

Genesis, Part 30

With Laban and his “posse” of “cowboys” decamped and headed back to Paddan-aram, Jacob was free to continue on his journey home. What follows in our story will be a turning point in Jacob’s life. Even though he was living in the flesh, Jacob was still God’s man. We should be careful judging whether someone is a Christian or not. There are many Christians who don’t look like they are believers, but they are. Jacob is a good example of that.

As God’s witness to the world, Jacob has been a poor one so far, but God is going to deal with that. To get his full attention, God will cripple him. “For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Heb 12:6). Lot didn’t look like a child of God, but he was. Peter says of Lot, “And if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked 8 for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard” (2 Peter 2:7-8). We now come to the test when the Lord is going to deal with Jacob because he will be a representative of God. Jacob will be brought to a place of fruit-bearing for a real and vital service to the Lord.

Despite the divine encouragement, a reunion with Esau seemed potentially dangerous. Had he forgiven him? Would Esau seize the chance to kill Jacob? These were the anxieties uppermost in Jacob’s mind as he returned to the land.

Genesis 32:1 Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him.

² And when Jacob saw them he said, “This is God’s camp!” So he called the name of that place Mahanaim.

Jacob continues on his way and soon the “angels of God” show up to meet him. They are camped in the same valley as his own camp. God is preparing Jacob for meeting Esau by giving the patriarch a vision of angels. Jacob had just left Laban and was about to return to the land and face Esau. At this point, God’s invisible world openly touched Jacob’s visible world.

At the edge of the Promised Land, Jacob was met by the angels of God. This encounter was intended to remind Jacob of God's care and Bethel. Jacob called the place Mahanaim, "two camps," by which he referred to his camp and the camp of the angels. The encounter is described with striking brevity. Only four Hebrew words report the meeting: the angels of God met him. He must have seen the camp of angels as a source of comfort to his camp, as he prepared to reenter the land. His glimpse of the angels of God assured him once again of divine protection accompanying him. This reassurance came at a time when Jacob sorely needed it.

When God's work is involved, the conflict is spiritual, not physical. This was true for Jacob, it was true for Israel, and it is true for believers today. No human effort can be sufficient for these things. The source of defense and the means of victory come from God.

Gen 32:3 And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, ⁴ instructing them, "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, donkeys, flocks, male servants, and female servants. I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight.' "

Encouraged by this encounter with the angels, Jacob sent a conciliatory message to his estranged brother. Esau was then living south of the Dead Sea in the land of Seir. Jacob hoped to find favor in Esau's sight by:

1. His humble demeanor ("your servant" and "my lord")
2. The fact that he was now a man of wealth.

Gen 32:6 And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him." ⁷ Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. He divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps, ⁸ thinking, "If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the camp that is left will escape."

His messengers returned with the news that Esau was coming to meet him with four hundred men, and Jacob was terrified. This sets an ominous tone for the meeting. For Esau to come out to meet him with four hundred men suggests he intends to exact his revenge on Jacob and his company.

Expecting the worst, Jacob set about making preparations for the confrontation with his brother. He did four things:

1. He organized his people and livestock in two groups, thinking that if Esau attacked one, the other could perhaps escape.
2. He organized a peace offering of sizable proportions. As Esau approached the camp of Jacob he would encounter one servant after another with gifts of sheep, goats, camels, and other livestock. Jacob hoped that the cumulative effect of these peace offerings would cause Esau to receive him in peace.
3. That night Jacob helped his family ford the Jabbok. The Jabbok River in Gilead flows into the Jordan River from the eastern frontier of Israel. This stream was about thirty feet wide and hip deep. Jacob felt that, with a night crossing, it was less likely Esau would attack.
4. He prayed, thanking God for the great blessing he had already bestowed, reminding God of the promises he had given, and asking God to save him from his brother.

Of the four preparations for meeting his brother, the last one was the most important. It showed a new-found sense of faith in the Lord that we have not seen before in Jacob. Yes, one must make physical preparations for some pending difficulty, but the most important preparation is getting right with God and going to him in prayer and faith.

Gen 32:9 And 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 kindred, that I may do you good,’ ¹⁰ I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. ¹¹ Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children. ¹² But you said, ‘I will surely do you good,

and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’ ”

Out of fear, Jacob prayed to be delivered. Surely he recalled Esau’s threat to kill him (27:41). Jacob’s deep fear shows up in every section of this passage, even in his prayer, but Jacob will see that God will deliver him from his brother.

