

# 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*).

**T**he 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?

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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?**

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## 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?

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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?**

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## 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?

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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?**

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## Prevailing Idolatry

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

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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?**

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## The Death of Rachel

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

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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?