

LIFE BIBLE STUDY

SESSION OBJECTIVE: GENESIS 32:1-33:20

To learn how Jacob became Israel.

Facing the Fallout

In the newest Star Wars trilogy, Kylo Ren (also known as Ben Solo) turns his back on his own family and eventually kills his father, Han Solo. Throughout the trilogy following his betrayal, he wrestles with his choices and ultimately reasons that he can never go back because they would never accept him. It makes one think to



some degree of Jesus' story about the prodigal son (minus the whole murder part). These stories are appealing because everyone has faced this scenario to some degree. You wrong someone, you run away from the problem, and at some point you know you will have to face them. In Genesis 32 and 33, Jacob is put in a similar position. After bartering with his brother Esau for his birthright (Gen. 25:29-34) and stealing his blessing (Gen. 27:35), Jacob left in a hurry to avoid potentially being killed by his brother (Gen. 27:41-43). Now, he is positioned to have to confront Esau after decades. How will Esau respond?

The Return

After hearing again from God and fittingly naming his camp (Gen. 32:1), Jacob prepares to face his brother. It's been twenty years since he last saw Esau, and the terms he left on were far from good. One might ask the question, "Why now?" Perhaps he was passing through the land where Esau dwelt, but how would Jacob know where Esau ended up? It's been, once again, twenty years since he last saw him. Beyond that, the world was a much smaller place. Communication was not worldwide and instantaneous as it is now with the advent of modern technology and social media.

There is no reason given for why he returns, except perhaps because he's coming home. His message to Esau is simple: "Thus says your servant Jacob, 'I have sojourned with Laban and stayed until now. 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.'" Below are some observations of the initial message and subsequent plans of Jacob.

A REVERSAL

For one, take note of the descriptors Jacob uses. He calls Esau, "Lord," and he refers to himself as a, "servant." It's an interesting and almost ironic reversal of what God said would happen (and what does in fact eventually happen). God told Rebekah regarding her two sons, "The one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23). Even Esau's blessing reflects God's words to Rebekah: "By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; but when you grow restless you shall break his yoke from your neck" (Gen. 27:40). How strange, then, that it appears that the younger is positioning himself as the servant to the older?

INCOMING

The messengers return, with no details about how the exchange went. The only detail Jacob receives is the imminent arrival of Esau (Gen. 32:6). Jacob does not know what Esau's disposition is, but he assumes the worst. How applicable to us, the modern reader! It seems bound up within the heart of fallen man to be driven by fear. There are myriad verses where God instructs His people to not fear, and so the assumption is that we fear a lot. Jacob reflects what seemingly all of humanity experiences.

DIVISION

Jacob immediately devises a plan. His plan is to divide his camp into two camps such that if Esau attacks one, it will provide enough time for the other to escape (Gen. 32:7-8). It's a solid defense strategy, but an overreaction. If Esau were really planning on attacking Jacob, why send the messengers back to notify him? Why even let the messengers live at all? Why not kill the messengers and maintain the element of surprise? Jacob's fear is clearly coloring his vision to some extent.

AN EXAMPLE

Verses 9 through 12 are a fantastic picture of what to do when driven by fear. Jacob immediately turns to the Lord in prayer. First, he confesses obedience to what God has asked him to do (Gen. 32: 9). Next, he humbles himself before God (Gen. 32:10). Now humbled, he asks God for protection against Esau's pending attacks (Gen. 32:11). He, of course, does not really know that Esau will attack him. Once again, he's being driven by fear. One of Jacob's concerns is that Esau will not just kill the men, but the women and the children too, and so he ends his prayer remembering God's promise to him to number his descendants (Gen. 32:12). What an example! When fear has taken hold, prayer is a great first step, and the prayer should be humble, grateful, and mindful of God's faithfulness.

TEMPERING THE ANGER

Jacob unfolds the next phase of his plan. He will not only divide his camps, but he will also send wave after wave of servants to give gifts to his brother Esau, in an attempt to win his favor over little by little. All of the livestock that are mentioned here are valuable, especially the young and the female livestock (suitable for reproduction that almost insures a growing herd). It is notable that Jacob does not give servants to his brother, perhaps out of fear that his anger might be expressed on them.

