

## **Jacob's Battle At Peniel. It Is A Strange Battle Because**

Text: Gen 32:24-31

1) Jacob's opponent is his Friend

Suggested Hymns:

2) Jacob, By All Odds The Weaker, Prevails

98, 414, 178, 207

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Genesis 32:24-31, ***24 Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. 25 Now when He saw that He 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. 26 And He said, "Let Me go, for the day breaks."***

***But he said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me!" 27 So He said to him, "What is your name?" He said, "Jacob." 28 And He said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed."***

***29 Then Jacob asked, saying, "Tell me Your name, I pray." And He said, "Why is it that you ask about My name?" And He blessed him there. 30 And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: "For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved." 31 Just as he crossed over Penuel the sun rose on him, and he limped on his hip. (NKJV)***

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

This world of ours is one great battle-field, and life is a constant warfare of one kind or another. There are battles that are fought with material weapons of destruction, with sword and spear, gun and cannon, bomb and gas, etc. The history of man is written largely in

human blood, and the trail of his much-boasted progress is strewn with ruin and wreckage, devastation and destruction.

There are other battles which are not quite so gruesome and gory. There is the battle for fame and fortune, for wealth and honour, the mad tug of war for possessions, by means fair or foul, of money, and the quest and conquest of power and influence.

Again, there are battles not so sordid in nature. There is the battle for success against mishaps and misfortune, the struggle for a livelihood for self and one's dependents.

Then there is that noble battle for truth and justice. There is the Christian's battle for Christ and His cause, for God and His Word, his battle against self, against the Old Adam, and the battle in which he wrestles *"not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places,"* and for which he must arm himself with the spiritual weapons of God's own armour described Eph. 6.

All of us are more or less acquainted with these various types of battles, and no one has escaped them all.

Our text, however, presents to us a unique battle, the battle of the patriarch Jacob at Peniel on the banks of the Jabbok River. The account of it is intensely interesting and very instructive. May the Spirit of God guide us in our study of this struggle as we ponder Jacob's Battle at Peniel, the Strangest Battle on Record.

### **1. It Is A Strange Battle Because Jacob's Opponent Is His Friend;**

In our text we meet the patriarch Jacob on his way back to his childhood home, from which he had been an exile for twenty years on account of the bitter hatred of his brother Esau.

These twenty long, eventful years he had spent working for his mother's brother Laban in Padan Aram. It was at the Lord's direction

that he was now returning to Canaan, the land of his fathers.<sup>1</sup> Secretly he had left his uncle, who had now also become his father-in-law, with his family, his cattle, and all his goods. At Mount Gilead, Laban overtook him and took exception with him for having left him so stealthily. Then after making a covenant of peace with him the two parted.<sup>2</sup>

Jacob proceeded onward, but not without apprehension and misgiving. Rebekah, his mother, had not sent word to her favourite son that it would be safe to return home, nor had Esau in any way indicated that he had undergone a change of mind and that he was ready for a reconciliation.

To ascertain at least in some measure what kind of reception awaited him, Jacob cautiously *“sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom,* with a very submissive and conciliatory message.<sup>3</sup> The messengers returned without even so much as a friendly greeting from Esau and with the ominous announcement that the sheik of Seir was coming to meet him with a force of four hundred men. Naturally Jacob was *“greatly afraid and distressed.”*<sup>4</sup>

With the shrewd precaution so natural to him he divided his entire caravan into two companies to assure saving at least half of his possessions. Then, since the situation seemed so serious that human knowledge and strength could avail nothing, he turned to God in prayer and laid the whole matter into the hands of the Almighty.

The following day he sent another group of messengers to his estranged brother, this time with gifts selected from his flock, to appease him. That night he lodged with the company. But his anxiety over the approach of Esau made sleep impossible. After tossing restlessly about for some time, he rose and took the immediate members of his family to the south side of the Jabbok. Then he went back and sent over the two companies into which his caravan had been divided. He himself, however, remained alone on the north side of the stream.

While Jacob prepares to spend the rest of that night in quiet solitude with thoughts of, and plans for, the approaching meeting with Esau, suddenly, from out of nowhere, a strange man appears. Jacob is filled with fear at the sight of him, and his fear proves to be well founded. For the stranger advances and without warning falls upon him.

Before Jacob is able to think for himself, he finds himself engaged in a terrific struggle with an unknown opponent. The combatants are apparently evenly matched. Neither seems to be able to subdue the other. Back and forth they wrestle, with neither of them making any considerable gain. So they battle on through the night, until the first beams of morning light herald the break of day.

Finally Jacob's mysterious, unknown assailant, when he sees that he does not prevail against his determined resistance, resorts to a strange strategy. By a mere touch of the hollow of Jacob's thigh he dislocates the hip-joint. By this fact Jacob now perceives that he is wrestling with no ordinary opponent nor even with an ordinary man. This opponent is plainly the possessor of more than human, of supernatural, power.

