

The background of the cover features a detailed, golden illustration of Jacob wrestling an angel. The angel is depicted with large, feathered wings and a halo, standing in a powerful, slightly twisted pose. Jacob is shown in a similar, but more human, pose, appearing to be in a struggle with the angel. The entire scene is set within a decorative, arched frame with intricate patterns. The overall color scheme is a warm, golden-yellow.

Wrestling Jacob

A study of
Genesis 32:22-32

Barry E. Horner

Wrestling Jacob

Genesis 32:22-32

A. Introduction.

Charles Wesley is said to have written over 6,500 hymns. Nevertheless, there is one composition that has gained distinctive acclaim. It is a hymn that was originally comprised of 14 stanzas and titled “Wrestling Jacob.” Dr. Isaac Watts said of it that, “that single poem, ‘Wrestling Jacob,’ was worth all the verses he himself had written.” Two weeks following the death of Charles in 1788, his brother John attempted to recite the lines of the first verse. Then he came to:

My company is gone,
And I am left alone with Thee.¹

He burst into a flood of tears, sat down in the pulpit, and buried his face in his hands. The singing ceased, and the entire congregation wept together. In a little while Wesley recovered and was able to proceed. Charles Wesley himself had frequently preached on the theme of Jacob wrestling with Christ, often calling on his congregation to wait upon and wrestle with the Lord for blessing. Hence he penned the hymnic account of Genesis 32 in such an evangelistic way that it reflects his conviction of the necessity of the earnest pursuit of Christ. On Sunday, May 24, 1741, he records in his Journal, “I preached on Jacob wrestling for the blessing. Many then, I believe, took hold on His strength, and will not let Him go, till He bless them, and tell them His name.”²

Hence our intent here, in the study of Genesis 32:22-32, is to explore this encounter of Jacob with an unknown guest who turns out to be, “The angel who has redeemed me from all evil,” as he describes Him in his dying days (Genesis 48:15-16). Here then is the testimony of Jacob Isaacson, the son of Isaac Abrahamson, who proves that mere family religion, a notable lineage in the flesh, with all of its temporal benefits, is not enough.

B. The Pursuit of Jacob by Christ, vs. 24-25.

1. Introduction.

By way of introduction to Jacob’s life (Genesis 25-50), he was born in the midst of conflict that commenced with ongoing struggle and rivalry with his elder brother Esau, even from his mother Rebekah’s womb (Gen. 25:22-23). There was also the opposite favoritism between his father Isaac toward Esau and his mother Rebekah toward Jacob (Gen. 25:28). Near the end of his life Jacob declared to Pharaoh, “few and unpleasant [evil, KJV] have been the years of my life, nor have they attained the years that my fathers lived [Abraham, 175, Isaac 180, Jacob 147]” (Gen. 47:9).

- a. To begin with, Jacob craftily obtained carnal Esau’s birthright, he having returned from the field famished. Jacob used his tasty stew to bargain away Esau’s firstborn inheritance that he carnally despised as quite insignificant (Gen. 25:27-34).

¹ Cook, Harrison, *Christian Hymns*, 790.

² John Telford, *The Methodist Hymn-Book Illustrated In History And Experience*, p. 180-81.

- b. He deceptively acquired Esau's blessing from Isaac at the instigation of his mother Rebekah (Gen. 27:1-45). Nevertheless God's covenant faithfulness with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, all evident sinners, is proven once again, being based upon grace through faith, not works.
 - c. Having received the Abrahamic blessing from his father Isaac (Gen. 27:28-29), Jacob then encounters God in a dream at Bethel confirming the blessing, and thus becomes God-conscious, but not converted (Gen. 28:12-15, 16-17).
 - d. Having been deceived by his Uncle Laban in the palming off of Leah as a wife, yet Jacob serves seven years for beloved Rachel, but craftily deprives his father-in-law of the best of his cattle. Having fled pursuing Laban, they exchange grievances and memorialize a "non-aggression/trespassing agreement" at Mizpah (Gen. 29-31).
 - e. However Jacob remains troubled since he fears retribution from Esau, especially when his brother comes in pursuit with superior force. Twenty years have not erased the rivalry. Hence he plans to placate and retreat; at the same time he seeks God's covenant protection according to promise, not works (Gen. 32:11-12).
 - f. Then in further withdrawal, Jacob seems to advance his wives, family and maids across the stream Jabbok, a tributary of the River Jordan. He then returns across the stream alone, as if to protect them from his brother. However, in fearful evening solitude, this yet proves to be a retreat into the arms of his Redeemer, vs. 22-23.
2. Jacob is wrestled by night, v. 24.

"Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." It is bad enough to be a vigorous, clever sinner, but to be alone with one's deviousness in the night is all the more depressing. Hosea 12:3-5 also describes this scene, and provides further insight: "In the womb he took his brother by the heel, and in his maturity he contended with God. Yes, he wrestled with the angel and prevailed; he wept and sought His favor. He found Him at Bethel and there He spoke with us [Gen. 35:10-15, Israel as a nation through Jacob]." Hence Jacob was "weeping" beside the Jabbok and at the same time "sought His favor," that is God's intervention. The all-sufficient, self-confident Jacob had come to a point of extremity. He began to prove God's summons through the Psalmist: "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me" (Ps. 50:15). So Jacob cried unto God in his loneliness and family predicament, and God came to him, as a Man, a particular Man! Yet, as Owen points out: "This was the greatest danger that ever Jacob was in."³

- a. Christ comes when we are alone.

There is something very unobtrusive about the way Jesus comes to Jacob; it is like the way he drew alongside those two depressed disciples on the road to Emmaus, as a fellow traveler. "Jesus Himself approached and began traveling with them" (Luke 24:15). So here Jesus appears as an unidentified traveler, who yet is soon recognized as some divine messenger. He purposely engages Jacob! Then to the forlorn Jacob,

³ John Owen, *Hebrews*, I, p. 224.

this Man appears to have come from heaven; a ray of hope breaks into his shadowy soul. Perhaps the Man responds as Jesus did to entice the Emmaus disciples: “He acted as though He were going farther” (Luke 24:28). Thus Jacob will not miss this glimmer of opportunity. The two Emmaus disciples were similarly aroused as darkness fell: “They urged Him [Jesus], saying, ‘Stay with us, for it is getting toward evening’” (Luke 24:29). So Jacob is physically exhausted and wrestles back in response with this passing stranger in the darkness, imploring him to stay and pour out desperately needed blessing upon his parched soul. So Charles Wesley commences his notable hymn:

Come, O Thou Traveler unknown,
Whom still I hold, but cannot see!
My company before is gone,
And I am left alone with Thee;
With Thee all night I mean to stay,
And wrestle till the break of day.⁴

For Jacob, the loneliness has meant unavoidable, depressing soul reflection, which introspection is not a popular, satisfying, health-giving, soul-reviving exercise. He is his own worst enemy. There is not a lot for him to be proud of; there are none to offer praise or comfort. Solo reflection is not fulfilling, especially when sin recollection is unavoidable!

But the solution here for Jacob is not going yet deeper and deeper into the even darker recesses of his degraded being. Rather the answer is in his cry to God, outside of himself. And God answers by reaching down in a way that Jacob could not have faintly dreamed about. More than heaven came down to rescue him; it was God Himself who stooped and, as Jacob himself testified, “redeemed me from all evil” (Gen. 48:16). That same God will likewise come today to those who, in honesty and agony of soul, tenaciously cry out, “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (Gen. 32:26). God delights in desperate persistence, as reflected in Jacob, cf. Luke 11:5-13!

b. Christ comes when we are disturbed.

In spite of a rich religious heritage, via his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham, Jacob is not a man at peace in his soul. He may well consider himself to be forsaken of God, at least at this time. In spite of the inheritance and blessing he deceitfully obtained from Esau, in spite of a beautiful wife, in spite of a son of the quality of Joseph, in spite of his superior cattle, yet Jacob is a man who finds that his past is catching up with him. Hence, in meeting a stranger who embodies the opposite of misery, this melancholy man, notwithstanding his outward success, becomes intrigued when accosted by such a mysterious, engaging visitor. He is used to getting what he wants by whatever means possible. However he is also presently wary. This encounter is more about Jacob being waylaid than waylaying someone. Further, this captivating Traveler seems to have a focused interest in Jacob. Why? Indeed the Stranger knows his name, v. 28, and surely its meaning as “supplanter” (Gen. 25:26). Remember that in those days, a name often represented the essential character of a person. But Jacob does not know the Stranger’s name. Wesley further portrays Jacob:

⁴ Cook, Harrison, *Christian Hymns*, 790.

