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# Session 2 - Jacob

Genesis 32:22-32:32

## Brief Notes

### Introduction

As with Abraham's prayer in Genesis 18, this passage is hardly descriptive of the way we engage with God in prayer, even though Paul can speak of Epaphras "wrestling in prayer" (Col.4:12). There is much that is strange and mysterious here, yet also deeply instructive.

It helps to have an understanding of the context, in terms of the story of Jacob thus far, and the study might well begin with helping people get a grasp what has happened prior to this. Notably, God's sovereign decision, made known whilst Rebekah was still pregnant, to channel his blessing to (and so ultimately through) the younger of the twins. The story of Jacob's life thus far though has been one of seeking to secure God's blessing by his own devious schemes. This event was to prove transformative - as the new name he is given bears witness.

The immediate context is that he is returning to Canaan, after a twenty years, and is therefore having to face up to the prospect of meeting again his brother, whom he had deceived and defrauded and who had vowed to kill him. The chapter opens with a vision of angels, echoing his vision on leaving the promised land, when God had again promised his blessing and protection. But for all the reassurance, Jacob is scared, making more desperate schemes. Strikingly though, he also prays (32:9-12), which sets the scene for his encounter with God by the River Jabbok

## **Verses 22-24**

Jacob wants to be alone to prepare himself for what the next day will bring, and it seems a fair assumption that he wants to be alone to pray. But he is not alone: "a man wrestled with him till daybreak". It will become clear that the "man" is God himself, who takes the initiative in assaulting him. But this wrestling match is in many ways symbolic of his entire life - struggling always to obtain blessing by his own efforts (and oftendeceit). Mostly he has strived against men - his father, his brother, his uncle - whilst avoiding God. Now he is forced to deal with God.

## **Verses 25, 26**

The man could not overpower Jacob only in the sense that Jacob would not give up the fight, for a touch to the hip was enough to cripple him. That display of superhuman power, and the desire to avoid being seen (v.26 - cf v.30, Ex.33:20) must have suggested to Jacob that it was no mere man he was fighting against, but God. Hence he asks for a blessing.

It would seem not only has he begun to guess who his opponent is, but he also has stopped imagining he can win this fight - with a dislocated hip he could fight no more - but instead of wrestling now he clings ("I will not let you go"). He is not striving to extract a blessing by his own might, but in his weakness and utter helplessness holding on for grace.

## **Verses 27-30**

God of course knew Jacob's name, but because a name would very often reveal or reflect a person's character, God was essentially forcing a confession from Jacob. His name literally meant "he grasps the heel" (cf.25:26) but figuratively it had the sense of "deceiver", a name Jacob had lived up to all his life.

"Jacob" bore witness to his guilt (which he had to own up to); "Israel" bears witness to the promise and grace of God., who gives a new name, a new nature, a new start. His victory (in overcoming) was actually his defeat, when at last in helpless dependency, he looked for mercy and grace.

## **Verses 31,32**

The importance of this new name in the Bible testifies to the importance of this episode and the lessons learnt. Jacob would never be allowed to forget it - the limp would be a constant reminder; and the Israelites would remember every time they tucked into their roast leg of lamb.

Chiefly the lessons here are about grace - clinging not wrestling, the hour of weakness very often being the hour of grace, etc. But there are perhaps lessons too about prayer. Epaphras is

testimony to the fact that we should learn to wrestle with God in prayer, applying ourselves strenuously - but not trying to overcome the resistance of a reluctant God, but rather recognising our utter weakness and holding on in persistent prayer to know God's blessing.

## Some possible questions

- There's one fairly big clue in the passage that this event was of great significance to God's People in the Old Testament. What is it?
- What do we know about Jacob's life thus far?
- The first half of ch.32 talks of the preparations Jacob has been making to meet with his brother Esau. Why would this reunion have been of such concern to him? Why do you think Jacob wanted this time alone? (vv.22-24)
- In what sense could the "man" not overpower Jacob?
- How does Jacob begin to understand who his combatant is?
- With a dislocated hip Jacob was well and truly defeated, so how can God say he had "overcome" (v.28)?
- Why does God ask him his name? (
- What is the significance of a new name?
- God's blessing is a very important theme in Genesis. (How so?) How had Jacob sought God's blessing up to this point? What has changed?
- The new name, the limp, the reminder of this episode every Sunday lunch all bear witness to the importance of this episode. What are the lessons that we should learn?
- How was God's assault on Jacob a kindness? Can we recognise God dealing similarly with us?
- Are there lessons for our prayer lives? In what ways do you find prayer to be a struggle? To what extent do you think prayer is supposed to be a struggle?

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