

Genesis 32: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 32 And the messengers returned to Jacob saying, We came to your brother Esau and he is coming to meet you and there are 400 men with him.

Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. He divided the people who were with him and the flocks and the herds and camels into two camps, thinking, If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the other camp that is left will escape.

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.

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.

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. 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.

[1 : 45] So he stayed there that night, and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau. Two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty milking camels and their calves, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys.

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. 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? 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.

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, 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. So the present passed on ahead of him, and he himself stayed that night in the camp.

[2 : 58] 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. He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had.

And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. 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.

Then he said, Let me go, for the day has broken. But Jacob said, I will not let you go unless you bless me. And he said to him, What is your name?

And he said, Jacob. 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.

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. 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.

[4 : 08] The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. 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.

In Genesis chapter 32, Jacob has just moved on from his encounter with Laban, after he fled from Laban's house and was pursued by him. And at this point he meets angels of God and declares the place where he is to be God's camp.

Note the call back to Bethel, another place named after such an encounter. In that case it's the house of God, the gate of heaven. Here it's declared to be God's camp. If Jacob's sojourn in Paddan Aram is a there and back again story, the presence of such a symmetry that we're seeing at this point is a sign that we're entering the return leg.

Jacob initiates contact with Esau, sending messengers ahead of him, and there's a directness that has not been characteristic of Jacob to this point. The ways in which he has tended to deal with people have tended to involve subterfuge or deception or some other sort of indirect approach. Here, however, he approaches Esau directly. Unfortunately, however, his messengers return with the news that Esau is coming with 400 men with him. Jacob, fearing the consequences of an attack from Esau, divides his people into two camps to limit his potential losses of Esau attacks.

[5 : 39] And note the connection between the name of Mahanaim, two camps, the place that he named after the fact that it was God's camp, and the fact that Jacob himself divides his company into two camps only a few verses later.

It seems that these are connected in some way, and it might be worth you thinking about why that might be. I'm not entirely sure. Jacob wrestles with God in prayer at this point.

He appeals to God's covenant promises to him and his fathers, calling for God to act to preserve him from the wrath of Esau. And staying there that night, he uses wisdom in sending out an immense gift of livestock to Esau.

This is a princely gift. And the numbers that he's sending are really large. They're suitable for breeding as well. Note the far greater number of female animals than male.

He is probably surrendering a significant proportion of the animals that he gained in Paddan Aram. These gifts are sent on a head, wave after wave, to pacify Esau.

[6 : 41] And in some respects, Jacob might be in a position akin to that of Abraham, his grandfather, when he was called to sacrifice Isaac. To actually enter back into the land, Jacob has to give up an awful amount of his wealth.

He then sends his wives, two female servants, and all his children, sending them a head over the Jabbok before him. And he is like Abraham, prepared to be dispossessed of everything.

He's left alone. And in the darkness and the isolation, a man comes to him as an adversary and wrestles with him until the daybreak. This conflict occurs at the Jabbok.

The Jabbok mixes up the letters of Jacob's name, which is about to be changed later on in that chapter. It's also similar to the word for wrestling. And so there is a lot of wordplay here, as there is throughout the Jacob story.

The man wrestling with Jacob touches the inside of his thigh next to the hip. This is an extremely intimate spot. It's where Eliezer touched when he swore his oath to Abraham.

[7 : 44] And we might see it perhaps as being connected with circumcision and the promise of seed. This is an event of wrestling between this unknown assailant and Jacob that is fraught with all these themes that have been playing throughout the book to this point.

The sun rises as he crosses over, as he finally defeats the opponent. And the sun rising maybe draws our mind back to the sun setting at Bethel.

He leaves the land of his fathers. He goes to Bethel. And as the sun descends, he sleeps. And now the sun is rising.

And there's a new stage of his life beginning. We might also think about the significance of water as a threshold. In the story of Israel, Israel is surrounded by a number of bodies of water that they cross at significant moments in their history.

And these water crossings are not just boundaries between the land and other things outside. They're existential boundaries for the nation. So they serve foreign gods on the other side of the river, the river Euphrates.

[8 : 53] Jacob has crossed that river just in the previous chapter. Then they are slaves in Egypt, delivered from slavery in Egypt as they cross the Red Sea.

Then there is the event of going into the land through the Jordan. There's the Jabbok, a tributary of the Jordan, the site at which Jacob wrestles with God and is given a new name.

