

THE GOSPEL PROJECT

THE STORY BEGINS

GOD THE COVENANT MAKER

The God Who Gives New Names

Today, we are going to look into Jacob's encounter with God that resulted in him receiving a new name. When someone is legally adopted into a family, they receive a new family name. The same is true when a person experiences the second birth and comes into the family of God through the name of Jesus. **Revelation 22:4 (ESV)** ⁴ *They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.* In Jacob's struggle where he experienced a "genuine name change," we can discover elements we can claim in the struggles of our own lives.

Twenty years have passed when we pick up in Jacob the trickster's life story. Jacob's parents took his birth name from the Hebrew noun for "heel" meaning, "he grasps the heel" or "he cheats, supplants." Jacob had grasped the heel of his twin Esau when Esau was born first. Jacob "lived up" to his name which reflected his grasping nature. Last week, we studied how Jacob fled his father's house after tricking his father Isaac regarding the blessing Isaac wished to give to his first born son, Esau. After 20 years, Jacob became sick of Laban's (that is his uncle/father-in-law) treatment. Under the LORD's direction, Jacob fled from Laban, and headed home to face an overdue encounter with his long embittered brother Esau.

It was the night before Jacob was to meet face-to-face with his estranged brother. Jacob had sent messengers ahead to tell Esau he was coming. **Genesis 32:6 (ESV)** ⁶ *And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him."* The thought of Esau coming to him with 400 men was naturally distressing and made Jacob extremely fearful. Since Jacob was relying on self, he decided to divide his family and flocks into two groups with the hope of saving at least some of his family and possessions. He put his "favorite" wife and "favorite" son in the rear of the company. He also divided out a portion from his possessions with the intent of *appeasing* Esau. From this we realize that Jacob still leaned toward scheming instead of faith walking. We should not be too quick in our judgment of Jacob. Most, if not all of us, have the tendency to do our own personal scheming at times. We might say something like, "the Lord helps those who help themselves" when in reality, we are just trusting our own plans over the LORD's.

However, in the midst of his fears, we see Jacob turning to the LORD in prayer. He said in part:

Read Genesis 32:9-10, 12 (ESV) ⁹ *And Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good,' ¹⁰ I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of 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 camps... ¹² But you said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'"*

1. The blessings of God are released through prayer!

Jacob reminds the LORD of his promises to him. Today, we have the Bible which is full of God's promises to His children. As we struggle with God in prayer, we can remind the LORD of His promises to us and claim them for our own. I have heard that every year \$5.8 billion in gift cards go unclaimed. Such a staggering figure seems appalling and yet we continually "waste" God's promises by not claiming them. Pastor J.D. Greear says that instead of just reading through the Bible, we need to pray through the Bible. The Bible is our prayer book.

Read Psalm 127:1 (ESV) ¹ *Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.*

This is a scripture we can claim and remind God of when we pray regarding our family, our church, our nation.

Read Psalm 84:11 (ESV) ¹¹ *For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly.*

Be bold and pray for the LORD's favor. Sometimes, when we are walking in His favor, we can still become fearful of losing that favor. For example, every week I am fearful as I approach my lesson preparation and I must ask for the LORD's favor each week – not just occasionally.

Jacob's old name reflected his flawed character but Jacob's nature was about to change in the midst of His struggle with the LORD.

Read Genesis 32:24-27 (ESV) ²⁴ *And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.* 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."*

Many wonder regarding the Man with whom Jacob wrestled. Some commentators have suggested that the Man was a vision of Esau or possibly Esau's guardian angel. To me, this is highly unlikely.

I believe the Man's appearance was a theophany or more specifically a Christophany. A theophany is a direct visual manifestation of God to man. The most frequent visible manifestations of God's Presence in the Old Testament are often referenced as the "Angel of the Lord." The word Christophany is sometimes used of pre-incarnate appearances of Christ in the Old Testament. Remember, Jesus in the New Testament is God Incarnate or God in the flesh. It is my belief that the Man wrestling with Jacob was the pre-incarnate Christ.

For us this wrestling match may seem very strange and mysterious until we look at this picture in the light of our own physical and spiritual struggles with God. Like many of us after calling out to the Lord, Jacob still found himself struggling with God throughout the night. Jacob had spent most of his life wrestling with people—Esau, Isaac, Laban, and even his wives—now we see the trickster wrestling with God.