PROTECTION

Finally, Jacob sends his wives and children away separately to cross the river (Gen. 32:22-23). While he is willing to risk his camp in an effort to appease the assumed anger of his brother, he is not willing to allow those who are closest to him be subjected to Esau. Jacob is acting to protect his lineage. Is this an admission

of a lack of faith that God will not uphold His promise to make his descendants great? It's hard to say, but it certainly is an action that seems driven by fear.

DARK TIMES

The whole of these events have taken place at night (Gen. 32:13), which is typically a way of expressing hardship, struggle, and/or general sin. Night imagery in both the Old and New Testaments typically convey a negative message. Jacob's insistence that Esau will still be angry after all the time that has passed has led him to make drastic moves. Fear makes people do crazy things. While we are to take this literally, that this happened at night, the author likely brings this detail out to evoke a sense of concern for Jacob's well-being.

WrestleMANia

All alone and waiting for the arrival of his brother, Jacob is met with an unexpected and unnamed figure (Gen. 32:24). He is simply described as a, "man." The Hebrew word conveys the exact same thing. But who is he? How did he get to Jacob? Where did he even come from? There are no details given. Jacob is alone, and suddenly he is thrust into a struggle that lasts until morning. Below are some observations.

JACOB'S STRENGTH

Jacob is apparently not an easy target to take down. Verse 25 says, "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." Now, at this point, we do not know the identity still of this mystery man, so it seems like a pretty believable proposition that Jacob has a shot at winning. After all, Jacob demonstrates his well above average strength in several instances. In Genesis 25:26, we see that he is holding on to the heel of his brother Esau as a mere newborn during delivery! He pushes the stone away from the well to water Rachel's flock in Genesis 29:10. He works as a shepherd in very harsh conditions for Laban for 20 years (Gen. 31:38-40). It should not surprise us then to find out that Jacob can hold his own in a wrestling match.

THE MYSTERY MAN

Jacob seems to have no trouble fending off the attacker, but then we are told that when the man chose to do so, he simply touched Jacob's hip and it came out of joint. No mere man could accomplish such a feat, so we are for the first time clued in that this figure is no ordinary man. So who is it? There are two interpretations that are prevalent. For one, it could be God assuming a bodily form, or a pre-incarnate version of Jesus. There are instances for sure when Yahweh appears as a man and is somehow understood to still be God (Gen. 18:1-3; 10). However, if this is the case, it poses an interesting theological issue in that he could not prevail against Jacob. While it is unlikely that this man could not actually prevail (seeing as how he simply touches his hip and incapacitates him), it would be out of character to say that of God. On the other hand, it could be an angel acting on behalf of God. Often in the Old Testament, interaction with angels who are working to accomplish the will of Yahweh is equated to interaction with Yahweh Himself (Gen. 16:10-11; 13). This is the most reasonable selection. Jacob wrestles with a supernatural figure, an angel, and yet Jacob sees the angel as a direct emissary of God.

A NEW NAME

After the wrestling subsides, the man asks Jacob for his name. This is another subtle detail that indicates superiority over Jacob. To ask the name of someone was only appropriate if you were in authority over them. Jacob responds, and then the man renames him *Israel*, which means, "you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:28). Name changes, as we have already covered, mark a monumental moment. Jacob is no longer the deceiver, but the victor. His legacy will be one of blessing, not embarrassment.

Not to be outdone, Jacob in true form turns the question around on the man, but the man does not answer. Instead, he blesses him and departs. Jacob has struggled against many men in his life at this point, and he has prevailed in all of the circumstances. This match with the mystery man is a humbling experience, and one that sets the tone for his new identity as Israel. Finally, someone has overtaken him.

THE SINEW

During the match, Jacob's hip is permanently injured. Verse 32 says that Jacob walked off, "limping because of his hip." We are left with an editorial in verse 33 that gives an explanation to the historical audience for a specific practice of their time. Verse 33 says, "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." Apparently, this life altering moment resulted in more than just a name change, but in a change in practice as well. While this is not recorded in later law, it was likely a known practice in Israel and this passage gave context for why the practice was instituted in the first place.

An Unexpected Reconciliation

In chapter 33, Jacob finally is confronted by his brother Esau, and it does not go the way we expect it to. Instead of anger, Esau is elated to see his brother (Gen. 33:4). Esau is confused by the gifts Jacob has offered him, and at first defers them because of his own abundance of belongings, but eventually accepts them because of Jacob's persistence (Gen. 33:11). There is a play on words that ties this chapter to the last. In chapter 32, because of his encounter with God, Jacob names the location *Peniel*, which means, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered" (Gen. 32:30). He equates this divine moment with the miraculous forgiveness and reconciliation with his brother, saying to Esau, "For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me" (Gen. 33:10).

