

# The Book of Genesis, Teacher's Guide

## Lesson 18: Jacob Returns and Wrestles with God

Genesis 31:1–32:32

### Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

These chapters bring Jacob home, through the tense parting with Laban and the terrifying approach to Esau, to the pivotal night of wrestling at the Jabbok. Doctrinally, the lesson teaches God's faithful guidance and presence in obedience, the nature of humble and persevering prayer, the meaning of 'wrestling with God,' the truth that God's strength is made perfect in our weakness, and, supremely, the genuine transformation of character that comes only from an encounter with the living God. The new name Israel marks a turning point in Jacob's life and a pattern for ours.

Give special attention to the wrestling and the transformation. The all-night struggle at Jabbok is the spiritual climax of Jacob's life: the lifelong grasper, who always seized blessings by his own scheming and strength, is finally brought to the place where he can only cling. God wounds him (the dislocated hip) so that he cannot fight, only hold on, and only then does the blessing come. This is the gospel pattern of strength through weakness, blessing through brokenness, and transformation through encounter rather than mere self-effort. The new name signifies a changed man, and it points toward the new identity God gives in Christ, who makes us new creations.

Formationally, this passage calls students to obey God's call into hard places, to pray humbly and persistently especially in fear, to stop striving in their own strength and cling to God, and to seek the deep transformation that comes only from meeting Him. Lead them to see that they, like Jacob, are changed not by trying harder but by encountering the God who breaks our self-reliance and then blesses us, giving us a new name in Christ.

### Question 1

#### Student Question:

*God told Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you" (31:3), calling him back to face what he had fled. What does this reveal about God's faithfulness to guide His people and to be with them as they obey, even into hard places?*

### Commentary and Teaching Notes

After twenty years, God calls Jacob home: 'Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you' (31:3). The call sends Jacob back toward the very place he fled, toward the brother who once wanted him dead. Obedience here means facing what he had run from.

Note that God's command comes with God's promise: 'I will be with you.' God does not send Jacob back alone; He pledges His presence. Throughout Scripture, God's calls to hard obedience are accompanied by the assurance of His presence, to Moses, to Joshua, to the disciples in the Great Commission.

Draw out God's faithfulness to guide. God had told Jacob He would bring him back to this land (28:15), and now He directs the timing and the way. God leads His people, often calling them forward into difficulty, but never abandoning them in it. His guidance and His presence go together.

Help students see that obedience sometimes means returning to face what we have avoided. Running may relieve us for a season, but God often calls us back to the unfinished business, the hard relationship, the matter left unresolved, promising to be with us as we go.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- God's faithful guidance, calling His people forward and home (Genesis 31:3).
- God's commands accompanied by the promise of His presence.
- Obedience sometimes meaning returning to face what we have fled.
- God leading into difficulty but never abandoning us in it.

### **Discussion Prompts**

- What did God call Jacob to face, and what promise came with the call?
- Why does God so often pair His commands with 'I will be with you'?
- How does God's presence change the way we face hard obedience?

### **Question 2**

#### **Student Question:**

*Where is God calling you to go, or to go back, to something difficult you have been avoiding, perhaps a hard relationship, an unfinished matter, or an act of obedience? How does the promise "I will be with you" help you face it?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

This question applies God's call into hard places to the student's life. Many of us are avoiding something, a difficult conversation, a needed reconciliation, an unfinished obedience, a place of past failure, and God may be calling us back to face it.

Help students identify their 'Esau,' the hard thing they have been running from. Avoidance often feels safer, but unfinished matters tend to follow us, and God's peace often lies on the far side of the obedience we are evading.

Anchor the courage to face it in God's promise. We can go back into the hard place because God goes with us. 'I will be with you' is not a guarantee that the encounter will be easy, but that we will not face it alone, and that God is at work in it.

Invite a concrete step: the difficult thing the student has been avoiding, and one move toward facing it in obedience, leaning on the promise of God's presence rather than their own resources.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Identifying what we are avoiding and God may be calling us to face.
- Unfinished matters following us until faced.
- Courage grounded in the promise of God's presence.
- God's peace often lying beyond the obedience we evade.

### **Discussion Prompts**

- What hard thing have you been avoiding that God may be calling you to face?
- What makes it so hard to go back to it?
- How does 'I will be with you' help you face it?

