

Jacob Wrestles with the Angel and Meets Esau

Genesis 32:22 though Genesis 33

"I was born by the river in a little tent. Oh and just like the river I've been running ever since. It's been a long time, a long time coming, but I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will..." "A Change Is Gonna Come" by Sam Cooke



Figure 1 Jacob Wrestling till Daybreak

Here in Genesis 32, Jacob spends the night alone at Peniel for what would prove to be one of the most monumental experiences of his life. Here as he is preparing to enter the land of promise, he has an encounter with God that will both cripple and bless him. What Jacob experiences here, will unquestionably prove to be a seminal moment in the patriarch's life.

"Strangers in the night, exchanging glances..." *"Strangers in the Night" by Frank Sinatra*



Figure 2: Middle East Map Showing Location of the Jabbok River

Genesis 32:22-32 (ESV) ²² The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. ²⁴ And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." ²⁷ And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered."



Figure 3: The Jabbok in Modern Day Israel. The Jabbok River is Nahr es-Zerqa (“Blue River”), a tributary that flows West, emptying into the Jordan about fifteen miles North of the Dead Sea. At the ford it is about 10 yards wide.

³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. ³² Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh.

To me, this has always been one the most interesting and at the same time mysterious passages in all of scripture. There are other mysterious passages in scripture that I've struggled to understand. The Nephilim (Giants who interbred with daughters of men), God meeting Moses at an inn with an intention to kill him. Even the story of Abraham being asked by God to sacrifice his

only son Isaac which we studied earlier in this series. All are mysterious in their purpose and meaning until you dig deeper in scripture to uncover obscure details that help to explain the context of the events and the surrounding circumstances. At least on the surface here, the whole concept of a man wrestling with God throughout an entire night has always struck me at best to be a strange and confusing story.

Question for Discussion: Do you find it strange that Jacob would direct his family and servants to cross the Jabbok ford, along with all his possessions, while remaining alone on the opposite bank? Why do you think he would choose to do this?

Question for Discussion: In verses 24 and 25 the scriptures refer to Jacob's combatant as a man. Yet, later in the chapter it indicates that Jacob has encountered not just a man, but someone with supernatural power. Someone who had the ability to permanently displace his hip and damage the sinew of his thigh as a result of a simple touch. Is this a conflict in scripture? Who was this combatant? Why is it important to know the identity of this opponent?

According to the book of Hosea, the man Jacob wrestled with throughout the night was an angel...

Hosea 12:3-4 (ESV) ³ *In the womb he took his brother by the heel, and in his manhood he strove with God.* ⁴ *He strove with the angel and prevailed; he wept and sought his favor.*

How many here have seen the “Rocky” movies? The human drama of each story certainly plays a part, but the highlight and focus in each of the movies focuses for the most part on the fights themselves.

Interestingly here, no details of the fight are given, for it was just the preamble to the most important part, which was the dialogue between Jacob and God. As the angel of the Lord sees that daybreak is near, he tells Jacob “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob responds to the angel by refusing to let go of him, even though he has now been defeated, unless the angel agrees to bless him.

Here in this moment, is the perfect illustration of the basic difference between Jacob and his brother Esau. Jacob, with all his faults, deep down in his heart where the ultimate issues of life are decided, wanted...even demanded the blessing of God. Esau never did.

Question for Discussion: To read about God, or an agent of God, initiating a wrestling match with Jacob might seem strange on so many levels. Why do you believe God would choose to interact with Jacob in the form of a wrestling match? Particularly one that God would allow to last all night?

Jacob is a fighter. He was born a fighter. In all of scripture, Jacob is one of the most determined, strong willed and calculating characters you will find. He's not accustomed to losing battles. Whether he's battling his father's preference for his older brother, his older brother's birthright and blessing, or his brother-in-law's conniving nature. Jacob has fiercely and determinedly overcome whatever obstacles he has faced. Certainly, God's blessings were the reason the successes of his life. But, it would be understandable if Jacob might have a tendency to trust in his own strength and intelligence after overcoming so many obstacles.

