

## **What Is Your Name? *I Have Met God***

### **Genesis 32:22-32**

Today's message can be boiled down to this: *Life changes when you have a personal encounter with God.*

There are few things more important for you today than to come to grips with whether you have met God genuinely and personally – and whether meeting him continues to shape your life. Jesus came to introduce all who place faith in him to God. Jesus makes us alive to our Creator and opens up a life-transforming relationship to God as your Father. Are you experiencing that?

To guide us this morning, we come to the well-known story of Jacob's encounter with God. Of course, Jacob was quite a scoundrel. Have you noticed that? So, let me tell you that the way the Bible tells the stories about its main characters is different from the way other religions do it. Usually the purpose of stories in world religions is to tell us of their characters' virtues so that we might emulate them. But, in many Bible stories, we see no one living an exemplary life. The Bible does not hide the flaws of its main characters.

So, make careful note of this: The intent of the Bible is not to call you to emulate the people in the narratives but to show you how imperfect people meet God and – and begin to find a new life through faith in him. The stories help us see ourselves and our need of grace and salvation. The story of Jacob is probably the most vivid example of this. He almost never did what was right. But, God never gave up on him. Today, we see the night when Jacob's life was turned around. It happened as it always does, i.e., when Jacob met God personally.

Setting of the Encounter: A Time of Trouble

20 years earlier, Jacob had swindled his brother Esau out of the family inheritance. When Esau had found out, he vowed to kill Jacob. So, 20 years before the fate-filled night we consider today, Jacob had fled for his life to his mother's brother Laban. Since then, he had gotten married and become wealthy. But, he had also run into all sort of problems with Laban and this part of the family too. So, Jacob decided to head back home – taking with him a lot of cattle, servants and family members. You can read about this in Gen 30-32.

As Jacob and his entourage get closer to home, he began to send messengers to Esau to see if he was still angry after all those years. The only response he got was that Esau and an army of 400 men were only a day away. So, Jacob did what he always did, i.e., turned to scheming and planning. He wondered what he might do to minimize the damage. <http://home.insightbb.com/~biblestudy/GenesisPhotos17.htm>

He decided to divide his caravan into two groups and send them across to the west side of the river to locate at two widely separated places. But he stayed on the east side of the river so that if Esau arrived and wiped out one group, Jacob would join the other and save, at least, have of his wealth and, with it, could start a new life. What a scoundrel! He was willing to have ½ of his entourage killed in order to save his own neck!

But, to add to that plan, he decided he might appease Esau with extravagant gifts. He sent 220 goats – bleating and uncontrollably wandering all over – with instructions to tell Esau they are a gift from his brother to make up for what he had done. Then, later, he sent 220 sheep with messengers giving the same message. And then he sent yet another group with camels – followed by cows and then bulls and then donkeys. He sent these extravagant gifts in waves with the hope that they would take away Esau’s anger. On this day before meeting Esau, Jacob he was doing everything he could think of to solve his mess.

So, as we come to our passage, it’s almost nightfall. Jacob sends everyone away -- and he’s alone. It’s the night before the battle. It’s so much like the musical, *Les Misérables*, and the song, “One Day More”:

*“One night more -- Another night and then, my destiny -- This never-ending road to family.*

*This brother surely knows my crime – He will not spare my life this time. One night more...”*

Can you put yourself in his shoes that night? Can you relate to Jacob at all? Have you ever found yourself in a mess – and, although you might blame others, you know deep down that you have done things to get you where you are. You try to figure out how to get this behind you. You might even promise God that if you get out of this mess, you will

never do wrong things again. That's where Jacob was – alone and in the dark of night.

Part 1: Our Encounter with God: *“I saw God face to face (32:30).”*

As Jacob was sitting in the dark – thinking, strategizing and maybe even praying – a man rushed in, grabbed him and began a ferocious battle. Who was this man? I imagine Jacob must have thought it was either Esau or one of Esau's strongest warriors. Of course, Jacob was an incredibly strong man. He had been able to lift a stone that it usually took three men to hoist. He was used to winning battles in his own strength. But, he could not defeat this man. Who was the man? Hosea 12:4 says it was an angel. Whether angel or God in flesh, Jacob knew that, without question, this fighter was the one through whom God was meeting him personally. And, this meeting turned his entire life around. Again -- *Life changes when you have a personal encounter with God.*

There are several things about Jacob's meeting that seem to me to be true of every encounter like this:

1. It is always personal -- *Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak (32:34).*

Let's remember that Jacob's grandfather Abraham in Gen 12 and grandmother Sarah in Gen 18 had met God personally. Jacob's father Isaac and mother Rebekah had met God personally. It's true that Jacob had once had an unforgettable dream at a place he called Bethel. Jacob had even seen angels in 32:1 and tried praying in 32:9-12 – though, as I read his prayer, it is more of an attempt to get God to further his own schemes than to surrender his life in faith to God. It's clear that Jacob was still in control of his own life. He was still the grabber, schemer, deceiver that he had always been. He needed a personal encounter with God in which he would say personally, “Without you, O Lord, I can never find blessing, i.e., I can never really live.”

