

**'Jacob, the man whose name was changed', Gen. 32. 24-30.
Bethesda Coffee Morning. 27 February 2008.**

The title I have been given for this morning's talk is 'Jacob – the man whose name was changed' – and the set passage is found in Genesis 32.

As you know, you can legally and officially change any part or all of your name by Deed Poll. And people do change their names for a whole variety of reasons. My grandfather did – changing his surname from 'Horlick' – belonging as once he did to the family who made their name producing the malted milk drink to help folk sleep – for his own reasons changing his name from 'Horlick' to 'Horlock'.

But this morning, I am to talk about a man whose name was changed, not by himself, but – as was true also of several others in the Bible, such as Abraham and Simon Peter¹ – by God.

But first, the story so far Jacob was one of twins. And he and his brother Esau had been at loggerheads since the time they shared the same womb – for they had jostled together even there. In later life, Jacob had succeeded in depriving Esau, the firstborn, both of his natural birthright and of his father's special blessing. As a result of which, Jacob had been compelled to flee some 500 miles from the parental home – and Esau's wrath – to Haran. Where at first he met his match in the person of his unscrupulous uncle Laban, but where more recently he had succeeded in securing for himself much of his uncle's wealth – and from where now, after an absence of some 20 years, was, at God's direction, on his way back home. When he reached the border of his brother's country, Jacob had sent messengers ahead to tell Esau that he, Jacob, was returning and sought to find favour with him.

The messengers had returned to Jacob with disturbing news, 'Your brother is coming to meet you – accompanied by four hundred men!' Jacob's heart had sank.² Was he now to lose, not only all the goods for which he had laboured so long and so hard at Haran, but also his wives and children – not to speak of his own life?³

Jacob's reaction had been to divide all he had into two – his camp, his family and his flocks and herds – so that if Esau attacked, he (Jacob) might, he hoped, be able at least to save half. He had then prayed, 'Deliver me ... from the hand of my brother Esau'. And, as a further precautionary measure, he sent on his servants in advance with wave after wave of gifts to appease Esau – gifts totalling no less than 580 various animals.

And now, having also sent his family and goods on ahead, he was left alone. And it is here that our set passage takes up the story – with an account of the most amazing wrestling match ever ...

'Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. Now when He (the 'Man') saw that He (the 'Man') 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.

And He (the 'Man') said, 'Let me go, for the day breaks'. But he said, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me!'

And He said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob'.

And He said, 'Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have contended with God and with men, and have prevailed' ... And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for, he said, 'I have seen God face to face'⁴, and my life is preserved'.

Here then we find Jacob first wrestling, then clinging, then praying, then confessing, and finally prevailing.

And we note that, at the close of the bout, Jacob was in no doubt whatever about the identity of the 'Man' who had wrestled with him – 'I have seen *God* face to face', he said. And the prophet Hosea later wrote of Jacob that 'by his strength he wrestled with God ... he wept, and made supplication to Him'.⁵

And again we note that it was not Jacob who took the initiative. It was God who first wrestled with him – that He (God) might reduce self-sufficient Jacob to a sense of his nothingness, to make him see what a poor and helpless creature he really was – to bring him to the end of himself and to the point of absolute and total surrender. Which the Lord did by simply 'touching' the hollow of Jacob's thigh – the socket of his hip – so as to throw his thigh bone out of its joint. And at that moment, all Jacob's power to continue wrestling was gone! With a dislocated hip, Jacob was disabled and helpless.

But, although Jacob lost the wrestling match, when he realised who it was he had been fighting,⁶ he pleaded – and pleaded persistently – 'I will *not* let you go, unless you bless me!'

Jacob could no longer wrestle – all he could do was to cling – which he did! And now, with no support of his own, he did what God wanted him to do – to rely solely upon Him. For the Lord had deliberately brought Jacob to the point where he had no choice but to lean his entire weight on Him (the Lord)!

What Jacob now knew he could never gain by fighting in his own strength, he was determined to gain by relying on the strength of his Conqueror – confident that the One who could *disable* him could equally well *enable* him and bless him.

And the man who had once come out of his mother's womb grasping the heel of his brother, now clings equally tenaciously to his divine Opponent.