God has engaged Jacob in a manner deeply consistent with Jacob's inner spirit and nature. In essence, he is speaking to him in the most effective form given Jacob's life experiences...a full blown physical and mental struggle.

Here...tonight, Jacob will not win this fight. In fact, he never had a chance. Only after breaking Jacob's reliance on his own strength, can God cultivate in him, a total and complete reliance on God's own blessings and plan for his life going forward.

Question for Discussion: What was the purpose of God or his agent asking Jacob what his name was? Wouldn't God already know that his name was Jacob?

By asking Jacob's name, the angel is indicating his superior position to Jacob. The angel had won the fight. Jacob had lost.

In the context of the Bible, to reveal your name could be an act of self-disclosure, a revelation of your character, your deepest identity. The dubious meaning of the name "Jacob" was suspicious at best. Once before when Jacob was asked that question he had said, "I am Esau!" Here, he can no longer hide.

Historically, the name "Jacob," meant "one who supplants" or ("grabs the heel of"). It was given for the seizure of his twin brother's heel at birth. "Oh Lord," he must have thought in his heart at that moment..."you know me. I am Jacob. I am just a cheat, a liar." It might sound ridiculous, but it would be similar to someone today bearing the name "Cheatmeister" or "Swindlerosky".

If there were any ambiguity about the disrepute of the name "Jacob," Esau rendered his verdict in no uncertain terms: "Isn't he rightly named Jacob? He has deceived me these two times!"

Jacob now emptied of self and confidence, confesses his name. For Jacob, it was a confession of guilt - "I am fraud. I am deceiver. I am supplanter. I am rightly named Jacob, for I cheated my brother twice!" This

was all that God wanted. He simply wanted Jacob to be broken in His presence, seeing himself as he really was, confessing all that he was by natural birth. “I am Jacob!” Now God could begin his work!

Question for Discussion: The scriptures show that Jacob asked for God’s blessing and that his request was honored. But Jacob had already been given his brother’s birthright. And even more, had been the recipient of his father’s official blessing. His wealth was substantial and his future assured by God himself. In what way could the angel of God have blessed Jacob that had not already been given?

The angel of God blesses Jacob in a way that is both symbolic and meaningful. He changes his name to “Israel”. “Israel” means “God struggles” or “May God struggle.” The explanation of the name given by the angel however, “*Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.*” reverses this sense by saying that it was Jacob who had “struggled” successively “with God and with men”. When we consider the context of what occurred, “Israel” is probably best understood as meaning “he strives with God.”

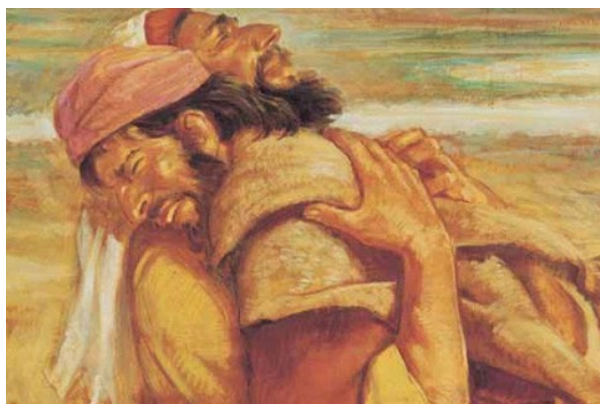
So, even in the new name given to Jacob, we find another interesting twist in this story. The name “Israel” emphasizes that it was God who initiated the struggle, and the explanation that the angel gives highlights the outcome. Both are true.

In the end, the renaming of Jacob brings to a climax his lifetime of struggling with others. By receiving a new name from God himself, Jacob, now Israel, in essence is able to cleanse himself of the embarrassing legacy of his name. He has now grown above and beyond that old legacy of shame.

