

“What’s in a Name?”
Genesis 32:22-32
February 19th, 2017

He occupies spots in both the Rock and Roll and Country Music Halls of Fame. He sold over 90 million albums, recorded more than 1,500 songs, and boasted 14 number-one hits. Songwriter. Storyteller. Six-string strummer. Preacher. Poet. Drug addict. Rebel. Sinner. Saint. Victim. Survivor. Home wrecker. Husband. Father.

Next Sunday would have been his 85th birthday – born in Kingsland, Arkansas in 1932. Hard to believe, but he died 13 ½ years ago on September 12th, 2003 at the age of 71. *Do you know who he is?* None other than the ‘Man in Black’ – Johnny Cash.

Cash found that his rise to stardom brought more than fame and fortune. It brought problems. While he was rising professionally, his personal life was spinning out of control.

Show business pressures drove him to addiction to amphetamines. His first arrest came in 1965, when he was caught with more than 1,000 pills in his pockets. From a weight of 200 pounds, he dropped to 140 pounds. Side effects from drugs caused him to have a severe car accident – he broke his nose and knocked out four teeth. He was just about as far down as he could get...we pause the story there.

Friend, can you relate to that? Have you gotten down to a point where you couldn’t see anywhere but up? Some of us know that God sometimes has to take us to the bottom of a pit to bring us to the end of ourselves, and to Himself.

Such was the case for Jacob. Up to this point in his life, trouble wasn’t far from Jacob, and much of it self-inflicted. He deceived his brother Esau twice, and his father Isaac once. He blasphemed God. He left home for the land of his mother, Rebekah, to find a wife. Once there, he was deceived by his uncle Laban, a man who was more than Jacob’s match for selfishness and deception. Jacob would be in Laban’s employ for 20 years before he began his return trip. Truly, Jacob was an illustration of **Proverb 13:15** which teaches, “...the way of the sinner is hard.”

Putting today’s passage of Scripture in context, we remember, briefly, the ground we tilled last Sunday – the first 21 verses of Genesis 32. After leaving Laban, Jacob sent messengers to Esau. Those messengers returned to Jacob with the disturbing news that Esau was not waiting for Jacob, but instead, Esau was coming to him with a force of 400 men! Jacob turned to God in prayer, and then split his family into two groups to minimize loss. He determined to send his wives, children, and possessions on ahead in an attempt to appease Esau.

Genesis 32:22-32:

“And he arose that night and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed over the ford of Jabbok. ²³ He took them, sent them over the brook, and sent over what he had. ²⁴ Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. ²⁵ Now when He saw that He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob’s hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. ²⁶ And He said, “Let Me go, for the day breaks.”

But he said, “I will not let You go unless You bless me!”

²⁷ So He said to him, “What *is* your name?”

He said, “Jacob.”

²⁸ And He said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.”

²⁹ Then Jacob asked, saying, “Tell *me* Your name, I pray.”

And He said, “Why *is it that* you ask about My name?” And He blessed him there.

³⁰ So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: “For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.” ³¹ Just as he crossed over Penuel the sun rose on him, and he limped on his hip. ³² Therefore to this day the children of Israel do not eat the muscle that shrank, which *is* on the hip socket, because He touched the socket of Jacob’s hip in the muscle that shrank.”

Jacob was a mess; he couldn’t sleep; he was restless. We can picture him pacing back and forth, desperately seeking for a way to preserve his life at the hands of his twin brother Esau. **Genesis 32:7** says he was “greatly afraid and distressed.” In his prayer to God, Jacob prayed for deliverance from Esau, lest he and his wives and children would be attacked.

Convinced that activity is better than inaction, he rises from sleep in the middle of the night and sends his family and possessions on over the river. Verse 24 begins with Jacob alone in the dark of night. The remaining 9 verses of the chapter can be divided in this way:

MP 1 – The Fight (v. 24-27);

MP 2 – The Blessing (v. 28 & 29);

MP 3 – The Response (v. 30-32).

