

# A Changed Man

By Brad Allison on 2/13/2006

Scripture Reference *Genesis 32:22-32*

As we continue our survey of the Bible, we come today to this chapter in which God changes Jacob's name to Israel. Name changes indicate life changes. When a woman gets married, she changes more than her last name. Everything is changed for the rest of her life, hopefully for the better. Christianity is all about change. The vision statement of our church says that we want to be a place where the gospel changes lives for the glory of God. One of the reasons this story is included in the Bible is that it is intended to be a pattern for the change that needs to take place in our lives as well. As with Jacob, the change needed in our lives cannot be self-generated. We need an encounter with God. It is only through such an encounter with God that our head knowledge can be turned into heart knowledge.

In college a student was asked to prepare a lesson to teach his speech class. The title of his talk was, "The Law of the Pendulum," a law which says that a pendulum can never return to a point higher than the point from which it was released. Because of friction and gravity, when the pendulum returns, it will fall short of its original release point until eventually coming to a complete rest. The student attached a three-foot string to a child's toy top and secured it to the top of the blackboard with a thumbtack. He pulled the top to one side and made a mark on the blackboard where he let it go. Each time it swung back he made a new mark. It took less than a minute for the top to complete its swinging and come to rest. When he finished the demonstration, the markings on the blackboard proved the law of the pendulum. The student then asked how many people in the room believed the law of the pendulum was true. All of his classmates raised their hands and so did the teacher. The teacher started to walk to the front of the room thinking the class was over. In reality it had only begun. Hanging from the steel beams in the middle of the room was a large, crude but functional pendulum made from 250 pounds of metal weights tied to four strands of parachute cord. The student invited the instructor to climb up on a table and sit in a chair with the back of his head against a cement wall. Then the student brought the 250 pounds of metal up to the teacher's nose. Holding the huge pendulum just a fraction of an inch from the teacher's face, the student once again explained the law of the pendulum he had applauded only moments before, "If the law of the pendulum is true, then when I release this mass of metal, it will swing across the room and return short of the release point. Your nose will be in no danger." After that final restatement of this law, the student looked his teacher in the eye and asked, "Sir, do you believe this law is true?" There was a long pause. Huge beads of sweat formed on his upper lip and then weakly he nodded and whispered, "Yes." The student released the pendulum. It made a swishing sound as it arced across the room. At the far end of its swing, it paused momentarily and started back. The student later testified that he had never seen a man move so fast in his entire life as the teacher literally dove from the table. Like this teacher, it is easy for us to believe in God while we sit here in church, but another matter entirely when the pressure is on. An encounter with God such as Jacob had here is the thing that will change us at a fundamental level and transfer our knowledge of God to our hearts. Notice three parts to this change.

## I. The Need for Change Is Indicated by Relational Strife

Jacob seemed to leave troubled relationships everywhere he went. The story we are focusing on this morning finds Jacob caught between two broken relationships, one with his brother, Esau, and the other with his uncle, Laban. His relationship with Esau had been broken when Jacob stole from Esau the blessing of their father, Isaac. Do you remember that story? Isaac was an old man who was ready to pass along the blessing to Esau. But Jacob

heard of it from his mother and, pretending to be his brother, wrested the blessing from Esau. When Jacob's lying and scheming was exposed, Esau was understandably angry. He said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob" (Gen. 27:41).

Jacob's relationship with Laban had also been a troubled one. While much of the blame for their difficulties belonged to Laban, Jacob wasn't without fault. He responded to Laban's scheming and conniving with some of his own. Jacob proved to be the better schemer, and he left his uncle with Laban feeling that Jacob had cheated him out of his property. So contentious was their parting that they had to swear an oath never to see one another again (31:52). And now Jacob is caught between these two relational failures. He can't go back to Laban, and he thinks he can't go forward toward Esau.