I still remember my first personal encounter with God. It was in Beckley, WV at a little Calloway Heights Community Church. [http://www.callowayheightsbaptist.com/About\\_Us/](http://www.callowayheightsbaptist.com/About_Us/)

Pastor Hayward Lough was preaching. A few months before, first my Dad and then my Mom, had met God through faith in Jesus. But, that Sunday, as the preacher was preaching (and I was probably squirming

as a 6-year-old), I suddenly felt as I was the only one in church. I was painfully aware of a number of Jacob-like things in my life: deception and scheming, at a first-grade level -- but deception and scheming nonetheless. I knew I needed forgiveness. I surrendered by faith to Jesus and God entered my life. It was real. It began the journey that I'm still on.

I've had a number of those kinds of encounters with God over the years. More often than not, they have happened in times of silence and solitude, just as this one happened in Jacob's life. But, the meetings have always been personal and required from me a conscious act of faith, of re-commitment to trust the Lord.

At this point, I think an ancient Bible passage like this one becomes very relevant to those of us who have gone to church much of our lives. We don't know God simply because our parents do. You and I need to have our own personal time of entrusting our lives to the Lord. Have you? As John wrote, "*No one has seen God at any time, except God the one and only Son – He makes God known (Jn 1:18).*" Perhaps God is breaking into your life right now and saying, "Today is your day of salvation." If so, turn to him – turn your sins over to him and entrust your life to him by trusting Jesus. An encounter with God is always individual and personal.

2. It almost always happens in times of weakness – *The man touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man (32:25).*

As he sat alone that night waiting for the meeting with Esau, Jacob had always thought he could fix things on his own. Even though he had always been a man who was trying to find something to fill his inner being, he had also rarely lost a battle of intellectual planning or physical fighting. But then, seemingly out of nowhere, a man assaulted him who has greater strength than Jacob had ever faced. Jacob still thought he could win until, with the simple touch of the man's finger, Jacob was crippled. Anyone who could do that could do anything.

It seems to me that this first acknowledgement of weakness was the beginning of Jacob's transformation. It happened at a point of pain, of need and vulnerability. This is why those who have always been successful find it hard to come to faith. As Jesus said to the disciples, "*It*

*is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich and successful to enter the kingdom of God (Mk 10:25)."*

I confess to you that most of my most profound experiences with God have come at times of weakness, uncertainty, or failure. As I have thought about my times of encountering God, I've remembered my anger and doubts at the death of my daughter, my many days in hospital over a three-year period because of pancreas disorders, and my times of struggling with failure. In his book *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis wrote, "*God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains.*"

If right now you feel like you are in the dark as Jacob was; if you feel the Lord has touched your life with pain as Jacob did; then perhaps God is telling you to turn to him and to trust him as you never have before.

3. It happens when God becomes the center of life -- *a man "jacobed" with him till daybreak (32:24).*

I'm quite sure that, if you had asked Jacob that night what the biggest problem in his life was, he would have said it was Esau. It had always been Esau: In the womb as the two fought. In his standing as the ignored 2<sup>nd</sup> child in his father's eyes. In his fleeing from his home because Esau wanted to kill him. And, now, as he sat in the darkness, he was sure that his main fight was going to be with Esau. If he had been in a 21<sup>st</sup> C counseling room, he would have said, "My inability to find any kind of blessing in my life has always been Esau. I've been wrestling with him all my life." Jacob's whole focus was on Esau.

Then, this man came and, the Hebrew literally says in v. 25, "Jacobed" with him. This man grabbed him. Wrestled with him. Tricked him, toyed with him and then, with a touch, took away his strength.

Essentially, what God was saying was this, "Jacob, the one you have been fighting with your whole life has not been Esau. Your fight has been with me! You thought that tomorrow you would be meeting the one you had been wrestling with all your life. No, your real meeting is now. I'm the one you have to be right with. You've been trying to resist me your whole life. I promised to bless you and make you a blessing – but you decided that you have to find that blessing your own way – through trickery and plotting. The problem beneath all your problems is that you've been trying to fight me out of your life. You've wanted to be

your own Savior and Lord. Until you understand that, you will never really live.