Night in the desert is very dark, indeed. No light or reflection of light in any direction. Black as pitch, nothing visible, and the darkness can be felt. Spooky! Suddenly, out of the darkness, a hand seizes Jacob. How scary! *Who was that? A wandering bandit looking to kill Jacob for his possessions? An assassin sent by Esau to kill Jacob?*

Verse 24 teaches **a fight** begins between Jacob and the unidentified stranger. *Who was this person?* Verse 24 identifies the stranger as “a Man.” Later, the Old Testament prophet Hosea provides a bit of commentary identifying this Person. **Hosea 12:4** reveals that Jacob “struggled with the Angel.” So, this is a heavenly Being wrestling with Jacob! And, when we consider Jacob’s words in verse 30, he says he had “seen God face to face.” This was most likely a Christophany, an appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ before He was born in human flesh. Jacob was struggling in the night with Jesus Himself!

<p>That this was an all-night wrestling match is just amazing to me. We didn’t have wrestling when I was a student at Pecatonica High School back in the late 1970’s, but I wrestled in gym class. And I must say it was about the most tired I’ve ever been. That Jacob hung in there with Jesus all-night is absolutely amazing!</p>
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We mustn’t err in thinking that Jacob was somehow equal in power to Jesus. God was working on Jacob through this “fight.” Jacob’s determination to hang in there was no greater than our frequent determination to have our own way in our own lives and try to win out over God. Our hardheadedness and sinful desire to have it our way simply refuses to surrender. In wrestling with Jacob, God was overpowering Jacob’s stubbornness and rebellion.

Verse 25 teaches that the Angel put Jacob's hip out of socket even. *Have you ever had your life put out of joint by God? Have you ever had your own little plans dislocated?* Of course you have. At such times, we were likely trying to do something contrary to God's will. The dislocation in our experience may have been a sickness, marital conflict, the loss of a job or contract, or some other setback that brought us to a point where we turned to God. Not every bad event we've suffered is due to our being out of the will of God. But, sometimes, maybe often even, God causes a dislocation in our life to bring us to our spiritual senses.

God did that for Johnny Cash. Because drug use isolated him from those important to him, Johnny was abandoned and without hope. So, in late 1967, he made his way to a cave on the Tennessee River near Chattanooga, Tennessee. Cash entered the cave and crawled for 3 hours until his flashlight batteries wore out. Exhausted, he lay in total darkness.

"My separation from (God was) the most ravaging kind of loneliness I'd felt." As he lay in the darkness waiting for death, Cash discovered a profound truth about God. "I thought I'd left Him, but He hadn't left me. I became conscious of a very clear, simple idea: I was not in charge of my destiny. I was going to die at God's time, not mine. I hadn't prayed over my decision to seek death in the cave, but that hadn't stopped God from intervening."

"So, I started crawling, feeling with my hands to guard against plunging over some precipice, just moving slowly." Eventually, Johnny felt a gentle, soft breeze. Slowly, he followed the breeze until he began to see light and finally, the opening of the cave.

Amazingly, when he emerged, June Carter and his mother were there with food and drink. They told Johnny they knew something was wrong and felt led to come and find him.

On the way home, he told them, "God saved me from killing myself." As He had with Jacob, God wrestled with Johnny Cash, breaking his spirit and making him into a man of God.

In the midst of **the fight**, Jacob asked the Angel to **bless him**. That included a name change for Jacob. In verse 28, the Angel said to him, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed."

Israel is a compound of two words – a verb, *sarah* (meaning 'struggle' or 'rule') and a noun, *el* (meaning "God"). Commentators have taken this to mean "he struggles with God" or "he prevails with God" because of how verse 28 is worded. A better case exists for how compound names are used elsewhere in the Bible. Consider two such examples:

* "Daniel" is a compound of the words "judges" and "God." Therefore, the name Daniel means "God judges", not "he (Daniel) judges God."

* "Samuel" is a compound of the words "hears" and "God." Samuel means "God heard", not "he (Samuel) heard God."

Following the same rule of interpretation for Jacob's new name, Israel, it would then mean, "God fights," or "God rules," (not that Jacob fought or Jacob ruled).

Jacob then makes a request of the Angel in verse 29, “Tell *me* Your name, I pray.” But, the Angel of the Lord is the One in authority here, and He isn’t bound to identify Himself.

In the Bible, receiving a new name signifies making a new beginning. In the course of our study of Genesis in this sermon series, we saw that happened with Abram (who became Abraham) and his wife, Sarai (who became Sarah). Among the others in sacred Scripture is Hoshea, who in **Numbers 13:16** was renamed “Joshua,” and Saul who was renamed “Paul” after his conversion experience on the Road to Damascus.

