

Jacob Becomes Israel



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Genesis 29–33.*

Memory Text: “Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed” (*Genesis 32:28*).

Jacob's 20 years of service in Mesopotamia were characterized by jealousy, contention, and intrigue. One sister sought to outdo the other in the number of sons she bore as both vied for first place in their husband's affections. Son-in-law and father-in-law shone in their attempts to deceive each other, with Laban manifesting interest only in his own advancement. The biblical story notes more faith in potions and human schemes than in God. Again, how little has changed in thousands of years.

Yet, while these same chapters reveal how groundless is trust in human power, they reveal how certain is the reality of the divine promises of mercy, forgiveness, and acceptance (how fortunate for us that hasn't changed either!). Indeed, even amid all these sad stories of human faithlessness, deceit, jealousy, and intrigue, we can see the mercy of God at work, a stunning and powerful testament to God's grace for fallen human beings.

This is seen, perhaps, most vividly in Jacob's night of wrestling. Here, again, we can see just how close the Lord can come to those who in true faith and repentance seek Him. At Jabbok, repentant Jacob became Israel, and God's plan triumphed in spite of the apparently unpromising human material with which He had to work.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 16.*

Family Woes

In the story of Jacob and Rachel and Leah (*Genesis 29*), there's more deception, only now Jacob is the victim instead of the perpetrator. Maybe he learned some lessons about deception after being on the receiving end of it.

Jacob's marriage to two sisters, which later Mosaic law prohibited while the first sister was alive (*Lev. 18:18*), was marred by a great deal of intrigue, jealousy, bickering, and sadness. God allowed this practice; He also allowed the bitter consequences that always seemed to follow it.

In a society in which children signified God's favor and attracted the husband's love, God blessed Leah with several children. The names given to the children of both wives and maidservants reflect the feelings of Leah and Rachel at the birth of those infants and testified to the contention that existed between them. The names either are derived from or resemble the sound of the Hebrew verbs associated with the names.

Read Genesis 30:1-4. Where have we seen this practice before? What does it mean that children keep repeating the sins of the parents?

Read Genesis 30:5-13. What sinful force is driving these actions?

By the end of this section, Jacob had fathered the children of four different women, for Rachel eventually conceived and bore Joseph (*Gen. 30:22-24*). Thus, he now lived in a single home with four women, some loved more than others, some holding higher "status" than others, yet all the mothers of his twelve children. Talk about a formula for contention, jealousy, and intrigue! All this would later bear bitter fruit, especially in the life of Jacob, who should have known better and who, having been given promises by God (*Gen. 28:10-22*), should have trusted in those promises without having to resort to polygamy.

What challenges are you facing, right now, that make it difficult to live by faith rather than by sight? How can you learn to trust in God's promises so that you don't resort to the wrong means in order to see those promises fulfilled?

Key Text: *Genesis 29:1, 13, 14*

Teachers Aims:

1. To examine the tragic effects of deception.
2. To affirm that the Lord never forsakes Jacob and is the source of his prosperity.
3. To show how God can use time to bring about healing and forgiveness.

Lesson Outline:

I. A Divided Home (*Gen. 29:15-31*)

- A. Jacob dwells with his Uncle Laban, and works for seven years to marry Laban's daughter Rachel.
- B. When Laban deceives Jacob by giving him Leah instead of Rachel, Jacob works another seven years for Rachel.
- C. Leah bears children, but Rachel is barren, causing conflict and competition between the two women.

II. Jacob's Prosperity (*Gen. 31:1-7, 17, 18*)

- A. Jacob works another six years for Laban (*vs. 38*) and increases his flock.
- B. Jacob attributes his prosperity to God's blessing.
- C. Jacob takes his family and possessions and leaves the house of Laban to return to his homeland.

III. From Fear to Faith (*Gen. 32:24-28*)

- A. Jacob hears of Esau and his army approaching and is afraid for his life (*vss. 6, 7*).
- B. Jacob wrestles with the Lord by night, and the Lord changes his name to Israel—"prince with God"—for he has struggled with God and with men and has prevailed.
- C. Jacob and Esau are reunited and make peace with each other (*Gen. 33:1-17*).

Summary: Jacob flees to his Uncle Laban's house and marries Leah and Rachel, for whom he must labor 14 years. The Lord is with Jacob and makes him prosperous in the house of Laban until he finally returns to his homeland with his family and all of his possessions.

