

“What’s Your Name?”—Genesis 32:27-28

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “What’s Your Name?”, is Genesis 32:27-28 → *He said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.”* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

*Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord* (cf. 1Timothy 1:2). Amen.

“What’s your name?” As frequently as this question is directed to us in our daily lives it is a very important question. Your name carries with it your identity in many ways. Aside from simply identifying you, it also says something about your heritage as well as your family relationships—especially your last name. In fact, whenever we encounter a name we may think of others with whom we’ve been acquainted who hold the same last name. Your name is important in relationships.

Your name also carries with it a perception which could be referred to as a “reputation.” That reputation says something about your character based upon your behavior. If your name conjures up negative

thoughts in a person's mind it is either because of rumors and gossip which has falsely formulated an idea of who you are or because of your own bad behavior which others have experienced "first hand." Thus, the reputation which your name carries with it can affect so many other areas of your life because your name is important in relationships.

Ever get "tongue-tied" while trying to read all those funny sounding names in the Bible? As weird as they may sound to us usually they too have something to do with relationships—especially a relationship with the LORD. Many times names were conferred based upon an experience a person had as he viewed that experience in relationship with the LORD. Not only that, because of relationship with the LORD, "re-naming" became important, as our text reveals. The importance of a name is something that affected Jacob's life and relationships immensely.

The name "Jacob" literally means "he takes by the heel." The idea is grasping the heel in order to trip someone, thus conveying the idea of a deceiver. In the case of Jacob he actually "lived up to his name." On two separate occasions he deceived his brother Esau and took the birthright from him. In the first occasion Jacob took advantage of Esau's severe hunger and offered a trade of soup for Esau's birthright. Unfortunately Esau conceded and gave up more than that of which he was aware. In this situation it was not just a matter of Esau's identity as the future patriarch of the family but also his place in the family of Jesus, the

Messiah.

Later on, Jacob sealed his place as the patriarch of the family by stealing the blessing of their father, Isaac, which rightly belonged to Esau, the firstborn. As Esau discovered the deception in the midst of the irrevocable blessing, he said to his father in Genesis 27:36 → *Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has cheated me these two times. He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing.* Esau immediately connected Jacob's character to his name. However, Esau's reaction was true to sin—he decided to kill him. Sin not dealt with properly will always breed more sin.

Our text brings us to the events which transpired before Jacob's reunion with Esau about fifty years later. Jacob was probably struggling emotionally as well as spiritually. He may have been apprehensive with fear over the thought of meeting Esau, thinking that he still wanted to kill him. He could have still been experiencing guilt before the LORD because of his deceptions some fifty years earlier. It appears that he was also forgetful of the Yahweh's promises made to him on two separate occasions where God declared in Genesis 28:14-15 → *In you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.* From God's perspective he had no reason to fear.

However, Jacob had to be brought to this perspective so he was approached by *a man* in the night. This *man*—very probably the pre-incarnate Christ—wrestled with Jacob but did not prevail over Him. Jacob refused to let go of his grip on Him until He blessed him. After asking Jacob his name, He said in verse 28 of our text: *Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.* The re-naming of Jacob to Israel pictured a whole new life for him, in relationship with the LORD and others.

The name *Israel* means “he strives or struggles with God.” In this incident Jacob discovered the only way to deal with sin was **on God’s terms**. Notice, God appeared to him in his struggle in order to bring him face to face with his sin **as well as** the LORD’s steadfast love and faithfulness, expressed in His forgiveness. The words, *you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed* are actually a form of absolution which produced a humility and peace in Jacob on his journey, as can be seen in the way the rest of the trip unfolded. He finally dealt with his sin against men and God properly by struggling through it **on God’s terms**.

In this struggle Jacob learned that it was really God with Whom he was struggling concerning his sinful deception, not Esau. Psalm 51:3 reflects this direction of accountability in David’s prayer to the LORD:

*Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You may be justified in Your words and blameless in Your judgment.* True peace with the burden of guilt lifted comes only in confessing your sin to the LORD and trusting in His complete forgiveness **on His terms as fleshed out in the Person & Work of the incarnate Christ, Jesus.**

Are you struggling with the LORD in sin, thinking that it is only a struggle with another person? Maybe you're thinking she or he has the problem, not you. Such sin not dealt with properly may even be breeding itself in your life to the point of struggling with yourself in guilt and despair. Repent, for Jesus Christ has dealt with your sin once and for all by His perfect life and sacrifice on the cross. He endured the struggle of your sin for you! Hebrews 12:3 tells you to *consider Him Who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.* **In your struggle with sin, the Holy Spirit empowers you to cling to Christ's struggle for you by faith!**

From this point on in Jacob's new life God's people were known by this new name given to Jacob—*Israel*. Later, when God's people were being called back into a relationship with the LORD because of their refusing to live up to their name, the prophet Hosea used this incident to remind them of the need for repentance and faith. He said in Hosea

12:3-4,6 → *In the womb he took his brother by the heel, and in his manhood he strove with God. He strove with the angel and prevailed; he wept and sought His favor. He met God at Bethel, and there God spoke with us . . . “So you, by the help of your God, return, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God.”*

This new name has much to say about our identity as God’s people today as well and this struggle with sin is also a part of our lives. We are called “Christians”—a name which the followers of Christ were given by unbelievers as they persecuted them. Galatians 6:16 calls the Christian Church *the Israel of God* because of faith in Jesus Who fulfilled God’s promises given to Jacob for you. As Galatians 3:29 says: *If you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.* We are the new Israel!

We are constantly struggling in our Christian lives as the devil continues to attack the Church of Christ in a effort to get us to sin. He uses worldly influences to tempt us and sometimes even lead into a sinful struggle with God again. However, Jesus Christ struggled with satan and was victorious so that we could live in a peaceful *face to face* relationship with the LORD forever. Jacob recognized His new identity in the Christ Who would come from his lineage and expressed it with another name in Genesis 32:30 → *Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has*

*been delivered.*” Peniel is Hebrew for “the face of God.”

Names have meaning. Names reveal identity. Names reflect relationships. We have been given a whole new identity in Jesus, *the name that is above every name* (cf. Philippians 2:10). It is this name we bear in the daily vocations of our lives in the world. There we struggle with the presence of sin and the devil in the name of Jesus, yet also prevail under the victory of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit as we *confess the name of Jesus to the glory of God the Father* (cf. Philippians 2:11)! Amen.

*There is salvation in no one else,  
for there is no other name under heaven given among men  
by which we must be saved.*

(Acts 4:12)

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