And, what about you, my friend? What name do you bear? Have you undergone a name change, thereby signifying a character change – a rebirth of your soul? I was Daren before God claimed me for His own back in August 1981, and I’m still Daren today. But, I have a new name since that time. That name is “Christian.” I am a Christ-bearer, and I have received a heart of flesh in place of my heart of stone, and God has breathed His Spirit into my life, bringing me spiritual life, a second birth.

If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, meaning that you are trusting in Jesus Christ for salvation from your sins, and you have confessed with your mouth Jesus is Lord, you have been saved from the punishment due your sins. And, you, too, have a new name – and a new life.

Luis Palau tells of a woman in Peru whose life was radically transformed by the power of Christ in salvation. The woman was a terrorist, a brute of a woman who was an expert in several marital arts. In her terrorist activities, she had killed 12 policemen.

When Luis conducted a crusade in Lima, the woman learned of it and, being incensed at the message of the gospel, made her way to get to the stadium to kill Luis.

Inside the stadium, as she contemplated how to get to him, she began to listen to the message he preached on hell. The terrorist fell under the conviction of her sins and embraced Christ as her Savior and Lord.

Ten years later, Luis met this convert for the first time. She had by then assisted in the planting of five churches; a vibrant, active witness and worker in the church, and had founded an orphanage that houses over 1,000 children.

For sure, a new life in Christ is the greatest blessing one could have.

To this point, we’ve seen **the fight** and **the blessing** – now, we see Jacob’s **response**. Jacob’s response consists of two actions. First, he names the place of his conversion “Peniel,” because there He saw (experienced) the Lord God in a permanent, life-changing way. And, second, he limped on his way toward a face-to-face meeting with his brother Esau, having crossed the Jabbok River, bearing the injury of wrestling with God.

There can be no denying it when people have experienced God and He has transformed them from sinners to saints. Before this encounter with the Angel of the Lord in the black of night, Jacob was merely a religious man, playing with religion. He believed in God and when in

trouble and difficulty, he always prayed to God. But, his practice of religion was something external to him, something that was helpful only when it suited him.

But, to believe in God is not enough as this story tells us. James teaches in his New Testament letter, “You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!” (**James 2:19**) To pray to God is not enough, though Jacob even did that (and a very good one, too).

The vital question is whether we have this true, central experience – *are we like Jacob before his struggle with the Lord, or Jacob after the wrestling with the Lord?* To answer that question, dear ones, we must examine ourselves and our own belief and our own position. *Have you looked at yourself in isolation, even as the Lord came to Jacob when he was left all alone on the other side of the river in the dark of night?*

Jesus came to Jacob in the dark of night, and wrestled his independence out of Him. It wasn't just an emotional experience. People may have an emotional experience and profess saving faith in Jesus Christ and still they don't have a true experience of God in Christ at all. There are such things as psychological conversions. Such is the danger of calling for people to make a decision to follow Christ after they've heard a dramatic story of someone escaping death, and then their emotions bubble over after singing several songs they've gotten emotionally captured in.

I'm thinking of a girl whom we got to know when she was in elementary school and junior high. Periodically, she'd come over to our house to play or for a meal. Her birth parents weren't together, and she didn't get along well with her step mother. When she was in high school, she began to live a hard life, searching for meaning in alcohol, sex, and other things.

She was invited to a youth group and attended for a while. She was eventually compelled to receive baptism, and may have even attended church services for a time. Today, her life is a mess, she has multiple children outside of marriage, and there's no evidence she ever knew the Lord at all.

The mark of the genuine Christian experience is its permanence. Jacob after Peniel was never the same again. He was lame, he had a mark upon him, and his name was changed from Jacob to Israel.

Friend, in closing, we note Jacob clung to Jesus until His conversion was complete. *What are you clinging to? Are you persevering in your faith by every means possible – personal Bible study – prayer – singing God's praises – sharing the gospel message with others – regular attendance and involvement in the ministries of your church?*

Or, *are you more concerned about your reputation before others? Do you hang on to what others think of you? Is it an obsession with having just the right physical appearance? Do you seek the praise of man and not the praise of God? Do you delight in purity and holiness, or depravity and sin?*

Shakespeare posed this question in *Romeo and Juliet* – “What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” The life you live is your name – *does yours bring glory to God, or do you need a new name?*