

Meeting God

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[0 : 0 0] Now, if we'd have our Bibles open, please, at Genesis 32, and we'll pray and ask the Lord's help as we come to this passage.

In God our Father, we know that no human words, nothing that we can say, has the power of your living word. You have graciously sent your Holy Spirit, you have graciously promised that when your word is opened and read and expounded, that your spirit is present to guide us into all truth.

And so we pray now that you will open your word to our hearts, and that you will open our hearts to your word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So, Genesis 32, verses 22 to 32. If you drive south down the M74 on your way towards the M6, just as you almost have come to the border, you'll pass the road sign to the quaintly named village of Echolfechen, a place of which it's said that those who can pronounce it can't spell it, and those who can spell it can't pronounce it.

Now, be that as it may, its claim to fame, perhaps its only claim to fame, is that in the 19th century was born there the writer Thomas Carlyle, famous historian and essayist.

[1 : 4 3] Most of his life he spent away from Echolfechen, but he retained an interest in the place. And one time the church there, the local church, was looking for a minister, and they asked Carlyle's advice about the kind of person that they were looking for.

He replied, you are looking for someone who knows God other than by he or see. Someone who knows God other than by he or see.

That's not just true of ministers, it is true of all Christians. Christians must be those who know God, not simply because they've heard of him, but because they've met him, because they know him.

And these two studies over these two Sunday mornings, the general title is Meeting God, Knowing God. God is always there. There is no time, as the psalm said that we read at the beginning, nowhere in this vast universe where he isn't, and nowhere where we can hide from him.

Nevertheless, there are certain times, certain moments in our lives when business is done with him, when we meet him in a particular way.

[2 : 5 4] And last week we saw how Jacob, fleeing from everything actually, not just from his brother, but fleeing from his old life, was suddenly confronted by God at the place he called Bethel.

And now we have another meeting, and the title for this I'm going to take from C.S. Lewis, Further Up and Further In. This is a deeper experience of God.

This is a new stage in Jacob's journey. Because knowing God can never be static. When I was a boy, I often used to go to meetings where testimonies were given.

Nothing wrong with that. The trouble was, the testimonies tended to stop at the moment of conversion. The very place they ought to have started. You know, the Lord saved me 30 years ago.

Well, what's happened then? What's happened in the 30 years? Where has he been then? There was nothing ever said. It was almost as if, well, I've met God. I've got that bit sorted out. Whereas a true testimony talks about what God is doing now.

[4 : 00] Let him, we sang, come, O fount of every blessing. Daily will I sing your praise. It's something that is effective for our whole lives and beyond.

Twenty years have passed since Genesis 28. Twenty years have passed since Jacob, the cheat, had been comprehensively cheated himself.

He had gone to Haran to live with his uncle Laban, who proved a much more effective cheat and deceiver than Jacob himself. He's acquired two wives. Incidentally, you may be surprised that people like Jacob and Abraham and others are polygamous.

And you may have noticed that nowhere does the Bible condemn polygamy. But what the Bible does is it shows the disastrous consequences of polygamy. It's true, there isn't a text in Scripture that says, you shall have only one wife and polygamy is forbidden.

But the whole thrust of the biblical story, the whole thrust of the one flesh in the creation story, means that polygamy, wherever it occurs, is disastrous.

[5 : 10] So it is on a small scale here in Jacob's family, the cheating, the lying, the uncomfortable and unpleasant and unpalatable events that happen as a result of this.

Of course, it happens on a mega scale with Solomon and with others. So the fact that Jacob has two wives doesn't mean that it was right for Jacob to have two wives.

It doesn't mean this is being held up as a model for us. What is being held up as a model is Jacob's meeting with God. What the business that Jacob did with God. And incidentally, of course, it is another reminder that God meets with imperfect people and changes them.

If God didn't meet with imperfect people, if God didn't come into the lives of those who were without fault, who were faults, sorry, that sentence isn't going to work out, I have to start again.

If God didn't come into the lives of people who had no faults, then God would never come into anyone's life at all. That's just incidental because very often we make the mistake of assuming that because something happened, it was right that it should have happened.

[6 : 23] But in any case, Jacob is about to have another experience. He's back, 20 years have gone and the past is catching up with him. The air is thick with the wings of chickens coming home to roost.

And here he is in this lonely place. But the past never simply repeats itself. There are events which are like other events, there are circumstances which are like earlier circumstances, but the past never simply repeats itself.