Strange, isn't it, that he, armed as he is with omnipotence, does not use His almighty power to gain an immediate and undisputed victory? But no! He uses it only to reveal His identity. This display of super-natural power made it evident to Jacob that his aggressor was none other than God Himself.

Yes, Jacob wrestles with God. There is no mistake about that. His opponent later calls Himself God when He says to Jacob, ***"Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed."*** The person with whom Jacob wrestles is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the well-known Angel of the Lord.<sup>5</sup> For this reason Jacob, after the struggle is over, names the place Peniel, which means "face of God"; "for," said he, ***"I have seen God face to face."***

To have God for an opponent in such a battle — how terrible! Is it not a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God?<sup>6</sup> Others have battled against God and have lost, have gone down in shameful, terrible defeat (the people before the Flood; the builders of the Tower of Babel; the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah). Jacob must have thought of that. The moment he realised with whom he was contending this thought must have shot through his mind, “I, a sinner, face to face with God! Only a miracle can save me!” “Woe is me! for I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips.”<sup>7</sup>

But while others have battled unsuccessfully, hopelessly, disastrously, against God, they have been the aggressors, rebels against Him, despising His will, defying His majesty. That is always the case with natural man, with the unregenerate world.

But here, strange to say, God is the Aggressor. Without warning He appears and falls upon one who has all the while counted himself as one of God’s children. Can it be that God has disowned him, rejected him, or turned against him? Not at all. Jacob’s Opponent is his Friend.

Paradoxical as that statement may seem to be, it is the truth. Jacob is persuaded of it, believes it. And the terror with which his heart is filled at the first realisation of his Aggressor’s identity is overcome by a confident faith in this fact. Past experience has taught him that God is his Friend.

It was by God’s grace that Jacob was what he was. He was God’s chosen one from his mother’s womb.<sup>8</sup> His birth was a special miracle of God in answer to a pious father’s prayer.<sup>9</sup> Before his birth God had given him the promise of greatness and of dominion. He was blessed by being born to God-fearing parents and to a father rich in this world’s goods.<sup>10</sup> God graciously gave him the promise of the covenant which also meant that he was to be an ancestor of the great Messiah.

And although this blessing brought him the hatred of his brother, so that he had to flee to Padan Aram, to his maternal uncle Laban, yet the

Lord blessed him there above all that he could ask or understand, so that, standing here on the banks of the Jabbok near the Jordan, he had felt constrained to confess, *"I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, and now I have become two companies."*<sup>11</sup>

God had visibly directed his life until now and had given him the promise of a glorious future with the assurance of a safe return home.<sup>12</sup> Should God turn against him now when he needed Him so greatly? Was it not at His express command that he was even now on his way into the homeland? Had he not during this very journey been assured of the provident protection and guidance of the Lord of hosts?

Just a short distance back he had been joined by two mighty armies of God's angels, the sight of which had been given to him to reassure him of their continued protection.<sup>13</sup> The God who had thus dealt with him in the past, who had given him such glowing promises, could not possibly be his opponent now. He must, He must still, be his Friend. In spite of all appearances to the contrary, Jacob could not believe otherwise.

A strange battle indeed! And yet, in a way, an every-day occurrence. In a sense, God wrestles with all men, as their Friend. He wrestles, strives, with the unregenerate to bring about their conversion. Remember the conversion of Paul.<sup>14</sup>

It is pitiable that many men in this struggle do not recognise God as their Friend and that finally the time must come when God is constrained to say, *"My Spirit shall not strive with man forever."*<sup>15</sup> There comes a time when God must give some over to the hardness of their hearts, to be ultimately consumed in their own iniquity, when men turn the tables and become the aggressors and thus by their opposition to the Gospel invite their own complete destruction.

But in the particular sense in which God wrestled with Jacob He only wrestles with His children. He becomes their Aggressor when He sends them trials and tribulations and afflictions. In such trials and afflictions Christians must recognise the hand of God, and they must realise that *“whom the LORD loves He chastens.”*<sup>16</sup> God may appear to be their adversary.

They may be all but overwhelmed in heart and conscience with fear and terror, with the feeling of God’s wrath and displeasure. And therefore they must constantly remind themselves that He who appears as their enemy and opponent is the Lord, merciful and gracious, slow to anger and plenteous in mercy.

They must remind themselves of mercies experienced in the past; that they are God’s children; that He is their truest Friend; that He has loved them from eternity with an everlasting love; that He has bought them, purchased and won them for His own, with the precious blood of a divine-human Saviour; that He has in accordance with His eternal plan drawn them to Himself by His Spirit through the Gospel to make them heirs of eternal life with Him in heaven.

