

The Face of God

by Watchman Nee

Watchman Nee's sermon explores Jacob's journey of transformation through God's promises, discipline, and the significance of encounters that reveal our true selves.

Scripture: Genesis 28:15, Genesis 32:30, Genesis 35:10, Isaiah 57:15, Romans 8:28, 1 Corinthians 2:3-4, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 2:19-22, Philippians 1:6, Hebrews 12:6

Topics: "Transformation in Christ", "God's Discipline"

Description

Watchman Nee explores the life of Jacob, emphasizing that God did not rebuke him but instead provided promises and discipline throughout his journey. Jacob's natural strength and self-reliance were gradually broken by God's persistent guidance, culminating in a transformative encounter at Peniel, where he recognized his true self before God. This moment marked a turning point, leading to his renaming as Israel, symbolizing a new identity and purpose. Nee highlights that God's work in us is often unseen and that our struggles are part of His divine discipline, ultimately leading us to a deeper relationship with Him. The sermon concludes with the importance of moving from individualism to a corporate identity in the Body of Christ, as seen in Jacob's journey to Bethel.

Transcript

There is one very striking peculiarity about the history of Jacob, namely, that God never preached to him, He only gave him promises.

Jacob was a man who stuck at nothing to accomplish his ends. What should we do with such a man? Surely at least we should exhort him a little, preach to him about his failings. Yet from beginning to end, God never once gave him one such word of rebuke or exhortation. Both Pharaoh and Abimelech reproved Abraham; Abimelech again rebuked Isaac; yet nothing like that happened to Jacob. But God worked. Without stopping to exhort or to explain, God disciplined him.

And God encouraged Jacob. The first time at Bethel God promised, 'Behold, I am with thee.' And He was! He led him. The natural strength cannot be changed by doctrine; we can be delivered from it only by God's chastening, step by step, until it is broken. And if God did not stay with us in this, we should certainly never go through with it. Jacob never longed to make progress; he never wanted to be spiritual, or to follow the example of Abraham and Isaac. God Himself sought him out and stayed with him and dealt with him over those long years, until at last at Peniel, when Jacob had produced his masterpiece of self-expression, God brought him to his knees and he yielded the mastery. God did every bit of it. We can well afford to trust the

discipline of the Spirit.

We have God's words in plenty, but we forget His discipline. We think that to hear sound doctrine is the only means of grace; but if we are His, the Spirit disciplines us all the time just as He did Jacob. He prepares for us a host of different circumstances just with this one object. Everything in our lives is directed by Him to this end, to bring us to the place of Israel. God is an acting God. He will never let us go. Everything the believer meets is measured to him by God. The chastening we experience is for our profit.

If we are His, then however bad material we are, God follows us. He is more tenacious than we are. We would need to be greater than God before we could prevent Him doing His work. While we are only men, natural men, God will have His way. While Jacob is there, however bad, God will pursue His goal of an Israel. Trust His tenaciousness, count on His invincibility. Look to Him, and in His time and His way, He will finish the work.

There is a further ground of encouragement. We do not have to know what work is needed, or what is going on, in order that God may do the work He has set Himself to do. True, the most pitiable people are those who are wrong and do not know it, for darkness is added to their wrong. But we may be the most pitiable people, and still God will take us in hand. Jacob, as we saw, was up against the most difficult situation in his life. His wives, his children, his possessions, himself—all things which were most precious to him, were in danger. Other people's things had never mattered to him; now, however, it was his own that were at stake, so he made the most detailed and careful plan.

Jacob did not know that he was exposing the nerve-centre of his strength. Esau had been brought on to the scene again by God so that that strength of nature might be fully discovered and exposed. It is God who leads us to it, bringing about circumstances in which we discover ourselves.

The whole meaning of Peniel is here. Our natural life has a life principle, which ordinarily we do not recognize. God may take pains to point it out to us, but we do not see it at all until we come to a place like Jacob's Mahanaim, when God brings into jeopardy the thing we have been most proud of. That pride is the thing God hates. The revelation of that natural strength kills what it reveals. Is there something we secretly boast of? Something we are very careful of because it represents Our greatest achievement, the best feature of ourselves? When God touches that, we are too ashamed to live. God's touch brings not only weakness but shame.

Peniel is 'the face of God'. 'I have seen God face to face,' said Jacob, 'and my life is preserved' (32. 30). God uses light to expose to us the true situation, and that is what brings us down to the ground. The light exposes what is the true spring and motive of our life. God in mercy must bring us there, where we see that all we have boasted of and gloried in is shame.

Remember, God is dealing with what we really are by nature, and at Peniel He begins His work. For there, in the light of God, we must be as we are, we cannot pretend. Pretence is not Christianity. We may very much want to be different, but what we are by nature, we are. Nothing hinders God more than pretending it is otherwise. The more 'humble' some people are, the more one wishes they would show a little pride, because that would give God a chance to get on with the work. For it is never our pretence, but only God's touch that brings about the transformation. If the work is to be done by me, it will get me nowhere. From being 'natural' I shall merely become unnatural. But if the work is God's work, the change wrought by Him has a definite purpose and direction. From Jacob He changes us to Israel.

