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Jacob Wrestles at Peniel: A Sermon on Genesis 32:22–31

GERHARD VON RAD

TRANSLATED BY FRED GAISER

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> The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that 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. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed."

[1] Gerhard von Rad, *Predigten*, trans. Frederick J. Gaiser (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1972), 91–98. This translation often uses dynamic equivalence rather than literal equivalence to clarify the meaning of the original German text. A few sentences referring only to then-contemporary issues have been omitted.

> Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

Dear congregation!

This story is a touchstone testing whether or not we can still read the Old Testament—whether we can actually read and understand it. If so, we would inevitably want to retell and talk about it. And with such reading and telling of the Old Testament, Christianity would gain a new face. One no longer hears the malicious words of the National Socialist era condemning the Old Testament as stories about "cattle dealers and pimps," but why is that? Is it because Christians have risen up in protest in the full power of the Spirit? No, the whole thing is simply about being politically correct. Nothing has changed about the helpless inability to read the Bible and tell its story. Isaiah said, "The LORD has poured out upon you a spirit of deep sleep" (29:10), which makes it like putting a book in the hand of someone who cannot read and demanding that he read it. But he will hand it back and say, "I can't understand that." What a scary prognosis.

To be sure, stories like this are not like fables in which where the moral is immediately obvious. Despite everything that happens in this story, it is finally unable tell us the outcome.

But, still, it's remarkable that, in spite of the dark and puzzling days depicted in the story, the story still grabs us. The reason for this is clear. We sense that the story might clarify for us something about ourselves, about life, the world, and even about God. So, like a hungry animal, we have a well-developed sense, a rather clear ability, to make distinctions about what will actually nourish our internal unsatisfied hunger. Even so, dear congregation, the ability to read and tell a story does not yet mean we understand it. It may be that the opposite is true. Careful reading is only the beginning of our attempt to understand; it's the threshold of a door. The only thing I know at this point is that the story is somehow about me. Reading makes me understand myself

more clearly. It's like a movie that was filmed here some years ago that used many local citizens as extras. Later, Heidelberg residents flocked into theaters hoping to see themselves in the movie.

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Dear congregation, be assured that we ourselves appear in the Jacob story. Not as extras, but as the main characters! We can relate to this man who takes care of his family in the night. He is a restless man. The encounter at the ford of the river symbolizes his entire life. He and his brother are estranged, but even more importantly, his relationship with God is unsettled. He has dared to bargain with the sacred, and now he is afraid; to be sure, he is much more afraid of his brother than of God. We could continue at this point, but first we need to look at two things: this night and this morning.

We sense that dark things of the night are kept secret, covered over with platitudes. We see this in many forms, most distastefully in the meaningless, eternally smiling facade of our prosperity; we keep a cheerful mask in front of our faces as long as we can. In the night, things get personal, and when things get inescapably personal, we find ourselves alone. The sentence, "Jacob was left alone" is an immovable stone that blocks the beginning of our story. Isn't that the case? Whenever we come against the big questions of our lives, the things that really matter, we are alone, without masks. It's in those nights that the true realities of our lives are revealed, beyond all conventional sense of things. Here we are authentic. Such was the case with Jacob. Something horrendous[2] came upon him when he was alone, and all con-

[2] Translator's note: "Something horrendous" here is my translation of the German "das Entsetzliche." "Entsetzlich" is a term used frequently in this sermon by Professor von Rad. "Entsetzlich" is a strong word that can be translated variously, including (but not limited to) horrible, horrific, savage, appalling, terrifying, frightening, and scary. As a noun (as in its first use here), it becomes the Terror, the Horror, the Horrible. In this translation, I use more than one of these possibilities. In this first use, "something horrendous (Das Entsetzliche) refers to the "man" who comes to "wrestle" with Jacob in the night.

ventional, cheerful, and harmless possibilities were gone, possibilities that had been hidden behind the mask of prosperity. Jacob was a man, a vulnerable and afflicted man.