Finally, this is the first mention of the name “Israel” in the Bible. And certainly, there is no other person who could legitimately bear the name “Israel,” and it is not used of another person in the Old Testament

At the conclusion of this encounter, Jacob names the place Peniel. Peniel means (the face of God) because Jacob realized he had seen the Lord.

“Should I Stay or Should I Go?...” “Should I Stay or Should I Go” by the Clash



Genesis 33:1-11 (ESV) ¹ And Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two female servants. ² And he put the servants with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. ³ He himself went on before them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. ⁴ But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. ⁵ And when Esau lifted up his eyes and saw the women and children,

he said, "Who are these with you?" Jacob said, "The children whom God has graciously given your servant." ⁶ Then the servants drew near, they and their children, and bowed down. ⁷ Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down. And last Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. ⁸ Esau said, "What do you mean by all this company that I met?" Jacob answered, "To find favor in the sight of my lord." ⁹ But Esau said, "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself." ¹⁰ Jacob said, "No, please, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my present from my hand. For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me. ¹¹ Please accept my blessing that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough." Thus he urged him, and he took it.

Here, the time has come for the long-awaited reunion of the two brothers. As he gazes out across the horizon, Jacob's fears appear to be materializing. The description of 400 men was accurate. There would be no random timing of the convergence of his family with Esau. He and the 400 men were now approaching with a sense of purpose!

As Esau draws near, Jacob's mind must have raced with doubt, causing him to somewhat lapse back into fearfulness and his natural behavior, arranging his household in such a way as to provide maximum protection for those he loved most. He decides to divide his family into groups as a defensive measure against an attack, organizing them into three groups according to wives and children.

The concubine wives and their children are at the front, making them more vulnerable than his preferred wives, Leah and Rachel. Leah and her children are next, and last is Rachel with her lone child, Joseph.

Jacob's preferential concern for Rachel and Joseph is consistent with the special love he had for Rachel.

Genesis 29:30 (ESV) ²⁹ So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years.

By arranging his family in this way, Jacob demonstrates his love and preference for family members by his actions, shielding Joseph and Rachel at the back. There's an interesting family dynamic at work here. One that was present in the household that Jacob grew up in and is certainly present now in the household he heads.

His father Isaac preferred his brother Esau. His mother Rachel preferred him. This outward display of preference had a destructive impact upon the relations inside the family. Both Jacob and Esau bore the scars of this behavior. So much so that the possibility of outright war between the families of the two brothers is here only narrowly averted.

Here the seeds of a new generation's rivalry are being planted. One that will cause extreme heartache and suffering within the family. But one that God will work towards His own purposes.

Interestingly, Joseph is the only child of the twelve named by the author here in chapter 33, almost anticipating the rivalry of the siblings that will be created. Looking forward a bit to chapter 37 we find confirmation of everything we suspect here...

Genesis 37:3-4 (ESV) ³ Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. ⁴ But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.

Question for Discussion: Do you believe the way that Jacob arranges his family members prior to his encounter with Esau, showed a lack of trust in what God had promised? Is he relapsing back into the “old” Jacob here prior to his face to face encounter with the angel of God? Why or why not?

Question for Discussion: Do you believe it was a mistake for Jacob to not only allow himself to have a strong preference between his wives and children, but to also manifest it outwardly in such obvious ways? Why or why not?

Despite the appearance of spiritual relapse, Jacob’s actions here also seem to convey that a change in his moral character has taken place. Here the author points out that Jacob decides to take the lead saying in verse... “*3 He himself went on before them,*”. Earlier, his messengers and family members had taken the lead.

As the two parties draw near, Jacob bows himself to the ground seven times. Esau, by comparison, was relaxed, warm, and accepting as he met Jacob first, then Jacob’s wives and children. He protests mildly against the extravagant gifts of livestock but finally consents to accept them.

Jacob might seem here to have shown undue servility and submission to his brother, speaking of himself as his servant. Some might think that he resorted to flattery and exaggeration in telling Esau that seeing his face was like seeing God. Purely with a purpose of saving his own life and the lives of his family members. Others might think that the face of God here means a reconciled face.

