

Questions
GOD ASKS US



What Is Your Name?

Names are important. Think about it for a moment. We come into the world without them. They are the first gifts we receive from our parents. More often than not they are chosen with great thought and care. We have them until we die. They are the way we are recognized, loved, and remembered. Perhaps this is why we like to be greeted by name.

In the culture of biblical times, names carried a much greater importance. They were not just ways in which people were called...Names were given to describe the essence of a person's character. They also symbolized the hopes, expectations, and dreams that the parents had for their children. Your name described who you were and what you were meant to become.

Keep these thoughts about the importance of names in your mind as we explore God's next question. It comes from a well-known episode in the life of a famous Old Testament character by the name of Jacob. You can read the story in Genesis 32.

Excerpt from *Questions God Asks Us*, pp. 49-50

The name "Jacob" is derived from the Hebrew word for "heel" (lit. "to grab someone's heel") and has the connotation of "deceiving" or "cheating." Throughout the stories of Genesis 25–31, we see Jacob cheat, deceive, and manipulate almost every member of his family and then escape when conflict grows. What's more, for over twenty years of his life, Jacob deliberately avoided using his own name. Once to his father who could not see, he lies about his identity, saying that he is Esau, so that he could receive Esau's birthright and blessing. On another occasion, after running from home, he avoids using his name again when meeting Rachel for the first time, introducing himself as a relative of her father and a son of Rebecca. The same sort of deception continues after marrying Rachel, as we're told that Jacob "deceived Laban by not telling him he was running away" (29:20).

Thus our story in Genesis 32 finds Jacob journeying home after spending twenty years away, with his previous actions threatening to catch up with him. Faced with the prospect of meeting with his brother Esau, who may yet wish revenge, Jacob finds himself at a turning point: he can face up to what waits for him or he can do what he has done in the past — turn and run.

Read Genesis 32:1-21. As Jacob returns to Canaan, he is faced with the terrifying prospect of meeting his brother Esau, from whom Jacob had fled twenty years earlier because Esau wanted to kill him (27:41-45). Now as Esau approaches with four hundred men, Jacob turns to prayer. In vv. 10-12, Jacob acknowledges God's past faithfulness by claiming he is not worthy of the "love" and "faithfulness" already shown him. Jacob recognizes that the success he has had to this point resulted from God's action on his behalf, which Jacob now depends on for his future as well.

Read Genesis 32:22-32. Having sent his gift to Esau on ahead, later that night Jacob sends his entire caravan across the Jabbok (an eastern tributary of the Jordan about twenty miles north of the Dead Sea). Jacob stays behind and remains filled with fear and distress. For all he knows, Esau still plans to kill him.

The text stresses that Jacob is alone. He will not be able to call for help should trouble come. And trouble comes! The text simply says that "a man wrestled with Jacob until the break of dawn" (v. 24). Based on what Jacob says at the end of the story (32:30), he presumes this "man" to be God. God and Jacob struggle for a considerable period of time, and when God sees that daybreak is near, God strikes Jacob in the hip. This blow has a crippling effect, but Jacob maintains his hold and fights for his blessing. That is when God asked him, "What is your name?" (v. 27).

Facing Up To Who We Are

"What is your name?" Hudson observes that the turning point in Jacob's journey "only begins to take place when he faced up to God's question and became honest about who he really was." If a name represents one's character, then Jacob (to this point) has been "the deceiver." That name encompasses the truth of who and what he has been – a supplanter, a cheater, one who lied to his blind father and stole his brother's blessing, one who had to run for his life and go into exile, one who struggled for twenty years with his father-in-law Laban, deceiving and being deceived.

That's the hard truth of who Jacob has been to this point. But for him to say his name becomes a confession that sets the stage for God to use Jacob in a new way. As for many others throughout scripture, a change in name suggests a change in character.

Can you see how significant it was for Jacob to answer God's question? When he told God, "My name is Jacob," he was acknowledging who he was and what he had become. He was being honest with himself and with God for the first time. He was becoming real. No longer was he pretending to be Esau in disguise or merely his mother's son. Now he was acknowledging who he had been and what he had done. He was Jacob, who had cheated his brother, deceived his father, and tricked his father-in-law. It was a moment of radical self-honesty that opened up the way for God to give him a new name.

