

Wrestling with God: Jacob at Peniel

In the most recent issue of *Modern Reformation* (March–April 2017), an issue devoted to the Reformed doctrine of the total depravity of man due to the influence of original sin, Eric Landry, executive editor of *Modern Reformation* and pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas, contributes to this theme with an article entitled “Living with a Limp.” The article draws its title and focus from the experience of Jacob at Peniel, where he wrestled with God and the socket of his hip was touched by God: “And he limped because of his hip” (Gen. 32:31). In the article the story of Jacob’s wrestling with God and his subsequent limp is incorporated into a homiletical exhortation related to the ongoing presence of sin in a Christian’s life; Jacob’s limp is portrayed primarily as a humbling but positive reminder of the power of grace in the face of such sin:

Only those who know the redeeming power of God’s grace can walk gracefully with their limp—telling others that God is indeed faithful to rescue them, if not from the effects of their sin, then from his wrath against sin, so that they can be witnesses to others who like them cry out for relief, for deliverance, and for blessing. (57)

“As Christians,” Landry states, “we walk the path of discipleship with a limp—still afflicted by the effects of remaining sin in our lives” (54). Although Landry’s association of Jacob’s limp with sin is made for the laudable purpose of providing consolation to believers afflicted by the power of indwelling sin, as described in Romans 7 (53), his interpretation is misguided, being inconsistent with the focus of Jacob’s encounter with God and with the spiritual significance of this encounter. Consequently, it misses the deeper significance of Jacob’s limp, which speaks of a believer’s positive transformation into the image of Christ for the fulfillment of God’s eternal purpose.

Jacob at Peniel

Jacob’s encounter with God at Peniel was not related to sin; it was related to the strength of his natural disposition, which hindered the work of God to transform him from a person who walked according to his own desires, strength, and schemes into a person who expressed the image of God and exercised the dominion of God. In his encounter with God, Jacob’s strength prevailed, a fact that God even

acknowledged (Gen. 32:28). Jacob held on to God and would not let Him go until He had blessed him. The Lord responded by changing Jacob’s name, indicating that spiritual transformation is the inward measure of the Lord’s blessing, and by touching the socket of Jacob’s hip, indicating that a transformed life involves a restricted walk. After his encounter with God at Peniel, Jacob, as Israel, began to trust and rely upon God in all things and matters, no longer walking according to his natural strength and abilities, as signified by his limp. Consequently, he became a genuine conduit of blessing to all whom he encountered.

In typology, Jacob’s life represents the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, a work that goes much deeper than just a recognition of the power of indwelling sin. Landry speaks of this power in reference to Paul’s experience in Romans 7, saying, “Sin is an ever-present reality for the apostle, just as it is for you and me” (54). Landry, however, in pursuit of his homiletical point, ignores the fact that just as sin was an ever-present reality for Paul, it was also an ever-present reality for Jacob, a person who knew that his entire life consisted of years that were few and evil (Gen. 47:9). Landry’s accurate statement about Paul undercuts his inaccurate association of Jacob’s limp with sin. If Jacob’s limp was related to sin, then as “an ever-present reality,” this limp would have been manifested in his walk prior to his wrestling with God, because he was a sinner both before and after his experience of wrestling with God.

In Landry’s homiletical interpretation, Jacob’s “weakness” becomes the source of his victory (57), and Landry suggests that acknowledging our sin can be a source of victory for us as well. This explication, however, is inconsistent with the account in Genesis. He states,

The power of God on display in Genesis 32 is strange. Jacob “prevails” over God (v. 28). God’s power is manifested in his weakness! Jacob can only know God in God’s hiddenness and weakness, not in God’s power. Only as Jacob becomes weak in his struggle against God does his victory emerge. Isn’t it the same for us? (57)

The referent of the word *his* in the phrase *manifested in his weakness* is ambiguous but is probably best understood as referring to God, especially since the following sentence, “Jacob can only know God in God’s hiddenness and

weakness, not in God's power," clearly attributes weakness to God, albeit certainly not as an intrinsic weakness but as a weakness that is the result of God's self-imposed restraint. The consideration that *his* refers to God is also supported by another instance of Landry's use of the lowercase pronoun *his* when referring to God: "God is indeed faithful to rescue them, if not from the effects of their sin, then from his wrath against sin" (57). Nevertheless, the sentence containing the ambiguous referent can also be read as alluding to Paul's word in 2 Corinthians 12:9, which says, "He has said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness." As such, there is some ground to suggest that *his weakness* refers to Jacob's weakness, a point that is seemingly reinforced in the next sentence in this passage: "Only as Jacob becomes weak in his struggle against God does his victory emerge."

What is striking, however, in the Genesis account is that there is no indication of weakness on the part of either God or Jacob. As a man (32:24), God wrestled with Jacob until the break of dawn, and there is no indication that He was only halfheartedly engaged in the struggle, that He was being playfully weak. And there is nothing to suggest that Jacob exercised anything other than his full strength in the struggle, because he clearly had the upper hand when he stated, "I will not let You go unless You bless me" (v. 26). The strength of God and the strength of Jacob's natural man set the stage for a titanic struggle, illustrating the strength of the natural man to resist the divine will. Jacob did not become naturally weak in his struggle with God; he was strong, and he remained strong until God touched the socket of his hip with His power.

Jacob's struggle in his natural man against the will of God mirrors the struggle to transfer the control and direction of our lives from our hands to His. Many hours are consumed in our struggles with God because we have confidence in our flesh and because He will not unilaterally impose His choices upon us. Rather, He waits until the light breaks; that is, He waits until He is able to expose to us our own desires for selfish blessings, and He waits for our acceptance of His light before touching our being, a touch that fundamentally breaks the strength of our natural man and produces a "limp," a different walk. A person who genuinely "limps" does not limp because of sin; he limps because his natural strength begins to recede with the Lord's touch. Our struggles with the Lord, struggles that expose the deeper dispositional strengths of our natural man and that expose our unwillingness to take His ways, are positive because the Lord can touch only what has been exposed in our struggles with Him.

The Spiritual Application of Jacob's Experience

In his association of Jacob's limp with sin, Landry states, "Walking with a limp...points others who feel the sharp

pain of sin and misery to the God who has given them the ability to feel that pain and who promises to rescue them from the power of sin" (57). In his pastoral application of Jacob's experience, Landry states,

Whether it is a relationship broken by infidelity or a body broken by addiction, these forgiven sinners may still walk with a limp for the rest of their lives. Part of pastoral counseling, of course, is to walk with them until the limp becomes more manageable, until they know how to more easily navigate life. (57)

Although caring for weak and downtrodden believers by patterning a life of living with the debilitating effects of sin and by providing the shepherding care that makes these effects more "manageable" is a laudable goal, this is not a proper application of the spiritual significance of Jacob's experience at Peniel. His limp does not speak of our need or ability to cope with sin but of our fundamental need for transformation, which can begin only when God is able to initially touch and break the intrinsic power of our natural man. As a result of Jacob's spiritual encounter with God, his name, meaning "supplanter, heel holder," was changed to Israel, meaning "one who struggles with God." To struggle with God is seemingly not a positive trait, but it is only when we genuinely struggle with God, being utterly honest with Him by withholding nothing, that He is able to impart the shining of His light. God is willing to struggle with us because He knows who will ultimately prevail when our hearts are truly turned to Him, when the veils of our natural man are taken away, and when we see Him for who He truly is—the Lord of glory; and He is willing to struggle with us because He knows the ultimate outcome of such a name-changing struggle—transformation into His same image, even as from the Lord Spirit (2 Cor. 3:16-18).

Jacob wrestled with God over who would be the Lord of his life, not in some misguided effort to deal with his indwelling sin. The limp that was the outcome of his struggle with God was not a reminder that he was a sinner saved by grace or even a sinner still in need of God's abounding grace. It was a reminder that he was a natural man in need of a continuing experience of the operation of God's transforming Spirit. Jacob's experience at Peniel, when his name was changed to Israel, was the beginning of this experience. However, it was only later at Bethel that God began to call him according to the name of Israel (35:10), thereafter referring to him as Israel (v. 21). The comfort that brings true consolation to us as believers is not that we can manage the debilitating effects of sin but that God desires to transform us into the same image of the Lord, an image that is surely freed from the slavery of sin but that even more expresses the God of glory in the church as the reality of Bethel, the house of God.

by John Pester