Jacob then confessed his unworthiness of God’s kindness, faithfulness, and material blessings. He had the correct attitude in prayer—total dependency on God. He addressed God as the God of “my father Abraham and of my father Isaac,” and reminded God of His command for him to return to his country and of His promise to bless him. He repeated the promise God had made to him about his descendants becoming as numberless as the sand of the sea (cf. 22:17). Jacob’s prayer, undertaken at a moment in which he perceives himself and his company to be in grave peril, is not only a prayer for aid, but a strategically worded argument for God to live up to the promises He made to him at Bethel—and thus, an argument that God needs to protect Jacob. All this should have built Jacob’s confidence, but his guilt and fear completely controlled him at this point.

God wants people to remind Him of His Word when they pray. This is not challenging God, but it demonstrates an understanding of God’s promises and more importantly, trust that God will do what He said He would do.

Gen 32:13 So he stayed there that night, and from what he had with him he took 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 calves, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. ¹⁶ These he handed over to his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, “Pass on ahead of me and put a space between drove and drove.” ¹⁷ He instructed the first, “When Esau my brother meets you and asks you, ‘To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these ahead of you?’ ¹⁸ then you shall say, ‘They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a present sent to my lord Esau. And moreover, he is behind us.’ ” ¹⁹ He

likewise instructed the second and the third and all who followed the droves, “You shall say the same thing to Esau when you find him, ²⁰ and you shall say, ‘Moreover, your servant Jacob is behind us.’ ” For he thought, “I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterward I shall see his face. Perhaps he will accept me.” ²¹ So the present passed on ahead of him, and he stayed that night in the camp.

To appease Esau, Jacob took a portion of his blessing and prepared a gift (minhâh) for Esau. A minhâh was often given to a superior to gain his favor. Jacob sent Esau goats, sheep, camels, cattle, and donkeys—550 animals in all, not counting the young camels! He thought these five herds sent separately would impress Esau and pacify him (v. 20). Jacob had to learn later, however, that God would have delivered him without such gifts. So too, the nation would need to learn that deliverance comes by faith in God, and not by giving tribute to the enemy.

Jacob Wrestles With An “Angel”

We get no introduction to this angel, and we have had no preparation for this battle. This comes out of nowhere.

Gen 32:22 The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. ²⁴ And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. ²⁵ 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 as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” ²⁷ And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” ²⁸ Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.” ³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. ³² Therefore to this

day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh.

His family safe back across the Jabbok, Jacob remained alone on the south bank of the river. He probably wanted privately to pour out his heart to the Lord. There in the darkness, he experienced a theophany, an appearance of the Second Person of the Trinity in human-like form. The man who met him there was none other than the Angel of the Lord who appeared earlier to Hagar and Abraham. Jacob might have thought at first that the stranger was Esau or one of his agents. Left with so little detail, reconstructing what took place leading to the encounter is impossible. That Jacob and the stranger became locked in a mighty struggle is clear.

This contest went through three phases:

1. Throughout most of the night, the two fought on equal terms. Without recourse to supernatural powers, the Angel could not prevail over Jacob. Some hold that the contest was entirely spiritual. The Angel was attempting to get Jacob to surrender his all to the Lord, who was attempting to humble him.
2. The Angel then employed his supernatural strength. He touched Jacob on the socket of his hip and wrenched it out of joint. Though in great pain, still, Jacob still refused to give up the struggle. Now, however, he realized that this was no mere mortal with whom he struggled. Whether Jacob's affliction was permanent or only temporary is not indicated.
3. Toward daybreak, the Angel begged Jacob to let him go. For Jacob to see the face of this Angel could be dangerous (cf. Ex 33:20). Jacob, however, would not release the opponent until he received a blessing. He may have feared that he had offended the Angel by his stubborn resistance. He certainly realized now that the Angel could, and probably should have crushed him. This was the first indication that a transformation was taking place in the soul of Jacob. He had outwitted and defeated Esau, Isaac, and Laban. Now he had met his match.

Jacob turned to fervent prayer and tears (Hosea 12:3-4). The purpose of the Angel had now been accomplished. Jacob was now begging for

spiritual strength with which to face the dangers of the next day. Here is the second indication of transformation: an all-consuming hunger for God. Above all else Jacob wanted the blessing of God.

The Angel asked Jacob to repeat his name. When Jacob did so, he was admitting his scheming, sinful nature. “Jacob” was what he was as well as who he was. This confession of unworthiness is the third indication of transformation.

The encounter with the Angel of the Lord had four positive results for Jacob:

1. The Angel gave Jacob (“the deceiver”) a new name, Israel, “he who struggles with God.” The name pointed to a new, spiritual character in Jacob.
2. He received a new blessing. When Jacob inquired about the name of his adversary, the Angel refused an answer. His identity was obvious. He then blessed Jacob and brought the encounter to a close.
3. Jacob had a new testimony. He named the spot of this heavenly encounter Peniel, “face of God”. He knew that he had come face to face with God on that long, lonely night.
4. He lived to see a new day. Jacob had seen God, but his life had been spared. That sunrise was very special to him. It signaled the beginning of his walk with the Lord.

Here at the Jabbok, Jacob tries to control the situation, just as he did at Bethel when he tried to bargain with God. He goes for the blessing, and he goes for the man’s name. He gets one but not the other. He cannot fully control the situation or explain what has happened.

Jacob received a physical reminder of his own weakness. He limped away from Peniel to face his brother. I am here reminded of what Paul says in Second Corinthians 12:10, “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

This event was an important turning point in the patriarch's life. The emphasis of the narrative is certainly on the wrestling, but its purpose was the changing of Jacob into Israel.

The narrator closes this strange account with the note that the Israelites would not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip. It commemorated the lameness which Jacob experienced as a result of his confrontation with the Angel of the Lord. Though this taboo became a custom in Israel, it was not made part of the Mosaic Law. Orthodox Jews still refuse to eat the tendon of the hindquarters of animals.

Jacob Meets Esau

It has all been building to this. Jacob is returning home and must deal with the twin brother Esau who 20 years before had sworn to kill him. At the urging of his mother, Jacob had escaped his brother's wrath to the home of his uncle Laban in Paddan-aram. There he married two women and two handmaidens and now has 12 children, 11 boys and one girl. But the Lord has called him home to Canaan, to the land that was promised to his grandfather, to his father, to him, and to his descendants — the land that would be called Israel, the place where he will fulfill his destiny. But now he must face his brother and their painful history. But he will face Esau, not as Jacob the usurper, but as Israel the new man.

Gen 33:1 And Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two female servants. ² And he put the servants with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. ³ He himself went on before them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother.

Spotting Esau and his four hundred men coming in the distance, Jacob prepared his family. The concubines and their children were put in front, then Leah and her sons, and finally Rachel and Joseph. He planned to introduce his family to Esau in the order of their importance. Jacob himself was out in front of all his family. Here is a new courage which is further evidence of the transformation. As he approached his brother he bowed seven times to the ground, an ancient custom in this culture. Here is a new humility that points again to the change in Jacob.

Gen 33:4 But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. ⁵ And when Esau lifted up his eyes and saw the women and children, he said, “Who are these with you?” Jacob said, “The children whom God has graciously given your servant.” ⁶ Then the servants drew near, they and their children, and bowed down. ⁷ Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down. And last Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down.

Esau would have none of this exaggerated homage. He ran to Jacob, embraced and kissed him. The two brothers wept. Esau was surprised to see Jacob’s family and was anxious to meet them. One by one the concubines and wives with their children came and bowed down before Esau. In talking with Esau, Jacob constantly referred to himself as “your servant” or “his servant” (vv. 5, 14) and to his brother as “my lord” (vv. 8, 13–15), whereas Esau simply called Jacob “my brother” (v. 9). This contrasts with their father’s blessing when Isaac made Jacob Esau’s lord (27:29).

Gen 33:8 Esau said, “What do you mean by all this company that I met?” Jacob answered, “To find favor in the sight of my lord.” ⁹ But Esau said, “I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.” ¹⁰ Jacob said, “No, please, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my present from my hand. For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me. ¹¹ Please accept my blessing that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough.” Thus he urged him, and he took it.

When the introductions were over, Esau asked about the several droves of livestock that he had met as he approached Jacob’s camp. Jacob explained that these were gifts that he wished to give to his brother. When Esau hesitated to accept the livestock, Jacob insisted. He said, Accept this (lit., “my”) gift (*minḥāṭî*, the same word he used in 32:13). Then Jacob added, Accept the (lit., “my”) present (*birkāṭî*). The word “present” comes from *bārak*, “to bless.” By using *birkāṭî*, Jacob showed that he was deliberately wanting to share his blessing with Esau, trying to soften his earlier actions. The transformed Jacob possessed a new generosity.