I need not tell Thee who I am,
 My misery and sin declare;
 Thyself hast called me by my name;
 Look on Thy hands, and read it there:
 But who, I ask Thee, who art Thou?
*Tell me Thy Name, and tell me now.*⁵

c. Christ comes in his humanity.

Jewish tradition suggests that the traveler encountered here is a shepherd with sheep and camels.⁶ Certainly Jacob's first perception is this Angel's humanity, as is usually the case with the Son of God. Men have no trouble accepting Jesus Christ's humanity; it is his absolute sovereign deity that they stumble over. What caused the Man to physically engage Jacob we are not sure. Was it because of His mention of details of Jacob's past life? Perhaps the Man suggested he knew Esau. However being physically engaged in a close struggle that Jacob cannot escape from brings about a more profound revelation that this Man is no ordinary individual. There is something very special about Him. With the Emmaus disciples it was the same; they interacted with a man who first engaged them; he was certainly learned in the Scriptures, but no more than a man. But they became more and more enthralled with His teaching, and upon intimately dining with him, when Jesus' broke bread for them, "their eyes were opened and they recognized Him [ἐπιγινώσκω epiginōskō]" (Luke 24:31), and thus desired Him! Jacob came to the same point of turning. Instead of spurning this Man, now he wants to know about Him with the typical intensity of Jacob's nature. So he addresses him:

In vain Thou strugglest to get free;
 I never will unloose my hold!
 Art Thou *the Man* that died for me?
 The secret of Thy love unfold:
 Wrestling, I will not let Thee go,
 Till I Thy Name, Thy nature know.⁷

Jacob is like the man born blind, who first perceived of Christ as a "man," then a "prophet," and eventually "Lord," "the Son of Man" (John 9:11, 17, 35-38). So Jacob first perceives Jesus as a "man," v. 24, then "the angel who redeemed me" (Gen. 48:16), and finally "God face to face," v. 30, or "the Lord, the God of hosts" (Hos. 12:4-5). But for now Jacob demands to know more about this visitor. He will not be disappointed or put off.

d. Christ comes to engage.

The initiative here is unquestionably His, that of this Man, even if the subsequent emphasis seems to be concerning Jacob's engagement of Christ. Literally, Jesus Christ and engaged Jacob with a "dust up," a physical scuffle! But this is a matter of

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible*, pp. 185-87.

⁷ Cook, Harrison, *Christian Hymns*, 790.

perspective that will later fill out in Jacob's understanding. To be sure, the Emmaus couple had invited Jesus to dine with them; but prior to this it was the Lord who first specifically sought them out in the late afternoon. Nathaniel thought that he had come to Christ by his own cooperation, being brought by his friend Philip. But he was astonished to be told, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you" (John 1:48). In fact the King of Israel has come for Jacob most specifically, as it were to crown him with a title, "Israel," that even his father and grandfather were not privileged to receive. In this particular pursuit is the prospect of the nation of Messiah.

e. Christ comes to save.

The emphasis here is first on the fact that, "Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." We tend to concentrate upon the dogged persistence of Jacob, v. 26, which in fact comes later, whereas the initial persistence here is that of the Angel, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the same revelation that Abraham (Gen. 12:7) and Isaac (Gen. 26:1-5) experienced. Probably it only now dawns upon Jacob that this Man is the Christ who his father and grandfather had earlier told him about. It is this Christ who establishes the contest here; it is He who approaches the sinner so as to wrestle him to the ground when necessary and gain the victory of salvation. While Abraham and Isaac had certainly met with this same Lord, nevertheless Jacob, like Paul, had to be wrestled with, both being such vigorous, defiant religious combatants. However, the point is that when God designs to save a person for a very significant task, as was the case with both Jacob and Paul, He does it with great persuasive power, even if the subject is particularly rebellious. He will bring pressure to bear, and the more resistant we become, the more persuasive and effectual He turns out to be, even if this requires the application of "goads" (Acts 26:14, a "thorn in the flesh" (II Cor. 12:7-10), or a limping gait for life! Salvation has consequences tailored to our condition.

3. Jacob is humbled by night, v. 25.

"When he [the Angel] saw that he had not prevailed against him [Jacob], he [the Angel] touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob's thigh was dislocated while he [Jacob] wrestled with him [the Angel]." The Lord appears to have sought nothing less than Jacob's unqualified humiliation, submission, and probably his specific agreement to be "Israel," the father of the promised nation. But the foxy renegade, notwithstanding his God-consciousness, rejects the proposal even at close quarters. Hence a stronger measure is required by the Angel.