But just *what* had come upon him? At this point in the story, Jacob doesn't know. We read, that "a man wrestled with him." Unhappily, we know only too well that one person might lead another into deep trouble. It's bad enough to have a human being as enemy, but the story doesn't say that the man who fell upon Jacob that night was a man of flesh and blood. Jacob doesn't know what it was. It was something far beyond our rational understanding and everyday imagination. Still, this is not something we don't experience ourselves. This "something" doesn't just stand there. It jumps out at us; it wrestles with us. Nietzsche wrote, "We are sorest bent and troubled by invisible hands" (*Thus Spake Zarathusta).* In our modern poetry and paintings, we encounter expressions of this horror that inhabits the world and that we recognize it as our own. We realize that we cannot actually name it. It is more than cruelty, more than illness, more than leaden cynicism, even more than war; it is something even more horrendous. This is what Jacob experienced, because this "man" belongs not to the visible world; it is something that comes from elsewhere, and something that petrifies us. Many Greek tragedies express this zone of eternal ice beyond the known world, and in all its ambiguity and formlessness there is something of this horror of otherness found also among people of this modern age.

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But that has all been just the backstory. Now we come to the thing itself, the words and actions of our story. There, Jacob is a man who strikes back. Notwithstanding his anxiety, he tries to assert himself, even lashing out at this metaphysical reality. But note this: this raw violence is only one part of the story. Jacob *speaks* to his opponent, he questions it. Now, for Jacob, something other than anxiety comes into play. He needs to know what this thing is. Here, in this spiritual

struggle, the actual enigma of this story is laid bare or the first time. The heart of the matter is this: Jacob speaks to this horrendous "something," He questions it; he regards it as addressable.

This indeed is the greatest mystery of the story, that through this unknown terror—as though it were a thin dark cloth—Jacob addresses God himself; he says, perhaps frightening even himself, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." How can we explain that? Certainly not by saying that Jacob was fundamentally a pious man. Piety is rich, but Jacob's request is rather a witness to human ultimate poverty.

Perhaps he thought that with the early morning sunrise his anxiety would fade away; perhaps he had been encouraged by the release of his opponent. What might Jacob have noticed about him? Maybe something that is not so frightening after all.

In any case, he must have known or sensed that God is now very close to him. But we ought not ask too deeply about what he knew or didn't know, about what might be going on in his perceptions, beliefs, and doubts. We might discover that Jacob spoke not because he was pious but because he was impertinent. But does that really matter? Our Lord once commended just such impertinence.[3]

Dear friends, how many of us might want to say, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." But could we actually get those words out of our mouths? Alas, the terror of such an encounter is found in every one of us; we have to accept it, even as Jacob did. But can we actually do that?

Here, we find ourselves in a bright and friendly environment, but the dark unknown surrounds us. We would like simply to accept this reality, as Goethe did, but we cannot. The Incomprehensible, which can quickly become the Terrible, is found everywhere. It sits with us at the table and stands beside our bed; we just have to endure it and to maintain our faith in the midst of it. If only it were possible for us to accept this oncoming darkness as Jacob did, and through this darkness—as through a very thin membrane—to address the heavenly Father, to hold on to him, and receive his nocturnal blessing. We, too, like Jacob, want to see the early morning sunrise.

Dear friends, believe me, this word, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me," whether spoken piously or impertinently to the heavenly

[3] Here, von Rad refers to Luke 16:8: "And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly."

Father as though he were very close, even despite the surrounding terror, is one of the most insightful words that ever came out of a human mouth. One of the brightest moments!

