

Jacob: Meets With God and Esau

Genesis 32-33

Focus Verse

“Then the man said, ‘Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.’” – Genesis 32:28

- From Panic to Prayer – Genesis 32:1-21
- From Struggle to Surrender – Genesis 32:22-32
- From Fear to Fellowship – Genesis 33

Engage

Why do mere mortals fight against Almighty God? God’s purposes stand, despite human or demonic opposition. God is stronger than anything else. God is wiser than anyone else. And yet fallen humanity foolishly desires the impossible – to overpower omnipotent God. Something within every man, woman and child desires unhindered “freedom” and the delusion of control. **Though not logical or wise, we struggle to surrender to our Creator, the One who knows and loves us best.** We may sing “I Surrender All,” but giving God His rightful place is hard in real life.

Jacob’s life offers a living picture of this real human struggle. He knew God’s love and promises but was born a fighter. For some reason, he learned most lessons the hard way. Like Jacob, we surrender imperfectly, but God pursues us persistently. God continued to force Jacob to face his fears, his flaws and his future. **God reveals His love by His consistent commitment to our growth in faith and godly character.** If conforming our character to His requires a battle, God will fight against us, with us and for us, for our greater good. God does what it takes to soften our hard hearts. He helps us bow our stiff necks and bend our stubborn knees.

From Panic to Prayer – Genesis 32:1-21

Jacob’s Preparations – 32:1-8

Genesis 32 and Jacob’s return to Canaan mark a new chapter in his life story. God molded Jacob’s character through 20 long years under his father-in-law, Laban, a hard master. Chapter 31 ends with a peace treaty between Laban and Jacob. After a warning from God, Laban allowed Jacob and his family to depart in peace. Jacob stood ready to enter Canaan, the land God had promised to him and to his descendants forever.¹ God’s future for Jacob lay before him.

The living God encountered Jacob at Bethel 20 years earlier. At that time, Jacob saw a stairway reaching to heaven with angels moving up and down the stairs (28:12-13). **Now, Jacob again saw God’s angels with him at Mahanaim, which literally means “two camps.”** Later in Israel’s history, this place appears again, including a time King David found refuge at Mahanaim when he was in danger.²

Jacob sought peace with Esau and sent messengers ahead of him to Esau in Seir in Edom.

Twenty years earlier, Jacob fled from his homeland because Esau threatened to kill him when he deceptively gained Isaac’s blessing.³ Now, Jacob humbly addressed Esau as “my lord” and referred to himself as “your servant Jacob.” He mentioned his own wealth and family to indicate he no longer sought to steal from Esau but merely sought his favor.

Jacob’s messengers returned with terrifying news. **Esau approached with 400 men, a powerful threat.** No one knew better than Jacob the deep root of Esau’s grudge against him. Fear and panic gripped Jacob. Was his brother determined to take revenge? How could his wives and children escape? Jacob devised a plan and divided his family and animals into two groups, preparing for the worst. He thought that if Esau destroyed one group, the others might escape. Did Jacob forget the company of God’s angels camping with them?

Jacob's Prayer – 32:9-12

Moments of great fear and distress may cause panic but also can bring clarity about what matters most. First, Jacob took practical steps to protect his family. Then, as Jacob's worldly possessions disappeared into the distance, he called on God in prayer. **God often uses circumstances that exhaust human solutions to call His people to Himself.** God stands ready to hear His children pray, no matter the situation. The Almighty God of the universe is not an idea or an impersonal force, but a person. God has a mind, will and personality. God exists as one being in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who operate in perfect unity. God made people in His image with a mind, will and the ability to communicate with Him and one another.

Jacob knew God would hear and answer his prayer. **Jacob recounted God's promises and faithfulness, and he honestly confessed his fear and desperate need.** Believers do not pray to inform God of what He does not know or plead for mercy He is reluctant to give. In prayer, needy people humbly acknowledge

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God's greatness and ask Him for what they lack in their own strength. What a joy to know that when we cry out to God, He hears and acts on our behalf. Heartfelt prayer allows believers to communicate with God and align their hearts and will to His. Jacob's prayer provides an excellent example for us.