Thus the thrust of the divine *coup de grâce*, the finishing stroke of Jacob's conversion, is now administered. A dislocated thigh results in the dislocation of Jacob's will and ego, like Paul on the Damascus Road who, in "kicking against the goads" (Acts 26:14), was temporarily blinded as a result. As the Apostle cried out, having fallen to the ground, "What shall I do, Lord?" (Acts 22:10), so Jacob's attitude was similarly turned about. Instead of wrestling to escape the claims of Christ, now he wrestles to embrace all of the blessing of Christ, v. 26. Here is the very essence of conversion. Similarly it was the risen Christ who wrestled with the Emmaus disciples resulting in resurrected souls that suddenly desired to run back to the Jerusalem that they had recently spurned. So with resurrected

Jacob, the Angel he spurned became the Angel he passionately embraced. Wesley continues:

What though my shrinking flesh complain,
 And murmur to contend so long?
 I rise superior to my pain,
 When I am weak, then I am strong;
 And when my all of strength shall fail,
 I shall with the God-man prevail.
 Contented now upon my thigh
 I halt, till life's short journey end;
 All helplessness, all weakness, I
 On Thee alone for strength depend;
 Nor have I power from Thee to move:
 Thy nature and Thy name is Love.
 Lame as I am, I take the prey,
 Hell, earth, and sin with ease o'ercome;
 I leap for joy, pursue my way,
 And as a bounding hart fly home,
 Through all eternity to prove
 Thy nature and Thy Name is Love.⁸

C. The Blessing of Jacob by Christ, vs. 26-32.

There is a radical change that comes upon the life of Jacob between vs. 25-26. Whereas in v. 25 he wrestles with dogged opposition to Christ, in v. 26 he wrestles with unrelenting devotion to Christ, notwithstanding his being made lame by Christ. With Paul it was the same; having militantly opposed Christ, yet on the Damascus road he suddenly yields to Christ, notwithstanding his being blinded by Christ. In both instances, saving union with Christ is the essential difference. For Jacob, this revolution in his life will now become all the more evident. He has not only received the life and influence of God in his soul; now he wants much more of it! Here is a clear indication of the change in affections or desires of the soul that comes about at conversion. A revolution takes place, a turning around, whereby a love for man, this world, temporal matters and material gratification is replaced by a love for God, Christ, the Word of God, and spiritual realities.

1. The particular *effect* of Christ, v. 26.

“Then he [Jesus Christ] said, ‘Let me go [Jacob], for the dawn is breaking.’ But he [Jacob] said, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’” A seemingly difficult yet successful task has been accomplished by the Son of God. He now appears ready to depart, His work of conversion and subjugation having been accomplished, or has it? More likely the Lord Jesus is acting as He did with the Emmaus disciples when “He acted as though He were going farther” (Luke 24:28). Here is enticement by means of withdrawal; it is akin to a necessary smack on the bottom of a newborn baby, that prompts its lungs to respond loudly. In a similar manner, Jacob vigorously responds. He is like the disciples who became so distressed when their Master told them that He was about to depart from them. At this,

⁸ Ibid.

they expressed great anxiety that Jesus them attempted to relieve (John 13:33, 36-37; 14:1-3, 18, 27-28).

But more particularly, why is blessed Jacob so demanding of “blessing” here? Has he not just received monumental blessing? Yes, that is so, yet in asking for more, what exactly does he have in mind? What we must remember here is that Jacob’s upbringing has been decidedly religious. He knows well of his family lineage, especially concerning his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham and the blessings they received. But more specifically, both Isaac and Abraham have received blessings *directly* from God (Gen. 22:15-18; 24:1; 25:11) and this Jacob knows and covets. He wants assurance of ongoing participation in this blessing. In this regard the aspiring personality of Jacob has not changed, but now his soul is alive unto God with a passionate desire for intimate union with God, and not material advancement. Never backward in human, selfish enterprise, now he boldly addresses Christ, and his request is granted! In other words, now Jacob is not seeking the blessing of initial salvation, but the blessing of God upon the saved.

