

“...Peniel...” Verses 1&2

1.

“And Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him.

2.

And when Jacob saw them, he said, This is God's host: and he called the name of that place Mahanaim.”

The rest of Jacob's journey back to his homeland was not to pass without further incident! As he and his retinue continued on their journey, “*angels of God met him*”. For us today, this is a remarkable statement, for how many meet with angels? And, at a time of false teaching and false sightings of ‘angels’ via New Age, charismatic and other modes... how do we recognise them when they are in front of us?

You may remember when three people walked toward Abraham when he sat at the door of his tent. Two were angels and one was Christ. Almost with every-day ease, Abraham recognised their status, even though they appeared in human form.

In this verse, Jacob evidently knew the beings he met were angels of God, for he says “*This is God's host*”.

Jacob recognised angels for what they were, even though, to us, his life was muddled with wrong acts and sinful actions. It is essential for us to know what we are seeing, for in modern times so many impediments prevent us from perceiving properly: unbelief, faltering belief, lies of bad teachers, untrue definitions, and so on. In our time – apart from some charismatics, who see angels everywhere, though they do not – no Christian *really*

expects to see an angel. Most of us operate as verbal believers in our daily lives. What we say and what we truly think can be two entirely separate entities!

Would you know an angel when you saw one? What if he was in human form? Would you be so

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confident in saying the being was an angel, one of God's host? Would you, on seeing an angel, just discount him and think it was an apparition or a figment of your imagination? Or, because of unbelief, would you simply not 'see' him at all?

The latter is impossible, for if an angel appears he is actually there, in front of you, whether or not you believe he is an angel! But, you might easily think of him as another human being, and thus miss the whole incident as holy, unless the angel forced you to your senses by godly means.

Jacob was met, then, in the desert, by more than one angel, as the text tells us. The angels (plural), *mal'ak*, were 'of God'. This makes them the messengers of God (from an unused Hebrew root word meaning a 'deputy sent out with a message' from a superior). Because there are two distinct types of angel, good or bad, we must know exactly who the angel comes from. In a world full of heresies and spiritual deceptions, many see angels – but not angels of God. You will note that an angel of God comes to a human being as a messenger. He does not just stand there to be admired! Nor does he speak nonsense or contradict scripture.

Immediately the angels appeared, Jacob said, "*This is God's host*" and named the place Mahanaim ('two camps', east of Jordan). This is an interesting encounter, for we are not told the angels actually said anything. Yet, they are messengers of God. The message seems to be that God was showing His presence and protection for Jacob. The angels were guardians sent to protect Jacob. Whenever God acts toward believers it is always for their good, even if we do not see it that way at the time! For this reason any spiritual encounter like this must give us confidence, even if we feel afraid or weak.

We have parallels even in modern history, such as the two World Wars, when soldiers in groups and ranks saw angels in the skies. My own father saw a huge angel, as did his company, with a sword in hand that pointed them down a particular road in France. They took that road. A company following behind went down the other road, and were all killed by the enemy. Angels also come to us in the quiet of night, or even in broad daylight. They always have a purpose, which we might discover by voice, thought or action.

There were probably many angels, as the word 'host' implies – *machaneh*, meaning a band, of an armed company, a camp of people. Their appearance was obviously a sign of strength and protection. The name given to the spot where the angels appeared seems to suggest a plan given somehow to Jacob. He was very afraid that he would meet his end by the hand of his

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estranged brother, Esau. What he does next seems to imply that he 'listened' to this angelic show of strength by putting a plan into action. Thus, he divided up his goods, stock and people, into two separate groups.

Verses 3-5

1.

"And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother unto the land of Seir, the country of Edom.

2.

And he commanded them, saying, Thus shall ye speak unto my lord Esau; Thy servant Jacob saith thus, I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed there until now:

3.

And I have oxen, and asses, flocks, and menservants, and womenservants: and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find grace in thy sight."

Before he did this, Jacob sent messengers to Esau. The plan itself was quite cunning and clever. The messengers went to the land of Seir ('hairy') in Edom ('red'), which was south-east of Palestine. At that time Edom was in transition; Esau's tribe was starting to take more and more control, and the previous inhabitants, the Horites, were diminishing in power. Hence the references to 'hairy' and 'red' in the place names, which describe Esau.

He wanted his men to go to "my lord Esau". The word 'lord' in this context, whilst used in the ordinary courteous sense, also recognises the strength of Esau as a tribal leader, and so the word *adown* refers to this strength and might.

Jacob's servants were to approach Esau with news of Jacob, saying that for many years he had lived with Laban, but he has now come away to go home, with huge stocks of animals – oxen, asses, sheep and goats and camels, and servants. In this way, Jacob was saying that though he went away empty-handed, he was now wealthy, and he wanted to "*find grace in thy sight.*"
Grace is

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, favour and acceptance.