Previously Jacob had attempted to order and direct his own life – to plan, to scheme, if necessary to deceive, to get what he wanted. The old Jacob had contended with Esau for the birthright and had succeeded.⁷ He had contended with Esau for their father's blessing and had succeeded.⁸ He had contended with Laban for his wealth and had succeeded.⁹ Whenever he had contended with *men*, he had succeeded. But now, in contending with God, he has failed. Now he could have sung – very literally – with Charles Wesley, 'Other refuge have I none, *hangs* my helpless soul on Thee'.

But the Lord touched, not only Jacob's thigh, but Jacob's conscience. For God's question, 'What is your name?', took Jacob on a tour of his life.

Twenty years before, when seeking his father Isaac's blessing, he had successfully deceived him. For when Isaac had asked, 'Who are you', he had lied, saying, 'I am your son, your firstborn Esau'. But, when seeking God's blessing, Jacob knew he couldn't deceive *Him!* And so he answered, 'Jacob' – realizing full well the meaning and significance of his name – acknowledging in effect, 'I am a supplanter, a heel-grabber, a usurper, a deceiver'.¹⁰ For in the presence of the all-knowing God, for him to mention his name 'Jacob' was in itself an honest confession of all that he was. His whole life to date was summarized in that name.

It was only when Jacob was willing to cling to the Lord in his helplessness and to admit his true nature and character that he was changed. But from now on Jacob *would* be a different man! And God publicised the change in Jacob's character and attitude by changing his name for him too.¹¹

Because of Jacob's experience of God that night, God gave him a new name – 'Israel' – probably meaning 'one who strives with God', focusing on Jacob's determination to cling to the Lord and to secure His blessing. And God gave him this name, the Lord said, because he (Jacob) had power with God – *not* in that he wrestled with Him all night, but because, at the close, he clung to Him in his weakness. And it was in his weakness, that Jacob was made strong.

And because of his experience of God that night – and because the ancient world knew nothing of hip replacements, Jacob – Israel – would never walk the same again!

We do not need, as Jacob, to have *our* names changed¹² – but we *do* need to experience what the Bible calls the New Birth – which we can do only by honestly confessing, like Jacob, what we are in ourselves, and by receiving the Lord Jesus – by believing and trusting in Him alone.

Endnotes

¹ Gen. 17. 5; Mark 3. 16; Acts 10. 18; John 1. 42. See also Sarah, Gen. 17. 15.

² Having never been recalled by Rebecca, Gen. 27. 45, he had every reason to expect a hostile reception.

³ But he should not have been unduly alarmed by the news of Esau's coming. He knew that God had already preserved him miraculously from the evil intentions of Laban, Gen. 31. 24. 29. Apart from which, he had only just met 'the angels of God', 32. 1-2, and, with his eyes opened to see *God's* 'host', he ought not have feared *Esau's* 'host'!

⁴ Jacob fully expected to see Esau's face next, Gen. 32. 20, but was required to see the face of God first, v. 30.

⁵ Hos. 12. 3-4 – almost certainly a reference to 'the Angel of the Lord'.

⁶ The true nature of his Antagonist began to 'dawn' on Jacob before 'the sun rose upon him', Gen. 32. 30!

⁷ Gen. 25. 29-34.

⁸ Gen. 27. 1-29.

⁹ Gen. 31. 1-55.

¹⁰ Playing on the meaning of Jacob's name, Esau said, 'Is he not rightly named *Jacob*? For he has *supplanted* me these two times. He took away my birthright, and now, behold, he has taken away my blessing!', Gen. 27. 36. I have seen Jacob described as the kind of man who follows you into a revolving door and comes out ahead of you!

¹¹ In biblical days, a name was much more than a label or means of identification. It was often an index of someone's character; cf. 'Let not my lord regard this man of Belial, Nabal: for *as his name is, so is he*; Nabal is his name, and folly is with him', 1 Sam. 25. 25.

¹² Although some do on their conversion. See, for example, 'Pastor Hsi'; who, when he became a Christian (having previously been a Confucian scholar and an opium addict – terrified of evil spirits), took the new name 'Sheng-mo', meaning 'Demon-Conqueror'. ('*Pastor Hsi*', Mrs Howard Taylor, OMF 1969, pages 58, 64-65.)