

Jacob-Israel



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Gen. 32:22–31; Hos. 12:3, 4; Jer. 30:5–7; Genesis 33; Gen. 34:30–35:29.*

Memory Text: “And He said, ‘Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed’ ” (*Genesis 32:28, NKJV*).

The family saga of Jacob continues, both the good and the bad. Yet, through it all, the hand of God and His faithfulness to the covenant promises are revealed.

This week follows more of Jacob, now that he had left Laban and, returning home, had to face Esau, the victim of Jacob’s treachery. What would his brother, so grievously wronged, now do to him?

Fortunately for Jacob, amid the fear of what was coming, the Lord God of his fathers appeared again to him in an incident that was a precursor to what would later become known as the “time of Jacob’s trouble” (*see Jer. 30:5–7*). And that night Jacob, the supplanter, became “Israel,” a new name for a new beginning, a beginning that would ultimately lead to the creation of a nation itself named after him.

In other words, despite all that happens, the story of the patriarchs and their family is told in Scripture in order to show us that God is faithful to fulfill what He has promised and that He will do so despite what, at times, seems to be nothing but His people doing all that they can to stop that fulfillment.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 4.

Wrestling With God

Gone from Laban, Jacob soon has another experience with God. Knowing that his brother, Esau, is coming with “ ‘four hundred men’ ” (*Gen. 32:6*), Jacob prays fervently to the Lord, even though he acknowledges that “ ‘I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant’ ” (*Gen. 32:10, NKJV*). Jacob, truly, has a better understanding of what grace was about.

And how does the Lord respond?

Read Genesis 32:22–31 and Hosea 12:3, 4. What is the spiritual significance of this amazing story?

Jacob is distressed, understandably so, by what is happening, and after doing what he can to protect his family, he camps for the night. He is then suddenly attacked by “a Man” (*Gen. 32:24, NKJV*). This is a term that can have special connotations, evoking the divine presence (see *Isa. 53:3*). Daniel used it to refer to the heavenly priest Michael (*Dan. 10:5*); it also was the word used by Joshua to depict the “Commander of the LORD’s army,” who was the LORD *YHWH* Himself (*Josh. 5:13–15, NKJV*).

Indeed, amid the fighting, it must have become obvious to Jacob that he was struggling with God Himself, as his words, “ ‘I will not let You go unless You bless me!’ ” (*Gen. 32:26, NKJV*), revealed. Yet, his fervent clinging to God, his refusal to let go, also revealed his passionate desire for forgiveness and to be right with his Lord.

“The error that had led to Jacob’s sin in obtaining the birthright by fraud was now clearly set before him. He had not trusted God’s promises, but had sought by his own efforts to bring about that which God would have accomplished in His own time and way.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 197, 198.

And the evidence that he had been forgiven was the change of his name from the reminder of his sin to one that commemorated his victory. “ ‘Your name,’ ” said the Angel, “ ‘shall no longer be called Jacob [the supplanter], but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed’ ” (*Gen. 32:28, NKJV*).

What has been your own experience as far as wrestling with God goes? What does it mean to do that, and why is it at times important that we have this kind of experience?

The Brothers Meet

From Peniel, “the face of God” (*see Gen. 32:30*), the place where he had this experience with God, Jacob moves now to meet with his brother. After 20 years of separation, Jacob sees him coming with 400 men (*Gen. 33:1*). Jacob is worried and, therefore, prepares himself and his family for whatever might happen.

Read Genesis 33. What connection is there between Jacob’s experience of seeing the face of God at Peniel and Jacob’s experience of seeing the face of his brother? What is the implication of this connection in regard to our relationship with God and our relationship with our “brothers,” whoever they may be?

Jacob bows himself seven times before his brother (*Gen. 33:3*), whom he calls several times “ ‘my lord’ ” (*Gen. 33:8, 13, 15, NKJV*) and with whom he identifies himself as his “ ‘servant’ ” (*Gen. 33:5; compare with Gen. 32:4, 18, 20, NKJV*). Significantly, Jacob’s seven bows echo his father’s seven blessings (*Gen. 27:27–29*); furthermore, when he bows, he specifically reverses his father’s blessing, about “ ‘nations [bowing] down to you’ ” (*Gen. 27:29, NKJV*).