Jacob reminds us that if we want to experience inner change, we must tell God who we truly are, willingly revealing all of ourselves. We need to acknowledge in God's presence those parts of our lives that need transformation—our anger and fears, our dishonesty and deception, our lustful desires and addictions. God confronts us with a question that challenges us to become totally honest and real. God asks us, What is your name?

Excerpt from *Questions God Asks Us*, pp. 52-53

Experiencing God's Blessing

Hudson reminds us that God “loves to bless” and these blessings come in “different and surprising ways.” Blessings are normally not gained through struggle; however, Jacob here holds God to God’s freely given promises (see 28:13-15). In other words, Jacob claims for himself what God has promised, and he will not let go until he receives a blessing (32:26). God responds positively (v. 29), but not until the exchange over names.

Regarding Jacob’s struggle with God (and our own), Terence Fretheim writes: “Such struggles might be viewed as divinely initiated exercises in human becoming, of shaping and sharpening the faithfulness of the humans involved for the deep challenges to be faced. God’s engagement in such moments in people’s lives is always a gracious move, informed most basically by God’s faithfulness to promises made, and in the interests of peace and well-being....We see a divine relentlessness in this moment of encounter, and a divine will at work on behalf of Jacob. God watches for openings, for opportunities to enhance the divine purpose in Jacob’s life.”

Through this struggle, Jacob receives the blessing (v. 29), along with a new name. The blessing comes from God; Jacob does not generate blessings for himself, and he finally recognizes the need of a blessing that he can only receive from God. Hudson summarizes this portion of our story in the excerpt below, reminding us of what it reveals about God’s nature to bless and of what we are called to do in response, just as Jacob did.

Do you see what is happening here? Jacob, in crisis, knew that it was God’s nature to bless, and he needed that blessing. His cry requesting God’s blessing was passionate, desperate, and demanding. However, **God did not immediately bless him; God wanted to know his name. There needed to be an honest disclosure about who he was.** For Jacob to receive the blessing that God wanted to give, he had to be willing to come clean.

There is a message here for us in crisis and in need of God’s blessing. We must tell God our names and share with God who we really are and what we have done. Usually we want our relationship with God to work the other way around. Like Jacob, we want to know God’s name. Often this indicates that we want a tame God whom we can manage for our own ends. We do not want God to be too surprising or unpredictable. Nor do we want to go into too many details about the mess in our lives. But that is not the way God works. If we want God to bless us, we need to face up to ourselves honestly.

Excerpt from *Questions God Asks Us*, p. 54

Receiving Our New Name

The story of the wrestling match tells us much about Jacob, about the man he was, and about the man he becomes. Jacob’s new identity is not received without struggle. God does not punish Jacob’s conflictive character, but challenges it and reshapes it so that Jacob is able to live into his promised destiny as Israel, which means “one who strives with God and humans.”

This is the truth of who Jacob is becoming, a new man, the father of a new nation. Traces of the old Jacob will remain, but he has matured from the person he once was. The once self-centered person will become the leader who, in his old age, leads his family down into Egypt and blesses Pharaoh himself (47:7, 10). This is the good news of the story. God gives Jacob a new name, and a new identity, and he is changed thereafter.

God was telling Jacob that he was receiving a new identity, one nothing like the one he had been living to that point. God was saying, “This is your true identity. This is how I see you. This is who I created you to be.”

Immediately following our text, Genesis 33 recounts the meeting between Jacob and Esau. Before Jacob wrestled with God, he feared the encounter with his brother. Now Jacob/Israel sees Esau coming with his four hundred men. He arranges his company, and then goes ahead of them to meet Esau. One wonders whether the long-dreaded encounter with his brother has lost some of its power over him, given the encounter he’s just experienced. Nevertheless, there must still be some fear in Jacob’s heart as Esau runs forward.