They must tell themselves, He who deals thus with me has not spared His own Son, but has delivered Him up for us all, also for me; how should He not with Him also freely give me all things? He is my Friend, the great Friend of sinners. How could He seek my harm?

The reason why Christians often wrestle so long and so fiercely through the dark night of affliction is that they do not recognise their Opponent. Sometimes God must take drastic measures to reveal His identity. He must strike a severe blow before His children realise who it is that thus deals with them, as He did in the case of Jacob when He dislocated the joint of his hip.

It is essential that we recognise God in all our troubles of body and soul. And the moment we do this our burden becomes lighter, and often

we see a blessing in it at once.<sup>17</sup> If only we always knew and realised that affliction and tribulation are not scourges of some sinister force, either earthly or hellish!

If Jacob had recognised his Opponent at once, that night would not have been so terrible nor the struggle so long. So we must realise that in our affliction God, our best Friend, deals with us. Past experience and His own promises assure us of His never-failing friendship. He will fit His wrestling strength to our own weakness and will certainly do us no real harm.<sup>18</sup> Thus in the end, if we persevere, the victory will be ours.

## **2. It Is A Strange Battle Because Jacob, By All Odds The Weaker, Prevails.**

Is it not a strange battle, this struggle with our best Friend? But it appears even more strange as we turn to consider another fact. That Jacob, by all odds the weaker, prevails.

As Jacob wrestles and finally recognises his Opponent by the mysterious dislocation of his hip as God, morning breaks over the eastern horizon. His assailant suggests that the struggle be terminated, saying, ***“Let Me go, for the day breaks.”***

One would think that Jacob would heartily welcome the suggestion, that he would be glad to have the battle ended, especially also because of the painful injury to his hip, that he would breathe a sigh of relief and say, ***“How thankful I am that this is over!”*** One would suppose that the moment he became aware that it was God with whom he was wrestling he would have believed his case hopeless and that he would now plead with his divine opponent, ***“Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”***<sup>19</sup>

But to our surprise, Jacob clings to his Opponent and refuses to let Him go. With iron determination and unflinching resolve he declares, ***“I will not let You go unless You bless me!”*** And to our amazement his Opponent yields. Jacob has won the battle. God confesses to him, ***“Your***

***name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.***”

How astounding! Jacob the weaker, a weak mortal, his Opponent the great and almighty God, and Jacob gains the victory! Have you ever heard of a battle in which the weaker prevails?

Perhaps you say, “*Yes, I have heard of battles in which the weaker were the victors.*” Perhaps you point to Gideon’s victory over the Midianites,<sup>20</sup> to David’s victory over the giant Goliath,<sup>21</sup> etc. True, in a way. And yet, after all, the victors were not really the weaker in these cases. We must not forget that God was on their side, and God and a righteous man always constitute a majority against all odds. But here God is on the other side. Here the odds are entirely against Jacob. And yet he comes out the victor. How is that?

Jacob has one invincible weapon, a weapon always effective, especially in every battle with God. He resorts to faith-inspired prayer, “***I will not let You go unless You bless me!***” Jacob’s struggle at Peniel is therefore not merely, nor even primarily, a physical contest, but also, and especially, a spiritual battle.

As soon as he recognises his opponent as the God of all grace, he also is persuaded that this struggle is not so terrible after all. In fact, it is a glorious opportunity. He cannot let it slip by. He must make the most of it. To release his Opponent without gaining a decided victory would be a sad mistake. He must hold God, hold Him not only in a physical way, but especially spiritually. He must hold Him by His word, cling in faith to His promises of grace and on the basis of them dictate the terms upon which this battle is to be concluded.

“***I will not,***” says he, “***I will not let You go unless You bless me!***” Jacob has gained his point. His faith is victorious. No sooner is the prayer of faith spoken than the battle is over. God surrenders, gladly

surrenders. Jacob has triumphed. As a token of his singular victory God gives him a new and significant name.

He says to him, “*What is your name?*” And he says, “*Jacob.*” And the Lord declares, “*Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.*” And God does as Jacob has asked Him to do. “*He blessed him there.*” Here is faith triumphant, faith which can move not only mountains, but the almighty God Himself.

This singular battle and its glorious victory of faith is an important, outstanding event in the life of the patriarch Jacob. The influence of Jacob’s experience at Peniel was not limited to the brief time of its actual existence. His faith had been tested severely, and by standing the test, it had been strengthened immeasurably.

From now on it shines forth with unclouded beauty and takes its place beside the faith of his fathers, of Isaac and Abraham, in its reliance on God and His special promises. In overcoming his heavenly opponent as he did, he had at the same time vanquished all earthly enemies, and with the so particularly positive promise of God’s blessing given to him in his victory he is ready for the future with all its possibilities.