This is what is at the heart of genuine relationship with God. Jacob had been having interactions with God up to this time – but only as a means to an end. If God was a way to get him what he thought he really had to have, then, he'd be willing to say that he believed in God. But, in this struggle, he learned that what he really needed to experience blessing was not anything that God might give. No, he needed God. So, at last, he holds on to God and God alone. Jacob thereby changes from a man who knows something about God – to knowing God. In spite of the weakness, the pain, the danger he held on saying, "I will not let you go until YOU bless me." If I don't have you – your blessing, then I don't have anything."

## Part 2: God's Encounter with Us

We dare not leave this part of God's Word without pausing to see that it says some remarkable things about God himself. I want you to make note of these things – and I want to ask you to ask honestly whether you have discovered them to be true. I want to tell you three things about God that have become very precious to me over my many years of walking with him.

1. God alone blesses -- *Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me (32:26)."*

This is our 6<sup>th</sup> week of learning from the life of Jacob and what we've seen each week was that what Jacob most wanted was blessing. All his life he had been striving for blessing. He thought he could find it if he grabbed the 1<sup>st</sup> son's blessing away from Esau. He probably grew up not being convinced of his own value – of the significance of his life. He was the child who felt he had to get the blessing himself. He was always trying to fill some kind of vacuum inside. But, that vacuum could not be filled by grabbing Esau's birthright, or by marrying the beautiful Rachel or by becoming rich. But, that night he learned it at Peniel he learned life's most important lesson – He was made for God. He learned that God knew him personally and wanted to bless him.

And, I love this part of the story, i.e., After Jacob got a new name, he asked what the man's name was. The man did not answer. It wasn't the time for him to tell Jacob because, in their culture, to know a name was

to gain some control over the person. No, Jacob would still have to learn to let God be in control. But, what God did was bless him. In doing so, he was saying, “I am the one who blesses you.” We are made for God. No one and nothing else can bless us in this way. To fill your innermost longing, you need to give your life to God.

2. God alone can change our lives – *Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel (32:28).*

Do you see that there are bad patterns in Jacob’s life that have been there for years? His grabbing and deceiving have been set and reinforced by years of grabbing and deceiving.

I know that we sometimes give up hope of things in our lives being different. We give up hope that our spouses could ever change – or that our children could ever change. And, let’s face it, we who are human do not change easily. And, change does not happen in a moment. But, if we give up hope that we can change, we give up the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Zacchaeus changed from a greedy man to a generous man. Paul changed from a hater of Christians to a lover of all people. *Life changes when you have a personal encounter with God.*

Jacob would have a new name – no longer grabber (Jacob) but one who overcomes with God (Israel). He would have to own up to the fact that he was a “Jacob” – and we have to own up to who and what we are too. But, God is God and God can change things. Jacob would also have a new limp. He might have beaten Esau without the limp – but, with that limp, he would have no hope. But, he was no longer Jacob alone. The days of him empty and losing in spite of using all his craft and power are over. The days of success through weakness have begun.

We will think about this more next week. But, now, I simply want you to grab hold of the hope that God can and does change lives – grab hold of him by faith and do not let go.

3. God alone is willing to empty himself and enter into our weakness - *- When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched (32:34).*

4. V. 34 is the most baffling part of the story, isn’t it? This man could render Jacob helpless by a touch of his finger but is, at the same time, in a position in which he says he cannot overpower him. How are we to

understand that? I'll give you both an imperfect and a perfect illustration of how to grasp it:

The Imperfect Illustration – When my children, Heather and Brandon, were little, I would come home from work and they would pile on me in a mock battle. I would get on my back and they would jump on me and wrestle with me. But, I was sure to put myself in a position in which I couldn't step on them or roll on them. The stronger they got, the harder it was. But, I made sure I never put my full weight on them. It was a real wrestling match – but one in which I made sure they were not hurt – but, instead, had joy. I think that, what God did, was something like that. He had the power to disable Jacob with a touch but God's intent was always to bless – never to destroy.

The Perfect Illustration – When we see Jesus crucified, we see the one through whom all things were created willingly surrendering to death on a cross. Why did he do it? The Apostle Paul helps us to understand what God did for Jacob and what Jesus did for us when he said, *Jesus, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness... He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death — even death on a cross (Phil 2:6-8)!*

This is the kind of God we worship. One who is willing to empty himself and enter into the life of Jacob. He is one who is willing to enter into our lives, carry the punishment for our sins, bless us, and give us a new name – a new script for our lives. *The sun rose above Jacob... (32:31)*. It was a new day. A new life.

Jacob remembered this encounter by calling the place Peniel – the place he met God. We remember it by going to the communion table...