

I. Intro

We are in January 2013. January, in case you didn't know, takes its name from the Roman god Janus, who was the god of beginnings and transitions. He was represented with two faces, one facing back and the other forward. Typically, his representation was put above doorways. This January sees a transition from 2012 to 2013 and marks a new beginning in our lives.

The idea of transition is very appropriate for our text today concerning the life of Jacob, for we see in this episode that Jacob is given a significant new name – Israel. That new name marks a fresh start in his life -- a turning from the old Jacob and his defective ways to the new man of faith and trust in God.

I would like us to reflect on the text in the form of three antinomies. An antinomy is an apparent contradiction, the meeting point of two opposites. In Jacob's life, there were some clear antinomies. We can see one in the fact that though being the younger brother to Esau, Jacob is given by God the rights of the elder. Another antinomy is the fact that though by nature tricky and deceitful and apparently lacking merit as a person, Jacob is made the key player, the torch bearer, in the plan of God to establish truth and righteousness on earth.

There are three more antinomies in our text, which is a kind of interlude in Jacob's nervous preparations for a meeting with his brother Esau after some twenty years. Each antinomy is instructive, teaching us about faith and trust in God. May the Lord bless them to us in our transition into the new year.

II. Though Alone, Jacob Was Not Alone

The first antinomy in this account is that though to all appearances Jacob was alone, he was not alone. For a reason we are not told, Jacob decided to send his wives, children, servants and all his livestock and belongings across the river Jabbok -- a small river that flows into the River Jordan some twenty miles from the Dead Sea -- and remain on the other side by himself. Why did he do this? We can only speculate. Perhaps he had some compulsion to be alone to prepare himself before God before his meeting with his brother. Whatever the reason, he wanted to be alone.

But he wasn't alone, for it is clear that God was with him there in the solitary place by the flowing waters of the river. Indeed, that was God's promise to him, for he had said: "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Gn 28:15). All that takes places subsequently by the river points to God's presence there with Jacob in a very real way. At Bethel, the house of God, Jacob had encountered God some 20 years earlier. Now he

encounters him here at Peniel, the face of God. At Bethel, Jacob dreamed of God; here at Peniel, he meets him face-to-face, as it were.

If you are a soccer fan I expect you'll know that the song, taken from an old musical, titled 'You're Never Walk Alone' is the anthem of the Liverpool FC, which the fans sing all the time. The words are hung over the entrance gate to the stadium in metal. The song goes:

*When you walk through a storm
Hold your head up high
And don't be afraid of the dark
At the end of the storm
There's a golden star
And the sweet silver song of a lark*

*Walk on through the wind
Walk on through the rain
Though your dreams be tossed and blown
Walk on, walk on, with hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone
You'll never walk alone.*

Nice thoughts. However, the companionship that is in view seems to be that of friends and family. That's not to be disparaged, but for the believer, it falls short, for the child of God knows that true companionship can only be in and with the Lord. Human companionship will ultimately fail, but not that of the Lord. Only the believer 'never walks alone.'

Nowadays, solitariness, being by oneself, tends to be seen negatively. Social networking media like Twitter and Facebook encourage people to be constantly engaged in some form of communication or chatter, even if it's about the most trivial matters. People apparently become fearful if their Smart phones don't work and they are cut off from the virtual world. It seems that constant communication with others is needed to give people a sense of importance and self-worth; and simply being alone with one's thoughts, meditating, is to be avoided at all costs.

But the Bible shows us that solitariness must have its place in our lives; we should not be afraid of it. Jesus sought a solitary place to commune with his heavenly Father and (Mk 6:6) encouraged his disciples to get away too. He taught his disciples: "But you when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen" (Matt 6:6). Think of John the apostle, who in his isolation, exiled on the isle of Patmos, was given stupendous revelations of what was to come. Throughout the Bible, we find the state of loneliness being an opportune time for God to speak to his people.