Jacob indicates a very important aspect of conversion that is lacking today. He is not content with the reality that Jesus Christ has sovereignly, particularly laid claim to Him. Rather Jacob wants to claim the specific riches of his inheritance and at the same time receive that quality of assurance which was so vividly testified to by his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham. In other words, when Jacob declares, “I will not let you go unless you bless me,” he is like a child who so loves his father that he desires all that his father is and has. However, today, the portrayal of becoming a Christian in terms of decisional regeneration has no place for Jacob’s subsequent plea. In reality, Christian conversion, in all of its wonder and glory and certainty, is nevertheless “commencement,” the beginning of pilgrimage as Bunyan so well portrays it, that never loses sight of spiritual advance and eventual arrival and welcome at the Celestial City. And it is this prospect of the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham and Isaac that Jacob so passionately desires. It may have been wonderful for his father and grandfather to have received such reassurance, but now Jacob wants it for himself. In other words, a new Christian is not content to read about the past blessings that great saints have received, rather he wants the blessings for himself.

2. The particular *interest* of Christ, v. 27.

“So he [Jesus Christ] said to him [Jacob], ‘What is your name?’ And he said, ‘Jacob,’” meaning “heel-catcher, supplanter, displacer” (Gen. 25:21-26). Undoubtedly Jesus knew the name of his new disciple here. However in seeking identification, he is also reminding Jacob of his combative, contentious past at a human level, now that he has met his match and been humbled. He is also indicating that such “blessing” is not something that can be blithely called upon by man since it is God’s to sovereignly bestow. Jacob might better have responded, “My name is Jacob Isaacson and my father was Isaac Abrahamson.” This would have been a more attention-getting reply. Certainly the meaning of Jacob’s name does not indicate any meritorious ground for the bestowal of blessing! However, it may well be that this Jesus, who has already met with Abraham and Isaac, is intentionally soliciting not simply a personal title, but also a lineage that identifies him as a son of Isaac and a grandson of Abraham. To gain a hearing, a son will often invoke his father’s name when it has status and prestige and clout. So perhaps Jacob misses an opportunity here, though it does not effect the divine outcome. Jesus well knows of Jacob’s important lineage based upon promise, and it is this being so that the prospect of blessing increases.

3. The particular *blessing* of Christ, vs. 28-29.

Simply put, through his persevering character, like a wide-mouthed, newly born chick, Jacob gets all that he could ever ask for, and infinitely more. David will have a similar experience of undreamt of blessing (II Sam. 7:1-29). Jacob is to embody the nation Israel that is about to be born in Egypt, originally promised to Abraham (Gen. 12:2), that will descend from his twelve sons, that will continue to struggle with his brother Esau's seed even to this day (Gen. 25:22-23). In his carnality, Jacob obtained his earthly father's blessing (Gen. 27:30); now in his newfound spirituality, as a saved sinner, he receives blessing from his heavenly Father, through His Son. And how he longs and yearns for it. Here is this further essential characteristic of true conversion; in his ongoing life and pilgrimage, the authentic Christian thirsts and craves for the blessing of God. And how ready God is to bestow His blessing upon those who ask for it, even He who "is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us" (Eph. 3:20; cf. II Cor. 9:8). Such also was the experience of Jabez, meaning "pain/sorrow," the head of a family in the tribe of Judah (I Chron. 4:9-10). So having become a child of God, included among the blessings Jacob received are:

a. A new *name*, v. 28.

"He [Jesus Christ] said, 'Your name shall no longer be Jacob [heel-catcher, supplanter, displacer], but Israel [he who strives/persists/ perseveres with God]; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.'"

(1) To strive *with men* is but to live on earth.

Life is a struggle from birth to death, from the first breath to the last gasp. In between, the striving and wrestling never departs. Some prevail more than others. Some live on the struggle while others despise it. Jacob was a man who seemed to thrive on competition; he longed to achieve, to win, with the end justifying the means. Solomon was similarly ambitious: "Thus I considered all my activities which my hand had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun. . . . So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind" (Eccles. 2:11, 17). Likewise Jacob was led by God, with considerable effort, to see the foolishness of his former ambitious pursuits. Now he strives in an opposite direction, and God delights in this form of exertion.

(2) To strive *with God* is to reach toward heaven.

Thus Jesus Christ declares: "You, Jacob, have wrestled/persisted with God and have won out/accomplished/prevailed." In other words, "Jacob, the blessing will be conferred upon you," a princely title. But is this not a denial of the sovereignty of God here? Can man debate and negotiate and deal with God, and accomplish? The answer is decidedly "Yes", since Jacob here is doing business with God as a newborn child. And God encourages His children to press their case with Him (Matt. 7:7-11; Luke 11:5-13). Here then is the repudiation of a common, modern misunderstanding, that being a Christian is like passively

ambling along a primrose path. From now on Jacob will limp every step of the way! But the big picture is that Jacob shall be mightily blessed as he limps!