Jacob also had relational difficulties within his own immediate family, due to his overt favoritism toward one of his wives, Rachel, and her sons. What was the source of these relational problems? It was Jacob's lack of trust in God, which led him to use people instead of love people. If you don't trust God, it always leads to relational difficulties. The theme of Jacob's life evidenced itself very early. He was the younger of twins, and when he came out of the womb, he was grasping the heel of his brother. His name, Jacob, came from that incident. Jacob means to take by the heel or to cheat and connive. His whole life was marked by an effort to control others and use them for his own ends. Such an approach to life always leads to relational problems. If you're busy using people, you won't be able to love them. No one likes to work for a boss who uses them for his own ends. No boss likes workers who will use him or her as a stepping stone to career advancement. A parent who wants their children to do well only so that the parents will look good will destroy his family.

It is only when we learn to trust God that we will stop using people and begin to love them. That actually happens with Jacob. After he learns to trust God, the next chapter records how Jacob meets with Esau and gives him the blessing that Jacob had sought for so many years. Though this is not evident in some translations, the ESV makes it clear in 33:11, where Jacob says to Esau, "Please accept my blessing that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me." For years, Jacob plotted, lied and connived to get the blessing. Now he is able to rest in the confidence that God had given it to him, and the striving ended. Have you noticed that when someone is secure in a particular area, there is a confidence, a contentment, a cessation of anxiety and striving in that area? For example, you men who are blessed with a full head of hair even into middle and old age never have to go around saying, "I have a full head of hair." You just do, and your security about that allows you not to do all the things the insecure do. Men with a full head of hair never have to decide about the comb-over technique. It's just not an issue. Once Jacob became secure in the blessing, he no longer had to strive to get it. Once you and I learn to trust God, we become secure and no longer have to use people, control people and scheme to get things. We simply look to God.

Just a quick application before moving on. Is your life characterized by chronic relational problems? I'm not talking about the existence of conflict, because that is normal. Rather, I'm talking about a series of broken relationships in which you part with hard feelings. If that is a theme in your life, it's because you need to change. You need to trust God instead of use people. Our next point begins to help us know how to do that.

## II. The Heart of Change Is to Stop Trusting in our Strengths and Trust God Instead.

Why did God come and wrestle Jacob? Why didn't he employ another type of encounter? For example, why didn't he come and argue with Jacob? The answer is critical in understanding this entire passage. God came to wrestle with Jacob because he had to engage

Jacob at the point of Jacob's strength, and then show Jacob the inadequacy of his strength so that Jacob might learn to trust in God rather than in his own strength.

We're clued in to Jacob's physical strength back in chapter 29, where we saw that he was able to move this giant stone all by himself, a task normally requiring several men. Jacob also seemed to have verbal strength, easily able to trick first of all his brother Esau and then his own father into giving him the blessing. When people entered into a conflict with Jacob, they usually lost. Ultimately, even Laban lost to Jacob, in spite of Laban's vast skills in the area of trickery. Jacob lost some early battles with his uncle, but ended up winning the war as he left Laban with a great deal of what had been Laban's property. As God pursued Jacob to bless him, it was vital that Jacob learn not to trust in his strength, but to trust in God. He had to learn to stop wrestling and striving, and to trust instead. The way God works in our lives is along the same lines. We too must learn to stop trusting in our strength and look instead to God.

The great enemy in our trust of God is not doubt, but self-trust. And the area of life in which we tend to trust ourselves is in the area of our strengths. Have you ever noticed how criticism in an area of one of our strengths can be so hard to hear. Suppose someone were to come up to me and say, "Brad, I think you're a terrible interior decorator. You're color-blind, have little sense of artistic beauty and show very little creativity in your interior designs." I can tell you quite honestly that such a criticism would not bother me in the least. I would smile, agree with my critic, and forget about the criticism within minutes, if not seconds. But if another critic were to speak up and begin criticizing me in an area I have regarded as a strength, it would be a different story. Suppose someone were to say, "Brad, I can't believe you've been preaching for thirty years and still do such a pitiful job. Have you ever considered whether you ought to pursue another line of work?" Such a criticism would be far more devastating because so much of our self-identity is wrapped up in our strengths. The heart of the change needed in our lives is to stop trusting in our strengths and begin trusting in God instead.