COMMENTARY

No matter how far he flees, Jacob can't outrun his past. It dogs him to his Uncle Laban's. Far from finding a haven there, Jacob once again tastes the bitterness of deception. This time he is on the receiving end as the crafty and wily Laban first dupes him into marrying the wrong daughter and then cheats him again and again over wages during long years of service. Each trial forcibly brings to Jacob's mind how his own deception grieved the heart of God. Humiliating as these trials are, God lovingly permits them in order to work a deep repentance in Jacob's heart, a repentance that culminates in a night of spiritual anguish in which Jacob wrestles with the Angel and prevails.

Jacob's Wages *(Gen. 30:25-43)*

How did the schemers, Laban and Jacob, attempt to outsmart each other after Jacob had requested permission for himself and his family to return to his native country? *Vss. 26-43.*

The form of payment agreed on extended Jacob's stay for another six years (*Gen. 31:41*). Jacob's request appears magnanimous when we realize that in the Near East "goats, as a rule, are black or dark brown, rarely white or spotted with white, and that sheep are for the most part white, seldom black or speckled."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, p. 394. As Laban would be left with all the pure-color animals, the deal seemed advantageous to Jacob's father-in-law.

How did Laban seek to prevent any off-color characteristics being bred back into the pure-color stock? *Gen. 30:35, 36.*

To what ancient superstition did Jacob resort after any possible attempt at selected breeding had been thwarted by Laban's separation of the stock? *Vss. 37-43.*

Jacob, as well as Laban, seemed to be unaware of the fact that even those animals that appeared to be pure in color still carried in them recessive color characteristics that could be transmitted to their offspring. Being at a loss as to what he should do, Jacob took refuge in the mistaken belief that vivid sights experienced by a mother during conception or pregnancy would mark her offspring.

While to all intents and purposes Jacob's stratagems appeared to meet with success (*vs. 43*), what message did God convey to the patriarch in a dream? *Gen. 31:7-12.*

Jacob attributed his success to God's blessing (*vss. 7, 9*), and the Lord blessed him in spite of his superstitious beliefs (*vs. 12*). Indeed, the dream of verses 10-12 may have been intended to explain to the patriarch how the recessive off-color characteristics were passed on by the pure-color parents. God used the occasion for a miracle and blessed Jacob, not because of his skill or ingenuity but in order to thwart Laban's exploitation.

Even despite all of Jacob's mistakes, the Lord was still with him. What hope does this offer you, despite the mistakes you have already made?

Meeting His Match

The more Laban cheats his nephew, the more God blesses Jacob. Jacob's life becomes an unending struggle with that equally cunning trickster. Finally, when Laban's jealousy threatens Jacob's safety, he and his family flee back to Canaan.

On the way home, Jacob receives word that the twin he cheated twenty years ago, the brother who threatened to kill him, now advances in his direction with 400 men (*Gen. 32:6, 33:1*). Jacob agonizes in prayer that night. Alone, the weight of his past sins crushing him, he pleads with God to soften his brother's rage. Inspiration tells us that Jacob beseeches God at midnight, an especially fitting time, considering how the darkness of the hour mirrors the despair that threatens to overwhelm his soul. Suddenly, Jacob feels a hand on his shoulder. His mind already a little wild with despair and bitterness over past sins that now expose his family to danger, Jacob thinks he's under attack. He wrestles the stranger with a strength made fierce from grief and desperation. At daybreak, the stranger touches his thigh with His finger, and Jacob is instantly crippled. Jacob now knows he is wrestling with no ordinary man but with God.

A strange thing happens. The Angel says " 'Let Me go' " (*Gen. 32:26, NKJV*).

Let me go?

This from the God who says "Let him take hold of my strength, that he may make peace with me" (*Isa. 27:5*) and bids us to say of Him, with the psalmist, "Thy right hand shall hold me" (*Ps. 139:10*)? This from the God who the Bible teaches is yearning for us to come to Him? In light of these texts, doesn't "Let Me go" seem at odds with God's desire to draw us to Him? So why, then, would the same One who says "Come unto Me" (*Matt. 11:28*) tell Jacob to "let Me go"?

It is easy to overlook these words, because the providential outcome of Jacob's story overshadows the strange details. Some commentators believe that the reason why the Angel wanted to withdraw before daybreak may have been because He did not wish to have others witness the scene, or perhaps he wanted to prevent Jacob from seeing His face (see *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, p. 406). On careful examination, this strange phrase yields a spiritual lesson, as well, one that beautifully, and graphically, illustrates how God justifies and sanctifies us through faith.

Perhaps God tells Jacob to let Him go because as sinful, fallen beings, we have no right to hold onto a holy God. According to the law, whose penalty for breaking it is death, sinners deserve to be shut out of the presence of a pure and holy God. In all of our sinfulness, we are not worthy of the mercy of God or His presence. "Let me go" perhaps represents Jesus in His role as Judge declaring the justness of the law that says we deserve death. Our efforts cannot free us from this guilt; Jacob wrestled all night with God but could not prevail anymore than we can prevail with God in our own righteousness to earn what God alone freely gives us: unmerited favor, or grace.

Jacob's Flight to Canaan (*Genesis 31*)

Read Genesis 31:1-16. What happened that prompted Jacob to finally leave?

As a result of his greed, Laban alienated his daughters and changed Jacob's wages ten times. Laban's absence provided the opportunity for Jacob to leave Mesopotamia (*vss. 17-21*). Rachel's theft of her father's household deities may testify to the fact that her beautiful appearance concealed a half-converted heart. After thirteen years of marriage, she still had not submitted fully to the God worshiped by her husband (*vs. 19*).

What sanctimonious accusation did Laban level against Jacob when he overtook him after covering a distance of more than three hundred miles? *Vss. 22-30*.

Conscious of his innocence, Jacob then invoked the death penalty upon the one in whose possession the household gods were to be found (*vs. 32*). While such a penalty was in harmony with Mesopotamian law, it was as foolish and rash a decision as was that of Jacob's sons years later (*Gen. 44:9*). Rachel's ruse demonstrated that she was the daughter of Laban, partaking of his character (*Gen. 31:32-35*). Since Laban was unable to support any of his charges, Jacob reprimanded his father-in-law angrily and attributed his own success to the God of his father (*vss. 36-42*).

Read carefully Jacob's reply to Laban (*vss. 36-42*). What can we learn from it about the character of Jacob that helps explain God's blessing on him?

In the end, despite Jacob's innocence, he ultimately gave all the credit to the Lord. This shows that, whatever his mistakes, he knew the Lord and the reality of the Lord working in his life. Despite his faults, he was seeking to live by faith. How important that we all have the same experience for ourselves, that of having "the fear of Isaac" (*vs. 42*) with us.

Thus, Jesus the Judge serves also as our Mediator, giving a forgiveness that is not deserved—never can be earned, a forgiveness that foreshadows His work at the Cross. Right before this, God touches Jacob with His finger. This is significant, because we are told that the finger of God wrote the law on the tablets of stone. It is the finger of God that now touches the thigh of Jacob and cripples him. Before a holy law that demands justice for our sins, we are all cripples, unable to stand in our own righteousness. It is only when we come to God,

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Genesis 30:25-43, 32:30, Malachi 3:2, 1 Timothy 3:2*

- 1 When Jacob goes to live with Laban, we once again see God’s will manifesting itself in spite of, and even through, human schemes, superstitions (*Gen. 30:37-39, for example*), and questionable cultural practices. Why does it appear as though God supported these things? How do you see God’s will manifesting itself today in our own or in other cultures?
- 2 Seventh-day Adventists and most other Christians condemn polygamy and require people converting from religions or cultures that permit it to eschew it. Yet, Jacob and other biblical figures often were polygamous. How do we reach the conclusion that God disapproves of polygamy? Can we see a clear or implied condemnation in the Bible, in either the Old or the New Testaments? Explain.
- 3 Previous incidents in Jacob’s life definitely suggest that although he has a real and active faith in God, he also places a great deal of reliance on his own ingenuity that often degenerates into scheming. Are his efforts to win over Esau (*Gen. 32:13-21*) an example of this, or are they, rather, examples of prudence? If so, might this not show how God can turn our weaknesses into strengths? Explain.
- 4 One of the strangest episodes in Genesis is Jacob’s struggle with the Angel, who was God the Father or Christ. What does it mean in this context to struggle with God? Does this have any application to our own experience? In what sense can we be said to struggle with God? Is it literally an adversarial situation? Explain.
- 5 At the end of this long, strange night, Jacob insists that the Angel (God the Father or Christ) bless him. The Angel does so by giving him a new name, Israel, because Jacob has struggled with God and “‘prevailed’ ” (*Gen. 32:28, NKJV*). How does Jacob “prevail,” since it is absurd to suggest that he is somehow superior to God?