In the same manner, consider John Bunyan's own testimony in his *Grace Abounding To The Chief Of Sinners*. Although converted, yet he continues to wrestle with doubts and fluctuating faith. He further portrays these pilgrimage struggles in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. But now let me ask you: "Did the blessing of God fall upon John Bunyan?" Why the only answer would be, "Mightily so!" Consider Jacob's future. It will involve years of grief due to the treachery and deceitfulness of most of his sons. For twenty-two years he will grieve over the seeming loss of Joseph. Yet is Jacob blessed of God? Mightily so. The same could be said of David whose life involved serious personal sin and family strife with Absalom. Nevertheless, was David blessed of God? Mightily so! Peter was told that the end of his life would conclude with martyrdom (John 21:18-19), yet the Lord Jesus had earlier declared of the Galilean fisherman, "Blessed are you, Simon, Barjona" (Matt. 16:17-18). So C. H. Spurgeon himself testified:

It was with a young man (*Spurgeon describes his own experience at his conversion and beyond*) seeking, and he entered a little sanctuary, and heard a sermon from the words "Look unto me, and be ye saved." He obeyed the Lord's command, and "he blessed him there." Soon after, he made a profession of his faith before many witnesses, declaring his consecration to the Lord, and "he blessed him there." Anon, he began to labor for the Lord in little rooms, among a few people, and "he blessed him there." His opportunities enlarged, and by faith he ventured upon daring things for the Lord's sake, and "he blessed him there." A household grew about him, and together with his loving wife he tried to train his children in the fear of the Lord, and "he blessed him there." Then came sharp and frequent trial, and he was in pain and anguish, but the Lord "blessed him there." This is that man's experience all along, from the day of his conversion to this hour: up hill and down dale his path has been a varied one, but for every part of his pilgrimage he can praise the Lord, for "he blessed him there." There may perhaps, be here some Christians in trouble. Brother, sister, I do not ask you what your trouble is, and I do not want to know; but there is a little text I would like to whisper to you, "Casting all your care upon him, for he careth for you." Will you not trust to him after that? If so, he will bless you there. Is your trouble concerning temporal want? Let me put this passage into your mouth as a sweet morsel, "Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him." Suck that down and he will bless you there. Oh, what a blessing will come out of the marrow and fatness of that thought! Is there a poor Christian here, who says, "I feel half ashamed to go to the communion table; I am so unworthy"? You never were worthy, and never will be. Turn your eyes again to the cross. Look to the Savior for worthiness. He will bless you there. "I feel so cold and chill," says another. Think of the Saviour's love to poor, dead, cold sinners such as you are, and he will bless you there. If you are very cold, it is no use thinking of the cold in order to get hot, the best thing is to go to the fire. And if you feel dull and dead, do not try to get better by looking within, and examining yourself: fly away to Jesus Christ, and he will bless you there.

⁹ C. H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, "He Blessed Him There," 56:3219, pp. 644-645, Ages Software.

Hence all of these saints could sing:

With mercy and with judgment
 My web of time He wove,
 And aye the dews of sorrow
 Were lusted with His love:
 I'll bless the hand that guided,
 I'll bless the heart that planned,
 When throned where glory dwelleth
 In Immanuel's land.

I've wrestled on towards heaven,
 'Gainst storm and wind and tide;
 Now, like a weary traveler
 That leans upon his guide,
 Amid the shades of evening,
 While sinks life's lingering sand,
 I hail the glory dawning
 From Immanuel's land.¹⁰

b. A new *blessing*, v. 29.

“Then Jacob asked him [Jesus Christ] and said, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he [Jesus] said, ‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ And he [Jesus] blessed him [Jacob] there.” So the great covenant promise given to Abraham and Isaac was confirmed to Jacob. However, when a man has wrestled with God and been overcome and blessed, when a man has been made alive unto God, it is certain that he will have a newfound desire for a much greater knowledge of God. This is a sure mark of true conversion. And such is the case with Jacob who, in having a passion for his vanquishing Redeemer, now wants to know his name. Could it be that in having learned from his father Isaac, and thus grandfather Abraham, of the glory and wonder of the Angel of the Lord they encountered, especially the conferring of the great covenant promise, Jacob wanted confirmation that he had indeed been overcome by the same Divine Majesty? Jesus’ question seems to hint at this, as if probing Jacob’s curiosity, when he asks, “Why is it that you ask my name?”