> And following that, God gives him another name, under which God will know and accept him. Now Jacob wants God to see him as the one who handed over to God all his poverty; he was so poor that only thing left for him was to throw himself on God's heart, even through this terrifying darkness. This new name meant, "I have called you by name; you are mine." (Isaiah 43:1)

Naming comes up three times in our story. God asks Jacob for his name and then gives him a new one; then Jacob counters by asking this unfathomable counterpart for his name. Lastly, Jacob names the location. At first, that might seem a bit strange to us, but the reason is simple. People don't really know something until they name it. It's like a new star discovered by astronomers that, one might say, doesn't really exist until is given a name. A new law of nature must be described in words before people can really recognize and work with it. It's the same with the spiritual and metaphysical things. In the language of the Bible, when God renames Jacob, it means that he recognizes him and gives him a place in God's world. He has given him a place in God's plan of salvation, which means he will never take his eyes off him, now he will hold him in his thoughts, his hands, yes, even in his heart. All of that is included in what the Bible calls God's "recognition." As Paul says, "Anyone who loves God is known by him" (1 Corinthians 8:3).

Back to our story. It's time now to consider Jacob, and this is where we come in, we in the university congregation, we academic Christians, or more modestly, we who serve the primal function of being human. Now Jacob is completely human, one who recognizes and gives names. He has fully recovered. The story continues:

> Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him.

Dear friends, one can scarcely understand what was captured in these few words: "Please tell me your name." The amazing human

desire to know about the ultimate, about the foundation and source of our lives, about God himself—and its ever recurring failure. As we see, the mysterious partner never answers this question. He fends it off; it's as though he was once again hidden behind a visor. Jacob sees nothing but an iron, rigid face. We see that even with all our academic knowledge and research, we come up against this rigid, iron face of God, as he backs away, step-by-step.

But all our human desire to know is never of a pure, theoretical, contemplative nature. Underlying all our desire to know is our desire to gain control. We are like Jacob, who dared to reach for the Ultimate with his covetous hand.

With this "Please tell me your name," we recognize our irrepressible will to use God for our own purposes, but God refuses to let himself be used as one uses a natural or scientific law. God closes his visor and rejects Jacob's question: "'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him." How remarkable is that? This God who rejects Jacob's question blessed him at the same time.

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And us? God blesses us with joy, fulfillment, and even insight. In the shadow of his great mystery, God also wants us to do our own academic work, and, dear friends, it is best when we do this work mindful of our Counterpart, when it is open to God. This stance will actually be good for our academic work, protecting it from making itself absolute. It is always in danger of seeing *itself* to be God, and becoming sterile!

Now, in our story, it's the dawning of the morning. Jacob's terrifying despair has been lifted. Just look at him: it is a remarkable man standing there in the morning sunrise. He no longer sees himself as victorious; he is visibly somewhat battered and perhaps a little confused. But at least he knows what to do now. Once again, it's about naming, recognizing, and understanding.

> So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved."

Now, *this* is theology. Theology has its proper place precisely here in the morning twilight. One cannot do theology in the midst of that terrifying despair. There, one can only be saved or lost. But thereafter one *must* do theology, and woe to the one who tries to do it elsewhere than in its immediate vicinity of the fading shadow of such nights and their terrors.

Yes, you friends of the theological faculty, this overhang, this abyss, is where we have settled to do our little bit of theology! But if it is our task to recognize the place where one can encounter God and to clarify and preserve, where and when can that happen other than in this morning twilight?

There is something infinitely comforting about this morning. The narrator says, "The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel"—not that Jacob can be assured that he will never again be spared from such nights. He doesn't get that, but what else can possibly happen to him? He says, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved."

With these words, we hear once more the great enigma. Is what he is saying true? He has fought, struck back, moaned, and groaned. He has tried to understand, but has he actually seen God face to face?

Yes! That really was God, up close and personal. He has never been so close to God's heart as he was this night. And therefore, the morning into which this strange man limps already has an Easter glow.

Gerhard von Rad (1901–1971) was a prominent German academic, Old Testament scholar, Lutheran theologian, exegete, and professor at the University of Heidelberg. Translator Fred Gaiser is Professor of Old Testament Emeritus at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, and was the editor of Word & World *for many years.*