

GOD OF JACOB

Genesis 32:22–31

The same night [Jacob] got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Over the last few Sundays in the Old Testament readings we have been tracing the story of Jacob. About 2000 years before Christ, that's 4000 years ago. Jacob, son of Isaac and Rebekah, grandson of Abraham and Sarah the founding mothers and fathers of God's nation of Israel. From Jacob's twelve sons came the twelve tribes of Israel. So a significant figure. We're going to trace God's dealings with Jacob, which reach their climax in today's reading.

It started before Jacob was born:

Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived (Gen. 25:21).

So Jacob was born as an answer to prayer. It turned out Rebekah was pregnant with twins, and had a very uncomfortable pregnancy:

The children struggled together within her; and she said, 'If it is to be this way, why do I live?' So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger' (Gen. 25:22–23).

This tells us something about how much our characters can be formed even in the womb—these two twin brothers were fighting with each other even before they came out. This also tells us that God had already made a decision regarding the boys. It was God's own free decision, and it was not according to the way we normally do things. In human societies, the oldest child usually becomes the chief inheritor and head of the family, but in this case God said, 'the elder shall serve the younger'. Esau was going to be the firstborn, and Jacob the second, but Jacob would be the one to whom God would give the chief inheritance. Particularly the covenant promises made to their parents and grandparents, through Isaac and his father Abraham. Neither our character, nor where we come in the family has anything to do with this choice of God. God makes His choice of love for us regardless of our character and actions.

That is good news for us. Paul the apostle tells us in Ephesians 1 that God 'chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love' and 'destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ' (Eph. 1:4–6). It's for us to live in that marvellous mystery of God' choosing of us.

In many ways, Jacob himself was a nasty piece of work:

When [Rebekah's] time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out,

with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob [that is *he takes by the heel* or *he supplants*] (Gen. 25:24–26).

That was the way Jacob was going to operate. He was a schemer, and a go-getter, with his eye on the main chance. He would take any opportunity to advance himself, no matter at what cost to others. After the twin brothers grew up, Esau came in from hunting one day starving hungry, and Jacob was at home cooking a stew, and Esau asked Jacob for some of his stew, and Jacob refused to give it to him until Esau had sold him his birthright inheritance as the eldest. So here is Jacob, quite unfeeling in the face of his brother's extremity, intent on getting what he wants for himself: the privileges that rightly belong to Esau as the firstborn. OK—God will give Jacob what God had promised, but here is Jacob setting about getting it for himself, regardless of God or anyone else. But at least Jacob, despite his deficient character, and however he went about it, still somehow had a heart to want what God wanted for him, and to want it desperately.¹ This was in contrast to Esau, who was prepared just to let go what he had, for his own immediate satisfaction. Later Jacob connived with his mother Rebekah by pretending to be Esau, to steal the firstborn's blessing from his dying father Isaac. So again Esau missed out. This made Esau want to kill Jacob, and Jacob had to leave home in a hurry, for a long time.

So Jacob has the birthright and the blessing. But he still has not come to where God wants him to be. So God meets Jacob on the way, with a wonderful vision of a ladder reaching to heaven, with angels going up and down on it, and God right there, and God reiterates the covenant-promise that God had made to Jacob's grandfather Abraham, and his father Isaac—God now makes that same promise directly to Jacob. How does Jacob respond? First of all, he realises that more has been going on than he has been aware of:

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it! And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven' (Gen. 28:16–17).

Even so, Jacob is still his old self, still with an eye on what's in it for him; he goes on to almost bargain with God—if you do this, this, and this for me, then you can be my God, and I'll do this for you—while still holding God at arm's length.

Then last Sunday we heard about what happened after Jacob arrived at his uncle Laban's place. Here Jacob, the conniving, manipulating deceiver, meets his match in Laban. Laban, I think, is God's retribution on Jacob for the way he has gone about things up to now. They deserve each other. We heard how Laban deceived Jacob on his wedding night by giving him the older daughter Leah as his wife after Jacob had worked for Laban seven years for the younger daughter Rachel, whom he loved. So then Jacob had to work another seven years for Rachel. Later there is the squabbling between Jacob and Laban over the ownership of the flocks, and Jacob's claim to his wives that 'your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times' (Gen. 31:7). On one occasion Jacob even resorts to magic and the occult to pursue his own ends, to increase his own flock at Laban's expense. That's manipulation at its worst, and darkest.

The amazing thing is that, through all this, God keeps to His purpose and continues to bless Jacob. Even with the business of the flock, Jacob later admitted that God had shown him in a dream what was really happening there. It wasn't all the trouble he had gone to with attempts at magic manipulation—God Himself had been making the flock increase, to redress the injustices that Laban had done to Jacob (see Gen. 31:10–13). However, despite the fact that Jacob knew that God was looking after him—a fact he was very willing to use for his own advantage in his dealings with Laban—Jacob still was holding God at arm's length. I think he rather thought of

¹ See further: 'Thy Nature and Thy Name Is Love' in Geoffrey Bingham, *The Vandal*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1990, pp. 35–64.

God as another negotiating partner that he could get something out of—much as he had done at Bethel. Perhaps Jacob still had no other way in his own mind of thinking about it, that you can only get from life what you can scheme to get out of it. We may be the same.

It's interesting: although Jacob had said at Bethel that, if God did this, this, and this, 'then the LORD will be my God' (Gen. 28:20–21), yet right through this period, Jacob did not acknowledge that relationship with God as his own. In all these chapters, Jacob always refers to God as 'the LORD' (Gen. 30:27), or just as 'God' (31:7, 9), or 'the God of my father' (31:5, 42), or 'the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac' (31:42), or even 'the God of Abraham and the God of [Jacob's great uncle] Nahor' (31:53)! But never does he refer to the Lord as his own God, as 'the God of Jacob'.

