

Walking with a Limp

thoughts on

JACOB

and

WATCHMAN NEE

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SHAPING MOMENTS. Most Christian believers can identify the critical shaping moments of their spiritual lives. Perhaps an adverse experience—a death in the family, an illness or a business failure—turned our heart toward God. Maybe we heard a powerful Sunday message or an expository teaching that opened our eyes to God in a new, significant way. Or possibly we read a book that enabled us to understand the things of God afresh.

Like most believers, I too can point to any number of such shaping moments in my life. One of the most significant occurred in 1974. That year I purchased and read a book titled *Changed into His Likeness* by Watchman Nee. My life was never the same. I learned that one of God's chief missions in our lives is to shape us and mold us into the image of Christ. And I came to understand that God utilizes all kinds of circumstances and situations to patiently and carefully re-create His likeness in our fallen, yet redeemed lives.

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JACOB'S LESSONS. Nee's book examined Israel's three patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. My heart quickly identified with Jacob. Jacob knew of God's call even before his birth. The scriptures say that he was born grabbing the heel of his twin brother Esau. In Jacob's day, birth order was everything. If Jacob was to be God's chosen he must be born first. The name Jacob means supplanter or literally "heel grabber."

So desperate was Jacob for the birthright, that as a young man, he persuaded his

brother, Esau, to sell his birthright for a pot of stew. And later, with his mother's help, Jacob deceived his father, Isaac, into granting him the coveted "blessing."

Jacob's trials are legendary. We all know of his "wrestling match" with the angel of the Lord—the wrestling match that cost him the natural strength in his thigh, the strongest muscle in the human body. Following Jacob's profound, life shaping encounter, we surmise that he walked with a limp for the rest of his life. God had struck a blow to Jacob's natural strength.

Up to that time, Jacob had always lived in tents. He'd been a nomad. But from that moment forward, Jacob moved into a permanent residence in the city of Salem—the city of peace. And God changed his name to Israel which means Prince with God.

Nee's book so impressed me that a few years later I wrote a song I called *Jacob*.

Jacob, Israel,
My heart beats close to yours I know.
Jacob, Israel,
I'm a striver like you,
A striver like you,
I'm a striver like you.

After reading Nee's book I determined that I would learn from Jacob, that I would never grasp for the things that God had promised me. I decided that even though I had gifts and talents and even a call from God, I would never strive in my own power to make things happen.

As I looked around at all that was going on in my life, I could see that God was shaping me, preparing me, dealing with areas of my life that were not yet surrendered to Him.

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So, I determined to wait it out, to be patient, to allow God to do His work in me before I rushed ahead and tried to get things going.

WAITING ON GOD. Even though I had musical ability and a desire to lead worship, I never stepped forward to ask for this role. Three times however, in three different churches, leaders approached me and asked me to lead—a request that I fulfilled in all three cases.

I also did not actively promote my own music, although one of my songs, *Shout Joyfully*, did wind its way south I am told, from church to church, from here in Virginia, into Kentucky, and eventually to Mobile Alabama, ending up in the earshot of the president of *Integrity Music*. It is the only song of the over 140 that I have written that has ever been published and distributed nationwide. Ironically, after *Shout Joyfully* was released by *Integrity Music*, I sent in three separate new submissions—nine songs in all. I never heard one word in response from *Integrity*!

JACOB AND THE NATURAL MAN. Studying Jacob taught me about the natural man. What is the natural man? The natural man is that part of us to which we naturally turn before we turn to God to deal with life's daily challenges. For example, the natural man takes an aspirin to remedy a headache

instead of first turning to God in prayer. The natural man turns to a bank for a loan to consolidate his debts before first turning to God for help. The natural man turns to his own knowledge and experience to solve a problem before turning to God. The natural man is our own natural strength, that which we have come to depend upon throughout the course of our lives.

"You cannot use natural means to achieve a Divine end."

RESPONSE. What then is the proper response when God calls and gifts us to do His work? Is it to behave like Jacob—to charge ahead of God using our own wits and natural abilities? I think not. A call from God, and His release into service must not be confused.

One of the lessons I thought I had learned from Nee and *Changed into His Likeness* was to never, ever attempt to use my own natural abilities to accomplish God's will. But now, at the age of forty-eight, after thirty-two years of walking with Christ, I realize that I still have much to learn.