

GENESIS

Chapter 32

Jacob Fears Esau

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. 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.’” 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.” 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.’” 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 himself stayed that night in the camp.

32:1 *angels of God met him.* Jacob had just left the region of the hostile Laban and is about to enter the region of the hostile Esau. He was met by the angels of God, whom he had seen at Bethel when he was fleeing from Esau to go to Laban (28:12). Thus God was with Jacob, as he had promised. (CSB)

32:2 *Jacob saw ... God's camp!* Jacob called this company of angels “God's camp” (Hbr *machaneh*), from which comes the place-name Mahanaim. (TLSB)

Mahanaim.† Located in Gilead east of the Jordan and north of the Jabbok. Two camps had just met in hostility and separated in peace. Two camps were again about to meet (in hostility, Jacob thought) and separate in peace. But Jacob called this crucial place “two camps” after seeing

the angelic encampment, suggesting that he saw God's encampment as a divine assurance. God's host had come to escort him safely to Canaan. Yet he also feared meeting with Esau, so he divided his household into two camps. (CSB)

32:3 *Seir ... Edom.* Far to the south of Jacob's ultimate destination, but he assumed that Esau would come seeking revenge as soon as he heard that Jacob was on his way back. (CSB)

32:4 *Your servant.* A phrase suggesting both courtesy and humility. (CSB)

32:6 *four hundred.* A round number for a sizable unit of fighting men (see 1Sa 22:2; 25:13; 30:10). (CSB)

32:7 *afraid and distressed.* Jacob forgot about God's company of angels. (TLSB)

divided. Tactic used by ancient merchants and caravans to ensure that some of their livestock and goods would survive a raid. (TLSB)

32:9 *Jacob said .* His first recorded prayer since leaving Bethel. (CSB)

32:11 *mothers with their children.* Jacob was afraid that Esau's wrath would extend to Jacob's family as well. (CSB)

32:12 *your offspring like the sand of the sea.* A reference to God's promise in 28:14. (CSB)

God's promise was the basis for Jacob's prayer. (TLSB)

32:13 *gift.* Probably a wordplay: Out of his "two camps" (Hebrew *maḥanayim*, v. 2; see vv. 7–8, 10) Jacob selects a "gift" (*minḥah*) for his brother. (CSB)

present. That Jacob sought to turn away Esau's anger with this gift does not mean he lacked trust. Luther: "Although we have God's promises and commandments, nevertheless, God must not be tempted, that is, means must not be neglected, but we must use these things we can use since, indeed, God has not given us reason and the counsels and help of reason that we should despise them" (AE 6:104). (TLSB)

32:16 *drove.* Herd or flock of animals being driven in a body. (TLSB)

32:20 *he will accept me.* When Jacob finally does see Esau face-to-face, he hopes to be able to smile (lit, "he will lift my face"). (TLSB)

32:1–21 Faced with possible death, Jacob turns to the Lord in prayer, then makes preparations to aid his family's safety. His prayer is a model for ours: address God, confess who God is and what He has done, confess our unworthiness, petition Him, and remember God's promises, which are the basis for our prayers. God's promise is to bless and pardon us for the sake of Christ, the Offspring of Jacob. • Lord, teach us so to pray! Amen. (TLSB)

Jacob Wrestles With God

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 Peniel, 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.

32:22 *the same night* – Jacob and his caravan had reached the Jabbok, a stream that flows into Jordan from the east just midway between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. (PBC)

two female servants – Bilhah and Zilpah. (TLSB)

Jabbok. Today called the Wadi Zerqa, flowing westward into the Jordan about 20 miles north of the Dead Sea. (CSB)

Eastern tributary of the Jordan River, 25 mi N of the Salt. (TLSB)

Jabbok means "wrestler." (Leupold)

32:23 *sent them across the stream* – After leading family and flocks south across the Jabbok under the cover of darkness, Jacob himself went back across the stream, apparently to spend some time alone with the Lord in prayer. (PBC)