And the emphasis on this story is newness. God is doing something new. God is taking Jacob further up and further in. And there are three new things in this story.

And the first one isn't a particularly happy one. There is a new problem. Well, that's life, isn't it? There are always new problems. That's one thing we always get plenty newness in, new problems.

There is a new problem. There is a new name. And there is a new start. And that's the way we're going to look at the chapter. So let's look first of all at the new problem.

[7 : 33] If you glance back a few verses in chapter 32 to verse 6. The messengers return to Jacob saying, We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you.

And there are 400 men with him. Now, that could, of course, be a huge welcoming party. But 400 men is an awful lot of people to bring on a welcoming party.

And in particular, since the word translated here, meet, often elsewhere means to meet in battle. So this is a big problem. So how is Jacob going to deal with this?

And Jacob deals with this by getting alone at the ford of the Jabbok. Verse 22. The Jabbok is a tributary of the Jordan.

In the bleak area, just as the Jordan plunges through the Judean desert down into the Dead Sea, about 20 miles before it reaches the Dead Sea, there is this ford of the Jabbok.

[8 : 35] And this ford plunges its way through gorgeous, bare, barren, desolate, eerie countryside, particularly as the light falls. So there is Jacob.

Jacob is about to meet 400 men. But before that, he goes to this lonely place. Now, in this problem, there are really two problems, or there are really two aspects to it.

First of all, there is the imagined problem. What Jacob thinks is the problem. And the problem is Esau with his 400 men. He said to Jacob at that moment, what's your problem, Jacob?

He says, it's obvious. Esau with 400 men. I cheated him. He hasn't forgotten. He hasn't forgiven. And he's coming to get me. That's almost certainly what Jacob would have said.

Maybe some of us have to face Esau, and 400 men are the equivalent. Maybe some of us have a problem that's filling our whole horizon, and we've no idea what to do about it.

[9 : 40] We just don't know how to tackle it. It may be that God is wanting to say something to us through it. Because God is maybe saying, that's not the real problem, is it?

And so it is here. We've got the imagined problem, Esau with 400 men. Glance ahead at chapter 33, verse 4, and you'll see what I mean when I say an imagined problem.

Esau ran to meet Jacob, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. So this was a problem that was imaginary, although it was very real in the darkness of the night at the ford of Jebuk, with the eerie, eeriness of the surroundings, and the loneliness of the place.

What was his real problem? Verse 24, a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. Here is the real problem.

The problem is not Esau. Forget about the 400 men, Esau. There's only one man you need to worry about. And here he is, a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.

[10 : 45] This is one of the Bible's great stories, isn't it? The falling of silence. The fading of the twilight. The mysterious figure. No explanation is given.

This figure simply emerges on the scene. And we're in the presence of a deep mystery. There's a paradox here, isn't there? Jacob was left alone, and the man wrestled with him.

Both things are true. Because it's in silence, it's in solitude, that Jacob meets God. So yes, Lewis says in one of his letters, it's very easy to avoid God.

All you need to do is turn the radio up loudly. Well, nowadays, of course, it would be the iPod, or whatever you call it, or anything else that you've invented. All you need to do is surround yourself with noise.

Surround yourself with busyness and bustle. It's very easy to avoid God. Here, however, there is no avoiding of God. A man wrestled with him.

[11 : 47] But notice also the emphasis on Jacob's tenacity. Because the wrestling, actually, is bringing out the best in Jacob. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob.

Jacob probably was not coming into this lonely place to meet God, any more than he expected to meet God back at Bethel. Nevertheless, when God takes the initiative, Jacob responds when the man saw that he could not overpower him.

Jacob, in other words, is serious about engaging with God. It's always easy to play around with the things of God, isn't it? To dip our toe in. To have an interest.

To be on the fringe. Jacob is going further up and further in. That's what meeting God is about. Nothing static. Something that develops.

Something that continues. So there is a new problem. And the problem is not Esau and his 400 men. The problem is the man wrestling with him. The problem is knowing him better.

[12 : 52] Understanding him more fully. Secondly, we have a new name. What is your name? Verse 22. What's your name? Now, long ago, back in chapter 26, Esau had said, Isn't he rightly named Jacob?

Jacob, he has deceived me. The name Jacob means cheat, twister. And Jacob had fully lived up to his name. In fact, we wonder had Bethel changed him all that much.