Unfortunately, as seemingly happy as this reunion is, the prophetic future of these two brothers is still one that is tumultuous at best, and this newfound affection for one another will soon diminish. Esau suggests they travel together, but Jacob insists that Esau go ahead. Esau suggests that some of Jacob's party come along, but Jacob once again humbly denies his request. In the end, Esau travels back to Seir, but Jacob goes to Succoth (Gen. 33:16-17). Succoth, meaning "booths," is named accordingly; Jacob makes booths for his livestock there. Incidentally, Succoth is the first stop in the Exodus (Ex. 12:37). This is the last time Jacob and Esau will be together until their father Isaac dies (Gen. 35:29), and their people groups (Israel and Edom) will be at odds with one another until the final breaking point described in Obadiah.

The chapter ends with Jacob arriving in a place called Shechem and buying land from the sons of a man named Hamor. The first thing Jacob does is construct an altar for worship, following in the footsteps of his father (Gen. 26:25), and his grandfather (Gen. 12:7). The name, El-Elohe-Israel means, "God, the God of Israel." The details of Shechem and the land purchase will set up the events to follow in chapter 34.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Genesis 32:1-8. Who is Jacob on the brink of seeing for the first time in a long time? What does he do? What is his plan for seeing his brother and what does he believe his brother will do to him?

2. Read Genesis 32:9:12. In your own words, describe the aspects of Jacob's prayer to God. Is this a good way to pray today as well? Why or why not?

Day Two

1. Read Genesis 32:13-21. What gifts did he set aside to give to Esau? In your own words, describe Jacob's plan to send multiple droves with gifts, and why he chose to do that.

2. Read Genesis 32:22-32. Who does Jacob wrestle with? What ends up stopping the match? When do they begin wrestling? When do they stop wrestling? What new name was Jacob given, and what does it mean? What does Jacob name the place where this happened? What is the significance of his limp in Jewish practice?

Day Three

1. Read Genesis 33:1-3. In your own words, describe what happens in this passage.

2. Read Genesis 33:4-11. What was Esau's response in seeing Jacob? What was Esau's response when Jacob offered him all of the livestock? Why do you think Jacob likened seeing Esau with his experience the night before when he, "saw the face of God" (Gen. 33:10)?

Day Four

1. Read Genesis 33:12-17. What does Esau suggest? What is Jacob's response? What does Esau suggest next? How does Jacob respond? Where do Esau and Jacob end up, respectively?

2. Read Genesis 33:18-20. Where does Jacob purchase land? Who does he purchase the land from? How much does he pay for the land? What's the first thing he does on the land (Hint: It's a practice that connects him to his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham)? What does he call the altar?

Week 26 Discussion: A New Creation

In Genesis 32, Jacob has a life changing experience with God that results in his name being changed to Israel. Jacob had, “striven with God and with men and prevailed” (Gen. 32:28). His name change, like most name changes in the Old Testament, are significant because they mark a shift in the very character of the person being renamed. Jacob isn’t just given a new name, he *becomes* a new man. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul says that we aren’t given a new name, but that we become a *new creation* when we come to faith in Jesus Christ. “The old has passed away, behold! The new has come!” Talk as a group about what it means to be a new creation, and how radically your life changed after professing faith in Christ.

1. Icebreaker: Describe your salvation experience with the group. What happened beforehand that prepared you to eventually believe the Gospel? Who led you to faith? What church did you first plug into?
2. When you think of your life as a Christian, would you describe yourself (by your actions) as a new creation? Why or why not?
3. Read Colossians 3:9-11. How does your relationship with Jesus alter the way you relate to other people?
4. Does being a new creation mean that you never sin? Does it mean you only commit *some* sins, but not the really bad ones? Why or why not?
5. If you have been born again, have you responded with believer’s baptism? Why or why not?
6. What has God called you to do in the local church since you’ve become a new creation? Are you walking in that calling? If not, why?

Takeaways:

1. Jacob anticipates Esau’s anger because he is driven by fear.
2. God changes Jacob’s name to Israel, signifying that Jacob is undergoing a spiritual change.
3. While there is temporarily peace, the descendants of Jacob and Esau will not live in peace with each other.

PRAYER REQUESTS: