

Text: Genesis 32-33

Title: "Jacob's Journey to the God of Israel"

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Introduction: *The Pilgrim's Progress* has been described as "The #1 best-selling book of all time, other than the Holy Bible!" [<http://www.answersingenesis.org/PublicStore/product/Pilgrims-Progress-The-AUDIOBOOK-edition,4675,188.aspx>]. It seems difficult to be absolutely sure about that kind of statistic, but the world-wide influence of this work is denied by none. The author was the Baptist preacher John Bunyan, born in 1628 as the humble son of a tinsmith. His work did not share world-wide popularity in his own day. He was a frequent resident of the Bedford jail.

The longer title of the book is *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come Delivered Under the Similitude of a Dream Wherein Is Discovered the Manner of His Setting Out, His Dangerous Journey, and Safe Arrival at the Desired Country*. The author included at the beginning of the story an apology or defense for his work where he describes his book as follows:

"And thus it was: I, writing of the way
And race of saints in this our gospel day,
Fell suddenly into an allegory
About their journey and the way to glory."

Later his description continues:

"This book it chalketh out before thine eyes
The man that seeks the everlasting prize;
It shows you whence he comes, whither he goes,
What he leaves undone, also what he does;
It also shows you how he runs and runs

Till he unto the gate of glory comes.”

And:

“This book will make a traveler of thee,
If by its counsel thou wilt ruled be;
It will direct thee to the Holy Land,
If thou wilt its directions understand.
Yea, it will make the slothful active be,
The blind, also, delightful things to see.”

The Pilgrim's Progress is an allegory that tells us about the journey of a fictional character, which is designed to make us travelers who understand the direction to a saving relationship with God.

What John Bunyan accomplishes with his pen, paper, and imagination, the Lord accomplishes as the author of the real history of the life of Jacob. We do not read allegory on the pages of Genesis; we read real history. And yet, God is the author of this history as Bunyan was the author of an allegory, and the history God authored is designed to make travelers of us.

Jacob embarked on a journey some twenty plus years ago that began at Bethel with the vow of Gen. 28:20-21, and he comes to the end of that journey at the end of Chapter 33 (v. 20). *Israel* is Jacob's new name; and God's new name is *the God of Israel*. Jacob's journey from Laban to Esau is a journey from one relationship with God to another, and as such it is written to make travelers of each of us who need to know the Lord better. As fellow-travelers on that journey, I want us to see briefly five important characteristics of Jacob's pilgrimage to the God of Israel.

I. There was concern along Jacob's journey (32:6-8; 13-23).

Illustration: At one point in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the journeyman Christian and his good friend Hopeful find themselves bound in chains in the dungeon under the Castle Doubting, where he has been imprisoned by the Giant Despair. Bunyan's description of their capture contains some parallels to the fear that Jacob experiences on his journey:

"So they were forced to go, because he was stronger than they. They also had but little to say, because they knew themselves in a fault. The Giant therefore drove them before him, and put them into his castle, into a very dark dungeon, nasty and stinking to the spirits of these two men. Here then, they lay from Wednesday morning to Saturday night, without one bit of bread, or drop of drink, or light, or anyone to ask how they did; they were, therefore, here in evil case, and were far from friends and acquaintance. Now in this place Christian had double sorrow, because it was through his unadvised counsel that they were brought into this distress."

Application: Jacob's journey is plagued with fear, and the fear he felt must have been similar to Christian's, in that he owned some responsibility for the circumstances he faced. Jacob's fear must involve regret. It has been over twenty years since he had any contact with his brother, and the last time they were together he had caused such anger in Esau that he had to run for his life. Past failure had brought the present danger, and this contributes to the fearfulness that Jacob feels about the danger.

Our journey to God will not be without failure, nor will it be without fear and concern. As God works in our lives he allows us to fail, and he allows us to experience real fear.

Fear and failure are a part of the journey to know God better; they are not things that we somehow conquer before we get started.

II. There was company along Jacob's journey (32:1-2).

Illustration: Have you ever listened to a plan of action that seemed so inadequate to the need at hand that it made you cringe? I have had meetings at work in the past that made me feel that way. A problem exists, the boss comes up with a plan that is going to cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, along with lots of time and effort, and still not come close to working.