If you read the story of Jacob between these two incidents, if you read the story from his flight from Bethel to Haran, then the story of what happened there, and even the story of his chicaneries in chapter 32 up to this point, you wonder if he's changed.

And yet, Jacob has changed. Jacob realizes that he needs to be serious about God. I will not let you go unless you bless me.

Verse 26. Jacob, above everything else, needed blessing. No doubt, as Esau approached, Jacob thought he needed protection. But what he really needed was blessing.

[14 : 03] And what is blessing? Come you, O fount of every blessing. Blessing is nothing less than the life of God in this life and in the life to come. That's what the word blessed means.

It's always a pity when people translate the word blessed in the Bible as happy. Happiness is a feeling which comes and goes. And we thank God for it. And some people are of more sunnier disposition than others.

Blessed is something that's true whether we feel it or not. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the pure in heart.

It's not primarily a feeling. Although we thank God for the feelings that come. Blessed is something that God gives as a gift. And that's what Jacob needs. Now, God says, What is your name?

Is that because God doesn't know who he's wrestling with? Is he wrestling here with a stranger? Of course not. God is saying, Jacob, 20 years ago, you were asked that question.

[15 : 11] Your old blind father, Isaac, asked that question. What is your name? And Jacob, then you cheated, didn't you? You told us a lie. You said, My name is Esau.

Jacob, what is your name? Rather like that earlier question, Adam, where are you? Of course God knew where Adam was.

Trouble is, Adam didn't know where he was. And God is saying to Jacob, Jacob, do you really know who you are now? Are you ready to go to the next stage? Who are you? Not what's your self-image, not what do others think of you.

We all care an awful lot about that, don't we? Particularly in this image-conscious age. God is saying to us, not just saying to us none of these things, God is saying, Who are you? Are you ready to be open with me?

Are you ready to be totally honest with me? Who are you? And Jacob said, I am Jacob. Yes, Lord, you're right.

[16 : 13] I'm Jacob. I'm the cheat. I'm the manipulator. I'm the one who tried to run things my own way. And Jacob becomes open and honest with God.

And notice, of course, he says, what, Jacob asked him, What, please tell me your name. Verse 29. And God refuses, almost as if Jacob, Jacob, don't you know who I am?

Almost as if God is saying, Jacob, the fact that you were honest with me shows you know my name anyway. So this new name, this new name, your name, verse 28, your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel.

For you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed. Israel meaning the prince with God. And that new name leads on to a new destiny. It's not just a new name, it's a new destiny.

Once he's acknowledged he is Jacob, then he is ready to be Israel. Just as once we acknowledge we are sinners, once we acknowledge we have gone away from God, we're ready to come back.

[17 : 23] Indeed, that's part of our coming back. What the Bible calls repentance. Israel, the heir to all God's promises. That's what blessing means. Israel, you are now, and you are going to inherit all these promises.

Isn't this what John says in his first, first letter? What kind of love is this that the Father has bestowed on us that we should be called the children of God?

That is not just a promise to Jacob, that's a promise to everyone who acknowledges who they are in their sin and is able to be made what they will be in Christ.

And John goes on to say, we do not yet know what we shall be, but we know that when we see him, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is, part of the journey towards his likeness.

So the new problem, the new name. But thirdly, there is a new start. This story is going somewhere. Verse 31, the sun rolls upon him.

[18 : 30] Now that's a literal detail. It's part of the art of the storyteller. As I say, this is a brilliantly told story. On the one hand, the darkness, which of course, as well as being literal darkness, symbolizes the darkness in which Jacob is living.

The sun rose. It's a new day. A new era. Because notice, it doesn't just say the sun rose. The sun rose upon him. The sun rose upon Jacob, not just on the whole world.

And he called the name of the place, Peniel. So let's look first at the name of the place. Now Peniel, later on the chapter called Penuel, it's exactly the same word, means the face of God.

Remember his earlier experience, he had come to the house of God, to the gate of heaven. Many people come to the house of God, will never make it to the face of God.

That's why it's a good idea, not to call church buildings God's house. Because that gives the totally wrong idea, that simply by coming, by a kind of osmosis, something will rub off.

[19 : 39] What Jacob comes to now, is the face of God. Jacob comes to God himself, further up, and further in. Too often, if we talk about the house of God, we too often identify that, with ways of doing things, with particular buildings, particular traditions, and so on.