Jacob's Gift – 32:13-21

Jacob took an active step to repair and restore his relationship with Esau.⁴ After Jacob prayed, he sprang into action and prepared to meet his brother by sending ahead an honorable gift – about 580 animals. His gift expressed goodwill and a heartfelt desire for reconciliation. The passage does not indicate whether Jacob's next step was his own idea or reflected God's guidance. Whatever motivated him, God continued to press hard on Jacob, for his own good.

Jacob's Example of Prayer

The seven points in Jacob's first recorded prayer can help us today as we pray.

- **Praise God.** Jacob directly addressed God in prayer (32:9a). Acknowledge your relationship with God and say what is true about Him.⁵
- **Remember God's Word.** Jacob intentionally prayed God's command and promise back to Him (Genesis 32:9b with 31:3,13). Repeat the promises in God's Word, which are truer than your fear or doubts.⁶
- **Confess your sin and unworthiness.** Jacob recognized he had no right to God's blessing and acknowledged God's blessing, despite his sinfulness (32:10a). God answers prayer because of His mercy, not our worthiness. Confess your utter dependence on God and specific sin in full confidence of God's grace.⁷
- **Thank God for past mercies.** Jacob recounted God's undeserved kindness and faithfulness to him (32:10b.) A thankful heart always strengthens faith. Recounting God's record of faithfulness gives confidence in present and future struggles.⁸
- **Present your specific requests to God.** Jacob clearly stated his request, "Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau ..." (32:11a). Praying specifically allows you to identify specific needs, recognize God's intervention and give Him the glory when He answers prayer.⁹
- **Honestly pour out your heart to God.** Jacob exposed his emotions to the Lord – "... for I am afraid he will come and attack me ..." (32:11b). God understands you completely and is never shocked by what you feel. You can express your reality to God, trusting His compassion and knowing He is stronger than what you feel.¹⁰
- **Believe God and personally apply His specific promises.** Jacob remembered that God's promises secured his future (32:12). Expect God to answer. With bold faith and humble submission, trust God in specific ways based on what He has declared is true in His Word.¹¹

Jacob's Solitude – 32:22-23

Jacob camped at the ford of the Jabbok, midway between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. Less than a day's journey separated him from the Jordan River and the promised land. **Jacob had done everything he knew to prepare to make amends to Esau.** When evening came, he helped his family cross the Jabbok safely and settle for the night. He then found himself alone, but not for long.

Jacob's Struggle – 32:24-26

As Jacob sought solitude alone under the stars, a “man” appeared and wrestled with him until daybreak. The passage does not clearly identify Jacob's adversary. Was the “man” an angel or God Himself? Though the identity of Jacob's opponent is not clear, clearly the “man” represented the person of God confronting Jacob. This momentous and mysterious wrestling match forced Jacob to face both his own weakness and God's strength.

All his life, Jacob had depended on his sharp mind and physical strength to get what he wanted – the birthright, his father's blessing, his wives, his flocks and herds. **Now, as Jacob prepared to enter the promised land, God wrestled with him to teach and reassure him that spiritual power comes only from God.**¹² God most often chooses those who in some way are foolish, weak, lowly or even despised in this world so no one can boast that they deserve God's blessing.¹³

The wrestling match revealed both God's relentless pursuit of Jacob and Jacob's persistent desire for God's blessing. God allowed Jacob to struggle on in human strength. When “the man” realized he could not prevail, he touched Jacob's hip.¹⁴ Jacob ultimately grasped the identity of this “man.” Though it may appear Jacob forced God to bless him, the reality of God's sovereignty leads to a different conclusion. God controls all things to accomplish all His purposes.¹⁵ God is all-powerful. No one forces God to do anything. God is good and delights to bless His children, but He lovingly disciplines them for their good and growth.¹⁶

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God's Blessing – 32:27-32

Weary Jacob persistently clung to his opponent, refusing to let go until he received a blessing.

Jacob's heart and motives throughout this interesting encounter are challenging to understand. His request for God's blessing seemed to reveal growing faith and dependence on God, but also relentless persistence. When asked by the “man,” Jacob stated his name, a reminder of its meaning – “the supplanter,” “deceiver” and “the one who grasps.” Jacob struggled all his life against God and people. But he received a new name, Israel. In Scripture, new names represent a change in direction and character by the grace of God. Unlike other name changes in Scripture, Genesis continues to record his name as “Jacob” more than “Israel” in chapters 33-50. Certainly, this critical encounter impacted Jacob greatly as he was forced to recognize the futility of fighting God in human strength. While it is tempting to imagine that this encounter completely transformed Jacob, he likely continued to struggle to fully trust God for the

rest of his life. God's persistent work in Jacob's life to move his faith forward represents the most certain focus of this passage.

Jacob asked the name of his visitor, who replied by offering Jacob a blessing. **God repeatedly reaffirmed His covenant promises to Jacob through the course of his life.** Jacob named the place of his struggle Peniel, “face of God,” because he “saw God face to face, and yet [his] life was spared.”

Jacob, now called Israel, emerged from Peniel with a lifelong limp, a constant reminder of the foolishness of struggling against God. Every step he took from this day forward proved his human weakness and need to depend on God. Like the Apostle Paul's “thorn in the flesh,” God gifted Jacob with a physical reminder that His strength is made perfect in weakness.¹⁷ God prepared Jacob not only to reconcile with Esau, but to reconcile himself with this truth.

The Doctrine of Sanctification

Sinful people are saved from sin by faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ on their behalf. At salvation, believers are justified, covered by the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit indwells believers, setting them apart to love and serve God (Romans 12:1-2). The believer is freed from sin's penalty and one day will be fully delivered from sin's presence. However, believers continue to struggle with personal sin while living in this sinful world and are not yet fully delivered from indwelling sin. **Growing to reflect Christ in daily thoughts, conversations and actions requires a process known as sanctification** (Romans 6:1-23; 8:1-17). Spiritual growth comes when a believer surrenders to the Holy Spirit's conviction of sin and steps out in specific steps of faith and obedience. Every believer can trust the ongoing work of God to increasingly develop God-pleasing holiness in daily life.

God persistently intervened to mold Jacob's character and draw him to Himself. In the same way, God orchestrates a believer's life circumstances to reveal and root out personal sin and promote obedience and surrender. God lovingly and intentionally allows situations that require us to acknowledge our need for Him. **Daily life provides regular opportunities to trust and obey God in new and deeper ways.** God uses difficulty and even pain to move us to overcome our self-sufficiency. Our joys teach us to trust His goodness in new ways. Our struggles lead us to depend on God in fresh ways. The process of sanctification requires overcoming sin, an often painful process that reveals the new life of the Holy Spirit within the believer.

Without an understanding of God's loving and perpetual commitment to your spiritual growth, the hard things in life lack context and feel random. You might be tempted to blame God rather than trust Him. Without recognizing God's gifts of grace in the warm sunshine and gentle breeze moments of daily life, you miss the tender ways God expresses His love to you through the storms. **Without an eternal perspective, the ups and downs of daily life overshadow God's intentional and loving commitment to your growth in faith and character.**

Like Jacob, you may struggle with lifelong patterns of sin that make you long to be delivered fully from the domination of sin and self. **Believing that God's deeper work stands behind everything you encounter provides hope when life is hard.** Knowing God loves you enough to do whatever it takes to root out rebellion brings perspective to your ongoing battle with sin. God will dethrone your idols and reveal your weaknesses to call you to deeper faith and richer fellowship with Himself. God loves you too much to let you love other things more. One day every believer's battle with sin will be over. How do you see God's bigger, deeper work within you in whatever you are facing this week?

From Fear to Fellowship – Genesis 33

The Reunion – 33:1-11

Jacob looked up to see Esau approaching with 400 men. He lined up his children with their mothers, with the maidservants leading out and Rachel and Joseph last. Jacob still exhibited favoritism and perhaps had remnants of trusting his own methods. Despite this, his faith was growing. **Jacob led the throng, limping toward Esau with humility, bowing seven times.** Jacob sought reconciliation with his estranged brother and took the initiative to seek peace.

God did immeasurably more for Jacob than he asked or imagined.¹⁸ While we cannot be certain of Esau's heart toward God, He had worked to defuse Esau's anger. Proverbs 21:1 says, "In the LORD's hand the king's heart is a stream of water that he channels

toward all who please him." Like the father's welcome of the prodigal son in Luke 15:20, **Esau ran to meet Jacob "and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept."**

Jacob introduced his family to Esau as gracious gifts from God. Esau questioned Jacob's costly gift of flocks and herds, which Jacob admitted had been sent to gain his favor. Esau did not similarly credit God for his own riches but said, "I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself." **This exchange reveals healing in their relationship, which was formerly divided by their desire to dominate each other and seek personal advantage.**

The brothers did not mention past offenses. Jacob insisted Esau accept his gift, "For to see your face is like seeing the face of God ..." The previous night

Jacob wrestled at a place he named Peniel, meaning “face of God.” **Jacob knew only God could have accomplished the brotherly love he saw in Esau’s face.** Jacob insisted, “Please accept the present ...”; because Jacob insisted, Esau accepted his gift.

The Parting – 33:12-20

Esau did not want to part from Jacob. **However, Jacob declined Esau’s offer to accompany him on his journey so he could meet the needs of his young family and animals.** Jacob’s eldest child, Reuben, was not more than 12 years old, and the family’s escape from Laban had exhausted the littlest children, as well as the flocks and herds. Jacob graciously refused Esau’s offer of guards to protect him from robbers.

Esau returned to Seir. We do not know why Jacob did not follow Esau to Seir as he had indicated he would. Instead, he went to Sukkoth. **There, Jacob built a place for himself, his livestock and an altar; he later purchased a plot of ground near Shechem.** This was only the second piece of the promised land purchased by the patriarchs, according to biblical records.¹⁹ Jacob built an altar to sacrifice to the God of Israel, *El Eloe Israel*. Nearly 2,000 years later, Jesus sat by “Jacob’s well” when He promised the gift of living water to the woman of Samaria.²⁰

Should Jacob have settled in Shechem or gone directly to Bethel?²¹ Was this stop yet another time when Jacob exercised his own plan rather than seeking God? We cannot know for certain, but the next chapter records devastating influences and consequences for his family at Shechem, after which God directly instructed him to return to Bethel. **Again, the persistence of God to deal with Jacob, despite his human flaws, stands out.**

Even before birth, Jacob wrestled with his brother in his mother’s womb. At his birth, his tiny hand firmly grasped his brother’s heel. As he grew to adulthood, Jacob seemed to wrestle to obtain what he believed was due him – first with his father, Isaac, and brother, Esau, and then with his father-in-law, Laban. The amazing truth is God never let go of Jacob. **God’s faithfulness did not depend on Jacob’s faithfulness.**

God upheld the purposes and plans He announced to Jacob’s mother, Rebekah, while Jacob and Esau were in the womb. God’s faithfulness to His character, will and Word brought Jacob to a transforming encounter at Peniel. When believers reflect on their lives, they discover that God has faithfully challenged them to change and grow, even through struggles. **God reveals His love by His consistent commitment to our growth in faith and godly character.**

Take to Heart

Hold Fast

Every time Jacob faithfully obeyed God, he gained new insight into God’s person, character and ways. When Jacob left Laban to return home, he encountered the real presence of God’s angels at Mahanaim. God’s angels still attend to and protect God’s people today. The fearful believer who calls on the Lord can say with David, “The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them. Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.”²²

God later confronted Jacob at Peniel, wrestling the wrestler so he would better understand God’s strength and his own weakness. Believers grow in understanding of God’s character, and they trust Him in daily life. Greatest of all, the indwelling presence of God the Holy Spirit produces what human effort cannot.

Jacob’s powerful prayer in Genesis 32 reflects his growing relationship with God. Jacob’s faith

journey includes gradual growth and setbacks. Jacob had worked faithfully under Laban then left when God commanded that he return home. **Jacob’s ongoing struggle to trust God more than his own resources offers a realistic picture of the life of a Christian.** Spiritual growth is not a matter of immediate transformation but gradual progress. Human insight, intelligence, education, talents, organization, connections, willpower or finances cannot meet our greatest needs. The good news of the gospel is not “try harder to be better.” Faith in God’s promises, now fully revealed through Jesus Christ’s life, death and resurrection, provides what human striving cannot. God draws near to those who seek Him. He is always accessible. We can praise Him, confess our unworthiness, pour out our troubles to God, ask for His help and trust His promises for our own situations. God is faithful, even when we are not.

Jacob's independent spirit made surrender to God and people challenging. God continued to orchestrate Jacob's life to reveal His goodness, confront Jacob's self-will and lead him to greater faith. God did not leave Jacob stuck in futile dependence on his own resources. He understood Jacob better than Jacob understood himself. **God will customize His work in your life to lovingly grow you in specific ways, at specific times.** Like Jacob, we sometimes resist God, either actively or passively. How quickly and easily do you submit when God's plans do not make sense or seem undesirable to you? We often default to our own limited understanding and coping habits without thinking or taking time to pray. Has God left you with a "limp," something in your life to remind you of your weakness and need for God's grace and strength? Where is God

calling you to stop fighting Him and to yield to His higher ways?

Relationships can be challenging. Every relationship on this earth involves individuals marred by sin and self-interest. Relational dynamics, competing personalities and life demands can cause brokenness between people who are important to us. Jacob suffered a severely fractured relationship with Esau because of his own sin. God led him to face his fears and take active steps to reconcile with his brother. **Restoring broken relationships requires humility, forgiveness, sensitivity and intentionality.**²³ Sometimes our heartfelt and genuine efforts cannot mend what has been broken. What relationship in your life challenges you most? How is God leading you to pray, and what is He leading you to do? When relationships become challenging, we often first focus on the issues in the other person's

life rather than discerning God's sanctifying work in us. How is God lovingly molding you through the relationships in your life?

Do you recognize the futility of resisting God? Every drop of water in the universe splashes where God intends.²⁴ God is infinitely greater, wiser and more powerful than we are.²⁵ We gain helpful perspective by stopping to think about a mere human fighting the God who holds all things by His power and in His perfect control. We sometimes fail to recognize how we exalt ourselves above God and His ways. Will you ask God to convict you of the ways you foolishly resist Him? Instead of even subtle resistance, will you take comfort and delight in the beauty of the person of God? **God can be trusted with what you cannot control and cannot understand.**

Check out these footnoted references for further study of God's Word in this week's lesson.

- 1: **God's promises at Bethel:** Genesis 28:13-14
- 2: **Mahanaim:** Joshua 13:26; 21:38; 2 Samuel 2:8, 12; 17:22-29
- 3: **Jacob and Esau's strife:** Genesis 27
- 4: **Reconciled relationships:** Matthew 5:23-24
- 5: **Praise God in prayer:** Psalm 62:1-2; Matthew 6:9; John 11:41; Acts 4:24
- 6: **God's promises in prayer:** Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 40:11; Proverbs 3:1-3; Jeremiah 29:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:24
- 7: **Confession in prayer:** Psalms 51:1-4; 103:10-12; Daniel 9:9, 18; Luke 18:9-14
- 8: **Record of faithfulness:** Nehemiah 1:5-11; Psalms 57; 62:5-8; Ephesians 1:6-9
- 9: **Pray specifically:** Mark 5:23; Philipians 4:6, 7; Colossians 4:3; James 5:13-18
- 10: **Emotion in prayer:** 1 Kings 19:1-8; Psalms 142:2; 143
- 11: **Expectant prayer:** Isaiah 55:10-11; John 14:13-14; Hebrews 4:16; 1 Peter 1:24-25; 2 Peter 1:4; 1 John 1:9
- 12: **Spiritual power:** Psalm 62:11; Zechariah 4:6; Romans 9:16
- 13: **God's blessing:** 1 Corinthians 1:27-29
- 14: **Jacob's wrestling:** Hosea 12:2-4
- 15: **God's sovereignty:** Psalm 33:10-11
- 16: **God's work to mature His children:** Philipians 1:6; 2:13; Ephesians 1:4-6; 2:10; Hebrews 12:11
- 17: **Strength in weakness:** 2 Corinthians 12:9
- 18: **God's actions:** Ephesians 3:20
- 19: **Abraham's land purchase:** Genesis 23:17-20
- 20: **Samaritan woman:** John 4:5-6
- 21: **Return to Bethel:** Genesis 31:13; 35:1
- 22: **Lord's goodness:** Psalm 34:7-8
- 23: **Reconciling broken relationships:** Matthew 5:9; 7:3-5; 18:15; Romans 12:16, 18-21; Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:13, 15
- 24: **God controls the water:** Job 38:8-11; Psalm 107:24-25, 29; Jeremiah 5:22; Matthew 8:27
- 25: **God's greatness:** Psalms 8; 104:24; Romans 1:20; 1 Corinthians 1:25