

## Jacob Wrestles with God

It has been twenty-one years since they last saw each other. It's like a high school reunion, each anticipating what the other will be like, look like. One of them must travel far to get there, having been gone all these years without sending so much as a word back home. The hair's a little thin, nothing to be done there, but those few extra sit-ups in the morning will hold the paunch in place, perhaps. Should he bring the family or make an entrance on his own? Should he arrive in a stretch limousine or the little red sportscar? So many details to attend to! The right impression must be made.

He carefully packs his best blazer, the one with the monogrammed buttons. He has been highly successful, which helps. He stops off at the bank to get a roll of bills which he inserts in his monogrammed money clip. At the reunion dinner party, at the right time, he'll nonchalantly pull the clip out of the blazer pocket and buy a round of drinks at the cash bar. Understatement speaks volumes.

When he left home, it was hurriedly. Jacob had played his last trick at the time, living up to his name of "Supplanter" or "Trickster," and it wasn't until he met up with Laban in Haran

that he learned how sharply those tricks could sting. Laban was his mother's brother and, eventually, his father-in-law. Laban



made Jacob look like lightweight when it came to deception. He tricked Jacob out of the best years of his life, but when it was time to leave, Jacob won the last round. He left like a thief in the night with two wives (Laban's daughters Leah and Rachel), two maids (also surrogate mothers), eleven sons, one daughter, and much livestock. He is coming home with a huge retinue. The only question, and it is the pressing question, is what to do with the past.

Esau his twin will be waiting for him. Esau's slow mind has had twenty-one years to brood over the many wrongs Jacob has done him: tricking him out of the birthright, stealing the blessing. Their checkered past together ended in 27:45. The narrative of chapter 32 picks right up where it left off; for all we know, Esau is still breathing murderous threats against his brother's life.

"An ancient Jewish proverb states that when a person has a clear conscience, everyone fears him, but when he has a guilty conscience, he fears everyone else."—Page H. Kelley, *Journey to the Land of Promise: Genesis-Deuteronomy* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 1997), 51.

### Jacob's Plan

Jacob is the quintessential pragmatist. While still safely on the other side of the Jabbok River, he devises a series of plans which betray his heightening anxiety. He sends messengers to "my lord" Esau in Seir, a region of Edom, announcing the return (32:4, 5). The messengers report that Esau will indeed meet him along with four hundred men. Surely this means trouble, Jacob thinks, so he divides his huge camp of family, slaves, and livestock into two companies. One group at least will escape destruction (32:8). The stakes are high and Jacob is desperate.

Typically calm and collected, Jacob cannot think his way out of this mess. He is distressed and fearful, and he turns to God in prayer. The prayer of 32:9-12 is impeccable. Jacob identifies the Lord as God of Abraham and Isaac, and the One who sent for him to come back home (31:13). He confesses his unworthiness before God and his fear of Esau. He asks for deliverance, and reminds God of the promise made back at Bethel (28:15). His safety is of course the issue: "You have said, 'I will surely do you good . . .'"

Having thought it over after a good night's sleep, Jacob then makes a fabulous

"The listener is not invited to know the outcome until the last moment. The brothers have to wait to see how it all would turn out. The listener must wait with the brothers."—Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation, 263.

gift of over five hundred choice animals: sheep, goats, camels, cattle, donkeys. The servants are instructed to herd them by droves, an amazing menagerie, and to make sure Esau knows this is Jacob's present to him. The point is appeasement (32:20). Jacob knows he has wronged the brother and the situation is urgent. Perhaps the "gift" will buy Esau's favor.

### Jacob in Control

Summing up the action of 32:1-21, we see Jacob's scheme as items on a checklist:

- Send messengers.
- Split up the booty.
- Pray about it.
- Send huge present.

In all this activity, Jacob is thoroughly, if not desperately, in control. He has done all that is humanly possible to insure his safety. Calculation and strategy are practical matters, even as they increase his anxiety and his need to manipulate the situation for his own well-being. And his plans are all circuitous, skewed attempts at reconciliation.

Even the commendable prayer is indirect, for the forgiveness he needs from his brother is not mentioned. Worship means first righting the wrongs, then offering up the sacrifices: ". . . at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you . . . [go and] first be reconciled to your brother or sister" (Matt. 5:23, 24). Jacob does all the things that need not be done, omitting the one thing that is direct and therefore difficult for him. The most that can be said about his preparations is that they keep him busy.

We are Jacob. We prognosticate and plan, we strategize and prioritize. We do not ask directly and we avoid that which is uncomfortable. Jacob's fears

are his attempt to keep control of the situation. If he frets enough, some magic might occur whereby the danger disappears. Surely our worries are worthy of something! "Hope for the best but plan for

"As God has 'snatched' property for Jacob from Laban, so Jacob prays to be 'snatched' from the power of Esau."—Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation*, 265.

the worst" is a cultural motto. It is, we believe, pragmatic advice. And it is spiritually bankrupt.

### Losing Control

The good news of the Jacob story is different. The action of Genesis 32 moves back and forth between the secular and the sacred as Jacob prepares to meet his brother. Pragmatic preparation and holy intervention overlap; the practical and the spiritual are intertwined. God does not leave Jacob alone, the sole master of his worries. Instead, God appears to him, at night, and wrestles him to the ground.

This is disturbing to us; we cannot imagine how frightening it is to Jacob. It is not a quick and easy solution. The wrestling match is inhumanly lengthy, brutally painful. God will not be left out of the equation; God will terrify Jacob. While Jacob would prefer a hearty slap on the back, the mysterious one grants him a wrenching experience that leaves him limping. Jacob could not in his wildest dreams anticipate this wrestling match, work out a little harder at the gym and build up his strength for it. It comes to him out of nowhere and directly. If he had to choose between meeting Esau and meeting God, surely he would chose the former. But for once, Jacob has no control.

### An Unexpected Assailant

Genesis 32:22-32 is one of those key texts in the Old Testament. Shrouded in mystery and ambiguity, it has been retold and examined perhaps more than any other of the patriarchal materials. Moses too meets up with a dreadful presence, also at night and on his way back home (Ex. 4:24). It is an archaic story of a killer angel whose meaning escapes us, except as an explanation for circumcision (already better explained in Gen. 17:10-14). The story of Jacob and the dark presence is likewise an ancient one. But placed where it is, between his practical plans and the meeting with Esau, it takes on a whole new significance. We don't hear many sermons about the Moses episode. This passage, in contrast, is pivotal.

Jacob is alone in the night. He has (again shrewdly) sent the women and children on, across the Jabbok River, far ahead of him (32:22, 23). Not even Esau at his angriest could attack these defenseless ones; besides, Jacob himself is safely far behind. Suddenly,

out of nowhere, he is assaulted. At first neither the reader nor Jacob knows who the assailant is; the narrative will not allow us to know too much. A “man” wrestles with him (v. 24). It is not until the aftermath that this shadowy figure is recognized as God (v. 31).

The encounter in the night is a dangerous one. In Chinese the character for “danger” is the same as that for “opportunity.” In scripture danger and opportunity are flip sides of the same coin. This is a crisis situation and Jacob must fight for his life, but when it is over, he has more life than he could imagine. Jacob cannot talk his way out, worry his way out, appease this figure in any way. He does not get what he asks for (“Please tell me your name”). He gets instead a life-long limp and a new name.

### A Name and a Blessing

It is not uncommon for people to be given new names in the Bible. The Hebrew name is the identity, submerged for a while, then brought to the surface by God and made clear. Abram, “exalted ancestor,” is really Abraham, “ancestor of a multitude” (Gen. 17:5). The name says something deep and telling about the character of that person.

Naming is powerful. Furthermore, to know a person’s name is to have a secret and hidden knowledge, a degree of control over that person, as well. In Jewish life today, when a person is very sick, his or her Hebrew name may be changed to make it harder for death to find that person. “What’s in a name? that which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet,” wrote Shakespeare. Hebrew wisdom would counter: This may be true for roses, but not for much else.

For this reason the stranger does not reveal his name. Jacob wants to have a hold on this character that only knowledge of the name will give him. But the stranger will not give it and cannot be overcome. While Jacob wants power and control, he is given a new name instead.

The name is “Israel.” The old Jacob (heel, trickster) does not vanish with the dawn, but he is renamed. His character remains intact:

he grasps the heel of Esau as they enter the world (25:26), he grapples and holds on tight to the dark figure in the night. He is still and always Jacob. He will never be anything else. But something new has happened that will be his forever. Jacob/Israel has been severely touched by God.

“You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed” (32:28). Faith means wrestling with God. The opposite of love is not hate, but apathy. We argue with those whom we love because we love them. We strive to stay engaged and connected when the easy way is letting go. The opposite of faith is not wrestling and struggle, but meek submission. We do well to note that in the story of Job, it is not the pious words of his friends that God loves but the questions and challenges that Job offered up (Job 42:7). Had either Job or Jacob said “You win,” they might as well have said “Whatever” or “Que sera, sera.” This is fatalism, not faith. As the dark angel tells him, Israel denotes one who has struggled with God and held his own. From here on out, the names Jacob and Israel are used interchangeably for both this man and a nation, which descends from Jacob’s twelve sons.

Jacob holds his own. He will not let go. He asks for a blessing, somehow knowing that this otherworldly figure is capable of giving it. The request is ignored at first. Then, as the dawn begins to break, it is granted: “And there he blessed him” (32:29). What is the content of the blessing? Is it the new name? Is it simply the end of the match? How are we to understand it? A clue comes from what Jacob calls this place: Peniel. Peniel (also called Penuel) means “the face of God.” The blessing is that Jacob sees God face to face, yet his life is preserved (v. 30).

The long night is almost over, but the sun has not yet risen. Darkness still shrouds the stranger. God’s hidden “face” does not protect the divinity, but rather protects us in our frailty. The stranger/God cannot let Jacob see him, as in Exodus 33:20: “You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” The concern here is not for the Holy One but for humans, who must be shielded from the holiness that annihilates in its pure flame. The distance is necessary. Dawn was

#### “Bless me”

“Many of us, like Jacob, have wrestled with something, for something, without really knowing what we sought. Jacob, having now finally gotten ahold of God, finds what he was seeking, and refuses to let go.”—John C. L. Gibson, *Genesis*, vol. 2, Daily Study Bible (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 200–202.

#### Want to Know More?

**About the episode of Jacob wrestling with God?** See Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation*, 266–74; for a provocative interpretation, see Jack Miles, “Jacob’s Wrestling Match: Was It an Angel or Esau?” *Bible Review*, October 1998, 22–23.

**About the giving of names?** See Paul J. Achtemeier, *Harper’s Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 682–84.

about to break; he must make haste and be gone! But in the twilight, exhausted Jacob knows who this “man” is. Who let go first? We cannot tell. Perhaps the stranger left freely, or perhaps Jacob permitted him to go. Either way the stranger leaves before the full light of day, and this is a good thing. So the blessing is twofold: Jacob is blessed with a glimpse of the face of God, and he lives to tell the tale.

### An Unexpected Welcome

He is limping now toward Esau (33:1), the angry brother with four hundred soldiers, or so he thinks. But Jacob never planned for this:

it is a huge reunion, and Esau has let out all the stops. Esau forgets all decorum, hikes up his cloak, and runs to meet his long-lost twin (33:4, compare Luke 15:20). The “army” is there to hold up the welcome-home banner. Esau hugs and kisses him, weeping tears of joy, while Jacob weeps tears of sheer relief.

Jacob is overwhelmed. It is not unlike his first meeting with lovely Rachel at the

well, when straightaway he fell for her, impulsively kissed her, and let his heart have its way (29:11). To Esau he speaks from the heart as he exclaims, “Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God” (33:10). It is a shining moment. His is a dazzling, life-giving recognition.

The Holy One is not to be confused with the brother. Between the two there is distance and mystery. And yet the blessing at Peniel is mirrored in the forgiving brother. Jacob spontaneously senses the reflection, some correspondence between heaven and earth. The sacred and the secular, the face of God and the face of Esau, play off one another in a shimmering display.

The reunion was not what Jacob expected. He got the award for “Traveled Farthest to Get Here,” but his rehearsed speech stayed crumpled up in the blazer pocket. There never was an opportunity to flash the roll of bills with all the hugging going on. He forgot to be conscious of his thinning hair, and even his bad limp went unnoticed. The funny thing was that name tag he wore:

“The limping of Penue’el may keep us from speaking flippantly about the ‘New Being,’ for the New Creature may be marked by limping as the sign of newness (compare 2 Cor. 4:7-12).”—Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation*, 273.

“He had met God in the river and in his brother’s arms. And God’s name and face was Grace.”—H. Stephen Shoemaker, *GodStories: New Narratives from Sacred Texts* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1998), 57.

whoever printed it spelled it right, but somehow the old name didn’t seem to fit anymore. And at times, the faces in the crowd seemed to glow. It must have been the candles.



### Questions for Reflection

1. This is a story with many interesting twists and turns (no pun intended). Perhaps most interesting is Esau’s welcome of Jacob after Jacob had stolen Esau’s birthright and blessing. Why do you think Esau responded to Jacob this way?
2. Jacob has always been a wrestler, struggling with Esau in their mother’s womb and then manipulating circumstances and people all along life’s way. What is the message of grace to someone who approaches life as a wrestler like Jacob?
3. Jacob is given a new name, and throughout scripture, the faithful are given new names (see even Rev. 2:17). What does it mean to be given a new name? Think of the people who are important in your life. What name would you give them?
4. This is a dramatic moment in Jacob’s life—he is reconciled with his brother after many years of separation and has a new relationship with God. What would you think the rest of his life is like? Look over the next few chapters of Genesis to see how accurate you were. Drawing on the previous unit, consider how the next few chapters of Genesis affirm the notion of “being kept by God.”