Application: Jacob's plan in the face of the four-hundred person army of Esau kind of makes me cringe. It seems woefully inadequate for the need before him, the protection of his family. Its goal is summarized in verse 8. Only one of the two companies will be slaughtered.

God wanted Jacob to understand that He had arranged for two companies of a different kind. Jacob has an encounter with the angels of God and he calls the place this happened Mahanaim (v. 2). That word *Mahanaim* is the same word translated *host* in verse 2 and *company* in verse 8. It is what is called the dual form of that noun. In Hebrew, you have the singular form for one; the plural form for three or more; and the dual form for two. Jacob names the place he saw the angels "Two Companies."

One of the companies was comprised of the angels or messengers of God (v. 1), and the other was comprised of his own messengers (v. 3). Jacob's journey was accompanied by an unseen company, one that God had commissioned to help Jacob's journey reach a successful end. As woefully

inadequate as Jacob's two-company plan was, God made up for this with His perfect two-company plan. He can do what we cannot as we travel the journey of life to know Him better. Never lose sight of the Lord's unseen company.

III. There was calling out to God along Jacob's journey (32:9-12).

Illustration: I mentioned that Christian and Hopeful were in the dungeon until Saturday night. Here is how Bunyan describes what happens on this eventful evening:

"Well, on Saturday, at about midnight, they began to pray, and continued in prayer until almost break of day. Now, a little before it was day, Christian, as one half amazed, brake out in this passionate speech: 'What a fool,' quoth he, 'am I, thus to lie in a stinking dungeon, when I may as well walk at liberty! I have a key in my bosom called Promise, that will, I am persuaded, open any lock in Doubting Castle. Then said Hopeful, that is good news, good brother; pluck it out of thy bosom and give it a try.'"

Application: Oh how we need to hear the exhortation of Hopeful today: "That is good news, good brother; pluck it out of thy bosom and give it a try!" Jacob gives the promises of God a try in prayer.

1. There is the wonderful promise of who God is: "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac." He is the God who has always been faithful to those who have gone on before us. He will not change in response to us.

2. There is the wonderful promise of God's personal commitment to each of us as individuals: "O Lord, who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your relatives, and I

will prosper you.” Paul tells us that God has promised to care for all who are in Christ, each and every one: “He who spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not also with Him freely give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32).

3. There is the wonderful promise of God’s grace, His unmerited favor that says that I need not be worthy or merit the wonderful care He provides (v. 10). No promise of God would every be ours if it were something we had to earn. God gives to the unworthy; he heals the sick; he justifies the sinner; he finds the lost; he saves the perishing. His promise is that He is gracious and kind and loving, and so we need not merit His favor; indeed, we could not.

4. There is the wonderful promise of a future secure in the descendant of Jacob (vv. 11-12). Jacob’s wives and children could not be annihilated, because God had promised that one of his descendants would be multiplied as the sand on the sea. Each of us who hides in Christ this morning as our haven of rest is a grain of the sand Jacob refers to here. God promised Jacob a secure and glorious future, and this promise is ours too in Jacob’s descendant, Jesus Christ.

Pluck the key of these promises out of your bosom and give them a try. Commit yourself to faithful seasons of prayer claiming His promises on your journey to the God of Israel.

IV. There was change along Jacob’s journey (32:24-32).

Illustration: One of the most glorious parts of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is the change that happens at the very beginning of Christian’s journey. The early pages of the book describe him as “a man clothed with rags, standing in a certain place, with his face from his own house, a book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back.”

It is the cross that changes Christian from burdened to free: “He ran thus until he came to a place somewhat ascending, and upon that place stood a cross, and a little below, in the bottom, a sepulcher. So I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up to the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do, till it came to the mouth of the sepulcher, where it fell in, and I saw it no more.”

Our text includes elements of Jacob’s change into Israel:

1. The change came when Jacob was alone with God (vv. 24, 26, 30). There is some discussion about why the sun coming up posed a threat to the work of this wonderful man whom Jacob wrestles. I believe that the man required that they be alone. This is change that happens face-to-face; one-on-one. There is no mediator between Jacob and this man when God’s change comes to Jacob’s life.