Jacob and Esau (*Gen. 32:1–32*)

Soon after he separates from Laban and is now on his own after so many years, Jacob is met by two angels (*Gen. 32:1, 2*). Though the text doesn't say what, if anything, that they said to him, no doubt their presence at that place certainly gave him some courage and confidence. Perhaps that explains why, in the next verse, he decides to send messengers to his brother.

Notice that in the message he calls himself “thy servant Jacob” (*vs. 4*). **Why do you think he would use that term with his brother?** See *Gen. 25:23; 27:29, 37*.

After the messengers return, their words are ominous. They gave no reply from Esau to the friendly message Jacob had sent. Instead, they say that Esau is coming toward Jacob with 400 men. No wonder Jacob was “greatly afraid and distressed” (*vs. 7*).

Read Jacob's prayer in verses 9-12. **What are the basic elements of the prayer? What was he praying for? What promises was he claiming? How did the prayer show his dependence upon the Lord?**

However sincere and heartfelt the prayer, Jacob was also going to use some diplomacy and wisdom (*vss. 13-21*). He had hoped that with all these gifts he could “appease” (*vs. 20*) his brother. Perhaps there's a lesson here: Sure, we need to pray, we need to lean on the Lord, but at the same time we need to do all that we can within our power, all that is in accordance with God's will, to see that prayer answered.

Jump ahead to Genesis 33. **What can we see in the interaction between both these brothers to show that they were changed men since the last time they had seen each other?**

Regardless of whatever spiritual growth both had over the years, time also tends to heal wounds. What can you do, until time applies its healing balm, to help alleviate whatever pain you might be feeling over past wrongs?

broken in spirit, as Jacob's body was broken in strength, acknowledging our weakness, and holding on to God with great faith that we prevail: "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

The law that once crippled us is now "marrow to thy bones" (Prov. 3:8), kept by Christ in the heart. Now the darkness of the soul becomes daybreak. Isaiah, looking back centuries later on this mid-night struggle in which the dark despair that surrounded Jacob lifted at dawn, wrote, "Remember these, O Jacob and Israel; for thou art my servant: I have formed thee; thou art my servant: O Israel, thou shalt not be forgotten of me. I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins: return unto me; for I have redeemed thee" (Isa. 44:21, 22).

Witnessing

The sun. Center of our solar system, created by God on the fourth day of Creation week. Provided to warm our earth, to coax living things to grow and develop. Ordained to mark time and the seasons. A powerful, pulsing force affecting, both positively and negatively, our daily lives on this planet.

The sun emits rays so powerful, and potentially damaging, that looking directly at it can cause irreparable damage to our eyes. So, while we feel its warmth and daily observe its positive benefits—including its stimulation of vitamin D production in the skin, needed for healthy bodies, and its activation of the process of photosynthesis, leading to vibrant plant life—we wear sunglasses for protection and avoid looking directly at the sun.

So it is with the face of God. His countenance is so radiant that to look on it without a filter is impossible. God, however, has provided us with a perfect filter—Christ Jesus, Savior of humankind. Through Christ, our Intermediary, we are able to see the true nature and character of God.

Jesus Christ is one with the Father. He speaks for the Father. He acts on His Father's behalf. He reaches out to each of His broken children here on earth in the name of His Father. Through Him, we have the ability and the means to communicate with our Father; from Christ we learn of our Father's great love for each of us.

As our Advocate, Christ strives with His Father on our behalf. We, however, must choose to accept and follow the Father and the plan of salvation He and the Son have provided.

During the coming week, make a concerted effort to reach out to someone who is struggling with the decision to accept Jesus. Make this individual a focal point in your daily prayers. He who created the sun and all its power will hear each and every prayer.

Jacob's Night of Fighting and Faith

Read Genesis 32:23-32. What does this account say to you? What's the lesson you can learn from this story about your own "struggles" with God? See also *Hos. 12:4*.

Ellen White is clear that Jacob was wrestling with Christ, the "Angel of the covenant."—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 197. No wonder that twice in the depiction of the night of wrestling the texts state that it was indeed God who had appeared to Jacob that night. Here, again, we see just how up close and personal the Lord is willing to get with His people.

What is the significance of the name change?

