, it is often not an easy thing to come to this point, this determination before God, this clearest possible sight of what is truly important. Think of all that went into making it such a moment and such an experience of crystal clarity for Jacob. All his old sins; years of struggle resulting from his sin; all that God had done for him and promised to him; and all the danger of his life brought him to this moment by the Jabbok. And then it took Jacob an entire night of wrestling – there was a long struggle before the breakthrough, before it became clear to him what all of this meant. How like our lives; how like every Christian life. How hard it is to reach that point when only God and yourself are present and when finally the wonderful, the mesmerizing supremacy of God himself takes possession of your soul. No wonder such experiences are as rare as they are, so much having to go into creating them! That struggle not to let God go will take more out of you than anything else you ever do in the world. It will exhaust you and leave you limping. But if it gains you the blessing of the Lord himself all the other effort of your life will seem to you a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Is it possible that there is someone in this congregation today who, having heard these things, does not want to say with Jacob, "I will not let you go until I have your blessing." Are there not many here who, beset with fears, want nothing so much as God himself to reveal himself? Say it yourself and say it again *and again* until the Lord comes to you in the night.

In vain thou strugglest to get free,
I never will unloose my hold;
Art thou the man that died for me?
The secret of thy love unfold.
Wrestling, I will not let thee go,
Till I thy name, thy nature know.
(Charles Wesley)