What Jacob then did was a masterpiece of strategy. First, he sent Esau a message to 'lay the idea' in his mind, then, he followed it up with a 'drip technique'... the unfolding of his plan in stages, to build-up the anticipation. At each stage, Jacob could tell from the response if Esau was about to attack, and at each stage, also, he is breaking down any idea of attack Esau might have planned! Jacob knew he had done wrong before, but he did not wish to die because of it.

Verses 6-8

1.

"And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, We came to thy brother Esau, and also he cometh to meet thee, and four hundred men with him.

2.

Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed: and he divided the people that was with him, and the flocks, and herds, and the camels, into two bands;

3.

And said, If Esau come to the one company, and smite it, then the other company which is left shall escape."

After sending out his servants, Jacob sat and waited patiently, no doubt with immense anxiety. Such are men! We trust in God, yet we are not free of anxieties brought by circumstances! The servants returned with their news...

They had given Esau the message. Now, Esau was coming to meet Jacob, accompanied by 400 men. Naturally, Jacob saw this as a sign of impending doom, thinking Esau was about to kill him. But, he was forgetting a very big fact – that angels never appear, especially not as a host, for no reason! They had come to show that God was indeed with Jacob. No matter what the circumstances look like from the human perspective, God will act as He has planned. No human plan can supersede what God wishes to do! The mass of angels, then, were as good, if

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not better, than 400 men, because they are invincible!)

Even so, Jacob now feared for his life. In anticipation of being attacked, and of having everything kept as the booty of war, he divided up his goods and everyone he had into two groups. One group would stay with him and the other would head off into the desert. Then, if he attacked, Esau would think that what he saw was the sum total of Jacob's wealth, and be content with that.

We all do this kind of thing: we make contingency plans, when, all along, God has showed us His presence and favour. So, if you fail to act suitably, showing a lack of trust or faith in God at times, do not worry overly: Jacob, and all the great patriarchs, had their problem with anxiety, too! Sometimes, God acts instantly, but at other times, He has already put His plan into motion even before He prompts us to pray about it. In this case, He did the latter.

Verses 9-12

1.

“And Jacob said, O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, the LORD which saidst unto me, Return unto thy country, and to thy kindred, and I will deal well with thee:

2.

I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands.

3.

Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau: for I fear him, lest he will come and smite me, and the mother with the children.

4.

And thou saidst, I will surely do thee good, and make thy seed as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.”

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As he waited in dread, Jacob acknowledged God's protection in his prayer! We all do this, do we not? We pray outwardly with confidence, but inside we shake with fear. It is not that we do not have faith – it is just that the 'old man' in us tries to make us afraid, and often succeeds.

First, Jacob approached God with an 'historical' statement, that God was the God of his forebears, and that He had promised Jacob He would treat him well if he returned to his own country. In itself, this should have been enough for Jacob, but fear set in and overcame what was truly in his heart. There are times in our own lives when we move, bit at a time, away from God. Then, He gently or with hardness, makes us realise that the path we are on is not good: we must return to our 'own land', that is, to a path set by God. Our peace of mind relies on this.

Though we recognise this to be needful, and that God is prompting us, we nevertheless become anxious and tend to dither along the way. We start to fear what others can do to us, and imagine all kinds of woes that will befall us. Often, those woes do not come along and God gives us a smooth passage from our sinfulness to holiness. Our fears were all in vain! But, how many can make that journey back to God without fear? I know that I have failed to do so many times. But, what is good for Jacob is good enough for me!

Paul, too, bemoaned this very thing, that he wanted to do what was good and holy, but often did the opposite; then, when he wanted *not* to do something, he did it anyway! That is how the human frame is. And that is why God has given us the key – repentance.

Jacob's next statement to God is true: he was not worthy of God's mercies. None of us deserves anything from God, whether mercy or any other good. We are counted worthy not because of who we are, or what we do or think, but because of the worth of Jesus Christ. We avoid hell because of what *He* did, and because of His protection... as Christ said, we are clasped in His hand and whoever is in His hand He will never let go, no matter how stupid or faithless we become. Take heart, then, in any and all circumstances.

We are not even worthy of 'truth' given to us. That is, divine instruction and the faithfulness of God toward us. Yet, God gives us these things freely, because of His Son and what He did for us on the cross. God cannot lie and He cannot change what He has promised – and so those who believe, anxious or not, filled with fear or not, will always be the focus of His love and protection.

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Yes, at times we spoil it all by insisting on letting our fears take us along a different path (which is always filled with dread and lack of peace), but this is temporary. God will intervene, for He knows our human frailty and the real inward state of our heart, which is always leaning toward Him and His love!