Many of us do not know what has happened at Peniel until later on. We don't know quite how or when it happened, but things are inconvenient; it hurts to run! It is the peculiarity of the touch of God that we cannot now do the things we used to like doing. In speech, for example, we used to be confident, but now we are hesitant and uncomfortable. With Paul we say, 'I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power' (I Corinthians 2. 3-4). We go and we serve God, and we speak because God wants the task done, and not because, as once we did, we find enjoyment or gratification or comfort in doing it. We shall do the work, but fundamentally it will be God who does it, and not us.

Peniel is God's new start; it is not perfection. There for the first time Jacob was named Israel; yet after that he was still called Jacob very often. There was much that lacked in him, which may be the reason why God did not tell him His own Name there. Peniel is a turning point. Abraham's road had led to Shechem and on from there to Bethel and Hebron. These, as we have seen, were places characteristic of the land. It was after Peniel that God led Jacob over Abraham's road.

Yet even after Peniel Jacob went on with his plans. If we know ourselves, we shall not blame him. To change in a night is not an earthly thing, it requires the work of heaven; but the fact is that after Peniel Jacob's strength had gone. We easily call a halt to Jacob, but we do not so easily stop ourselves. Let us not interpret the Bible by theory, but see it in the light of experience. Yes, Jacob went right on pursuing the course he had been following before God met him.

When he met Esau, he discovered that he had wasted his time! 'Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him' (33. 4). All the crafty and calculating preparation had been to no purpose. Esau was ready to be reconciled.

It is good to notice the conversation that follows. 'And Esau said, I have enough; my brother, let that thou hast be thine. And Jacob said, Nay, I pray thee, if now I have found grace in thy sight, then receive my present at my hand: forasmuch as I have seen thy face, as one seeth the face of God, and thou wast pleased with me' (33. 9-10). Jacob's form of address to his brother may seem unduly flattering, but we should not regard this as simply a bit more of Jacob's scheming, however much there may have been of pretence in his humility. There was fact here also. 'I have seen thy face as one that seeth the face of God.' Those we have wronged will always represent God to us. When we meet them, we meet God; and we are judged, unless the thing is settled. How deep were the lessons God was teaching Jacob through this encounter with Esau.

'So Esau returned that day on his way unto Seir. And Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built him a house, and made booths for his cattle: therefore the name of the place is called Succoth. And Jacob came in peace to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Paddan-aram; and encamped before the city. And he bought the parcel of ground, where he had spread his tent, at the hand of the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, for a hundred pieces of money. And he erected there an altar, and called it El-elohe-Israel' (33. 16-20). Jacob did now what neither Abraham nor Isaac had done: he built a house and he bought land. He left his tent! But he also built an altar, to God, the God of Israel. He was not yet perfect, had not yet reached Bethel; and whereas God had set his fathers in tents, he had built a house. Yet he had advanced. There was trouble in Shechem. God would not leave him at peace, but let him meet very bad trouble (chapter 34) which would never have occurred had he not settled in Shechem. His very name became offensive to the inhabitants, and his whole household was put into jeopardy.

Then at last Jacob was sent by God to Bethel. `And God said unto Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there: and make there an altar unto God, who appeared unto thee when thou fleddest from the face of Esau thy brother' (35. 1). There at Bethel God completed His work, for nothing could touch Jacob's heart like Bethel. It was the place where his long experience had begun.

Bethel is God's house, the place where divine power is manifested through the Body of Christ. It is a place into which we dare not bring anything that is not of God. `Put away the strange gods that are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your garments: and let us arise, and go up to Bethel; and I will make there an altar unto God, who answered me in the day of my distress, and was with me in the way which I went' (35. 2-3).

As we saw in the life of Abraham, Shechem represents strength, the strength of Christ with us to deal with everything. That strength is ours to prepare us for entering into God's house; for when we arrive there, holiness will not be merely personal but corporate. In the Body of Christ, all is of God.

`And he built there an altar, and called the place El-beth-el', that is, the God of Bethel. At Shechem He was the God of Israel; now He is the God of Bethel. Jacob had moved on from individualism to relatedness in the Body. God wanted a house, a people, for a vessel. He cannot fulfil His purpose without a corporate witness. In the Church God is the God of Bethel, not just my God.

`And God appeared unto Jacob again, when he came from Paddanaram, and blessed him. And God said unto him, Thy name is Jacob: thy name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name: and he called his name Israel' (35. 9-10). God appeared, and not in a dream this time. He came at Bethel to confirm and complete what Peniel had begun. Jacob was no longer the rascal, the usurper-he was God's prince. That which begins when we see the light of God is completed in the house of God.

At Bethel God addressed Jacob with the words, `I am God Almighty.' It was the same address that He had used to Abraham. `I am no longer concerned merely to expose your helplessness, I am here to affirm my might.' God can speak like this to Jacob because now He has a vessel according to His heart.

Again Jacob set up a pillar at Bethel (5. 14) and this time he did something he did not do before: he poured over it a drink offering, typifying joy. The first time he came to this place it was `a dreadful place' and he only feared. Now he rejoiced. And now the way was opened for him to go forward to Hebron.

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