But unless we have a direct meeting, with God, then what happens is, we become bored, we become critical, we become entirely centred, on ourselves.

Jacob has gone, to a direct meeting, with God himself. And that is the, that's the whole point, of coming together. And that's why the scriptures, must be at the centre, of what we do, when we come together.

Because it's through the scriptures, that God reveals himself. It's through the, it's through the written word, that the living word, Christ Jesus, comes to us, in all his glory, in all his power, to change.

But, what about this last verse? This seems a crashing anticlimax, doesn't it? We have this brilliant story, and then we have this, rather odd business, about to this day, the people of Israel, do not eat the sinew, of the thigh, this is on the hip socket.

[20 : 57] Well, so what? Wonderful, that's exciting, isn't it? It seems a terrible anticlimax, but surely, it's not. Surely, what's being said here, is that this was, no wonderful experience, which was soon forgotten.

This experience, would mark Jacob, for life. He would never be, the same again, and he would have, the scars, to prove it. Just as, God's people, would never be, the same again.

When we have, dealings with God, this will mark us, for life. John Piper, who many of you, heard a few weeks ago, told, a fascinating story, not here in Glasgow, but in the London Conference.

This is a story, about someone, who's part of his, ministry team. And this man, was driving, along the road, with his daughter, at that time, in her late teens. And suddenly, she became, desperately ill.

She went into, a kind of fit, and she was having, tremendous difficulty, in breathing. He drew up, at the side of the road, and he panicked. He'd forgotten, to take his mobile, phone with him.

[22 : 06] There seemed, nobody around. And he did his best, but as the seconds, passed, the girl became, became more, and more distressed. Her breathing, seemed, seemed as if, it was going to stop.

And just at this moment, a car, drew up, behind them. And in the car, there was a doctor. And the doctor, had one of those, now, there are any doctors here, I'm not a doctor.

We had one of those, one of those, those devices, which enable you, to give, to inject something, into someone's neck, which can, which can break, the blockage, and help them, to breathe again.

A risky procedure. Well you see, this doctor was there, he had the, he had the technology, with him, and he was bold enough, to take the risk. So he injected, to the girl's neck.

In a few moments time, she started, breathing again. Some years later, this man, the father, was conducting, the wedding service, of his daughter.

[23 : 07] And there she was, in her wedding dress, looking beautiful. But the thing, he commented on, was the scar, on her neck. He said, my dear, this is a wonderful day.

God has been, very gracious. Surely, that scar, will remind us all, to the end of your life. That you had, that God, in his grace, brought a doctor along, just at the right time, to do the right thing.

Now of course, I know what you're thinking. The God, who had the grace, to bring the doctor along, could have prevented, the epileptic fit, in the first place, couldn't he? But that is not the point.

And that's not the point, of this story. God could have prevented, Jacob ever meeting Esau. The point is, very often, God brings us, through experiences, that leave scars on us.

That leave marks on us. Because we have to learn, things about him, about meeting with him. He has to bring us, further up, and further in. We need to know, that God.

[24 : 09] We need to wrestle, with that God. Because, there is a deeper point, in all this story still. And I'll finish, with this. The man, who wrestled, with Jacob, that night.

The man, who left the mark, on him, is a man, who himself, has scars. As we'll sing, in a moment, still as of old, upon your body, bearing, the marks of love, in beauty, glorified.

There is no, there is no, Christianity, without the cross. There is no, there is no victory, without suffering.

And the fact, that Jacob, had this wonderful, experience, was left, on his body, a mark, on his body. You may not have, marks on your body, because of experiences, of God.

But, don't, have any mistake, if you are going, to have dealings, with God, there are going, to be scars. There are going, to be wounds. But these wounds, in a day to come, will be part, of the glory, and wonder, of meeting, with that God, who will one day, bring us, further up, and further in.

[25 : 28] Let's pray. Lord, as we, look back, down the corridors, of time, and glimpse, this man, Jacob, not very, admirable, not, particularly, an example, to follow, and yet, a wonderful example, of your goodness, and grace, which worked, in his life, and which can work, in ours.

And so, be with us now, Lord. Help us, to labour, and not to count, the cost, the fight, and not to heed, the wounds. So that one day, in the glory, of your heaven, we will hear the words, well done, good and faithful servant.

Amen.