In terms of time (which only exists for mere humanity) His response might not always appear to be prompt enough for us, but in terms of eternity, His timing is always perfect. My mother told us (six children) that she prayed fervently that each one of us would be saved in God's own time. It took 18 years for God to get to me, and before grace overtook me (and even afterward), I did some rather stupid things, giving her some heart-stopping moments. But, each of us was saved, one at a time! It seemed a long time to my mother, but to God it was all in hand, and His answers came when He had planned them to come into place.

Jacob, though accepting that God was on his side, still took precautionary measures and told God what he had done. Of course, this was not necessary, for God knew; He knows what we will do even before we think about it. In modern parlance, Jacob is 'hedging his bets', by declaring his faith in God and yet showing his fear by splitting his wealth, both at the same time. Again, we all do this kind of thing in our own modern lives.

Then, Jacob pleads with God to protect him against Esau's wrath, even though God had already promised to do so. Recognise yourself in all this? I do! Instead of being led by God's peace, he was led by his own fear. Do not think that any of us can always feel peaceful. Though we trust in God our humanity often leads us to allow fear to come as a barrier. The remarkable thing is that despite this happening, God will intervene anyway, as if ignoring the fear. Perhaps fear comes to show us the difference between human responses and God's protection. The end result must always be strength of soul.

Then, Jacob again reminds God of His promise to make Jacob the father of nations, and would do him good. God expects us to remind Him of His promises. He knows, too, that our human frailty will often rock our confidence in Him. He puts up with this because He loves His Son, and because He loves His Son, He also loves us, through and because of, Him. As human parents we love our children, even though they sometimes veer off the path or even give us great grief. God is moreso.

Verses 13-18

1.

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“And he lodged there that same night; and took of that which came to his hand a present for Esau his brother;

2.

Two hundred she goats, and twenty he goats, two hundred ewes, and twenty rams,

3.

Thirty milch camels with their colts, forty kine, and ten bulls, twenty she asses, and ten foals.

4.

And he delivered them into the hand of his servants, every drove by themselves; and said unto his servants, Pass over before me, and put a space betwixt drove and drove.

5.

And he commanded the foremost, saying, When Esau my brother meeteth thee, and asketh thee, saying, Whose art thou? and whither goest thou? and whose are these before thee?

6.

Then thou shalt say, They be thy servant Jacob's; it is a present sent unto my lord Esau: and, behold, also he is behind us.”

I can easily imagine the mixture within Jacob, the fervency of his fearful prayer coupled with the inward faith in God. Now, after pleading with God, he tries to settle for the night, awaiting the appearance of Esau and his 400 men. What Jacob did not know, is that God had prepared the heart of Esau well before Jacob came close to the land of Seir.

In my own life I have experienced this pre-action by God, when He has started an action even before I realised an action was required!

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Before he tried to sleep, Jacob got his servants to separate out from the goods that remained, gifts for Esau. The gifts were indeed impressive: 200 nanny goats with 20 goat-rams, 200 ewes with 20 sheep-rams, 30 milking camels with their young, 40 cows with 10 bulls, and 20 female asses with young.

Each group of animals was kept separate under the charge of different herders. They were to be sent out as separate groups. The idea was to slow Esau down and to give him time to lose his perceived wrath, or at least to make it less intense. Each group or drove was to set out at varying times. The first herders, when Esau met them and asked 'Who is your master, where are you going, and who do these animals belong to?', would say 'These belong to your servant, Jacob.' Thus, Jacob did not give out a message of hostility but of humility.

The herders were to say that the herd was a gift to Esau from Jacob, who is not far away behind them. Esau, hopefully, would accept the gift, thinking it was the only one. And this is where Jacob is clever. What better way to give a nice surprise than to give an expensive gift, and then to follow it up with even more? And so the first group with herders went off on their journey.

Verses 19-23

1.

"And so commanded he the second, and the third, and all that followed the droves, saying, On this manner shall ye speak unto Esau, when ye find him.

2.

And say ye moreover, Behold, thy servant Jacob is behind us. For he said, I will appease him with the present that goeth before me, and afterward I will see his face; peradventure he will accept of me.

3.

So went the present over before him: and himself lodged that night in the company.

4.

And he rose up that night, and took his two wives, and his two womenservants, and his eleven sons, and passed over the ford Jabbok.

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5.

And he took them, and sent them over the brook, and sent over that he had.”

Jacob then spoke to the second group of herders, who had their own distinct type of animals. The instructions were the same. He repeated this with every separate group of herders, and each group was sent out well after the previous one. Not only would Esau be pleasantly surprised by each new present, but his 400 men would be slowed down immensely because they would have to look after the variety of herds as they progressed toward Jacob. The objective was simple – to appease his brother in the hope that when they met, Esau would lose his rage. Remember, God had already started work on that matter!