32:24 *left alone*. As he had been at Bethel (28:10–22). (CSB)

The solitude of the night his thoughts naturally turned to prayer again, for he was a godly man. (Leupold)

a man. God himself (as Jacob eventually realized; see v. 30) in the form of an angel. (CSB)

As he began once again to pour out his heart to God, he suddenly became aware that out in the darkness some one had grabbed hold of him and was wrestling him to the ground. The mysterious struggle continued – for hours – until the first streaks of dawn appeared in the eastern sky. In commenting on this passage, Martin Luther said: "This text is one of the most obscure in the OT." (PBC)

There is no commentator who can so expound this experience as to clear up perfectly every difficulty involved. This much, however, is relatively clear: Jacob was praying; the terms used to describe prayer make us aware of the fact that the prayer described involved a struggle of the entire man, body and soul; the struggle was not imaginary. (Leupold)

wrestled. God wrestled (*ye'abeq*) with Jacob (*ya'aqob*) by the Jabbok (*yabboq*)—the author delighted in wordplay. Jacob had struggled all his life to prevail, first with Esau, then with Laban. Now, as he was about to reenter Canaan, he was shown that it was with God that he must "wrestle." It was God who held his destiny in his hands. (CSB)

Jacob may have thought at first that his rival was Esau. However, cf v 30. Luth: “The wrestler is the Lord of glory, God Himself, or God’s Son, who was to become incarnate and who appeared and spoke to the fathers. For God in His boundless goodness dealt very familiarly with His chosen patriarch Jacob and disciplined him as though playing with him in a kindly manner” (AE 6:130). (TLSB)

Jacob was struggling with God in earnest prayer. This struggle involved spiritual striving with God for His blessing, but it involved a physical struggle as well. Jacob’s opponent, referred to as “the man,” later identified himself as God. (PBC)

There can be no doubt about it that the motivating power behind Jacob’s struggle is faith and the desire to receive God’s justifying grace; and the means employed is earnest prayer. (Leupold)

32:25 *did not prevail ... touched his hip socket.* God came to him in such a form that Jacob could wrestle with him successfully, yet he showed Jacob that he could disable him at will. (CSB)

This statement does not impugn God’s omnipotence, but it does effectively portray the power of prayer. God does allow the prayer of men to be mighty in His sight. God must oppose because the sinful will of those that pray often is not yet reduced to full accord with the divine will. As the will of man learns ever more perfectly to submit to God’s will, God can no longer “prevail” against such a one. (Leupold)

The struggle continued until Jacob’s divine opponent, by merely touching Jacob’s hip, threw the entire hip socket out of joint. Now Jacob couldn’t continue the painful struggle any longer, so he threw his arms around his opponent and held on to him. (PBC)

Hints that Jacob’s opponent was more than human. (TLSB)

We are not informed whether this infirmity was permanent or only for a few days or weeks. (Leupold)

32:26 *I will not let you go.* Jacob’s persistence was soon rewarded (v. 29). (CSB)

unless you bless me. Jacob finally acknowledged that the blessing must come from God. (CSB)

Jacob recognized that his adversary was no mere man, but God Himself. (TLSB)

God didn’t want Jacob (and He doesn’t want us) to be timid with Him. He delights to let us win victories over Him on the basis of humble believing prayer. Jacob clung in faith to God and to God’s promise, and he received the blessing he desired. (PBC)

32:27 *what is your name?* – The Lord asked him, not because He had forgotten, but to remind Jacob that he had been a “heel-grabber,” one who took unfair advantage of a rival. That old name no longer fit this man and so God gave him a new one. (PBC)

He asked not because He did not know it, but in order to give Jacob a new name. (TLSB)

32:28 *Your name shall no longer be Jacob.* Now that Jacob had acknowledged God as the source of blessing and was about to reenter the Promised Land, the Lord acknowledged Jacob as his servant by changing his name. (CSB)

Israel. † Israel means he struggles with God.) Here in Father Jacob/Israel, the nation of Israel got her name and her characterization. God later confirmed Jacob's new name (35:10). (CSB)

Luth: "Israel [means] a prince or God's fighter, that is, he who wrestles with God and wins. This happens through that faith which holds so firmly to God's Word, until it overcomes God's wrath and obtains God as the gracious Father" (WA DB 8:137). (TLSB)

Bible names often serve as more than convenient labels for people. Here Jacob's new name describes the new nature and character the Spirit of God had patiently and painstakingly created in him. Jacob had learned to lean on God. (PBC)

32:29 *Why...ask my name?* † God did not answer the question because he had revealed his name sufficiently by what he had done. (CSB)

Jacob wanted absolute proof of his rival's identity. Apart from the revealed Word, we should not ask for or seek a hidden name of God. (TLSB)

According to the Hebrew idiom, the name is the index of the character or personality. (Leupold)

there he blessed him – For Jacob another blessed fruit of the mysterious struggle was that he was free from the terror that had gripped his heart when he learned Esau was coming for him with 400 men. But now, with the Savior's promise ringing in his ears, he was ready to meet Esau, ready for whatever surprises the new day might bring. God still appears to His people on occasion as though He were an opponent. Each of us has known dark hours when we were unable to see God's mercy, but saw only a face that was angry. Jacob held on to God even when He appeared as his opponent, and he won a blessing. We will have that same experience when in faith we learn to say "My Savior, I will not let you go unless you bless me." (PBC)

He repeated the blessing He gave Jacob earlier (28:13–15). (TLSB)

Luther's supposition is that this may have been the great patriarchal blessing concerning the coming Messiah through whom was Jacob's "seed" all the families of the earth were to be blessed. (Leupold)

32:30 *name of the place Peniel* – Means "face of God." (Leupold)

Luth: "For through faith, in the struggle of the cross, one learns to recognize and experience God rightly" (WA DB 8:137). (TLSB)

I have seen the face of God...yet my life has been delivered. In His assumed human form. (TLSB)

The sight of God is usually a destroying fire (cf Heb 12:29). (TLSB)

Spared (*natsal*) means "delivered" or "preserved." God did more than let no harm come nigh Jacob; He again restored him, who otherwise would surely have perished. Luther gathers up this idea in "recovered" (*genesen*). (Leupold)

32:31 *limping* – God apparently felt that Jacob needed a memento of his victory, as a warning against relapsing into his old “Jacob” nature. And so, as Jacob left the scene of the wrestling match, he was limping. All God’s children need to learn that in and of ourselves we have no strength, no power with God or man. Our only strength, like Jacob’s lies in holding firmly to what God has promised. (PBC)

32:32 *do not eat the sinew*. Probably the sciatic muscle. Mentioned nowhere else in the Bible, this dietary prohibition is found in the later writings of Judaism. Jacob retained in his body, and Israel retained in her dietary practice, a perpetual reminder of this fateful encounter with God. (CSB)

Evidently a self-imposed practice; no such law is found in the OT. (TLSB)

God did not demand this ritual observance in the Mosaic law, but the descendants of Israel of their own accord instituted the practice because they recognized how extremely important this experience of Jacob was for him and themselves. Delitzsch tells us that Jewish practice defines it as the inner vein on the hindquarter together with the outer vein plus the ramifications of both. (Leupold)

32:22–32 Alone and faced with danger, Jacob finds God to be his adversary. Yet faithful Jacob wrestles and receives a new name and God’s blessing. It does not always seem that God is on our side. Sometimes He causes Christians to bear trials, temptations, and suffering—i.e., the cross. Yet, this is not to destroy us, but to strengthen us and finally bless us. Christian faith clings to God’s Word of mercy in Jesus Christ. • Lord, in Baptism, You have promised to be my God. Grant to me what You see that I need. Amen. (TLSB)