

The Book of Genesis

Lesson 18: Jacob Returns and Wrestles with God -- Genesis 31:1-32:32

Twenty years have passed. Jacob came to Laban with nothing but a staff, and now he is leaving with wives, children, flocks, and herds, a wealthy man. But the old tensions have curdled, and God says it is time to go home. So Jacob gathers everything and slips away, only to have Laban chase him down in anger. There is a tense confrontation, a search for stolen household idols, hot words on both sides, and finally an uneasy truce, a heap of stones at Mizpah where two men who do not trust each other agree to let God watch the boundary between them. Jacob escapes Laban. But now he must face the one thing he has been running from for two decades: his brother Esau, who once swore to kill him.

And Jacob is terrified. Word comes that Esau is coming to meet him with four hundred men. The old schemer's instincts kick in, he divides his camp, he sends waves of gifts ahead to soften his brother, he plans and strategizes. But then he does something we have not really seen him do before. He prays. And it is a beautiful prayer, humble and honest: "I am not worthy of the least of all the deserved kindness... that you have shown to your servant. Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother." The man who always grasped and schemed is finally, in his fear, clinging to God.

Then comes the strangest and most important night of Jacob's life. He sends his family across the river Jabbok and is left alone in the dark, and "a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day." All night they struggle, and as dawn approaches, the man, who is somehow God Himself, touches Jacob's hip and wrenches it out of joint. Now Jacob cannot fight; he can only cling. And cling he does, gasping the words that turn his whole life around: "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The grasper who spent his life seizing blessings by his own strength finally receives one the only way it can truly be received, by holding on to God in helpless desperation.

And God gives him a new name. "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob," the heel-grabber, the supplanter, "but Israel," for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed. Jacob limps away into the sunrise a changed man, with a new name and a permanent wound, both gifts from the God he met face to face. He calls the place Peniel: "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered." Read this passage and notice the pattern, because it is God's pattern with us too: He brings us to the end of our striving, breaks our self-reliance, and then, when we finally just hold on to Him, He blesses us and gives us a new name.

Group Discussion: All night Jacob wrestled, and even when his hip was wrenched out of joint he would not let go, saying, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (32:26). What do you think this strange, all-night wrestling match was really about, and what does it mean for us to "hold on" to God like that?

Personal Reflection: Jacob received his blessing and new name only after God touched his hip and left him unable to fight, able only to cling. Where is God bringing you to the end of your own striving and self-reliance? How hard is it for you to stop fighting in your own strength and simply hold on to God?

Read Genesis 31:1–32:32

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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)?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Hosea 12:3–4, Jacob wrestling and weeping, seeking God's favor; 2 Corinthians 12:9–10, God's power made perfect in weakness; Luke 18:1–8, the call to persistent, persevering prayer; 2 Corinthians 5:17, anyone in Christ as a new creation; Philippians 3:7–9, counting all things loss to gain Christ.