Question for Discussion: Do you believe Jacob addresses Esau here in an honest and forthright manner strongly posturing himself as Esau’s servant? Even going so far as to say, “*For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God*”. Or, is Jacob being manipulative again, showering Esau with verbal praises and gifts in order to further his own purposes? Why or Why not?

Possible Explanation...Jacob’s explanation, that seeing Esau’s face was like seeing the face of God, showed he knew this deliverance from harm by Esau was of God. At Peniel Jacob had seen the face of God and was delivered (32:30). Having lived through that, he then survived Esau. Thus Esau’s favorable reaction was God’s gracious dealing.

Something interesting to note here in the original Hebrew language of this text...Jacob presses Esau to accept his gift (Hebrew word here for gift is “**minkhatee**”). Jacob then goes further by adding...accept my present (Hebrew word here for present is “**birkatee**”, which comes from “**barak**”, which means to **ble**ss.

Jacob is no dummy! By using “birkatee”, he showed that he was deliberately wanting to share his blessings with Esau, most likely in a language and fashion that would soften his brother’s memory of the blessings he had earlier stolen.

“Honesty...Is Such a Lonely Word...” “Honesty” by Billy Joel

Genesis 33:12-20 (ESV) ¹² Then Esau said, “Let us journey on our way, and I will go ahead of you.” ¹³ But Jacob said to him, “My lord knows that the children are frail, and that the nursing flocks and herds are a care to me. If they are driven hard for one day, all the flocks will die. ¹⁴ Let my lord pass on ahead of his servant, and I will lead on slowly, at the pace of the livestock that are ahead of me and at the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir.”

¹⁵ So Esau said, “Let me leave with you some of the people who are with me.” But he said, “What need is there? Let me find favor in the sight of my lord.” ¹⁶ So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. ¹⁷ But Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built himself a house and made booths for his livestock. Therefore the name of the place is called Succoth.

¹⁸ And Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, on his way from Paddan-aram, and he camped before the city. ¹⁹ And from the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, he bought for a hundred pieces of money the piece of land on which he had pitched his tent. ²⁰ There he erected an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel.

Here again, Jacob uses deception to cleverly avoid traveling with Esau. He led Esau to think that he needed to travel slowly because of his young children and young animals, and that he would meet with Esau at Seir. But Jacob headed in the opposite direction — north to Succoth, east of the Jordan River and north of the Jabbok River, instead of south to Seir! He may have been wise to avoid Edom, but he did not need to deceive his brother again.

Question for Discussion: Why do you believe that Jacob deceived his brother Esau on his intended destination? Was he justified in deceiving his brother again?

Jacob continuing his journey, ultimately arrives and settles in Shechem and erects an altar to the Lord calling it **“El-Elohe-Israel”**, which means God, the God of Israel.

Like his forefathers, Jacob appears to struggle with taking detours. Twenty years earlier, when God had appeared to Jacob at Bethel, he had vowed that the Lord would be his God, that he would give a tenth of his wealth to the Lord, and that he would establish Bethel as God's house.

Genesis 28:20-22 (ESV) ²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, ²¹ so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, ²² and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you.”

Now, instead of returning to Bethel, he settles thirty miles away in the fertile area of Shechem, probably for the sake of his livestock. (Shechem represents the world.) God does not speak directly to him again until several years later in chapter 35, when He calls on Jacob to fulfill his vow. In the meantime, Jacob's decision to settle in Shechem leads to the tragic events we will read about in chapter 34.

Chapter 33 is a great commentary on the reconciliation of brothers. If we have offended a brother it is not the slightest use going to him in a contentious spirit or in a spirit of self-justification. The way to come is with reparations in hand and in a humble, contrite spirit. That spirit disarmed Esau on the spot, and he forgave Jacob fully, freely, and forever. (Esau's descendants, however, did not share in that spirit of forgiveness.)