

# The Struggle for Faith

*Readings: Genesis chapter 32, verses 22–31; Luke chapter 22, verses 39–46*

A month ago I was in Zimbabwe and we spent a week on Lake Kariba. The Kariba dam was built to provide hydro-electric power to Zambia and Zimbabwe and it was built at the point where the Zambezi river flows through a narrow gorge, the perfect place to build a dam wall. Back in the 1950s when the dam was proposed the local tribesmen said it would never happen. The gorge was guarded by the local river god whose name was Nyami-nyami, and he would never allow himself to be tamed. But construction went ahead and, at a crucial stage the Zambesi came down in the worst flood in living memory. Millions of pounds worth of equipment was washed away, many lives were lost as men battled with the elements and the tribesmen gloated; They said "We told you so" and ascribed the raging flood to the rage of Nyami-nyami.

Exactly the same kind of belief lies behind the story of Jacob at Penuel. The river Jabbok narrows at the point where Jacob tried to cross and local folk-lore had it that the ford across the river was guarded by the river-god who had turned back many an invader. So we have the story of Jacob wrestling with an unknown adversary and eventually Jacob prevails. What the Biblical writer has done is to take this legend, lifting it out of the sphere of primitive, superstitious belief and placing it within the sphere of Israel's faith. This is how Jacob experienced God; this is how Israel experienced God, and this is how we may experience God.

So we have the words; "Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day".

In fact Jacob was wrestling with his conscience and with the God who informed his conscience. Years before he had cheated his brother out of his birthright which was a serious thing in that society. As a result he had fled for his life from his brother's anger. And now he was preparing to confront his brother again. How would his brother react? Would he take revenge? Jacob was taking no chances. He divided his flock and settled down for the night. "And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day".

**1.** Transposed out of legend into the sphere of faith this story illuminates an important truth. Faith, and a relationship with God sometimes only comes after a period of prolonged and painful struggle. Jacob wrestled all night.

It is a truth we are reluctant to accept. We think that faith should come easily and much of our preaching suggests that it does come easily. "All you have to do is to have faith" — it's as simple as that!

And for those who do not find it that simple their struggle is simply intensified by well meaning assurances. The fact is that, for many Christians, the element of struggle is an essential component of faith.

Martin Luther battled for years to find faith. He even entered a monastery and took monastic vows — which was perhaps the worst thing he could have done! Even in the monastery he was tempted to unbelief. Once the temptation was so real that he threw down his pen and threw a bottle of ink at the imagined devil who tormented him.

And Jesus too, struggled. At the outset of His ministry he wrestled 40 days and 40 nights in the desert and each temptation was prefaced; "...if you are the Son of God". At the end of His ministry he spent the night agonising in the Garden of Gethsemane to know the Will of God until the sweat dropped like tears of blood. They were not crocodile tears nor was Jesus pretending. His agony was real.

And we need to assure people that there is nothing to be ashamed of in having to struggle for faith. One thing is for sure. If you hang in there the day will surely break, the light will dawn and God's presence will become real.

2. There is another dimension to this story. We are told that Jacob was wounded in his struggle and, from that day onward, he walked with a very noticeable limp. When asked why he was disabled in this way Jacob had to tell of his encounter with an unknown adversary. He was a marked man from that day onward. By this all men knew that he had wrestled with God.

And, if we have encountered God, then we too are marked men and women. I am not for a moment suggesting that Christians should walk with a limp to mark them out as having encountered God. But there ought to be a noticeable difference which marks them out from others. The difference is not physical but spiritual and moral. It is best described in the words of St Paul when he wrote to Christians in Galatia and urged them to evidence the gift of the Spirit — love, joy, peace, kindness, faithfulness. By this shall all men know that we have found faith and are disciples of the risen Christ.

Trouble is that any difference is not always apparent. I read recently of two men going to work on a London bus. They were reading the newspaper which ran the obituary of a friend who had recently died. And one line of the obituary ran: "Mr G... was a lifelong Methodist". At which point one man interjected "Fancy that. A lifelong Methodist. I would never have known it".

There was no doubting Jacob's encounter with God. Nor should there be any doubt about ours.