

# Jacob Called Israel

Devotional Reading: Romans 11:25-32

Background Scripture: Genesis 32:22-32

Today's Scripture: Genesis 32:22-32

## I. The Struggle Genesis 32:22-25

**<sup>22</sup> That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup> After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. <sup>24</sup> So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. <sup>25</sup> When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.**

22. That *Jacob got up* to travel during the *night* could indicate that he desired secrecy regarding his movements. Esau might have been made aware of Jacob's presence (see Genesis 32:20). As a result, Jacob may not have wanted his exact movements to be noticed. Nomadic travelers in the desert, similar to Jacob and his household, may have preferred to travel during the cool of the night.

Jacob's *two wives* were Leah (Genesis 29:21-23) and Rachel (29:28). He also had *two female servants* turned surrogate wives: Bilhah (30:4) and Zilpah (30:9). At this point, the four women had given him a total of *eleven sons*. Another son (Benjamin) would later be born to Rachel (35:16-18), giving Jacob a total of 12 sons (35:22b-26).

23. By sending his wives, servants, and children *across the stream*, Jacob planned for their protection. He was concerned that his upcoming interaction with his brother would prove to be dangerous for his family.

24. As the night progressed, *Jacob* prepared to meet his brother. Scripture describes instances when God spoke to his people in their solitary moments (see Exodus 24:2; Daniel 10:8). Though Jacob's family had left, he was anything but *alone* in the night.

Out of the night's stillness, a figure who appeared as *a man* approached Jacob. This occurrence is an example of a theophany, a specific appearance or manifestation of God to humanity. Some theophanies consisted of what appeared to be God in human form (see Genesis 18; Exodus 24:10; 33:11, 18-23; etc.). However, other theophanies demonstrated God's self-disclosure through non-human manifestations (see Exodus 3:2; 19:18; Numbers 22:28; etc.). These events confirmed a person's relationship with God and provided confidence of his work.

This appearance consisted of more than dialogue. Instead, a skirmish between Jacob and the so-called man resulted. The pronunciation of the Hebrew word translated as *wrestled* sounds similar to the pronunciations of the Hebrew words

for Jabbok and Jacob. The repetition of sounds would have been evident to original audiences and would have reminded them that Jacob jostled at the Jabbok!

25. Jacob had reason to be confident in his physical strength. He had spent 20 years in hard service to his uncle. The mysterious man *saw* Jacob's strength firsthand and *could not overpower him*. This was no ordinary wrestling match; each wrestler was unable to gain an edge over the other!

However, Jacob suffered an injury when his assailant *touched* him. Win or lose, this experience affected Jacob's body. That the injury occurred after the assailant could not gain an upper hand might emphasize a level of equal ability between the two, or that the man was holding back for Jacob's sake.

The nature of Jacob's injury is unclear because the underlying Hebrew words are difficult to translate. The word translated *hip* could refer to a person's side (Exodus 32:27) or upper leg (28:42; Judges 3:16, 21). It could also refer to procreation or descendants (see Genesis 46:26; Exodus 1:5). The *socket* describes the part of the hip that joins with another part of the body.

The severity of Jacob's injury is unclear. This is one of only four times in three passages where the Hebrew verb translated as *wrenched* is used in this particular manner. The other uses speak to God's Spirit departing (Jeremiah 6:8) and to the alienation experienced by Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians (Ezekiel 23:17-18). While the exact details of Jacob's injury are unclear, his hip separated in a way not intended for a hip to move.

## II. The Debate Genesis 32:26-29

**26 Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."**

**But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."**

**27 The man asked him, "What is your name?"**

**"Jacob," he answered.**

**28 Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."**

**29 Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."**

**But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.**

26a. Despite striking a blow to Jacob, the assailant demanded that Jacob *let* him go. That it was *daybreak* gives insight on the duration of the struggle—the night had passed without resolution. Perhaps the assailant was concerned that dawn would reveal his identity, to the detriment of Jacob.

26b. Risking further injury, Jacob would *let* his assailant *go* on one condition. Jacob held on and made a certain demand—he wanted something he was not entitled to receive.

Jacob's demand does not provide further detail regarding the reason or nature of the request. Perhaps Jacob desired divine blessing as he prepared for his upcoming interaction with his estranged brother. Or perhaps Jacob desired confirmation of the viability of God's promises (see Genesis 28:13-14). The scheming Jacob again sought to swing things in his favor.