It is as if Jacob’s intention was to pay his debt to his brother and return the blessing that he had stolen from him (*see Gen. 33:11*). When Esau saw his brother, against all expectations, he ran to Jacob and, instead of killing him, he “kissed him, and they wept” (*Gen. 33:4, NKJV*).

Later, Jacob commented to Esau: “ ‘I have seen your face as though I had seen the face of God’ ” (*Gen. 33:10, NKJV*). The reason for Jacob’s extraordinary statement was his understanding that Esau had forgiven him. The Hebrew verb *ratsah*, “pleased” (*Gen. 33:10, NKJV*), is a theological term referring to any sacrifice that is “pleasing,” “accepted” by God, which then implies divine forgiveness (*Lev. 22:27, Amos 5:22*).

Jacob’s experience of God’s forgiveness at Peniel, where he saw the face of God, is now repeated in his experience of his brother’s forgiveness, which he identifies as if he saw the face of God. Jacob lives a second Peniel, the first one preparing for the second one. Jacob has been forgiven by God and by his own brother. Truly, he now must have understood, even more than before, the meaning of grace.

What have you learned about grace from how others (besides the Lord) have forgiven you?

The Violation of Dinah

Now that Jacob has reconciled with his brother, he wants to settle in the land of Canaan in peace. The word *shalem*, “safely” (*Gen. 33:18, NKJV*), from the word *shalom*, “peace,” for the first time characterizes his journey.

After having purchased a piece of land from the inhabitants (*Gen. 33:19*), he erects an altar there, showing his faith and his realization of how dependent upon the Lord he really is. For every one of the sacrifices offered, there was an act of worship.

Yet, for the first time in his life, Jacob-Israel is exposed to the troubles of settling in the land. Like Isaac at Gerar with Abimelech (*Gen. 26:1–33*), Jacob tries to find accommodation with the Canaanites.

Read Genesis 34. What happened to upset his plans for a peaceful existence?

The story of this sordid incident highlights the ambiguity of the characters and of their actions. The sensual Shechem, who violates Dinah, also is characterized as sincere and loving Dinah, and he wants to try to make amends. He is even willing to undergo the covenant rite of circumcision.

Meanwhile, Simeon and Levi, who present themselves as the defenders of God and His commandments, and who resist intermarriage with the Canaanites (*Lev. 19:29*), resort to lies and deception (*Gen. 34:13*) and are ready to kill and plunder (*Gen. 34:25–27*). Their actions were not only reprehensible (why not punish the one man who had done it?) but also had the potential to cause many more problems.

As for Jacob, he only is concerned with peace. When the rape of his daughter is reported to him, he does not say anything (*Gen. 34:5*). However, after he hears about what his sons have done, he openly chides them because of what could follow: “ ‘You have troubled me by making me obnoxious among the inhabitants of the land, among the Canaanites and the Perizzites; and since I am few in number, they will gather themselves together against me and kill me. I shall be destroyed, my household and I’ ” (*Gen. 34:30, NKJV*).

Again and again we see deceit and deception, as well as acts of kindness and grace, in these accounts. What does this tell us about human nature?

Prevailing Idolatry

Read Genesis 34:30–35:15. What lessons can we take about true worship from what happened here?

Immediately after Jacob's complaint that his peace with the Canaanites had been compromised (*Gen. 34:30*), and after his two sons were rebuked (*Gen. 34:30*), God urges Jacob to leave Shechem and return to Bethel in order to renew his covenant. Indeed, the Lord tells him that, once he gets there, he needs to build an altar.

Meanwhile, the first thing recorded after God's command is Jacob's telling his people to put away the Canaanite idols, which had been taken in the plunder of the city of Shechem, and the household gods that had been stolen by Rachel (*Gen. 31:19, 32*). All this, too, is crucial to the idea of the covenant with God.

These idols had been kept and, probably, worshiped in spite of Jacob's commitment to God. It was not enough for Jacob to leave Shechem in order to escape Canaanite influence. Jacob had to get rid of the idols within the camp and in the hearts of his people.

The process of repentance consists in more than a physical move from one place to another, or a move from one church to another. Most important, it is that we seek by God's grace to purge the idolatry in our hearts, regardless of where we live, because we can make idols out of just about anything.

When Jacob obeys God and proceeds according to God's commandment, God finally intervenes and "the terror of God" (*Gen. 35:5, NKJV*) affects all the people around them, and they do not dare attack Jacob. Jacob is, then, ready to worship with "all the people who were with him" (*Gen. 35:6, NKJV*), suggesting that the family unity has been restored. Jacob gives this place the name El Bethel, a reminder of his dream of the ladder, a sign that the connection between heaven and earth, which had been broken for some time, has now been restored.

The emphasis is, this time, on the God of Bethel rather than on the place itself. This personal note resonates again when God reminds Jacob of his name "Israel" (*Gen. 35:10*), with the double promise that this blessing implies. Jacob's blessing, first, means fruitfulness, the transmission of the Messianic seed and the generation of many nations (*Gen. 35:11*); and second, it points to the Promised Land (*Gen. 35:12*).

What are subtle ways that idolatry can find its way into our hearts, and what can we do about it?

The Death of Rachel

Read Genesis 35:15–29. What other woes did Jacob face within his dysfunctional family?

As soon as Jacob leaves Bethel, three interrelated incidents mark the last step of his journey toward the Promised Land: Jacob's last son is born; Rachel dies; and Reuben, Jacob's first son by Leah, sleeps with Jacob's concubine. Though the text doesn't say why the young man would do something so evil, it could have been that he wanted to somehow defile the birth of Jacob's last son and to humiliate the memory of Rachel. We just don't know.

The birth of Jacob's last son is linked to Bethlehem (*Gen. 35:19*), which is within the confines of the Promised Land. This birth is, then, the first fulfillment of God's promise for the future of Israel. The midwife, prophetically, addresses Rachel with the very words God used to reassure Abraham: "Do not fear" (*Gen. 35:17, NKJV, compare with Gen. 15:1*).

Significantly, Jacob changes the name that the dying Rachel had given to her son, Ben-Oni, meaning "son of my sorrow" to signify her pain, into Benjamin, meaning "son of the right hand," perhaps implying the direction of the south in order to express his hope in the Promised Land and all that God said He would do for His people after they had settled there.

Yet, during this time Reuben has sexual relations with Bilhah, his father's concubine and Rachel's maidservant (*Gen. 35:25, Gen. 30:3*). We just don't know why he performed this scandalous act, other than as another example of human depravity.

Amazingly, Jacob does not respond to this horrible violation, even though he is told about it (*Gen. 35:22*). Perhaps at this point in his life, Jacob trusts that God will fulfill His word despite the sin and evil, at times, that goes on around him.

It is this precise lesson of faith that is implied in the list of Jacob's 12 sons, who will be the ancestors of Israel (*Gen. 35:22–26*)—not the most savory and kindest of people, as we will see. Yet, despite all the problems, all the dysfunction, even outright evil, such as Reuben's sin with Bilhah, God's will was going to be fulfilled through this family, no matter how messed up this family really was.

Despite human error, God's ultimate purposes will be fulfilled. Imagine what would happen if people cooperated, if they obeyed Him. How much more easily—that is, with less human suffering and stress and delay—could God's will then be accomplished?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Night of Wrestling,” pp. 195–203, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“Jacob’s experience during that night of wrestling and anguish represents the trial through which the people of God must pass just before Christ’s second coming. . . . Such will be the experience of God’s people in their final struggle with the powers of evil. God will test their faith, their perseverance, their confidence in His power to deliver them. Satan will endeavor to terrify them with the thought that their cases are hopeless; that their sins have been too great to receive pardon. They will have a deep sense of their shortcomings, and as they review their lives their hopes will sink. But remembering the greatness of God’s mercy, and their own sincere repentance, they will plead His promises made through Christ to helpless, repenting sinners. Their faith will not fail because their prayers are not immediately answered. They will lay hold of the strength of God, as Jacob laid hold of the Angel, and the language of their souls will be, ‘I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me.’ . . .

“Yet Jacob’s history is an assurance that God will not cast off those who have been betrayed into sin, but who have returned unto Him with true repentance. It was by self-surrender and confiding faith that Jacob gained what he had failed to gain by conflict in his own strength. God thus taught His servant that divine power and grace alone could give him the blessing he craved. Thus it will be with those who live in the last days. As dangers surround them, and despair seizes upon the soul, they must depend solely upon the merits of the atonement. We can do nothing of ourselves.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 201–203.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Why is Jacob’s weakness the occasion for God’s grace? How does Jacob’s experience relate to Paul’s statement, “When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10, NKJV)?
- 2 Why do you think the Bible reveals so many sordid details about the lives of many of its characters? What point could be made from doing this? What message can we take from it?
- 3 Dwell more on the question of idolatry. What are the idols of our culture, our civilization? How can we make sure we aren’t worshipping anyone or anything other than the Lord?

Double Answer to Prayer

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

The first-year theology student ran to the worship room at Zaoksky Adventist University south of Moscow, Russia. Falling on his knees, he prayed, “Lord, why are You blessing me? I am so sinful.”

Twenty-year-old Vadim Antyushin felt an overwhelming sense of his unworthiness of God’s blessings. He felt unworthy to study at the university and of the calling to become a Seventh-day Adventist pastor. He had just started his first semester of classes and, moments earlier, had unexpectedly received a gift of US\$100. It was a significant sum for him. “Lord, I’m unworthy of this money,” Vadim prayed. “You have provided for all my needs, and I lack nothing. Show me what to do with the money.” Vadim exchanged the US dollars for Russian rubles. After tithe, 6,000 rubles remained.

Vadim joined a small group of students who met once a week to pray and, a few days later, heard one of the students ask for prayers about his financial situation. Vadim listened silently. He didn’t know the student, and he didn’t know how much money he needed for his tuition. That night, Vadim returned to the worship room to pray. “Lord,” he said, “I would like to give the money to my classmate. Please bless this plan according to Your will.”

The next day, Vadim pulled aside his classmate to speak privately.

“How much money do you need for your studies?” he asked.

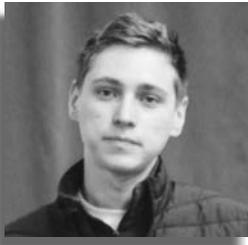
“Six thousand rubles,” the classmate replied.

Stunned, Vadim realized that God had answered his prayers. Not only that, but God had also answered the prayers of his classmate. Vadim joyfully gave the 6,000 rubles to his astonished classmate. The two embraced.

Two years later, the classmate has become one of Vadim’s best friends.

“He and I have gone through a lot together, and he has helped me in so many ways,” Vadim said in an interview. “Thank God that I have acquired such a friend. Thank God that He takes care of our needs long before we even know that we have a need. Before we ask, He knows what to give and through whom to give it. The main thing is to trust Him.”

“Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (*Eph. 3:19, 20, NKJV*).



This mission story illustrates the following components of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s “I Will Go” strategic plan: Spiritual Growth Objective No. 5, “To disciple individuals and families into Spirit-filled lives,” and Spiritual Growth Objective No. 7, “To help youth and young adults place God first and exemplify a biblical worldview.” Read more: IWillGo2020.org.

Key Text: *Genesis 32:28*

Study Focus: *Genesis 32–35; Hos. 12:3, 4; Jer. 30:5–7.*

Part I: Overview

Introduction: Jacob is now free from Laban. Under God’s blessing, Jacob has become rich. It seems that he is at last happy. He has reached his goal and is heading home to Canaan. Yet, Jacob is profoundly worried about his future in Canaan and the threat posed by his brother. It is precisely at this moment that God chooses to approach Jacob. This extraordinary confrontation will radically change the character of Jacob. As a result, Jacob is renamed Israel. Jacob’s encounter with God at Peniel corresponds to his Bethel encounter. The two accounts echo each other in words, structure, and themes. While Bethel begins at sunset, Peniel ends at sunrise, with the prospect of a glorious future. After a night of wrestling, Jacob emerges from his encounter with a blessing and a new name. He has had a personal encounter with the God of love and lived. In turn, Jacob is able to look upon the face of his enemy, his brother, Esau, in humility and love. Then Jacob turns to his family and confronts iniquity—the rape of Dinah, the murders committed by his sons, and, finally, the idolatry that was still prevailing in his household.

Lesson Themes:

1. **The Distress of Jacob.** Jacob’s trouble before arriving in the Promised Land contains a lesson of dependence on God and prefigures the eschatological distress of the end-time people of God.
2. **Wrestling With God.** Jacob’s confrontation with God forced him to confront himself and to change. His confrontation contains lessons about the significance of conversion.
3. **The Face of the Brother.** As a result of his encounter with God, Jacob can see the face of God in the face of his brother.

Part II: Commentary

The Distress of Jacob

Jacob’s distress (*tsarah*) inspires the prophet Jeremiah regarding the dreadful condition of Israel in exile (*Jer. 30:7*). Yet, beyond this particular event, the language of the prophet clearly suggests that he has in view the future eschatological Day of the Lord (*compare Zeph. 1:14–18*). Daniel

applies the same expression, referring to “distress,” “trouble” (*tsarah*), to the time of the end (*Dan. 12:1; compare Matt. 24:15, 21*).

Jacob’s distress derives from two causes. The first is horizontal and is related to his brother. The second is vertical and relates to God. Jacob’s first concern is with his brother, to whom he sends two companies of messengers. This initiative is a strategic operation to safeguard the second camp: in the event that the first camp is attacked, the second camp will have time to escape. Jacob decides to send “two camps of messengers” to Esau. Jacob calls his two camps of human messengers by the same name, *makhaneh*, “camps” (*Gen. 32:7, [8]*). Jacob understands that in order to recover his relationship with God, he must restore his relationship with his brother.

As his grandfather Abraham did, Jacob implores God for help. Jacob directs his plea to God alone, for it is God who commanded that he should return to Canaan (*Gen. 32:9*), the same God who promised to ensure his posterity (*Gen. 32:12*). Jacob refers to the wonder of God’s grace (*Gen. 32:10*). The two Hebrew words *khesed* (“mercy”) and *’emet* (“truth”) are the very words that Abraham’s servant used when he blessed God for having heard his prayer (*Gen. 24:27*). After praying, Jacob then camps for the night. However, before retiring, Jacob acts again. Thus, the text moves back and forth between prayer and action. Because Jacob is not naive and his faith does not make him passive, he secures his camp. Jacob organizes wave after wave of gifts to be delivered to Esau to “appease” him (*Gen. 32:20*). The Hebrew verb *kpr*, for “appease,” means “to atone.” The association with such other words as *minkhah*, “present,” a word referring to the offering (*Lev. 2:1–14*), and *nasa’ panim*, “forgive,” or “accept,” attests to a religious perspective. Jacob has in mind his past reconciliation with God (*Gen. 32:22–32*) as he attempts to reconcile himself with his brother (*compare Matt 5:23*).

Wrestling With God

Jacob remains alone because he wants to pray in anguish of spirit for God’s intervention and protection. While he prays, “a Man” (*Gen. 32:24, NKJV*) approaches him. Jacob, thinking he is being attacked by an enemy, begins to wrestle with the man for his life. The anonymous qualification “a man” renders the mysterious identity of this person. Jacob will identify the man as God (*Gen. 32:30*), as will the prophet Hosea (*Hos. 12:3, 4*). The same language will be used by Isaiah in his description of the Suffering Servant (*Isa. 53:3*). That God takes human form in order to relate to humans is not unheard of (*see Gen. 18:1, 17; Judg. 6:11*). The same term, “a man,” is used by Daniel to designate the heavenly High Priest (*Dan. 10:5; compare Dan. 8:11*) and the “commander of the army” (*Dan. 8:11, NIV*), an expression that designates the Lord Himself (*Josh. 5:14, 15*).

The information that this Man (God) did not prevail contains an important theological lesson about God in His relationship with humans. God's "weakness" in His confrontation with humans is an expression of His grace and love and of the mystery of His incarnation to save humans. The impression of weakness is immediately contradicted by the Man's next move. A simple touch is sufficient to produce the dislocation, suggesting a superhuman power. The place of the blow, "the socket of Jacob's hip" (*Gen. 32:25, NKJV*), which refers to the loin or the thigh, is a euphemism for the place associated with procreation. The divine touch is thus an implicit blessing pointing to Jacob's descendants (*Gen. 46:26, Exod. 1:5*). That Jacob was hit at the organ generator of life also has been linked to the dietary prohibition against eating blood. For life is in the blood (*Gen. 9:4*). This practice is, therefore, more than a mere reminder of the story of Jacob; it also recalls that biblical episode and, with it, its theological lessons. It also draws the meat eater's attention to the fundamental principle of the sacredness of life.

The prophet Hosea interprets Jacob's struggle with God as an experience of prayer (*Hos. 12:4*). It is Jacob's faith that explains his tenacious insistence (*Luke 11:5-8*). Thus, Jacob's new name is "Israel." The explanation of the "man" introduces a number of paradoxes: (1) Jacob has wrestled with God, and yet, the "man" explains that Jacob also wrestled with men; (2) the name Israel literally means "God fights," although this explanation affirms that it is Jacob who fights; (3) Jacob has just been hit by the "man," who dislocated his hip, and yet the narrative explains that it is Jacob who prevailed.

All of these paradoxes convey important theological lessons: (1) the quality of Jacob's relationship with God depends on the quality of his relationship with men (in this instance, Esau) and vice versa; (2) the name Israel, "God fights," reminds Jacob that he must learn to let God fight for him (*see Exod. 14:13, 14*). Jacob will prevail insofar as he will allow God to prevail over him, a principle that will be enunciated by Paul: "When I am weak, then I am strong" (*2 Cor. 12:10, NKJV*). Jacob calls the place where God has appeared to him "Peniel," which means "the face of God." This name signifies Jacob's personal experience; namely, that he was confronted by God and survived. The use of the Hebrew expression "face to face" does not mean that Jacob actually saw the physical face of God. This expression is equivalent to seeing "the form of the LORD" (*Num. 12:8, NKJV*) and describes, rather, the experience of a direct encounter with God (*Deut. 5:4*).

The Face of the Brother

To Esau's reluctance to accept his brother's present (*Gen. 33:9*), Jacob responds by explicitly connecting his relationship with him to his relationship with God: "I have seen your face as though I had seen the face

of God’ ” (*Gen. 33:10, NKJV*). Jacob has seen the “face of God” (*Peniel*) in the face of Esau. Jacob’s experience with Esau is a second *Peniel*—the first *Peniel* preparing for the second *Peniel*. Jacob’s encounter with God has helped him in his encounter with his brother, and his reconciliation with his brother will affect his relationship with God. Jacob has come to understand that his love of God and his love of his brother are dependent on each other. Jesus infers this unique theological lesson from the Scriptures:

“ ‘ “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets’ ” (*Matt. 22:37–40, NKJV*).

Part III: Life Application

The Distress of Jacob. “As the patriarch wrestled all night for deliverance from the hand of Esau, so the religious will cry to God day and night for deliverance from the enemies that surround them.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 201. How does Jacob’s experience of distress function as a prophecy of hope for the end times? What warning and encouragement can we learn from Jacob’s distress that can help us through the time of trouble? Have you ever personally had an experience that felt the same as a time of trouble—a period in which you prayed in anguish, only to be met with what seemed to be silence from God? How did you cope with this distress?

Wrestling With God. Remember moments in your life when you wrestled with temptations and with doubts; how did these struggles draw you nearer to God? Share your testimony with your class. How does Jacob’s bold statement “ ‘I will not let You go unless You bless me!’ ” (*Gen. 32:26, NKJV*) apply to prayer? Why does “losing” the fight with God mean winning the fight? How can wrestling with God change you forever? Read and comment on Romans 7:23–25. Why must we “wrestle,” and why is wrestling with God so difficult? Why is it impossible to prevail by ourselves? Read Ephesians 6:12.