### **Question 3**

#### **Student Question:**

*Facing his brother in terror, Jacob prayed humbly, "I am not worthy of the least of all the deserved kindness... you have shown to your servant" (32:9-12), pleading God's promises and mercy. What does this prayer teach us about how to pray, especially in fear?*

#### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

As Esau approaches with four hundred men, Jacob is gripped by fear, and we see his old instincts and a new dependence side by side. He schemes (dividing the camp, sending gifts), but he also prays, and his prayer (32:9-12) is a model of how to pray in fear.

Walk through the elements. Jacob appeals to God's covenant relationship ('O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac'); he recalls God's command and promise ('you who said to me, Return... and I will do you good'); he confesses his unworthiness ('I am not worthy of the least of all the deserved kindness'); he makes his request plainly ('Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother'); and he leans again on God's promise. Relationship, God's word, humility, petition, and trust in the promise: a pattern worth teaching.

Highlight the humility especially. The grasping, self-confident Jacob now says, 'I am not worthy of the least of all your steadfast love.' Fear has done its humbling work; he comes empty-handed, pleading mercy rather than claiming desert. This is the posture God honors: 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble' (James 4:6).

Help students see that Jacob's praying does not cancel his planning, but it reorders it. He still acts wisely, but now his confidence rests in God, not his schemes. Prayer and responsible action belong together, with prayer in the lead.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- A model of prayer in fear: relationship, God's word, humility, petition, trust (Genesis 32:9–12).
- Humility and confession of unworthiness as the posture God honors (James 4:6).
- Pleading God's promises rather than claiming our desert.
- Prayer reordering, not canceling, our wise action.

### **Discussion Prompts**

- What elements make Jacob's prayer a good model?
- How does fear humble Jacob in his praying?
- How do prayer and wise action fit together here?

### **Question 4**

#### **Student Question:**

*When you are afraid, do you turn first to scheming and self-protection, as Jacob's old instincts did, or to humble prayer? What would it look like to face your fears the way Jacob finally did, on your knees?*

#### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

This question presses the matter of how we handle fear. Jacob's first instinct was the old one, scheme and self-protect, but his better response was humble prayer. We face the same fork whenever fear grips us.

Help students notice their default. Fear tends to drive us either to frantic control (managing, planning, manipulating) or to paralysis, and rarely first to prayer. Yet prayer is where Jacob found his footing, and where we find ours: turning the fear into petition, casting our anxieties on the God who cares (1 Peter 5:7).

Encourage the Jacob-shift. We are not told to ignore our fears or to stop acting wisely, but to bring the fear to God first, to pray before we scheme, to seek His face before we manage the situation. Prayer does not always change the circumstance, but it changes us and reorders our trust.

Invite a concrete application: a current fear the student is tempted to handle by control or avoidance, and what it would look like to face it first on their knees, in humble, honest prayer like Jacob's.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Recognizing whether fear drives us to control, paralysis, or prayer.
- Casting our anxieties on God who cares (1 Peter 5:7).
- Praying before we scheme; seeking God's face first.
- Prayer reordering our trust even when the circumstance remains.

### **Discussion Prompts**

- When afraid, do you turn first to control, avoidance, or prayer?
- What fear are you currently handling in your own strength?
- What would facing it first in prayer look like?

### **Question 5**

#### **Student Question:**

*Through the night Jacob wrestled with God and refused to let go without a blessing (32:24–26). What does it mean to “wrestle with God,” and why is this persistent, desperate clinging a mark of real faith rather than a lack of it?*

#### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

The wrestling at the Jabbok is mysterious and profound. Left alone in the dark, Jacob is engaged by ‘a man’ who, the text and later Scripture make clear, is God Himself in some manifestation (Jacob says, ‘I have seen God face to face,’ and Hosea calls the figure the Angel; Hosea 12:3–4). They struggle all night, and Jacob will not let go, even when wounded, demanding a blessing.

Draw out what ‘wrestling with God’ means. This is not rebellion against God but a desperate, persevering engagement with Him, refusing to give up, holding on for blessing through a long and painful struggle. It is the very opposite of passive resignation or shallow faith; it is faith that clings.

Note that this clinging is commended, not condemned. God could have ended the match in an instant; instead He lets Jacob hold on, and then blesses and renames him. God honors the persistence. This is the same spirit Jesus commended in the persistent widow and the friend at midnight: keep asking, keep seeking, do not give up (Luke 18:1–8; 11:5–10).