Henceforth he goes without fear or misgiving to meet his brother. He has been in school and has learned his lesson well, the lesson of the vast superiority of spiritual strength to physical power and mental cunning and sound judgement. To remind him of this struggle, this victory, and its lessons, he keeps the mark of a dislocated hip, which causes him to limp on his hip. He is now an experienced, battle-scarred soldier.

We, my friends, need to learn Jacob’s lesson. We need to learn to know the great, the enormous, inexhaustible resources which as children of God we have at our disposal, within reach of our prayers. Scripture says “*The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.*”<sup>22</sup>

It is a truth to remember especially when we are bowed down under the burden of tribulation.

If we had thoroughly learned its lesson, we should not wrestle so long in vain when we come to our Peniels. We should realise that the best course is to take recourse to God in fervent, confident prayer; that in our trials God takes us into His school, from which we shall come forth better equipped for life; that in our trials He offers us the opportunity of great spiritual victories.

We read in 1 Peter 4:12, <sup>12</sup> *Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you.* God sends chastening trials “for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness. <sup>11</sup> *Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*<sup>23</sup> Through such training our faith is rendered pure, true, and precious, and we ourselves are thoroughly prepared, strengthened, and founded to eternal life.<sup>24</sup>

Dear Christian, God wants you to wrestle with Him. That is why He sends you trials. When He attacks you with them, He does not want you to cringe and whine, much less to sit back and grumble. He wants you to react. He wants to exercise you, to make you strong and skilful, not physically or mentally, but spiritually.

He wants you to bring your faith into action. It is plain to see that God was pleased with the manner in which Jacob bore himself in the conflict at Peniel. He wants you to battle like that. He Himself teaches you the tactics. You know from His Word that His might is strong, but that His mercy is stronger and that an appeal to His mercy is never made in vain. God is bound by His Word.

He expects you to know that Word and to hold Him to it, to hold Him by His gracious promises, and to wrest from Him by faith in prayer His

blessing, to say to Him, ***“I will not let You go unless You bless me!”*** Consider the persistent widow in Luke 18 and the Syrophenician woman in Mat 15.<sup>25</sup>

Jacob was bold, but it was the kind of boldness that God wants in His children. After all, that boldness rested on God’s mercy and the sure promises of His grace, and Jacob merely threw himself upon that never-ending mercy.

Essentially his demand, ***“I will not let You go unless You bless me!”*** is simply an acknowledgment of his dire need of God’s blessing, an expression of his earnest desire to have it, and an evidence of his firm faith that it would be given to him.

God looks for that same boldness in you. We Christians have every reason to be bold.<sup>26</sup> As believers in the saving blood of Christ, our crucified Saviour, we have a strong hold on God, and when we plead His merits, we must be heard.

It is in Him that, God is our Father, and that we have access to the Throne of Grace and the right to boldness before God.<sup>27</sup> We read in Hebrews 4:16, ***“Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”*** If we in all our troubles and trials come to God, plead with Him, wrestle with Him to get what He has promised and cannot deny or withhold, His blessing, temporal, spiritual, and eternal, we, too, shall be Israels, contenders with God, who to His own great joy prevail against Him.

Out of every such battle we shall go forth strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man,<sup>28</sup> blessed with a more robust and victorious Christian faith, better equipped and furnished to our Christian life, and more firmly fixed and grounded in our Christian hope. Thus shall we in our mortal weakness conquer God, and God’s strength will be made perfect in our weakness. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Gen. 31:3-13

<sup>2</sup> Gen 31:22-55

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 32:3-5

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 32:7

<sup>5</sup> See Hos. 12:4; Judg. 13:17,18

<sup>6</sup> Heb. 10:31

<sup>7</sup> Isa. 6:5

<sup>8</sup> Compare Gen. 25, 23 with Rom. 9:10-13.

<sup>9</sup> Gen. 25:21

<sup>10</sup> Gen 26:12-14.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 32:10

<sup>12</sup> Gen 28:13-15; 32:12

<sup>13</sup> Gen 28:12-15, Jacob's Ladder

<sup>14</sup> Acts 9:5b

<sup>15</sup> Genesis 6:3

<sup>16</sup> Hebrews 12:6

<sup>17</sup> Matt. 14:26-27

<sup>18</sup> 1 Cor. 10:13

<sup>19</sup> Peter: Luke 5:8

<sup>20</sup> Judg. 1:1-23

<sup>21</sup> 1 Sam. 7

<sup>22</sup> James 5:16

<sup>23</sup> Hebrews 12:10-11

<sup>24</sup> 1 Pet. 1:6-9; 5:10; Rom. 5:3-5

<sup>25</sup> The persistent widow, Luke 18:1-8; the Syrophenician woman, Matt. 15:21-28.

<sup>26</sup> Heb. 10:19-22

<sup>27</sup> Eph. 3:12

<sup>28</sup> Col. 1:11; Eph. 3:16-19