

JACOB - PRAYER: Battle of Faith, Call for Perseverance

VATICAN CITY, 25 MAY 2011 (VIS) - Continuing with his catecheses on prayer, Benedict XVI spoke in today's general audience about the Patriarch Jacob and his fight with the unknown man at the ford of the Jabbok. The audience was held in St. Peter's Square with 15,000 people in attendance.



The Bible, explained the Pope, describes Jacob as an astute man who obtains things through deception. At a certain point, he sets out to return to his homeland and face his brother, whose firstborn birthrights he had taken. Jacob waits overnight in order to cross the ford safely but something unforeseen occurs: he is suddenly attacked by an unknown man with whom he struggles the entire night. The story details their struggle, which has no clear winner, leaving the rival a mystery. "Only at the end, when the struggle is finished and that 'someone' has disappeared, only then will Jacob name him and be able to say that he had struggled with God".

Once the fight is over Jacob says to his opponent that he will only let him go if he blesses him. Jacob "who had defrauded his brother out of the first-born's blessing through deceit, now demands [a blessing] from the unknown man, in whom he perhaps begins to see divine traits, but still without being able to truly recognize him. His rival, who seems restrained and therefore defeated by Jacob, instead of bowing to the Patriarch's request, asks his name. ... In the Biblical mentality, knowing someone's name entails a type of power because it contains the person's deepest reality, revealing their secret and their destiny. ... This is why, when Jacob reveals his name, he is putting himself in his opponent's hands. It is a form of surrender, a complete giving over of himself to the other".

Paradoxically, however, "in this gesture of surrender, Jacob also becomes the victor because he receives a new name, together with the recognition of his victory on the part of his adversary". The name "Jacob", Benedict XVI continued, "recalls the verb 'to deceive' or 'to supplant'. After the struggle, in a gesture of deliverance and surrender, the Patriarch reveals his reality as a deceiver, a usurper, to his opponent. The other, who is God, however, transforms this negative reality into a positive one. Jacob the deceiver becomes Israel. He is given a new name as a sign of his new identity ... the mostly likely meaning of which is 'God is strong, God wins'. When, in turn, Jacob asks his rival's name, he refuses to say it but reveals himself in an unmistakable gesture, giving his blessing. ... This is not a blessing obtained through deceit but one given freely by God, which Jacob can now receive because, without cunning or deception, he gives himself over unarmed, accepts surrender and admits the truth

about himself".

In the episode of the fight at the ford of Jabbok, the Pope observed, "the people of Israel speak of their origin and outline the features of a unique relationship between God and humanity. This is why, as also affirmed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 'from this account, the spiritual tradition of the Church has retained the symbol of prayer as a battle of faith and as the triumph of perseverance'".

"Our entire lives", concluded the Holy Father, "are like this long night of struggle and prayer, passed in the desire of and request for God's blessing, which cannot be ripped away or won over through our strength, but must be received with humility from Him as a gratuitous gift that allows us, finally, to recognize the face of the Lord. And when this happens, our entire reality changes: we receive a new name and God's blessing".

Pope Benedict XVI Audience May 25