

# A Study in Genesis: Grace at Peniel

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**Scripture Focus:** Genesis 32:22-32

Last week we found Jacob earnestly praying to God (32:9-12) which seemed to signal his willingness to “let go and let God,” as the old saying goes. Yet it doesn’t seem Jacob is quite there yet. Jacob’s guilt and his fear completely control him at this point. He no sooner says amen, than he gets back to plotting how to win over (appease) his brother Esau, who he is afraid will make good on his threat to kill him. Jacob organizes and sends ahead a very substantial gift to Esau, rather than rely on God’s promised gift of safekeeping.

Before Jacob could cross the Jabbok River, following his family, servants, and possessions, that same night he’s left alone and something very out of the ordinary occurs. It goes as follows:

- Jacob is made to wrestle “with a man until daybreak.” (32:24) From every indication this fight was real and physical (not a dream).
- When “the man saw he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.” (v. 25) This injury will be remembered with a limp.
- The man asks Jacob to let him go but Jacob responds that he will not until he blesses him. (Jacob seems very into blessings!) The man asks Jacob his name and Jacob tells him. (vv. 26-27)
- The man then declares that Jacob will have a name change. “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” (v. 28)
- Next Jacob asked the man for his name, which he doesn’t offer, but a blessing he does give. Jacob then names the place “Peniel” saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” (v. 30)

Being reminded that in the Old Testament, one’s name is linked to his nature, it becomes clear that Jacob (“heel-catcher”) was himself caught and had to confess his true nature before he could be blessed. A new name is the blessing. To be called “Israel,” most biblical scholars agree, means “God fights” or “one who struggles with God.”

## Self-Reliance and Grace

It seems throughout Jacob's entire life he had been demanding God's blessing under all circumstances for his own use, under his own effort. He was too self-willed and too proud to let the blessing just be given to him, freely, on account of God's grace poured out on him. "God fights" would be his name. Jacob (Israel) would now be regularly reminded it is God who does the fighting and is never defeated – not him. Not us!

So, is the hip injury significant in this story? Some conclude that when God touched the strongest ligament or tendon of the hip, he was teaching Jacob a lesson about self-reliance. Jacob's body would fail him, so would his will, if he did not trust God for strength and guidance. Now crippled in his natural strength, he would become stronger in his faith.

Self-reliance is incompatible with the gracious work of God, during the time of the Patriarchs, as well as in the present age. What is always sufficient is God's grace!

- We have knowledge, yes; skills and abilities, yes; valuable experience, yes; material resources, yes! And all of this is a result of God's grace. (James 1:17) It is not meant to encourage self-reliance and independence from God. What is it all meant for?
- Can you remember a time when it felt as though you were struggling with God – contending with God over some situation in your life? What was it about and how did it turn out?
- What would you say to someone who might declare we should never struggle with God? That it is sinful to do so and evidence of an obvious lack of trust.
- God desires that we literally REST in the promises God has given us. Reflect on this in a personal way. Think - I have gone through many difficult times, "but God..." I have experienced confusion and dismay, "and yet God..." Complete the statement (be specific), just as those who have believed and trusted in God down through the ages have done. And I'll bet you cannot go through that reflection exercise without emotion welling up inside you over God's grace and faithfulness shown to you over and over again. (Can't you just hear Jacob? I stole the birthright of my older brother Esau – but God...!)