2. Sometimes great blessings are released through persistent prayer!

Jacob was genuinely fearful that night. In his encounter with God he may have thought that God was indifferent possibly even hostile towards his prayers because of his past mistakes. There are many today who experience the same emotions. Our Father wants us to be persistent in our prayer life. Do not mistakenly think He is indifferent to your needs. The result of our struggle with God in prayer reveals the strength of our faith.

Hebrews 11:6 (ESV) ⁶ *And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*

One thing I have wondered about regarding this encounter – is why in the world would God allow Himself to be overpowered by Jacob of all people? I now see that the weakness of God pictured in this struggle is a future representation of God becoming flesh – becoming a weak human being for the purpose of saving us from our sins.

Jacob's new name reflected the grace God showed him.

Read Genesis 32:28-32 (ESV) 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.* 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.*

All of his life he had been known as the "supplanter." Twenty years before he had misrepresented his name to his own blind father by calling himself by his brother's name – Esau in order to steal his brother's blessing. By telling his name, Jacob acknowledged his defeat and admitted his character. I visualize what happened being like an alcoholic going into an AA meeting and standing up saying – My name is _____ and I am alcoholic. Jacob said – My name is Jacob and I am a deceiver. **1 John 1:9 (ESV)** ⁹ *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

3. God Himself is our blessing!

The name Israel has been interpreted various ways – such as "he strives with God," "let God rule." Jacob's interest, however, became more focused on the One with whom he wrestled than the name he was given because he was genuinely experiencing the Presence of God. We know that Jacob struggled with God because Jacob said *I have seen God face to face*. Jacob did not mean that he had seen God in all of His resplendent glory which no man can do. Most likely at that point in history, Jacob was not privileged to know as much of God's Glory as we do today. This and other Old Testament Christophanies would culminate in man's beholding the glory of God in the face of God's Son – Jesus!

The Man dislocated Jacob's hip and Jacob would walk with a limp from that time forward. Nevertheless, Jacob was persistent to cling to the Man which pictures how we too should continue to cling to God in all of our struggles even when those struggles are painful. Jacob was bold enough to demand a blessing. This blessing was not given until Jacob said his name.

The next day Jacob humbled himself before his brother and Esau ran to meet him! You could say it was the ‘perfect day.’ Jacob’s wrestling had brought him God’s answer of peace within the family. However, “Jacob” did not immediately give up his grasping nature completely.

God’s command in **Genesis 31** was that Jacob return to Bethel. Instead, he delayed first at Succoth and then settled near Shechem. His family got into trouble at Shechem where his daughter was raped and his sons avenged that rape by committing murder. However, in time, God spoke to him again about returning to Bethel.

Read Genesis 35:1-2 (ESV) ¹ *God said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.”* ² *So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Put away the foreign gods that are among you and purify yourselves and change your garments.”*

When Jacob and his family left his father-in-law’s house, Rachel, Jacob’s beloved wife, stole her father’s family idols. In fact, Laban went after Jacob with the intent of reclaiming those idols. At the time, Jacob did not know that Rachel had them. We are not told when he found out but it was much later after Jacob’s successful prayer struggle that the idols were completely removed from the family. Eventually, Jacob gained the spiritual strength required to become an obedient son. Jacob’s new name reflected the task God gave him.

Read Genesis 35:9-12 (ESV) ⁹ *God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him.* ¹⁰ *And God said to him, “Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.”* *So he called his name Israel.* ¹¹ *And God said to him, “I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body.* ¹² *The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you.”*

As the LORD once again confirmed the new name of the second born son of Isaac to no longer be Jacob but Israel, God also confirmed that the blessing first promised to Abraham would be passed down through Abraham’s renamed grandson, Israel. Unlike God’s previous encounter with Jacob at Penuel, the LORD now shared His own name with Israel, the new man: *I am God Almighty*. In Hebrew the words are *El-Shaddai*. Although there is a question among Bible scholars as to the precise meaning the title speaks to God’s ultimate power over all.

The chorus of an old hymn says: There is a new name written down in glory and it’s mine. Oh yes! It’s mine! The white-robed angels sing the story, “a sinner has come home!” Israel had come full circle. He had come home. **Acts 2:21 (ESV)** ²¹ *And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.’*