



Wrestled

God changes His people when they encounter Him.

GENESIS 32:22-32

Life is mostly routine, but some moments change one's life forever. These may include the day you started your first full-time job, the day you retire, when you meet the love of your life and marry that special person, and the day your child is born. These are life-changing moments. More significantly, when people encounter God, their lives are changed.

Name some of your life-changing moments. Why are people often resistant to change?

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

GENESIS 32:1–33:20

Jacob's issues with Laban were resolved and behind him. After being away from his home for at least twenty years (Gen. 31:38), his hopes of returning to the Canaan, the land God had promised him, were before him. Still, Jacob had one significant issue that needed resolving: his relationship with his brother Esau. Jacob had taken Esau's birthright and blessing from their father Isaac, and the last memory he had of Esau was that his brother was planning to kill him. It was for this reason Jacob fled hundreds of miles from his home in Canaan and went to be with his relatives in Haran.

If Jacob was ever going to have peace, then there needed to be reconciliation between him and his brother Esau. As he arrived at his homeland, God’s angels met him at Mahanaim, “God’s camp” (32:1-2). This was a sign that God was still with Jacob, and that Jacob could trust the promises God made to him at Bethel, “the house of God,” to protect him and bless him going forward (28:12-15). Jacob could know God’s presence was with him.

With this understanding, Jacob sent his messengers to Esau in Seir, which is an ancient name for Edom. They returned with an ominous report. Esau was coming with four hundred men to meet Jacob. Jacob was understandably afraid, so he resorted to a two-pronged strategy: humility and kindness to Esau and prayer.

First, Jacob divided his people and herds into two camps thinking that if Esau attacked one of them the other might have a chance to escape. Second, Jacob prayed to God. He based his prayer on God’s covenant with Abraham and Isaac, and how God had promised to uphold that covenant with him also. Jacob recognized the covenant kindness and faithfulness God had shown him. Based on these things, Jacob humbly asked the Lord to rescue him from Esau (32:1-12).

That night, Jacob encountered the Lord (32:24-30). What’s more, God answered Jacob’s prayer regarding his brother. The two were reconciled to one another (33:1-20).

Read Genesis 32:22-32. What do these verses reveal about how God changes people when they encounter Him?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

ALONE (GEN. 32:22-24)

²² During the night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two slave women, and his eleven sons, and crossed the ford of Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, along with all his possessions. ²⁴ Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

VERSES 22-23

After dividing everyone and everything with him into two groups—hoping that at least one group would escape if Esau attacked—Jacob prayed for God to rescue him from Esau (32:9-12). Jacob also came up with the idea of preparing bountiful gifts for his servants to present to Esau, one wave of gifts after another with some distance between each wave. Jacob hoped these waves of spaced-out gifts would have such an effect on Esau that they would give him time to reconsider and cause his heart to soften.

During the night, Jacob got up and took his family and the remainder of his possessions to *the ford of Jabbok*. Instead of entering into his homeland of Canaan, Jacob had taken the most direct route south toward Seir to meet his brother. He was afraid of Esau but was not going to hide from him. When Jacob and those with him reached the ford of the Jabbok, he sent them all across along with all of his possessions, but he stayed behind.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Jabbok is a tributary of the Jordan River, connecting to the Jordan from the east approximately fifteen miles north of the Dead Sea. The term Jabbok means “flowing.” Today the river is called Nahr ez-Zerqa.

The text provides no reasons for Jacob’s decision to take his family across the river at night or for his decision to stay on the other side. The river would have been easier to cross during the day, unless Jacob thought Esau might attack them while they were crossing, making it nearly impossible to escape. Perhaps he was too anxious to sleep, and this helped him take his mind off of his inevitable meeting with his brother. He may have been trying to think of anything he might have missed or anything else he could do to pacify Esau or protect his family. Whatever he was thinking, Jacob was about to have a life-changing encounter with God.