As Jacob perceived that he had struggled with a supernatural being, he pleaded for a blessing (*vs. 26*). His petition and perseverance were rewarded by a change of name. No longer would his name be Jacob ("to seize the heel" and by extension "to overreach" or "to deceive"). Now it would be Israel ("he strives with God").

Read verse 30. What meaning can you draw from the words that Jacob uttered? How could that apply to us today?

Jacob, when it was all over, said that he had seen the face of God and lived. In a sense, this is the same opportunity offered to all humanity through the death of Jesus. Jesus was God in the flesh, and through His life and substitutionary death He brought reconciliation between heaven and earth. Because of Jesus and what He has done, we all can, in a sense, "see the face of God" and live. Our past sins, like Jacob's past sins, no longer have to guarantee our destruction before the face of Him who is "a consuming fire" (*Heb. 12:29*).

In what ways have you been striving with God? What does it mean to strive with God? Might you even come away from such striving, like Jacob, with a "limp"?

God changes Jacob's name, as he did Abraham's, Sarah's, and Peter's—a symbol of how God had changed their lives. In place of the heart of a thief and a trickster, God transplants the divine nature. Though crippled and in pain, Jacob is able to face the coming of his brother with faith and peace, for he has “struggled with God and with men, and . . . prevailed” (*Gen. 32:28*). Jacob's struggle and victory is to be the experience of all who await the second coming of Jesus.

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: Tell your class about your first job. How old were you, and what were your wages? Jacob fled from his father's house as a consequence of his deception. Working for Laban, he became the victim of deception and falsehood. How do we keep from becoming bitter when we are victims of injustice? Review Jacob's story in Genesis 29–31, comparing it with Christ's undeserved betrayal recorded in Matthew 26. What principles did Jesus portray that should guide our reactions?

Thought Questions:

1 “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go” (*Gen. 28:15, NIV*). Jacob was in a difficult situation because of his own choices and behaviors, as well as Laban's character. Yet, he claimed God's promise and acted to care for his family. Read Genesis 30:25–43. In class, discuss Jacob's breeding techniques. How has God blessed you even after you have made mistakes? What does this unusual story tell us about God's concern for His flawed children?

2 Wrestling is a physical sport often done for entertainment and financial rewards. This was not the case with Jacob. Read the account of Jacob wrestling with God in Genesis 32:22–32 and in Ellen G. White's *Patriarch's and Prophets*, chapter 18. What in Jacob's personality made it necessary for God to use this method of working with him? What personal applications can you make?

Application Question:

Despite the whole story, one could argue that Esau had every reason to hate his brother, Jacob. Jacob prepared to meet Esau with these words of reconciliation: “‘Now I am sending this message to my lord, that I may find favor in your eyes’” (*Gen. 32:5b, NIV*). He also sent gifts; tangible symbols of repentance. Has someone wronged you? Or have you wronged another and not yet reconciled? Regardless of who has wronged whom, in prayer, ask God to prepare you to take bold steps of service toward that person. Ask Him to send His Holy Spirit to touch both hearts, yours and that individual's.

Further Study: Read also *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 190–203, and *The SDA Bible Commentary*; comments on Genesis 29:31–35:29.

“Though Jacob had left Padan-aram in obedience to the divine direction, it was not without many misgivings that he retraced the road which he had trodden as a fugitive twenty years before. His sin in the deception of his father was ever before him. He knew that his long exile was the direct result of that sin, and he pondered over these things day and night, the reproaches of an accusing conscience making his journey very sad. As the hills of his native land appeared before him in the distance, the heart of the patriarch was deeply moved. All the past rose vividly before him. With the memory of his sin came also the thought of God’s favor toward him, and the promises of divine help and guidance.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 195.

“Jacob had received the blessing for which his soul had longed. His sin as a supplanter and deceiver had been pardoned. The crisis in his life was past. Doubt, perplexity, and remorse had embittered his existence, but now all was changed; and sweet was the peace of reconciliation with God. Jacob no longer feared to meet his brother. God, who had forgiven his sin, could move the heart of Esau also to accept his humiliation and repentance.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 198.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ As a class, discuss the actions of Jacob in preparing to meet Esau. Why did he work so hard to try to appease his brother? Shouldn’t the promises that God had made to him been enough to cause him to move ahead only by faith? Was he showing a lack of faith by his actions, or was it faith in action?
- ❷ Ask those willing to talk about an occasion when time healed some painful wound. What lessons can be learned from those experiences? What can we do to help people hurting from wounds that can take a long time to heal?