Help students see that real faith sometimes looks like wrestling: an honest, persevering struggle with God in prayer through a hard season, refusing to let go of Him until He blesses. Far from being a failure of faith, this holding on is its very expression.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Wrestling with God as desperate, persevering engagement, not rebellion (Genesis 32:24–26; Hosea 12:3–4).

- Clinging to God for blessing through a long, painful struggle.
- God honoring persistence, as in Jesus' parables of persistent prayer (Luke 18:1-8).
- Wrestling as an expression of real faith, not a lack of it.

### **Discussion Prompts**

- What does it mean to 'wrestle with God'?
- Why is this persistent clinging a mark of faith rather than its failure?
- How does Jesus commend the same persistence in prayer?

### **Question 6**

#### **Student Question:**

*Where in your life do you most need to "hold on" to God right now, refusing to let go through a long, hard struggle? What does persevering with God look like in that situation?*

#### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

This question invites students to identify where they need to 'hold on' to God. Many are in the middle of a long struggle, a prolonged illness, a wayward loved one, a besetting sin, a season of darkness, where the temptation is to let go, to give up on prayer, to drift from God in discouragement.

Help students see Jacob's example as permission and encouragement to persevere. We are allowed to hold on, to keep pressing, to refuse to release our grip on God until He blesses. This is not presumption; it is the persevering faith Scripture commends.

Address the temptation to let go. Long struggles wear us down, and the enemy whispers that God is not listening, that prayer is pointless, that we should stop. Jacob teaches us to cling all the harder, especially when we are wounded and weak.

Invite a concrete commitment: the long struggle in which the student most needs to hold on to God, and a renewed resolve to keep clinging in prayer and faith, refusing to let go until God blesses, trusting that He honors such perseverance.

#### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Identifying the long struggle where we need to hold on to God.
- Permission and encouragement to persevere, not give up.
- Resisting the temptation to let go in discouragement.
- Clinging harder in weakness, trusting God to honor perseverance.

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Where do you most need to 'hold on' to God right now?

- What tempts you to let go in that struggle?
- What would clinging to God look like there this week?

## Question 7

### Student Question:

*God blessed Jacob only after touching his hip and leaving him unable to fight, so that he could only cling (32:25–26). What does this teach us about how God’s strength is often made perfect in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9–10)?*

### Commentary and Teaching Notes

A crucial detail: God blesses Jacob only after wounding him. ‘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’ (32:25). Now Jacob cannot wrestle; he can only cling. The blessing comes not to the strong fighter but to the broken man who can do nothing but hold on.

Draw out the principle of strength through weakness. God often must break our self-reliance before He can bless us. As long as Jacob could fight in his own strength, he did; only when he was wounded and helpless did he receive the blessing the right way, by clinging in dependence. This is the pattern of grace.

Connect it to Paul’s experience. God gave Paul a thorn in the flesh and refused to remove it, saying, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Paul concluded, ‘When I am weak, then I am strong’ (2 Corinthians 12:9–10). God’s strength flows into our acknowledged weakness, not our self-sufficiency.

Help students embrace this counterintuitive truth. We instinctively seek strength, control, and self-sufficiency; God often works through weakness, brokenness, and dependence. The wound that ended Jacob’s fighting was a gift, the doorway to blessing. Our weaknesses, surrendered to God, can become the very place His strength is shown.

### Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God breaking our self-reliance before He blesses (Genesis 32:25).
- Blessing coming to the broken man who can only cling.
- God’s power made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9–10).
- Wounds and weaknesses surrendered to God becoming doorways to His strength.

### Discussion Prompts

- Why did the blessing come only after Jacob was wounded?
- How is God’s strength made perfect in our weakness?
- How can a weakness become the place of God’s strength?

## Question 8

### Student Question:

*Where are you tempted to rely on your own strength, cleverness, or control rather than depend on God? How might God be inviting you to find His strength precisely in your weakness and brokenness?*

### Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the matter of self-reliance into the student's life. We are all tempted, like the old Jacob, to rely on our own strength, cleverness, planning, and control, to be the master of our own situations. God often works to bring us to the end of that self-reliance.

Help students name where they trust themselves rather than God: in their competence, their resourcefulness, their ability to manage and fix and control. These are not evil in themselves, but they become a substitute for dependence on God, and God may lovingly weaken them so that we learn to lean on Him.

Reframe weakness and brokenness as invitation rather than mere loss. The places where we are weak, where we cannot fix or control, are precisely where God invites us to find His strength. Our limitations, surrendered to Him, become the arena of grace.