If you and I would know more of God, we will need to keep the social networks and all the 'friends' at bay, shut the door on the world, and get alone with him. If we don't, our spiritual lives will be impoverished and we will miss God's directions for our lives.

III. Jacob's Struggle With a Man Pointed to His Struggle With God

What happens next in the Biblical account is undoubtedly very strange. A man, a stranger, appears. One thing leads to another and a nighttime wrestling match ensues between Jacob and the stranger. Was Jacob provoked? Was he trying to defend himself? Was this some kind of 'Smackdown' wrestling contest like we can see on TV? We are not told. We don't know the details; we know only that there was this unique physical struggle, an encounter that was down and preserved by the OT people of God and the inspired writers. The physical encounter is in some way connected with the name of the river, for the word for wrestling sounds like the name Jabbok.

If this event seems strange, it might help to realize that truth can sometimes be stranger than fiction. Sometimes, the most unpredictable, bizarre events can occur. Let me give you one example. One day at Don Mueang International Airport over twenty years ago, passengers were checking in as normal in the airport lounge. Suddenly, all the passengers found themselves running for their lives. Why? A bullock was running amok in the lounge, scattering passengers and luggage as it looked for a way out! It had escaped from a rail car that was being loaded at the station opposite the airport, run up the ramp to the airport, and charged into the lounge. What were the odds of a passenger confronting a wild bullock in that modern airport lounge that day? A million to one, probably. But it happened.

Jacob's nighttime encounter at the Jabbok seems similarly bizarre. However, it was not just by chance, for the hand of God was in it. The man Jacob wrestled was no mere mortal. Jacob realizes this after he twice asks him "Tell me your name" and receives no reply. The man's refusal to reveal his name shows his mysterious, divine origins. He also has amazing power, for in the fighting, he numbs or dislocates Jacob's thigh, probably touching the sciatic nerve, rendering him lame. This man is evidently an angel of God, as Jacob realizes, when he declares: "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared" (v 30). To see God's angel was to see God himself.

Jacob has already encountered angels in his life. His dream at Bethel was all about them and as he leaves Haran, he meets angels (32:1), calling the place Mahanaim, or "two camps." This mysterious angelic presence in Jacob's life indicates his importance in the great redemptive plan of God and show the Lord's concern to fulfill his promise to ever be with him. We should note that angelic ministry was also a feature of Jesus' life. They announced his birth and strengthened him after he was tempted by Satan.

It follows that Jacob's wrestling with this divine representative is more than a mere physical struggle. It points to something else. It has often been said the wrestling refers to prayer, and how we have to wrestle in prayer with God. However, although this episode may be an illustration of prayer, there is no evidence that this is what is meant by the writer. In fact, what the wrestling points to is Jacob's conflict and struggle with man, which represent his struggle with God.

The word struggle has both negative and positive features. Negatively, it refers to his self-seeking and reliance on his wit and cunning to advance himself. His name, Jacob means ‘supplanter,’ which is what he became for Esau, taking over his status and wealth. He was also in conflict with his father and his uncle Laban. And he struggled with God in a similar way. Knowing God’s revealed will concerning the chosen line, he used trickery to advance his cause and prosper himself. His character defects caused him to be at odds with God and man.

But now there is a positive aspect to his struggle with God. We see this in his determination to be blessed by the angel: “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” This shows Jacob’s hunger for God’s favor and guidance in his life. This is confirmed when he is given a new name – “Israel,” or ‘he who fights or strives.’ His new name represents a new start for him. His fighting qualities, wit, and cunning are now baptized into the service of God and are no longer an obstacle. His new name will give hope to all his descendents that they too will be enabled to overcome human enemies and triumph when tested by God.

Jacob’s unusual struggle with the angel illustrates the struggle every believer must engage in on his pilgrim path. In Eph 6:12, Paul declares: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” We are the Israel of God, born to fight and resist all that opposes the cause of Christ and the gospel. We are called to resist the world, the flesh, and the devil. Fighting qualities, like Jacob’s, are needed in our lives to keep us unpolluted from the world’s corrupt ways and free from the temptations that would pull us down. We may not be called to be Manny Paquaios in the boxing ring, but we are all called to be fighters in the arena of faith!