So all of these events, these water crossings, help define Israel's identity. Whether it's their name itself, whether it's their deliverance from slavery, their entrance into the land, their movement away from the realm of serving foreign gods.

In all of these respects then, water crossings can be existential passages or changes. The wrestling leads to a new name and a blessing.

Now, what might this remind us of what's taking place here? One of the first things it should remind us of are the two children struggling in the womb of Rebekah. That's the very first thing that we read about in the story of Jacob.

[9 : 59] He's wrestling with his brother, so much so that when he comes out of the womb, he's grappling with his brother, holding on to his brother's heel. And as we read through the story of Jacob, we'll see two other things, that name and blessing are crucial themes throughout the story.

When he's first born, he is given a name. And the name seems to be given by his father particularly, not necessarily by his mother. It's not a flattering name. And later on, it's referred to by his brother Esau after he has been robbed of his blessing.

Esau says that he has supplanted him these two times. Now, name is an important theme then.

Jacob does not have a flattering name originally, and he's given a new name here.

Another theme is blessing. Jacob deceived his father and outwitted his brother to receive the blessing. And that was a crucial thing for him, to get that blessing.

And now, he is given a different blessing, and he will not let go until he is given that blessing. That tenacity is something that we've seen in Jacob to this point.

[11 : 10] But here, I think there's something very important about it. We're returning to the two core themes of Jacob's story to this point. We're replaying the story of the birth and the story of the events in the tent of his father Isaac.

And now, these themes are being resolved. Think about the way that Jacob sends on the gift ahead of himself to his lord Esau.

That reminds us of the blessing that is given to Jacob by his father Isaac. It seems as if Jacob is beginning to play out the blessing to Esau, to give back what he has taken in some respect.

Jacob has also been a wrestler throughout his life. He's wrestled against Esau. He's wrestled against Isaac. He's wrestled against Laban. And God recognizes this as he wrestles with him.

He says that he has wrestled with God and with men and has prevailed. He's wrestled with those figures like Esau and Isaac and Laban and grown through that conflict. And now, he's meeting with God himself and wrestling with God himself.

[12 : 18] What's going on there? Well, one of the things I think we're seeing is that he has been wrestling with God and man and has prevailed. Who was wrestling with Jacob when Laban was mistreating him?

When Isaac was blessing his brother ahead of him? When Esau was trying to kill him? Who was wrestling with him? In some sense, ultimately God himself.

Wrestling with him as a heavenly father might wrestle with his son so that his son might grow in strength. And at that point, Jacob can realize that all these stories in his life, all these events in his life, that he might chalk down to his misfortune and all the opposition that he's facing.

Ultimately, this is God wrestling with him. God wrestling with him so that through that testing and trying, he might become strong. He might become a true wrestler with and wrestler for God, which is the name that he's given.

Then, as God is wrestling with him, he's able to see his experience in a new way, to see that God's providence has been working throughout. Now, a question to reflect upon as we conclude.

[13 : 30] Many people identify this point as Jacob's conversion, or perhaps slightly earlier on as he prays to God as he hears that Esau is approaching. Now, I don't think that's the case.

However, there is a transition in Jacob's life at this point. He becomes a new sort of person, a more mature sort of person. He's given what he's finally longed for, a new name and a blessing.

These things that have been key themes and driving factors of the story to this point are resolved here. Now, what I think we're seeing is a transition in his life.

And there are many points when, in our own lives, we have key transition experiences that are not necessarily conversions in the way that they are commonly understood, a movement from not believing in God to believing in God.

Rather, it's a movement into a new level of faith, a new level of faith that resolves tensions that have been playing in our lives to that point, tensions that may have defined our lives and finally moving past them.

[14 : 37] As we'll see in the next chapter, Jacob is no longer wrestling with Esau in the same way. He performs the blessing to Esau. He allows Esau to go out ahead of him.

This is another sort of birth scene. Two well-matched opponents wrestling with each other, waiting to see who's going to go out first. It's a wrestling for a name and a blessing for the firstborn status, in some sense.

And when Jacob is blessed by God, he is able to give the blessing back to Esau that he stole from him, in some sense at least. And so I want to encourage you to think about some time or times in your own life when such a transition has occurred.

Not necessarily a movement from not believing to believing, but a movement from one level of understanding and faith and experience and way of thinking about your life to a completely different one, a movement into a new level of maturity.