Invite a concrete reflection: where the student most relies on their own strength, and what it would look like to surrender that area to God, finding His strength in their weakness rather than striving harder in their own.

### Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Recognizing where we rely on our own strength and control.
- Self-reliance becoming a substitute for dependence on God.
- God lovingly weakening our self-sufficiency to teach dependence.
- Finding God's strength in surrendered weakness.

### Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most tempted to rely on your own strength?
- How might God be inviting you to depend on Him instead?
- What would finding God's strength in your weakness look like?

## Question 9

### Student Question:

*God changed Jacob's name from "Jacob" (the grasper, the supplanter) to "Israel" (one who strives with God), marking a real transformation, and Jacob limped away forever changed,*



*saying, "I have seen God face to face" (32:28–31). What does this teach us about the genuine transformation that comes only from an encounter with God, as opposed to mere self-improvement?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

This is the doctrinal high point: genuine transformation through an encounter with God. God changes Jacob's name. 'Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed' (32:28). 'Jacob' meant grasper, supplanter, heel-grabber, a name that summed up his whole scheming life. 'Israel' means one who strives with God. The new name marks a new man.

Stress that this is real transformation, not mere self-improvement. Jacob did not change himself by trying harder; he was changed by meeting God face to face. He had spent decades grasping and scheming and was still, at heart, Jacob. It took an encounter with the living God, a night of wrestling, a wounding, and a clinging, to begin to make him Israel. We are not transformed by resolutions but by God.

Note the marks the encounter leaves. Jacob walks away with two permanent things: a new name and a limp. The blessing and the wound go together. God's transforming work often leaves a mark on us, a humbling, a weakness, a tenderness, that reminds us forever of our dependence on Him. Jacob would limp the rest of his life, and every step would preach that he met God and was changed.

He names the place Peniel: 'I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered' (32:30). To meet the holy God and live is itself grace. And that meeting, not Jacob's striving, is what changed him. This is the pattern of all true spiritual change: we are transformed by beholding God (2 Corinthians 3:18), not by mere moral effort.

Land it in the gospel. The deepest change of identity God offers comes in Christ: 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are not merely improved; we are made new, given a new name and a new heart, transformed by union with the God we meet in Jesus. The lesson is not 'try harder to be better' but 'meet God, cling to Him, and be changed.' Encourage students to seek the transforming encounter, in the Word, in prayer, in surrender, rather than settling for self-improvement that never reaches the heart.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Real transformation through encounter with God, not mere self-improvement (Genesis 32:28).
- The new name 'Israel' marking a changed man, beyond decades of self-effort.
- God's transforming work leaving a mark (the limp): blessing and wound together.
- Being transformed by beholding God, not by moral effort alone (2 Corinthians 3:18).
- The new identity and new creation given in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

- Seeking the transforming encounter rather than settling for surface change.

### **Discussion Prompts**

- What is the significance of the change from 'Jacob' to 'Israel'?
- Why is this transformation different from mere self-improvement?
- How does true change come by encounter with God rather than effort alone?

### **Question 10**

#### **Student Question:**

*Look back over the whole passage. Name one specific way God is calling you to stop striving in your own strength, to cling to Him, and to be transformed by meeting Him rather than merely trying harder.*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

Use this capstone to bring the night at Jabbok to a personal point. We have seen God's call into hard places, humble and persevering prayer, the meaning of wrestling and clinging, strength through weakness, and transformation through encounter. The question is what God is forming in this student.

Press for the specific. For one it is obeying a hard call; for another, praying instead of scheming in fear; for another, holding on through a long struggle; for another, surrendering self-reliance; for another, seeking a real encounter with God rather than mere self-improvement.

Close with the God who meets and changes us. The God who wrestled Jacob into Israel meets us in Christ and makes us new creations. To be formed by this passage is to stop striving in our own strength, to cling to God in our weakness, and to let Him do what no amount of self-effort can: change us from the inside out and give us a new name. We may walk away limping, but we will walk away blessed, and we will walk away His.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Stopping our striving and clinging to God in weakness.
- Praying and persevering rather than scheming.
- Seeking transformation by encounter, not self-improvement.
- The new name and new creation God gives in Christ.

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Which call is God pressing on you: obedience, prayer, clinging, or surrender?
- Where do you most need to stop striving and simply hold on to God?
- How does being a 'new creation' in Christ reshape how you pursue change?