Throughout the night, each group of animals and herders started out toward Esau, at different times. Then, Jacob tried to rest. This was only a short period, for when it was still dark he arose and took his wives, children, and their servants out of the camp, and “*over the ford Jabbok.*” That is, they crossed the river Jabbok (‘emptying’: the river or large stream cut across Gilead mountains, entering the Jordan between the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee) at a convenient shallow point or ‘ford’, which appears to have been in a wadi. He wanted them out of harm’s way when Esau came.

Verses 24-30

1.

“And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.

2.

And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him.

3.

And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.

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4.

And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob.

5.

And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.

6.

And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And

7.

he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there.

8.

And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.”

Jacob then waited, alone in the desert. Without any explanation, we are then told that Jacob began wrestling a man, and that the struggle went on until day-break. It is a very strange part of the narrative, but this is exactly what it is - an historical record of what actually happened.

The ‘man’? We are not told here that he was an angel. The word itself has a number of potential meanings, such as man, husband, a human being who is not God, a servant, a great man or champion.

In this text we see that whoever he was, he was a great man or champion. The meaning of ‘angel’, or even God, is implied in this text rather than given directly; if an angel, it is likely he was one of the great army of angels seen previously by Jacob. The two wrestled, literally, grappling in the dust and sand, until dawn started to break. The mystery man could not defeat

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Jacob (which was the intention), and so he *“touched the hollow of Jacob’s thigh”*... *naga*: he struck the ‘

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’, the outside of the thigh, where it joined the pelvis, disjuncting it.

Even with the associated pain and disability, the other man saw that he was not winning, such was Jacob’s strength and determination. So, he said, *“Let me go – it is now dawn.”* But, Jacob refused: ‘I will not let you go until you bless me!’ This and the ensuing conversation suggest to us that the ‘man’ was indeed an angel sent by God to test Jacob. Though this may be deduced, it is more accurate to say it was God Himself.

The man asked Jacob what his name was, and Jacob replied. The man told him that his name would no longer be Jacob, but Israel (‘God prevails’), because he exercised power with God and with men, winning against all odds, even when disabled. In this, says the angel (for only an angel could speak in this way), Jacob proved himself to be a ‘prince’ of perseverance.

When we meet what we think is impending disaster, we must fight hard and not give up, even when we are hurt or impeded. By doing so, we show God (and onlookers) that we are serious, and will continue in faith no matter what hits us. It is then that we become princes, great in the eyes of God, Who will reward us suitably. All we might see is the struggle, but in that struggle we become mighty and full of spiritual power, including over men and their wickedness.

Naturally, in this pause, Jacob asked the man/angel what his name was. ‘Why ask for my name?’ asked the ‘man’... and he blessed him. He then went away and Jacob named that place Peniel (‘facing God’). The text says *“for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.”* This is a fascinating phrase. Does it literally mean Jacob ‘saw’ God face to face. This would certainly explain his summation – that his life had been preserved, for no man can see God and live. (* ‘God’ refers to the three-in-one, therefore to ‘see’ God must be to see the Father, or perhaps Christ).

Thus, the ‘man’ could have been God the Father or Christ in human form. It might also explain why He (if God) wanted the struggle to end before the sun arose, so that Jacob could not see Him as He was... because to see Him is to die. (Of course, the struggle, for God or angel, would have been symbolic – either could have won without a hand being used! The struggle was real enough for Jacob, who was meant to struggle intensely with God, as a decisive moment).

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Or, did Jacob mean it in the rhetorical sense, that by seeing an angel, he saw God in the encounter? I believe scripture gives the answer. Jacob himself says he saw God and lived. In chapter 35, verse 1, God told Jacob it was He Who appeared to him that night. Therefore, though interpretation might seem difficult, I see this 'man' as God Himself. Furthermore, I see Him as the Father, because only the Father says that to see Him would result in death. Perhaps my interpretation of this is wrong, but I have looked at the 'clues' and have arrived at a reasonable answer.

Either way, it was a life-altering experience. When we struggle with God we will be left in no doubt that we have done so, and the result will be just as dramatic! If YOU have ever struggled in this deep way with God, it will show its effects throughout your life. Guaranteed! So, do not claim it unless you have done so... too many Christians feebly claim they have had this or that spiritual struggle, or have somehow struggled with God, when it is just their personal delusion, claimed to impress their friends!

Verses 31&32

1.

"And as he passed over Penuel the sun rose upon him, and he halted upon his thigh.

2.

Therefore the children of Israel eat not of the sinew which shrank, which is upon the hollow of the thigh, unto this day: because he touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh in the sinew that shrank."

'Penuel' and 'Peniel' are the same word. When the angel left, Jacob continued to walk toward the camp he wanted Esau to see, as the sun shone through. As he walked he limped badly, "*he halted upon his thigh*"

. That is, he was lame and would remain so all his life.

From that time forward, in remembrance of the struggle, Jews do not eat the meat or sinew of the part of the thigh affected by God's blow.

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