27. Names in the Bible often reveal insight on a person's character (1 Samuel 25:25; compare Proverbs 22:1) or their characteristics (Genesis 25:25; Luke 8:30). Names can even describe the situations surrounding a person's birth (Genesis 41:51-52; Exodus 2:22; 1 Samuel 1:20; 4:21; 1 Chronicles 4:9). That the mysterious man asked for Jacob's *name* forced Jacob to reveal an insight regarding his

nature. In this instance, Jacob answered honestly (contrast Genesis 27:19).

The underlying Hebrew for the name *Jacob* sounds like a Hebrew verb for the act of grasping (see Genesis 25:26). The pronunciation was also similar to a Hebrew word regarding acts of deception (27:35-36; see Jeremiah 9:4). Both descriptors were fitting for Jacob.

28a. In Scripture, the change of a person's name signaled a personal change for that person (Genesis 17:5, 15; 2 Kings 24:17; Acts 13:9). *No longer* would *Jacob* be known as a deceiver who grasped for personal gain. Abraham's descendant, a recipient of God's covenant promises, received a new name.

The meaning of Jacob's new name, *Israel*, reflects his life of struggle. The *el* syllable found in the Hebrew language is often used as a referent to the Hebrew word *Elohim*, a name for the God of Israel. When that syllable is found in Hebrew names, it speaks to something regarding God.

28b. The Hebrew word used to indicate a struggle of power sounds very similar to the first two syllables of Jacob's new name. This name reflected his struggles in life—*with God and with humans*. Jacob had found and would find success in both contexts. Even so, the proclamation did not condone his methods (see Genesis 27:23-33).

The declaration that Jacob had *overcome* serves as a bit of foreshadowing. Jacob had not yet found favor in his brother's eyes. The success that Jacob found in this wrestling match was the preface to a successful reunion with his brother.

29. *Jacob* desired a more intimate knowledge of God. However, this was not the time for God to self-disclose more fully. The mysterious figure scolded Jacob for asking his *name*. Instead, the figure *blessed* Jacob in that moment. This would not be the only time Jacob would expe-

rience a blessing from God (see Genesis 35:9; 48:3).

### III. The Results Genesis 32:30-32

<sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

<sup>31</sup> The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. <sup>32</sup> Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon.

30. Jacob recognized the significance of the night's events. During the struggle, he encountered and *saw God*. Very few individuals could claim to see God *face to face*. However, this expression did not necessarily indicate a physical face-to-face interaction with God. Instead, the expression was an idiom to speak to the intimacy of the experience.

31. The turning of a new day as *the sun rose* marked newness surrounding Jacob: his name and his physical affliction. As Jacob left *Peniel*, his walk was obviously affected. The injury he suffered to *his hip* during the night continued to affect him. Perhaps the injury stayed with Jacob for the rest of his life, a permanent reminder of his interaction with God.

32. An editorial comment clarifies the significance of Jacob's injury for future *Israelites*. Tendons and sinews are the connective tissue that joins bone and muscle. Later Jewish tradition interprets *the tendon attached to the socket of the hip* as the sciatic nerve that runs through the muscles of the hip and into the upper thigh. The command *do not eat* this body part is not found elsewhere in Scripture. The dietary practices of Jacob's descendants bore witness to his encounter that night.

# Involvement Learning

## Jacob Called Israel

### Into the Lesson

What's a decision or situation that you have "wrestled with" during the last week? How have you "held on" to God in the middle of the struggle?

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### Into the Word

Turn to Genesis 32:22-32 in your Bible and complete the following Bible-marking activity.

- Underline each statement of Jacob.
- Double-underline every descriptor of Jacob and his situation.
- Draw a circle around every mention of the names Jacob, Israel, and Peniel/Penuel.
- Draw a question mark above any word or phrase that you find difficult to understand.

What do these verses tell us about who Jacob is?

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Why do you think Jacob demanded a blessing?

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What is the meaning and significance of the names Jacob, Israel, and Peniel/Penuel?

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### Into Life

What is a struggle that you have experienced?

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How have you dealt with that struggle?

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### Key Verse

The man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

—Genesis 32:28

How have you experienced God's presence in the struggle?

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List Jacob's attitudes and actions and whether those should be emulated or avoided.

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### Thought to Remember

Despite the darkness and amid our struggles, God is present.