Esau would have none of that either. He had accumulated his own material wealth. He needed nothing that his brother was offering. Jacob insisted, however, because this amicable reunion deserved such celebration. In that culture, to refuse a gift was considered an insult. Esau finally accepted the gifts.

This scene is rather funny when you think about it. Up to this time, each brother has been trying to get something from the other. This was especially true of Jacob. Now he is insisting his brother take gifts. We are seeing a changed man.

Jacob said seeing Esau's face was like seeing the face of God! This showed that he knew this deliverance from harm by Esau was of God. At Peniel Jacob had seen the face of God and was delivered (32:30). Having lived through that, he then survived Esau. Thus Esau's favorable reaction was God's gracious dealing.

Gen 33:12 Then Esau said, "Let us journey on our way, and I will go ahead of you." ¹³ But Jacob said to him, "My lord knows that the children are frail and that the nursing flocks and herds are a care to me. If they are driven hard for one day, all the flocks will die. ¹⁴ Let my lord pass on ahead of his servant, and I will lead on slowly, at the pace of the livestock that are ahead of me and at the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir."

¹⁵ So Esau said, "Let me leave with you some of the people who are with me." But he said, "What need is there? Let me find favor in the sight of my lord." ¹⁶ So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. ¹⁷ But Jacob journeyed to Succoth and built himself a house and made booths for his livestock. Therefore the name of the place is called Succoth.

Esau offered to accompany Jacob on the remainder of his journey. Jacob, however, rejected this offer because he had to move his children and livestock very slowly. Jacob urged Esau to go on ahead. He would join his brother in Seir later. Esau then offered to leave some of his men to assist in the journey. Jacob again declined, citing the favor of his brother as more than enough compensation for the generous gifts. But instead of heading

south to Seir, Jacob headed west to Succoth which is east of the Jordan River and on the north side of the Jabbok River. He may have been wise to avoid Edom, but he did not need to deceive his brother. The text does not record Jacob visiting Seir.

Thus miracles were worked in Jacob and Esau. In Jacob, God brought about a spirit of humility and generosity. Esau was changed from seeking revenge to desiring reconciliation. These changes were proof that God had delivered Jacob in answer to his prayer (32:11).

A great change has come over this man Jacob. His clever scheming to present gifts to his brother had come to naught. God had prepared the heart of Laban not to harm Jacob, and God had also prepared the heart of Esau to receive Jacob. Esau did not want the gifts from Jacob because Esau himself had been abundantly blessed. He took the gifts out of courtesy only after Jacob insisted. Both are seen as generous and genuine in their reconciliation. Since Esau is now prosperous and never attached much value to his birthright anyway, there was no reason why he should not be reconciled to his twin brother.

The sun is beginning to shine on Jacob's life. Laban is appeased and Esau reconciled, and God has arranged all of this. Had Jacob been left to his own devices, he would likely have met a violent death. Before long Jacob is going to look back on his life and see the hand of God there – and he will give God the glory. However, the evil, he has sown is yet to bring forth a full harvest. Trouble is waiting for Jacob.

Gen 33:18 And Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, on his way from Paddan-aram, and he camped before the city. ¹⁹ And from the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, he bought for a hundred pieces of money the piece of land on which he had pitched his tent. ²⁰ There he erected an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel.

Shechem is in Canaan between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim directly west of the Jabbok River and about 20 miles west of the Jordan River. Jacob is sometimes criticized because he stopped here at Succoth and did

not continue to Bethel. But maybe we should not expect too much from Jacob, now Israel, at this time. He has been crippled and is just learning to walk with his spirit legs.

These verses form a sort of epilogue to Jacob's sojourn outside the land. He returned in peace and camped near Shechem, the place where Abram first camped when he arrived in Canaan (12:6).

Jacob, like Abram, purchased a portion of the land, and there, and like Abram, Jacob set up an altar (12:7). Jacob identifies his new name Israel with God when he named it *EI Elohe Israel* ("El is the God of Israel"). In this way, he acknowledged that the Lord had led him back to the land. This indicates real growth in the man who is just learning to walk. He is on his way to Bethel, but he hasn't arrived there yet.

The following chapters shift the focus onto Jacob's children. His arrival back in the land and his establishing of the altar is the culmination of Jacob's "Laban experience". In this chapter, Jacob named two more places: Succoth ("shelters") was named because of the sheds he built for his livestock (33:17), and the name of the altar commemorated the significance of God's relationship to Israel, Jacob's new name. God had prospered and protected him just as He had promised.