

Prayers

A prayer of praise

For the glory of creation
streaming from your heart
we praise you.

For the air of the eternal
seeping through the physical
we praise you.

For the everlasting glory
dipping into time
we praise you.

For the wonder of your presence
beckoning from each leaf
we praise you.

For setting us,
like the stars in their courses,
within the orbit of your love
we praise you.¹

A prayer for transformation

Lead us from that
which binds to that which frees;
lead us from that
which cramps to that which creates;
lead us from that
which blights to that which ennobles;
lead us from
which hides to that which celebrates;
lead us from that
which fades to that which endures.

Lead us from showing off to showing love;
lead us from being unreal to being real;
lead us from that which is partial
to that which makes whole.

Lead us from that which is false
to that which is real;
lead us from that which is self-centred
to that which is good;
lead us from that which fades
to that which endures.²

[Genesis 32:22-32](#)

I sometimes tell the story about the man who was the favourite preacher of my youth group when I was in my teens. He wasn't a young, trendy sort at all: in fact, he had been retired for many years. Born in Swansea in 1902, John would have been a toddler during the Welsh Revival, and he preached like it was still going on.

One Sunday, he asked the congregation in a sermon, 'Have you been converted?' And before we could think of an answer he added, 'Because I've been converted many times.'

To think that there is just one decisive crisis moment when we realise our need to repent and put our faith in Christ is misleading. There will be many times in our lives when God meets with us and shows us our need to change.

This incident with Jacob supports that thesis. He has had a dramatic introduction to the God of grace who knows him personally at Bethel when he saw the staircase to heaven in his dream. Now, having escaped from his scheming father-in-law and uncle Laban with his wives and children, he is preparing to meet his brother Esau, knowing that if the hoped-for reconciliation doesn't happen, he may be killed.

So what's new here? If the 'conversion' at the staircase to heaven was to understanding that the Lord was his God and with him personally too, what is it here?

Come with me into the strange story of Jacob wrestling through the night with the mysterious visitor and we'll see there are a couple of ways in which Jacob's vision of God and his relationship to him are opened up.

First of all, although we might well deduce that the stranger is either what we call a 'theophany' – that is, an appearance of God – or at very least God's representative, he doesn't have overwhelming power and he has to finish the

contest by wrenching Jacob's hip (verse 25). He leaves Jacob with a limp (verse 31) – although even then the man has to ask Jacob to let him go (verse 26).

But Jacob will only let go if the man will bless him. He does. But it's a curious blessing to our ears. The blessing is to give Jacob a new name:

‘Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.’ (Verse 28)

If you look in the footnotes of your Bible, you will see that the likely meaning of ‘Israel’ is ‘He struggles with God.’

How is it a blessing to be called one who struggles with God? It hardly sounds like a compliment, does it? Are we really supposed to struggle with God? Aren't we supposed simply to trust God quietly?

Well, we are called to trust God. The life of faith is about both believing and trusting. But it is an encouragement to be given permission, even within that relationship, to struggle with God. Were it not to be so, then a lot of the Bible would have to be deleted. Out would go the Book of Job, with its profound lessons about innocent suffering. Out would go many of the Psalms. Out would go Jesus' cry of dereliction on the Cross, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’

Jacob's blessing tells us that we can trust God and wrestle with him at the same time. It may be that we wrestle in faith with difficult questions about God and life. If people didn't do that, where would we be when people raise objections to the faith? Actually, it's one of my great sorrows that more Christians aren't willing to put in the hard yards intellectually.

It may be that we need to wrestle with awful circumstances of life, be they personal tragedy or worldwide suffering. Again, if we didn't struggle with God over this, how would we ever find encouragement for others who suffer? And where would be the motivation for practical action to help those in need?

If this struggling with God doesn't come naturally to you, belief and trust come easily to you, and you have a calm, serene faith, I am sure that too is a blessing. Your witness to the peace you find and radiate speaks of God, too. But do not look down on those who wrestle with God. They offer the whole Church a great gift with the fruits of their struggles.

And do not wish the associated difficulties upon anyone. But should you see someone wrestling with God, pray for them and support them, so that what transpires from their struggles is a blessing to them and to others.

The **second** point is this. Jacob is left with a limp, presumably for the rest of his life. And we also read in the final verse of the story – a verse that the Lectionary short-sightedly omits – that

Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon. (Verse 32)

Why is it important that Jacob is left with a limp? It is to remind him of his dependence upon God. Up until now, he had very capably been someone who could rely on his own native wit to fix things and to get out of problems. But he cannot fix his broken relationship with his brother – even though he has already hived off some of his flock to meet Esau first and be offered to him as a gift to soften him up. There is no guarantee this will work.

Jacob has to learn that life with the God who is with him is a life of dependence upon that God.

But how would a message like that be received by a man who has proved himself to be a sheep farmer, with sheep, goats, camels, and plenty of worldly goods to his name (31:5-19)? How easy it would be for him to regard himself as a self-made man, with all his wealth the result of his own farming skills and business acumen.

Perhaps that's why the unknown wrestler leaves him with a permanent limp. He needs to know that every good thing comes from God, that he cannot rely on his own native wit or intellect to see him through life. He needs God. He needs to trust.

It makes me think of the Apostle Paul's thorn in the flesh. We don't know what that thorn in the flesh was. It could have been his poor eyesight that we read about elsewhere in his epistles. It could have been another physical ailment. If we push the context, it might have been on-going persecution. But Paul says it kept him dependent upon the all-sufficient grace of God in Christ, rather than trusting in the extraordinary spiritual experiences he had had. (2 Corinthians 12:1-10)

What are the things that tempt us into becoming self-reliant? A successful career, a good reputation in the community, a great investment portfolio, property or land? So it is that even into the most glittering of lives comes something to make us limp. A family tragedy. Ill health. Job loss. The collapse of a business venture. An unfaithful spouse. I'm not saying of those are good things, but they make us remember that we are not self-made people, we are God-made and Christ-redeemed people. Our trust needs to be in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and not in ourselves.

And right now our world faces a limp on a massive scale with coronavirus. Our western society, that had put so much trust in non-stop economic growth, now finds its very foundations threatened.

Perhaps all of us need to hear in the story of Jacob wrestling the stranger a call to put aside our self-reliance and to renew our dependency upon God.

As the old saying goes, I may not know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future.

So surely it's worth trusting him – even if such faith involves wrestling with him at times.

Prayers

A prayer of petition

Day by day, dear Christ:
teach us from your word and your world;
lead us on our pilgrimage of life;
help us to live in your rhythms;
spur us to overcoming prayer;
strip from us all that clutters;
cherish through us your creation;
heal through us what is broken;
blow us to places beyond our comfort zones;
inspire us to foster unity;
reach out through us
with your justice, truth, and love,
that we may be aflame
and struggle for you forever.³

The Lord's Prayer

A prayer of blessing and commitment
Christ,
to whom the spirits are subject:
cast off the works of encroaching darkness
and bring us all under
your serene and victorious reign.

Christ, you are the refined molten metal
of our human forge.
Purge our desires,
strengthen our resolve,
sharpen our minds,
shape our wills.⁴

¹ Ray Simpson, *Tree Of Life (Kindle edition)*, p21.

² *Ibid.*, p47f.

³ *Ibid.*, p37.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p197.