Remember that for the Hebrews, a name was more than a title; rather it signified a person’s distinctive, essential character. Jacob wants to know something of the soul of God. Hence Charles Wesley has rightly caught the real intent here when he describes Jacob’s plea as follows:

Wrestling, I will not let Thee go,
 Till I Thy *Name*, Thy *nature* know.¹¹

Thus Jacob wants to know if this is the Angel of Jehovah, the Lord Jesus, that his father and grandfather encountered, and not just a lesser angel. However no name appears to be given since the personal title, Jehovah/Yahweh, will not be revealed until Moses meets this same Jesus at the burning bush near Mt. Sinai (Ex. 3:1-16; 6:1-

¹⁰ Cook, Harrison, *Christian Hymns*, 816.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 790.

4). Nevertheless Jesus Christ responds by imparting the blessing that Jacob, now Israel, has sought. By the very nature of this bestowal, which surely God alone could convey, Jacob now knew that his benefactor was the Son of God. The content of the blessing was a transcript of the character of God.

But specifically, what more was this blessing? Undoubtedly it was divine, direct, personal confirmation of that which Abraham and Isaac had received. Jacob had dreamed of such a blessing at Bethel (28:10-17), but his meeting with this stranger in the night was no dream. Dreams are notoriously unreliable, whereas this was direct spiritual/physical encounter. Hence Jacob was claiming the full reality of the promise, that is yet again confirmed again in 35:9-12! And so the blessing was conveyed, but not upon one who merely trivialized his family religion, some dabbler who was entertained by religion. Rather this feisty sinner cast his all into his wrestling with God, and God was pleased to bless him mightily!

4. The particular revelation of Christ, v. 30.

“So Jacob named the place Peniel [meaning the face of God], for he said, ‘I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved.’” He was astonished because he understood the principle which the Lord later revealed to Moses: “You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!” (Ex. 33:20). In other words, no man can see God in His unveiled, essential glory and survive. Unholiness cannot endure pure holiness. Jacob viewed a human embodiment (not an incarnation) of God; Moses beheld God’s back, but not His face (Exod. 33:17-23). In other words, as Paul declares concerning faith in Christ, “We all, with unveiled face, [are] beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord. . . . [God] is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (II Cor. 3:16-18; 4:6; cf. John 14:9). So Jacob beheld Christ “face to face,” first with resistance, then with great desire. Because of this personal encounter, he will never be the same, and nor would he want it any other way, for in beholding this divine Jesus Christ, he has beheld He who in sovereign grace has sought him out to save and redeem him. But further, from now on his life will reflect the truth that he has met with God. There is no more trickery in the life of Jacob. Surely this was a factor in the subsequent raising of Joseph, the most recent, eleventh son born to date, whereas the ten older sons had been raised by a relative scoundrel. Indeed, any one today who is savingly engaged by Christ will never be the same. So now, what is it that follows in Jacob’s life?

a. Jacob humbly bows before his brother Esau, 33:1-11.

The immediacy of this reunion after Jacob’s conversion, and the surprising grace of Esau, is indeed providential.

b. Jacob repudiates the severe retribution of Simeon and Levi, 34:1-31.

In the extreme treachery and pillaging that befalls the Shechemites, over Dinah, perhaps Jacob recognizes a reflection of his own zealotry.

- c. Jacob cleanses his house of idolatry, 35:1-7.

Again God is at the forefront of safely directing Jacob's steps back to Bethel for worship, under divine protection, v. 5, but not before family cleansing from worldliness.

- d. Jacob is distressed at the seeming death of Joseph, 37:31-35.

This may have suggested to him that the promise of God to his father Isaac would not be fulfilled through Joseph!

- e. Jacob worships God again at Beersheba en route to Egypt, 45:25-46:4.

Now knowing that Joseph is alive and exalted, divine confirmation is given through visions that God is in fact faithful; he will live out his days with Joseph.

- f. Jacob is preserved in Egypt and blesses Pharaoh, 47:7-12.

Descending into the womb of Egypt, Jacob the greater blesses and testifies of the God of Abraham to Pharaoh the lesser.

- g. Jacob blesses his sons, 48:1-49:28.

The seed of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, provide a double, tribal blessing, mediated through "the angel who has redeemed me [Jacob]."