How often do we seek to evade direct and personal relationship with God by thinking of God as the God of our forbears—of our tribe and our culture—and not the God of *us* directly?

All of that was about to change. And we heard about how in today's reading. The time was come when the wily and resourceful Jacob was to find that in truth he had nothing by which he could secure himself, in a situation that was out of his hands, over which he had no control. Does that feel familiar? We all need to come to that point sooner or later in life, for it is at that point often that we truly meet God.

The situation is that Jacob is returning to the land where his brother Esau lives. Last time Jacob had seen Esau, Esau had wanted to kill him. Jacob's fears were not calmed by the news that came back to him:

We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him (Gen. 32:6).

That was not good odds, and required desperate measures:

Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies, thinking, 'If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape' (Gen. 32:7).

Then Jacob prayed, now perhaps for the first time really from the heart:

O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac . . .

—still the only way he knows to address God, but he does go on to say this:

O LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,' I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies.

That is the first time we have heard Jacob praying in that way: no bargaining, no tit for tat, just saying it as it is, for a change. Then he prays, quite straightforwardly:

Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. Yet you have said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number' (Gen. 32:9–12).

There. At last, holding on to nothing but the promise and the faithfulness of God.

Jacob still made a point of sending droves of goats, then sheep, then camels, then cows and then donkeys on ahead as presents for Esau to soften him up:

For he thought, 'I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me' (Gen. 32:20).

He is still coming from the mind-set that has a desperate need to be accepted, and still hopes he can trade his way into that position. The droves of animals actually made no difference—Esau, when he came across them, didn't even know what they were for (see Gen. 33:8-9)! God had already softened him up (see Gen. 33:4).

But Jacob didn't know that yet, and God still had something to do to him:

So the present passed on ahead of him; and he himself spent that night in the camp. The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak (Gen. 32:21-24).

We're going to see that this was more than just a man. It was a heavenly being. It was God Himself. That is what Jacob had been doing all along, wasn't it. Wrestling with God, to try to get out of God what Jacob wanted, but in a way that battled against God. Something needed to happen:

When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him (Gen. 32:25).

The *RSV* says the man 'touched' him on the hip. That was enough. Something broke in Jacob that night, and it was the making of him. Now Jacob's wrestling was no longer *against* God, but was a wrestling *with* God for all that God desired for him. Jacob's real God-given heart for the covenant blessing of God now comes through:

Then [the man] said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' So he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed' (Gen. 32:26-28).

'Israel' can mean one of two things: 'the one who strives with God', which is what Jacob had been doing, or 'God strives', in other words, when we know God's striving on our behalf and strive with God for that. In those two meanings is encapsulated the whole story of Jacob, and the whole history of the nation of Israel. And, perhaps, our own story as well.

There is now more that Jacob wants to know, whether he can know it fully or not:

Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him (Gen. 32:29).

God is not going to be at Jacob's disposal. Jacob can never use God's name in any attempt to manipulate God. But Jacob now knows God's blessing. And Jacob then knew who he had really been with:

Jacob called the place Peniel [that is, *the face of God*], saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved' (Gen. 32:30).

That is what happens to us when we put our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, who hung on the cross to take away sin—Jacob's and ours included—to bring us to God. We see God, face to face, and we are preserved in life. Be there now.

I love this next picture:

The sun rose upon [Jacob] as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip (Gen. 32:31).

It often takes something like that, doesn't it? Something that will be with us for the rest of our lives: a gladsome little gift from God, as a constant reminder.

So Jacob now, at last, knew utter security in his relationship with the faithful Creator. There was something else that went with that. Remember the present that Jacob had sent on ahead to appease Esau? As I said, Esau didn't know what it was for. Because when Jacob came towards Esau:

Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept (Gen. 33:4).

The whole thing had changed. And when Jacob said that the present had been to obtain Esau's favour, Esau said:

'I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.' Jacob said, 'No, please; if I find favour with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favour. Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want.' So he urged him, and he took it (Gen. 33:9–11).

Very different from the grasping kind of Jacob that we saw earlier, isn't it? But what does Jacob say to his brother Esau? Jacob has just seen God face to face. And now, he says that seeing his brother Esau is no different from that: 'for truly to see *your* face is like seeing the face of God!' A loving relationship with God brings with it a loving relationship, of the same order, with our brother or sister, or with whoever is next to us at any point of time. And that is just what Jesus and his apostles said: Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbour as yourself (see Matt. 22:44–40; John 13:34; Rom. 13:8; 1 Pet. 1:22; 1 John 4:10–11).

The telling thing comes at the end of Genesis 33:

Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, on his way from Paddan-aram; and he camped before the city. And from the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, he bought for one hundred pieces of money the plot of land on which he had pitched his tent. There he erected an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel (Gen. 33:18–20).

The name Jacob gives to the altar is a very significant one. 'El-Elohe-Israel' means 'God, the God of Israel'. Jacob here is rejoicing in his new God-given name. And for the first time he is saying that God is not just the God of his fathers Abraham and Isaac but also, at last, the God too of Jacob: 'God, the God of *Israel*'! Are we happy to rejoice with him in God as the God of *us*?

When I was working with the New Creation Teaching Ministry I used to drive every day up Ackland Hill Road. And near the top of the hill opposite is a stand of eucalypt trees. Our eucalypt trees here do not grow straight up like the mighty Mountain Ash in Victoria, or the Tasmanian Blue Gum. They are much more angular—that's part of their attraction. I wrote this little poem about them, and I called it '**WRESTLING JACOB**':

These
gum trees
don't know about
straight lines.

In
every
which
way
they
grapple for
the sky!

I think the Lord finds
the overall effect

pleasing.

Martin Bleby
27th January 1998