VERSE 24

Sending his family across the stream, Jacob was *left alone*. God would use what happens here not only to bring about a resolution in Jacob's situation with Esau, but it would bring about a resolution to Jacob's life. Up to this point, his life had been characterized as a struggle with both people and God.

In the night, Jacob was grabbed by what appeared to be *a man*, and Jacob *wrestled* with the man *until daybreak*. The language indicates this was no dream. Jacob actually *wrestled* with someone. The fact that this struggle lasted until dawn conveys the determination of both combatants. In Hebrew, there is a play on the words, *Jacob*, *Jabbok*, and *wrestle*. All three words have similar sounds. In order for "Jacob" to cross the "Jabbok" and enter into the promised land, he must "wrestle" with this man.

The ambiguity of the word *man* heightens the mystery of the account. The wording helps the reader empathize with the uncertainty and anxiety Jacob must have experienced. All Jacob knew was that a man had grabbed hold of him in the darkness of night. No other details are given about this man here. Later on, the prophet Hosea said that Jacob "strove with God" (Hos. 12:3). Like He did with Abraham when He revealed the timing of Isaac's birth, God appeared to Jacob as "a man" (Gen. 18:1-16). When this encounter was over, Jacob realized that the man was God (32:30). All this said, it was God who initiated this encounter, not Jacob.

How can time alone with God calm our anxieties and give us clarity?

NEW NAME (GEN. 32:25-29)

²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." ²⁷ And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." ²⁹ 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.

VERSE 25

Jacob is characterized as one who had exceptional physical strength throughout his life. When he was born, he was grasping the heel of his twin brother Esau (25:26). When he first met Rachel, he demonstrated his strength by rolling the stone from the mouth of the well to water her father Laban's sheep (29:10). Jacob had spent at least twenty years working under difficult physical conditions for Laban (31:41). It is not surprising, therefore, that he was able to hold his own against the mysterious assailant—that is, until his opponent *touched his hip socket* with a blow strong enough to dislocate his hip. This gave Jacob's opponent an advantage in the struggle. The one who had spent a lifetime of getting an advantage over others was now the one at a disadvantage.

VERSE 26

Even with his disadvantage, Jacob would not let go. He could not win, but he certainly was not about to lose. His assailant told Jacob to let him go because the day was breaking. It was at this point that Jacob began realizing the real nature of the man with whom he had been struggling. Therefore, Jacob declared to his opponent that he would not let him go unless He blessed him.

Jacob had cheated his brother and secured for himself a blessing from his father, Isaac, by duplicity. Now, he could receive God's blessing only by clinging to Him. Afraid and desperate, Jacob asked for that which he could not provide for himself. The prophet Hosea indicated that Jacob "wept and sought his favor" (Hos. 12:4). At his last encounter with Laban, Jacob had referred to God as "the Fear" of Isaac, meaning that Isaac worshiped and trusted in the Lord alone (Gen. 31:53). Jacob needed to recognize he did not need to fear Esau, or anyone else for that matter. Just like his father before him, the only one Jacob needed to fear was God.

VERSE 27

The man's question brings everything to focus: ***What is your name?*** Jacob's name literally meant "one who supplants" or "grabs the heel." It became associated with the meaning "supplanter"—someone who seizes, circumvents, usurps, assails, or overreaches—to accentuate the kind of man Jacob had been. Esau made this clear when he said "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has cheated me these two times" (Gen. 27:36). Jacob's name was truly linked to his character and actions. The man did not need to know Jacob's name. The question was like so many other questions God posed in the Old Testament to force the one being asked to face the truth about themselves. Jacob's reply forced him to confess who and what he was: a deceiver, supplanter, and cheater.