IV. When Jacob Was Weak, He Became Strong.

Such was Jacob’s determination to overcome the angel that the angel has to disable his movements. Yet, impeded though he is, Jacob continues the struggle without letup. In his weakness, he overcomes. But as the newly-named Israel, he continues to limp, showing that God has left his mark on him. In this weakened state, he carries his new name of ‘he who fights.’ This is the condition that God wants him to be in. He now understands more clearly that even as he fights against those things that God allows into his life to test him, he must depend on God for strength to do so.

Here is illustrated the antinomy that as believers our weakness is a source of strength. In 2 Cor 12: 9, Paul writes that God said to him concerning a physical disability that he had: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” He then adds in v 10: “I delight in weaknesses ... For when I am weak, then I am strong.” Commenting on this, James Packer writes: “What the world never understands – and what those who think that the good Christian feels strong and has life easy never understand – is that only consciously weak souls ever lean hard enough on the Lord to stand steady or walk straight in his risen power” (“The Way of the Weak is the Only Healthy Way” p 28). Our Lord came into this world to

give us this very example, for though weak and vulnerable in the flesh, with no apparent greatness to boast of, he was God's servant par excellence. It is only as we give up relying on our natural strength, wit, and resources and lean on God that God can use us and fully bless us. This place of weakness, not strength, is where the Lord would have us.

A word that one often hears in churches nowadays is the word 'empowerment.' One hears of ministers and leader seeking to 'empower' their congregations. Empowerment is seen as the thing. I have serious doubts about this idea, however. It's not that ministers and preachers shouldn't seek to strengthen the faith of the believers. That is surely a given. What disturbs me is that it seems to turn the church leaders into superior beings who alone have special ways to make the believers strong. In my mind, I see the leaders sprinkling magic 'wiffle dust' on the congregation, pronouncing some special words, and turning the believers into bright-eyed, hyperactive super-Christians bursting with their own strength. But church leaders cannot in fact empower anybody, being all weakness themselves. And in fact, in the light of 2 Cor 12:9, should they not be seeking to weaken the believers, i.e., getting them to fall out of any reliance on their own strength and depending on the Lord?

James Packer calls this weakening process "growing downward." It's the process by which our sinful self is diminished. We learn to stop kidding ourselves that we are persons of great importance to the world and God. We settle for being insignificant and dispensable. We stop trying to be great Christians and realize that everything in our lives depends on exalting our blessed Lord Jesus. Oh, to grow downward! Oh, to be weak that we may be strong in the Lord!

V. Conclusion

Do you know, I was avoiding speaking about this passage in Genesis, even though it's a key episode in Jacob's life? The reason was that I have a lot of questions about it for which I don't have the answers. My rational side said, "No, you don't want to get into this kind of thing. It's too bizarre" But on reflection, I thought: "No, that won't do. This is Scripture, God's inspired word. Even if I don't fully understand it, I can and should declare it. Who am I to judge God's revealed truth?"

And the truth is that we never do have all the answers. We see in part not in full. We can admit that yet still be strong in the Lord.

For even if we don't understand everything – and we never will -- we can focus on what we do understand.

We can focus on the truth that in Christ, we are never alone in this world. And our loneliness is not to be feared but embraced, for it is in such times that the Lord can enrich and strengthen us.

We can focus on the truth that we are called to be warriors for our Lord in this world, not spiritual wimps. Though lovers of peace, you and I have to put on the whole armor of God and wrestle with the dark forces arrayed against us and the gospel.

We can focus on the truth that it is in our growing downward and sensing our weakness, like Jacob, that we become strong in the Lord.

And for 2013, those truths are plenty for all of us to be going on with.