Notice how God works in Jacob's life to remove from him this trust in his strength. He lets Jacob exhaust himself in the effort and still not win. God wrestles him to a tie. Obviously, God could have prevailed at any moment, as we see him do eventually. He simply touches Jacob's hip and cripples him permanently. He could have done so during the first few seconds of the wrestling match, but chooses not to. Why? Because it's the normal way God deals with us in teaching us to repent of dependence on our strengths. He knows that we must learn the hard way, so he says to us, "You think that you will deal with life by your intelligence and hard work. Fine—have at it." Have you discovered what Jacob discovered here—that it never works?

Illustration #1: I met someone on the airplane ride back from Florida last week who had just left his wife. He said he did so because he wasn't happy any longer and he just knew that God wanted him to be happy. So I asked him the question that God often asks us: "Has it worked? Are you happy now?" He answered, "It's too early to tell", which I interpreted to mean that he is not happy now but holding out hope that he would be at some future point. I think that's why God wrestled with Jacob all night instead of touching his hip during the first seconds of the wrestling match. We don't easily give up trusting in our strengths, and God normally has to allow us to exhaust ourselves in their pursuit before we will give them up and trust him.

Illustration #2: I understand that tennis great Boris Becker, after his second Wimbledon victory, made the astonishing confession that he was struggling with thoughts of suicide. An outside observer is so surprised at that confession because Becker is viewed as someone who has made it to the top, who has achieved what he has worked so hard for all these years. But that is precisely why this moment is such a difficult one—to have that

which has motivated you for years suddenly taken away because you realize it no longer works. Novelist Jack Higgins, author of *The Eagle Has Landed*, was once asked during an interview at the height of his success, "What is one thing you know now that you wish you had known as a small boy?" His astonishing answer was this, "When you get to the top, there's nothing there." (quoted in *Can Man Live Without God?*, p. 56).

During this nocturnal wrestling match, Jacob learned to stop wrestling and start clinging to God. He learned to do so in the same way we learn it, by coming to the end of our strength and seeing that God is the source of the blessing we have always sought.

### III. The Result of Change Is Release from the Fear of Suffering.

Before his wrestling match, Jacob was afraid. Remembering Esau's last words in which he declared his intentions to kill Jacob, Jacob sends messengers to his brother with a message of reconciliation. When Jacob's messengers return, they report that they saw Esau headed toward Jacob with 400 men. That was not good news, because that was the standard number of men in a raiding party. We read in verse 7 that Jacob's response was one of "great fear." But after his encounter with God, and encounter leaving him physically weaker, he goes forth to meet his brother. He still doesn't know whether Esau's intentions are violent or peaceful, but after meeting with God and surviving the encounter, he is ready to meet anything else. He has come to know the true God at a heart level.

How can we know God at that level? The answer lies in the name change given to Jacob. God says that his name shall now be called Israel. Interestingly, he was not often called by that name after this point. As a matter of fact, he is referred to throughout the rest of the Bible as Jacob, not Israel. That latter name is used of God's people, including us. The Church in the New Testament is called "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). But what does that name mean? Jacob, as we have seen, means deceiver or conniver. Israel means God strives. That's the essence of the change needed in our lives. We need to stop striving and trust in the God who strives for us.

### CONCLUSION:

Imagine a man who walks into a room where he hears some music that touches him deeply. After listening to it for just a short-time, he has a strong desire to begin dancing to the music. And so he does. He begins improvising a dance that expresses his joy in the music. As he is dancing around the room, a second man enters and sees the first man dancing for joy. But this second man is deaf and so cannot hear the music being played. But he is drawn to the man who is dancing and wants to dance like him. He observes him carefully and begins to memorize his movements. After a while, he begins moving in similar ways but with some noticeable differences. His rhythm is just a little off, since he can't really hear it. But most importantly, there is no joy in his heart, only mechanical moves of his arms and legs. The way in which we stop being like deaf men dancing is to trust in the God who strives for us. We see God striving for us most clearly in Jesus, who worked so hard for us that he could sleep in the bottom of a boat during a storm. He worked so hard in the garden of Gethsemane that he perspired drops of blood. He worked that you and I might rest in him. May God help us to do so!