

September 18 Lesson 3 (NIV)

Jacob Called Israel

Devotional Reading: Romans 11:25–32

Background Scripture: Genesis 32:22–32

Genesis 32:22–32

²² 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. ²³ After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. ²⁴ So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. ²⁵ 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. 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.

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

³¹ The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. ³² 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.

Key Text

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

God's Exceptional Choice

Unit 1: God Calls Abraham's Family

Lessons 1–4

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How to Say It

Bilhah *Bil*-ha.

Elohim (*Hebrew*) *El-o-heem*.

Jabbok *ab-uck*.

Peniel *Peh-nye-el*.

theophany *the-ah-fuh-nee*.

Zilpah *Zil-pa*.

Introduction

A. Defining Struggle

The image of Jacob wrestling under the night sky with a mysterious individual has captivated thinkers, artists, and writers through the centuries. The sheer number of artistic endeavors that

depict this event speaks to the text's influence. Renaissance painters and modern alternative musicians have all used this event from Scripture to inform their art.

However, Jacob's struggle is more than a provocative backdrop for creating art. Nor is Jacob's struggle merely a stand-in for the battle between good and evil. Instead, the struggle would define Jacob and his descendants.

B. Lesson Context

Today's text comes from the larger set of narratives regarding Isaac's son Jacob and his conflicts with others. Jacob's struggle with his brother Esau began at their birth (Genesis 25:26, lesson 2). Their conflict became more intense by Jacob's scheming (and meal preparation) when he acquired his brother's birthright (25:29–34). Later Jacob tricked his father into giving him the blessing set aside for firstborn Esau (27:6–36). Jacob's scheming destroyed his relationship with his brother. Esau "held a grudge" and threatened to kill Jacob (27:41). In response, Jacob fled to the household of his uncle Laban (28:5).

Jacob worked seven years for his uncle to gain the hand of Laban's daughter Rachel in marriage (Genesis 29:18). However, Laban required that Jacob first marry Leah, leading Jacob to another seven years in service to marry Rachel (29:26–27).

Jacob flourished during his time in Laban's land, but the relationship between the two men soured (Genesis 31:2). This was due to Jacob's perception of unfair treatment regarding his payment from Laban (31:6–7). In response, Jacob and his wives took all that they owned and left Laban's household in secret (31:17–21). Ultimately, Laban confronted Jacob and the two agreed to a covenant (31:44). Jacob's struggle with his uncle had subsided.

Today's text comes as a part of Jacob's preparation to meet his brother. If Jacob returned to the land promised by God, then he would have to be on good terms with Esau. Jacob initiated contact by sending messengers to request favor from Esau (Genesis 32:5). Esau responded with a promise to appear—along with 400 of his men (32:6).

This response brought fear and distress to Jacob. It would appear that the time had come for Esau's threats to be fulfilled. Jacob responded with alarm: he divided his camp (Genesis 32:7–8), approached God in prayer (32:9–12), and prepared gifts for Esau (32:13–20). Jacob's fear was understandable; God had promised him descendants (28:14). An enraged Esau would likely not only kill Jacob but also Jacob's household. Jacob, known for his scheming ways, openly admitted fear of someone else's scheme.

Throughout his life, Jacob's clever planning had generally paid off in his favor, often to the detriment of others. A mysterious struggle would now define Jacob in unimaginable ways.

I. The Struggle (Genesis 32:22–25)

A. Jacob's Situation (vv. 22–23)

22. 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.

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.

While unnamed here, Jacob's *two wives* were Leah (Genesis 29:21–23) and Rachel (29:28). Jacob also had *two female servants* turned surrogate wives: Bilhah (30:4) and Zilpah (30:9). At this point in his life, 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, see lesson 4).

The text does not mention Jacob's daughter, Dinah (Genesis 30:21). While she was likely present with the family at this time (34:1), her exclusion from the narrative could be because she did not participate in the night expedition over *the ford of the Jabbok*.

The Jabbok is identified as an eastern tributary of the Jordan River. The river served as a boundary for non-Israelite kingdoms (see Numbers 21:24; Deuteronomy 2:37; Joshua 12:2) and Jacob's descendants (see Deuteronomy 3:16).

23. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions.

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 (see Lesson Context).

B. Jacob's Injury (vv. 24–25)

24. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.

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 (see Genesis 16:13; Exodus 4:10–12; Numbers 22:22; Joshua 5:15; Judges 6:16–17).

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. 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.

Jacob had reason to be confident in his physical strength. He had spent 20 years in hard service to his uncle (Genesis 31:38–41; compare 29:2, 10). 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 *touch*ed 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 exact 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)

A. Dual Demands (v. 26)

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

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 (compare Exodus 33:20; Judges 13:22).