VERSE 28

Jacob's confession precipitated a wonderful display of God's grace. The man told him that he would ***no longer be called Jacob*** but instead would be ***Israel***, which means, "God fights" or "God strives." This raises an ambiguity in the text because, while the meaning of the name refers to what God does, the explanation of it being the new name for Jacob refers to what Jacob did. Jacob's name would be ***Israel*** because ***you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.***

Certainly, one could say Jacob had ***prevailed*** over Esau and Laban in the past. However, the facts that God initiated the struggle with Jacob and that Jacob prevailed in that struggle also are both true. Also, God would continue to fight for Jacob/Israel even on this day as He softened Esau's heart toward his brother. What's more, Moses's audience, Israel, needed to recognize that, just as God fought for their forefathers and had already fought for them in Egypt, He would continue to fight for them going forward. Nevertheless, they too would struggle against God and His will for them as His covenant people. This was the third person God renamed in Genesis. When God renamed Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah (17:5,15), their new names reflected the expansiveness of God's blessing on them through His covenant with them. So was the case with Jacob's name change to Israel as well.

KEY DOCTRINE: *Salvation*

Regeneration, or the new birth, is a work of God's grace whereby believers become new creatures in Christ Jesus. (See John 3:3; 2 Corinthians 5:17.)

VERSE 29

Jacob was emboldened to ask the man to ***please*** reveal his name. Who was this with such power and authority? The man's response was measured, asking Jacob his reason for the question. It was as if he was saying to Jacob, "If you would stop and think about it, you should know who I am." Also, the fact that ***there he blessed him*** should have been a strong indicator that the man was God or an angel possessing the authority of God—the One who had revealed Himself to Jacob at Bethel and promised to bless him. There is no reason to believe Jacob was trying to get this name so that he might exercise some power over the man. The following verses suggest Jacob's intention was to give the place a name just like he did at Bethel. Consequently, using a name that somehow reflected what "the man" wanted to be called would make sense.

How did receiving a new name set the future course for Jacob? How can a change in identity serve as a blessing?

If God is for us, everyone else might as well be.

NEW WALK (GEN. 32:30-32)

³⁰ So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.” ³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. ³² Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip on the sinew of the thigh.

VERSE 30

Jacob realized that he had encountered *God face to face*, so he named the place •*Peniel*, meaning “the Face of God.” It was by God’s grace that He visited Jacob, wrestled with Jacob, and changed Jacob’s name. Jacob also recognized that he was still alive because of God’s grace. The grace of God is the work of God.

Jacob’s action here evidences his faith in God. If God spared him, what could Esau do to him? Jacob had asked God to rescue him from Esau. Now, he knew that God was about to answer his prayer. If God is for us, everyone else might as well be (see Rom. 8:31).

Praise God for His grace—not only in allowing us to wrestle with Him during times of uncertainty—but for the ways He reveals Himself to us in those times (v. 30).

VERSES 31-32

Jacob left *Penuel* with two things he did not have when he had arrived the evening before: a new name and a limp. Both would serve as a reminder of his grace-filled encounter with God. His name would be a reminder of his relationship with God. His limp would be a reminder of the failure of his self-sufficiency and the need for continued humble faith in God. Therefore, the nation of Israel made it a custom to refrain from eating *the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket* in honor of the events that happened to Jacob at *Penuel*.

BIBLE SKILL: Use a Bible dictionary to learn more about a feature of Israel’s religious life.

The account of Jacob’s struggle with God at Peniel concludes with an explanation of the prohibition against eating the thigh muscle at the hip socket (Gen. 32:32). By observing this dietary practice, the Israelites honored the Lord as well as their ancestor Jacob. Read Leviticus 11:1-47 and Deuteronomy 14:1-21 for dietary restrictions God later gave His people regarding clean and unclean animals. Read a Bible dictionary article on “Clean, Cleanness.” Identify some possible reasons the Lord gave His people this legislation.

APPLY THE TEXT

- People should expect to encounter God in times of their greatest need.
- Believers have a new identity after they encounter God.
- Believers can celebrate God’s working in their lives.

Discuss with your group ways you have seen God working in your lives. How can you collectively celebrate what God is doing?

When have you encountered God in a time of great need? Ask God to give you opportunities to share your testimony of His faithfulness with those who need to hear it.

Memorize Genesis 32:10.

PRAYER NEEDS