The change that God desires for us will not come through our parents, nor through our pastor or priest; the change will come from dealing with God face-to-face, alone. Have you told God of your need for a change? Have you ever wrestled with Him in prayer until He blessed you with the change you need?

2. The change came when Jacob wrestled with God (vv. 24-26). The picture of Jacob wrestling with this man says more about the condescension of this man that it does the determination of Jacob. The blessing here is strictly a one-way street: the man asked Jacob his name and changed it; Jacob was rebuffed when he inquired of the man’s name. In addition, the man owns a claim to deity (v. 28). So Jacob correctly concludes that he had been wrestling with God all night long (v. 30). God condescends to bring change to the life of Jacob.

This is the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and Christ demonstrates this in John 4:4-12. He had to go to Samaria and meet this woman on a parcel of ground that originally belonged to Jacob. He condescends to this woman, and comments "If you knew who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink.'" That leads to the question from the woman, "You are not greater than Jacob, are you?"

The answer is *yes*. That woman encountered, not merely Jacob's well that day, nor merely Jacob, but rather the One who is greater than Jacob, the One who condescended to wrestle with Jacob and bless Jacob, and now He was condescending to argue with this woman that He might bless her. He offers the same condescension to you and I. Can you see how he is working in your life? Ask Him to bless you.

3. The change came when Jacob recognized his need (v. 27). Jacob recognizes that his name is *Jacob* – meaning *heel*. Remember how Esau had emphasized the significance of Jacob's name? "Is he not rightly called *Jacob*, for he has supplanted me these two times?" (Gen. 27:36). Here in our passage Jacob is forced himself to recognize the significance of his own name. He needs a name change because he needed a changed nature. He recognized his need.

4. The change came with wonderful results (v. 28). The results were spiritual blessing – confident standing where there had been only fearful dread (v. 30, "my life has been rescued"). A physical malady served as a gracious memorial of this wonderful spiritual change. Israel was now ready to meet Esau, come what may. Are you ready to meet that which threatens your life, come what may? Said differently, are you ready to die? This is the rescue Israel experiences when God changes him. He is ready to die.

V. There was comfort along Jacob's journey (33:1-20).

Application: Chapter 33 gives the happy account of the completion of Jacob's journey home, which became for him a journey to the God of Israel. Two blessings come to Jacob as he completes his journey.

1. Although Jacob needed his own life to change, God blessed him with a changed Esau as well. Esau is no longer the man who wanted to kill him. If we allow God to change our lives, it will amaze us how He begins to work in the lives of others around us, who need to be changed as well.

2. Jacob mentions something in verse 10, which teaches us something very important about how we are to treat one another: "I have seen thy face as though I have seen the face of God."

The apostle John says something very similar as he teaches us how to love our Christian brothers (1 John 4:11-12a, 20-21). Jesus wants us to love our brothers like we love our God. To say that we love God while we hate our brothers is to lie.

One of the great themes of Genesis 33 is wonderful miracle of brotherly love, unity, and forgiveness. Just like Jacob looked on Esau as though seeing the face of God, we need to learn to see the face of God in our brothers and sisters in Christ. They are indwelt by God's Spirit. They are the body of Christ. They are the flock of God for whom He shed His blood. They are the apple of His eye.

If we cannot love their face, which we can see, how can we claim to love the Lord whom we cannot?

Conclusion: May God make us like Jacob and Esau as we journey on together to know Him better. We know that our natural tendency is toward the animosity Jacob and Esau experienced early in their journey. But God is the one who is changing us as we journey on.

Jacob means *heel*; but *Israel* means *Prince of God*. The journey from one identity to the other was not an easy one for this patriarch, nor will it be for us. There will be concerns that must be met with the unseen company, a calling out to the God of promise, and the willingness to be changed. In the end, the journey will be worth it as we too are transformed from heels into God's royalty for His glory. "He who began a good work in [us], will perform it until the day of Christ" (Phil. 1:6).

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching