

Genesis 32:1 – 32

¹ Now as Jacob went on his way, the angels of God met him. ² Jacob said when he saw them, 'This is God's camp.' So he named that place Mahanaim. ³ Then Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. ⁴ He also commanded them saying, 'Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: 'Thus says your servant Jacob, 'I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed until now; ⁵ I have oxen and donkeys and flocks and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight.''' ⁶ The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, 'We came to your brother Esau, and furthermore he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.' ⁷ Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and the herds and the camels, into two companies; ⁸ for he said, 'If Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the company which is left will escape.' ⁹ Jacob said, 'O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your relatives, and I will prosper you,' ¹⁰ I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You have shown to Your servant; for with my staff only I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies. ¹¹ Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, that he will come and attack me and the mothers with the children. ¹² For You said, 'I will surely prosper you and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which is too great to be numbered.''' ¹³ So he spent the night there. Then he selected from what he had with him a present for his brother Esau: ¹⁴ two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, ¹⁵ thirty milking camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. ¹⁶ He delivered them into the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, 'Pass on before me, and put a space between droves.' ¹⁷ He commanded the one in front, saying, 'When my brother Esau meets you and asks you, saying, 'To whom do you belong, and where are you going, and to whom do these animals in front of you belong?' ¹⁸ then you shall say, 'These belong to your servant Jacob; it is a present sent to my lord Esau. And behold, he also is behind us.''' ¹⁹ Then he commanded also the second and the third, and all those who followed the droves, saying, 'After this manner you shall speak to Esau when you find him; ²⁰ and you shall say, 'Behold, your servant Jacob also is behind us.''' For he said, 'I will appease him with the present that goes before me. Then afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me.' ²¹ So the present passed on before him, while he himself spent that night in the camp. ²² Now he arose that same night and took his two wives and his two maids and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream. And he sent across whatever he had. ²⁴ Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵ When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob's thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, 'Let me go, for the dawn is breaking.' But he said, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' ²⁷ So he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' ²⁸ He said, 'Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.' ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him and said, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And he blessed him there. ³⁰ So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, 'I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved.' ³¹ Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Penuel, and he was limping on his thigh. ³²

Therefore, to this day the sons of Israel do not eat the sinew of the hip which is on the socket of the thigh, because he touched the socket of Jacob's thigh in the sinew of the hip.

Historical and Cultural Background

- *Will Esau and Jacob Become Another Cain and Abel?*: Esau had vowed to kill Jacob (27:41 – 42), like Cain killed Abel (Gen.4:8). Now Jacob wants to find favor (*hen*; 32:5) with him. Jacob selects a present/gift for Esau (*minhah*; 32:13, 18, 20, 21) of livestock (32:13 – 14). He is going to send them ahead of his company, and come last (32:15 – 20).
- *Jacob Handicaps Himself*: In case Jacob fails and Esau attacks, he divides his household into two companies (*mahaneh*; 32:7 – 8) so if Esau attacked him alone, both might escape. If Esau attacked one, the other might escape. Notice that Esau describes it as *one* company/camp (*mahaneh*) in 33:8.
- *Wrestling*: The river Jabbok (*yabboq*) is close in sound to 'wrestle' (*'abaq*) and also to Jacob's name (*yaqob*), which meant 'deceiver, supplanter.' Recall that Jacob and Esau wrestled physically in the darkness of the womb of their mother Rebekah (Gen.26:22), and that Rachel and Leah wrestled relationally with each other (Gen.30:8).

Structure of the Jacob, Rachel, and Leah Story¹

- A. God makes promise; struggle in childbirth; Jacob and Esau born; Jacob buys birthright (25:19 – 34)
- B. Jacob's mother Rebekah is endangered in a foreign place, Isaac lies about her, makes a pact with foreigners (26:1 – 34)
- C. Jacob tricks Esau, fears him, and flees the Promised Land (27:1 – 28:9)
- D. At night, God speaks to Jacob in a dream (ladder with angels), Jacob names Bethel, makes deal with God (28:10 – 22)
- E. Jacob meets Rachel and Laban (29:1 – 14)
- F. Jacob must acknowledge the rights of the firstborn (Leah) and is vulnerable to Laban, Laban deceives Rachel (29:15 – 30)
- G. Jacob experiences conflict between his two wives (29:31 – 30:13)
- H. Rachel stops trying to thwart God's blessings to Leah; Leah bears children (30:14 – 21)
- H'. God 'remembers' Rachel; Rachel bears Joseph (30:22 – 24)
- G'. Jacob experiences conflict with Laban but accepts a handicap with his flocks, relinquishes his rights (30:25 – 36)
- F'. God prospers Jacob and protects him from Laban; Rachel deceives Laban (30:37 – 31:35)
- E'. Laban departs from Jacob (31:36 – 55)
- D'. At night, God wrestles Jacob, Jacob named Israel, asks God for blessing (32:1 – 32)
- C'. Jacob returns to the Promised Land, fears Esau, but is reconciled to him (33:1 – 17)
- B'. Jacob's daughter Dinah is endangered in foreign place, Jacob's sons lie, make a pact with foreigners, and kill them (33:18 – 34:31)
- A'. God fulfills promise; Jacob named Israel again at Bethel; struggle in childbirth, Rachel dies; Reuben forfeits birthright; Isaac dies, Jacob and Esau bury him (35:1 – 29)

¹ By Mako Nagasawa using insights from J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), and Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1986), p.53 – 54.

Questions

1. How is God reassuring Jacob? Just looking at v.1 – 2, what do you think God is hoping Jacob will do?
 - a. Jacob has learned that he's been wrestling with Esau all his life, and instead needs to look to bless him. Paul says in Philippians 2 that Jesus did not look to his own interests but to others, and that we need to have that posture as well because we are joined to Jesus. Jacob's story has turned, and his character has started to change. He watched Rachel have some compassion for her sister Leah, after 'wrestling' with her (Gen.30:8); God then blessed Rachel with a son, Joseph. So Jacob accepted a handicap with Laban, and God blessed Jacob (G' reverses G). God protected Jacob from Laban and then Rachel got a chance to deceive her father (F' reverses F). Laban then departed from Jacob and released him (E' reverses E).
2. What do you think of Jacob's strategy to meet Esau?
 - a. He's clearly still afraid, expecting that Esau might kill one of the companies
 - b. Jacob prays in v.9. But how come he didn't pray sooner? Why did Jacob devise a strategy first? And then he comes before God saying that he has become 'two companies'? Is he really 'two companies'?
 - c. Is the gift of animals what Jacob heard from God? It's not clear. Maybe.
3. Why the wrestling match?
 - a. What did Jacob think about the identity of this man in the dark?
 - i. Esau, come secretly?
 - ii. Laban, returning for revenge?
 - b. How does wrestling characterize the life of Jacob?
 - i. He wrestled with his stronger brother from the womb, wrestling the birthright from him
 - ii. He wrestled with his reluctant and negligent father, wrestling the blessing from him
 - iii. He wrestled with the massive stone on the well when he met Rachel
 - iv. He wrestled with his lying, scheming uncle Laban, first for his daughter and then for fair work and fair pay
 - v. He wrestled with his wives about childbirth, and they wrestled with each other.
 - vi. 'In this culminating moment of his life story, the characterizing issue of wrestling is made explicit and literal.'²
 - vii. 'The verb 'he struggled' ('bq) occurs only here and in v.26, and is clearly a play on the name Yabbok (ybq), and probably Jacob too (y'qb). So we could paraphrase it 'he Yabboked him' or 'he Jacobed him'!³
 - c. We later find out that this man is God, somehow, or at least represents God. Why does God come and wrestle with Jacob here and now?
 - i. Jacob is going back to face his brother Esau. He is wrestling with the original, fundamental issue of his life.
 - ii. Actually, the wrestling match was kind of postponed for a long time, because Jacob committed deception and had to run away
 - iii. God represents Esau, in some sense. In the darkness, by water. It represents the womb, where Jacob wrestled in the darkness, in the waters of his mother's womb.
4. What does Jacob's limp mean?
 - a. That he can't run away any more. He caused trouble and then ran away from his problems and the problems he caused. But he has surrendered to God. That means that God wounded Jacob's sin in order to heal Jacob.
 - b. Illus: I used to run away from my problems, too, starting from my family. Now, I'm not able to run away any more, because of Jesus, Jesus' love for others, Jesus' desire that I work towards reconciliation, and his sharing his own desires with me. He wounded my sin so that he could heal me. It's devastatingly painful, but also strengthening in the truest sense. I have walked with a limp ever since.
 - c. 'God wounds us where we are already wounded.'⁴
 - d. It's interesting how we are both winners and losers with God. God is both our friend and our adversary. But it's because God is for us and opposed to our sin.

² Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York, NY: Norton, 1996), p.180

³ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16 – 50* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1994), p.295

⁴ John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*

- e. Jacob asks the man to bless him! Why? Whose blessing had he longed for? His father's. Perhaps he sees God as his father in some sense?
5. Why does God ask for Jacob's name? It's a bit strange to wrestle with someone for hours and then suddenly to ask for his name.
- a. God wants Jacob to say his own name. Has Jacob ever said his own name before? No. Even with Rachel at the well, he said who his mother and father were, but not his own name (Gen.29:12) Saying his own name would have been an admission of who he was and who he had become, 'the heel grabber, the deceiver, the supplanter.'⁵ Now, after a lifetime of struggle, he has to admit who he is.
 - b. But God reveals Himself as the one with whom Jacob was originally and most fundamentally wrestling. This is suggested by God renaming Jacob Israel, the one who has struggled with God and prevailed.
 - i. It doesn't mean that God caused Esau's competitiveness or Isaac's delinquency or Laban's trickery. Jacob could have responded differently to them, with God's help.
 - ii. But we do sense that behind his wives' barrenness and the childbirths lay God's care and power to bring life. God was bringing Jacob to face who he was.
 - iii. The power to rename or change names was a privilege granted only to superiors in the ancient world.
 - c. Jacob's entire life is now fundamentally changed. All along he had prevailed through his deceptions and manipulations, but now he prevails by clinging to God. It is important to note the ambiguity and mysterious tension in the name Israel. God is not against passionate 'striving'; it is how we strive and what we strive for and, most importantly, who we strive with that concerns Him.
 - i. Finally, after twenty years, with Esau coming over the horizon leading a large army, having no human resources left, Jacob prays in total dependence upon God. In this way of "clinging" rather than "wrestling" in his "striving with God and man" he will now prevail. This is the birth of Israel. It is an archetype of our own spiritual rebirth, which for some, like Jacob, occurs when we face the fear of losing everything.
 - ii. God blesses Jacob, and makes Jacob a blessing, when Jacob can no longer run away from others.
 - d. Illus: This is what Frederick Buechner says about this story:

'And then it happens. Out of the deep of the night a stranger leaps. He hurls himself at Jacob, and they fall to the ground, their bodies lashing through the darkness. It is terrible enough not to see the attacker's face, and his strength is more terrible still, the strength of more than a man. All the night through they struggle in silence until just before morning when it looks as though a miracle might happen. Jacob is winning. The stranger cries out to be set free before the sun rises. Then, suddenly, all is reversed. He merely touches the hollow of Jacob's thigh, and in a moment Jacob is lying there crippled and helpless. The sense we have, which Jacob must have had, that the whole battle was from the beginning fated to end this way, that the stranger had simply held back until now, letting Jacob exert all his strength and almost win so that when he was defeated, he would know that he was truly defeated; so that he would know that not all the shrewdness, will, brute force that he could muster were enough to get this. Jacob will not release his grip, only now it is a grip not of violence but of need, like the grip of a drowning man. The darkness has faded just enough so that for the first time he can dimly see his opponent's face. And what he sees is something more terrible than the face of death – the face of love. It is vast and strong, half ruined with suffering and fierce with joy, the face a man flees down all the darkness of his days until at last he cries out, 'I will not let you go, until you bless me!' Not a blessing that he can have now by the strength of his cunning or the force of his will, but a blessing that he can have only as a gift.'⁶

⁵ J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), p.205

⁶ Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: Harper Collins, 1966), p.17 – 18