- h. Jacob dies in his bed and is buried in Canaan, 49:29-33; 50:12-13.

In death he identifies with Abraham and Isaac, his only hope being the the Lord Jesus who redeemed all three according to sovereign grace.

Hence, when a man or a woman comes face to face with God, the result in their lives will never be indifference or neutrality, but it will result in profound change. In Jacob's case, he first desired to flee; then, on account of strong divine persuasion, he caught a glimpse of the gracious character of God close up, and as a result he desired to draw close. Then the reconciliation became complete, though it left a life long stamp.

5. The particular "thorn in the flesh" of Christ, v. 31.

"Now the sun rose upon him [Jacob] just as he crossed over Penuel [a nearby town?], and he was limping on his thigh." The newly inflicted pain and discomfort could never faintly reach above the sheer ecstasy that Jacob experienced as a result of his conversion and blessing. He always had before him the image in his mind of his Redeemer, derived at close quarters. This was a new day indeed. So Isaiah writes of the house of Jacob, "Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard" (Isa. 58:8).

But as Jacob traveled, wherever he went, surely one question always presented itself with old and new acquaintances. They would enquire: "Tell me, how did you come to be

lame?” Many would associate this crippled condition with divine judgment (John 9:1-2). However Jacob would give a quite unexpected reply. He never tired of relating, not concerning a tragedy, a sinful consequence, but a blessed crippling of his arrogance through divine intervention. He testifies about this when, being near death, he blesses Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh: “The angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads” (Gen. 49:16). Actually there is no mention here of his being lame; such a consideration is trivial compared with the greatness of the blessing he received, and that he desires for his family. He proved the testimony of the Apostle Paul: “Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (II Cor. 12:9-10).

6. The particular memorial of Christ, v. 32.

“Therefore, to this day the sons of Israel do not eat the sinew of the hip which is on the socket of the thigh, because he [Jesus Christ] touched the socket of Jacob’s thigh in the sinew of the hip.” This then is the testimony of the power of grace in the life of such a determined sinner. Unconverted, what would we know of Jacob? Surely nothing, except perhaps an ongoing trail of tragedy. But truly converted, sovereignly converted, Jacob’s wrestling at Peniel is the story of particular redemption that is perpetually told throughout the generations of God’s people. It is an account of a man God humbled and crippled, and yet at the same time He taught him to dance. So Charles Wesley concludes his account:

Lame as I am, I take the prey,
Hell, earth, and sin with ease o’ercome;
I leap for joy, pursue my way,
And as a bounding hart fly home,
Through all eternity to prove
Thy nature and Thy Name is Love.¹²

So even to this day when the Jews eat meat, especially from the thigh region, they still remember when “God touched Jacob.” Oh for the day when the Jews will acknowledge that it was “Jesus who touched Jacob!” Then they “will look on Me [Jesus] whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn” (Zech. 12:10; cf. John 19:37; Rev. 1:7). But for us today who also claim to have been touched by Jesus Christ, Charles Simeon asks a very penetrating question.

What resemblance do we bear to Jacob in this particular? I ask not whether we have ever spent a whole night in prayer, but whether we have ever wrestled with God at all; and whether, on the contrary, our prayers have not for the most part been cold, formal hypocritical; and whether we have not by the very mode of offering our prayers rather mocked and insulted God, than presented to him any acceptable sacrifice? Say whether there be not too much reason for that complaint, “There is no one who calls upon Your name, that stirs up himself to lay hold of You” (Isa. 64:7)? Dear brethren, I know nothing which so strongly marks our departure from God as this. To an earthly friend we can go, and tell our complaints, till we have even wearied him with them; and in the prosecution of earthly things we can put forth all the energy of our minds: but when we go to God in prayer, we are

¹² Ibid., 790.

restricted, and have scarcely a word to say; and our thoughts rove to the very ends of the earth. The prophet Hosea well describes this: “They have not cried unto me with their heart. They return, but not to the Most High: they are like a deceitful bow,” which, when it promises to send the arrow to the mark, causes it to fall at our very feet. O let us not fancy that we are of the true children of God, while we so little resemble Him whose name we bear, and bear as a memorial of persistence in prayer. The character of the true child of God ever has been, and ever will continue to be, that they are “a people near unto their God” (Ps. 73:27-28; 148:14).¹³

¹³ Charles Simeon, on Genesis 32:26, *Horae Homileticae*, I, p. 250.