Instead of striking his brother, however, Esau grabs him in a bear hug, kisses him, and then weeps. It is a scene of reconciliation, a scene of gracious welcome, and overwhelming relief. And somehow, this encounter, this reconciliation, is for Jacob something like the encounter he just had at the Jabbok. In an echo of his earlier statement, he says to Esau: “Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God” (33:10). We knew Jacob first as the deceiver who took his brother’s blessing, and this scene illustrates a remarkable first step in the change of Jacob’s character.

To learn, even through deep struggle, that God sees us as both all we are and all we need to be, is indeed a blessing. Hudson writes, “When we face up to ourselves before God, along with whatever other blessings we may receive, we are always given a new identity. This new identity tells us that no matter who we are or what we have done, God has a new future for us. We are not defined forever by our past sins and failures.”

How do we find out what our new name is? The process begins when we experience ourselves as beloved children of God. Only then can we take the inward journey to face our inner shadows, secure with the knowledge that nothing we uncover can ever render us unlovable to God.

John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, reminds us of this core identity: “**How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are**” (1 John 3:1). Reflecting on this passage, Hudson reminds us of the name God has given us:

We are God’s beloved! That is our true name, our deepest identity, and our divine calling. We may find ourselves struggling with negative images about ourselves. Perhaps we struggle with a low sense of self-worth and poor self-esteem. Or we may feel that we have sinned too greatly to be worthy of God’s love. Or perhaps in light of some terrible and unfair tragedy, we believe God is against us. Yet the truth of the gospel is that each one of us is deeply loved, accepted, and forgiven by God in Jesus Christ. Indeed, we have been God’s beloved from the beginning of time.

Excerpt from *Questions God Asks Us*, p. 57

Answering God’s Question¹

What is your name? As we have seen, God’s question invites us to face up to ourselves. This is seldom easy. It usually takes a great deal of rigorous self-examination, a radical self-honesty, and much reflection on the way we have been living. Telling the truth about ourselves to God can be one of the hardest things we ever do. If it sounds too difficult, may I offer a simple word of encouragement. Becoming honest with ourselves and wrestling

¹ Portions of this section are excerpted from *Questions God Asks Us*, pg. 58-59

with these things with God opens our lives, like few other things can, to the incredible depth of God's grace and acceptance and power. We actually begin to experience in a deeper way our belovedness.

1. **Ask God to reveal the Jacob who lives in you.** In other words, ask God to shed light on those times when you deliberately deceive those around you; times when you pretend to be someone that you are not; times when you try to evade the hard issues, rather than face up to them; times when you try to manipulate others to do what you want them to do. Telling God your name involves sharing the truth about things like these and being prepared to wrestle with God until you receive God's blessing.
2. **Remember also that God wants to bless you.** Do not be shy about asking God for this blessing. Make Jacob's prayer your own. "*I will not let you go, unless you bless me.*" Try to be as open-ended as you can regarding the nature of God's blessing. We usually don't know what God's blessing is going to look like. Even though God is dependable and trustworthy, there is always a surprising unpredictability in the ways God deals with us. So, be expectant that God is going to bless you so that you can become a blessing to those around you.

Above all, hear the whisper of the Spirit within you, telling you that you are God's beloved. Claim your new name as the core truth of your existence. From your very beginnings you have been loved by God with the love of Jesus Christ which will never, ever let you go. Know this and live!

Discussion

1. How do you feel about your name? Is there a story or a special meaning behind why you were given that name?
2. Have you ever "wrestled" with God? About what? In what ways can you identify with Jacob? (e.g. struggling with God, persistently seeking God's blessing, facing in the presence of God the truth about who you are and who you are called to be, etc.)
3. In order to be both blessed and transformed, Jacob had to be honest about who he was. What stops us from being honest with ourselves (and with God) about who we really are?
4. What does it mean to you that your new name is "God's beloved?" What passage(s) of scripture most enable you to experience and remember your belovedness? Share them with your group. (For example, some of mine are: Psalm 139:13-14; John 15:9; Romans 8:14-17, 31-39; Ephesians 2:10; Isaiah 43:2)
5. How will you answer God's question in the week ahead? What kind of inner change do you want God to bless you with? Would does it mean to you that your new name is "God's beloved?"