26b. But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

Risking further injury, Jacob would *let* his assailant *go* only on one condition. Jacob held on and made a certain demand—he wanted something he was not entitled to receive (compare Genesis 25:29–34; 27:35–36; see lesson 2).

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.

B. Different Designation (vv. 27–28)

27. The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered.

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 (see below). 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, see lesson 2). 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. Then the man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel,

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; compare Isaiah 62:2). *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. (This is the underlying word for God in Genesis 1.) When that syllable is found in Hebrew names, it speaks to something regarding God. For example, the name “Bethel” (Genesis 35:15) means “house of God”; the name “Elimelek” (Ruth 1:1–2) means “God is my king”; the name “Ishmael” means “heard by God” (Genesis 16:11).

Jacob’s renaming also gives us insight into the poetic passages where both names are used. Such dual usage indicates parallelism, where one thought is expressed in two ways (examples: Psalms 22:23; 78:21; Isaiah 10:20; Jeremiah 2:4; Micah 3:1).

28b. “because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.”

The Hebrew word used to indicate a struggle of power (see also Hosea 12:3–4) 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.

C. Divine Delight (v. 29)

29. Jacob said, “Please tell me your name.” But he replied, “Why do you ask my name?” Then he blessed him there.

Jacob desired a more intimate knowledge of God. However, this was not the time for God to self-disclose more fully (compare Exodus 3:14; 6:3). 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 experience a blessing from God (see Genesis 35:9; 48:3).

Centuries later, Manoah, the father of Samson, had a similar divine interaction and requested the name of the mysterious figure (Judges 13:9–17). In response, the figure declared that his name was “beyond understanding” (13:18; translated “too wonderful” in Psalm 139:6).

III. The Results

(Genesis 32:30–32)

A. Protected at Peniel (v. 30)

30. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.”

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 (see Exodus 33:20; compare John 1:18). Instead, the expression was an idiom to speak to the intimacy of the experience (see Exodus 33:11; Numbers 14:14; Deuteronomy 5:4; 34:10).

The prophet Hosea described this “man” (Genesis 32:24, above) as an “angel” (Hosea 12:4). This interpretation alludes to the sense of mystery experienced during divine interactions. However, Jacob’s declaration indicates that he saw this mysterious assailant as more than a man or an angel.

If a particular location was spiritually meaningful for the people of God, a significant name was provided for that location (see Genesis 22:13–14; 28:18–19; 35:15). The name Jacob gave this location reflected the relational closeness of his experience. The Hebrew word *Peniel* means “the face of God.” The exact location of Peniel is unknown, but it can be assumed to be east of the Jordan River.

During the era of the judges (about 1370–1050 BC), Peniel served as a critical juncture in the narrative of Gideon (see Judges 8:5–9, 17). Jeroboam I, king of Israel (reigned 921–910 BC), would later rebuild the city in order to further fortify his position (1 Kings 12:25).

Dual meanings are possible regarding Jacob’s declaration on the status of his *life*. On the one hand, Jacob could have been reflecting on his survival despite believing he had seen the face of God (compare Judges 6:22–23; 13:22).

On the other hand, Jacob could have been proclaiming an answered prayer. Previously, Jacob requested that God rescue him from his brother Esau (Genesis 32:11). The underlying Hebrew root for this request is used again when Jacob proclaimed this his life was *spared* (compare 33:10). Jacob could trust that the rescue he desired would come to pass because he had been blessed by God.

B. Remembered by Relatives (vv. 31–32)

31. The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.

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: *he was limping*. 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. 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.

An editorial comment clarifies the significance of Jacob's injury for future generations of *the Israelites*. Tendons and sinews are the connective tissue that joins bone and muscle (see Job 10:11; Ezekiel 37:8). 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. However, the prohibition is found in later Jewish commentary. The dietary practices of Jacob's descendants bore witness to his encounter that night.

Conclusion

A. The Clenched Hand of Prayer

English poet Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830–1894) used the example of Jacob's struggle in her poem "Alas My Lord." Rossetti interpreted Jacob's struggle as a demonstration of "the clenched hand of prayer" that she desired her readers to practice. The poem concludes with a petition to the Lord "to hold Thee fast, until we hear Thy Voice" and "see Thy Face."

We may be tempted to judge Jacob's stubbornness because of our familiarity with his story. However, we can admit that we need "the clenched hand of prayer" to sustain us during our struggles. God is present—we only need to open our eyes.

Jacob's struggle humbled him and gave him a new identity before God and man. When we struggle—spiritually or physically—our faithfulness to God will point others to him. He is the one who can give true rest (see Matthew 11:28).

B. Prayer

O God of Jacob, you are present in our struggles. We ask that you use those moments to reveal yourself to us in a unique way. We want to better understand your will and direction and follow it in our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Despite the darkness and amid our struggles, God is present.¹

¹