

Genesis 32 • Struggling with Man and God

Introduction

A teaching that crops up now and again throughout Scripture, and is especially prevalent in the book of Revelation, is that things often first happen in heaven before they're transferred down to earth. In the case of Jacob, we find that this isn't just true of events but of man as well. Before the activities and relationships of this earthly life can be resolved, one's spiritual differences need to be resolved first in order to apply spiritual solutions. Just as Cain carried his struggle with God for having his sacrifice rejected to Abel, we often carry our spiritual struggles into the arena of our struggles with others. Therefore we need to learn and apply as quickly as possible that our struggles with man are actually our struggle with God.

¹Now as Jacob went on his way, the angels of God met him. ²Jacob said when he saw them, "This is God's camp." So he named that place Mahanaim.

[Read v.1-2]

Q: What does God do before Jacob has a chance to do himself?

A: Sends His messengers. Jacob is about to send messengers to Esau, but God first sends His messengers to Jacob.

Q: What is the meaning and significance of Jacob's naming that place "Mahanaim"?

A: It means "Two Camps" or "Two Companies". It signifies that Jacob was not only accompanied by an earth "camp" or "company" but also by an additional heavenly one.

³Then Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. ⁴He also commanded them saying, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: 'Thus says your servant Jacob, "I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed until now; ⁵I have oxen and donkeys and flocks and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight.'"

[Read v.3-8]

Q: Does the fact that Esau is coming to meet Jacob with 400 men have only one interpretation?

A: It **could** mean that Esau is coming out with an armed force to attack Jacob, but it could also mean that Esau is coming out to **protect** Esau.

Q: Why do you suppose that Jacob instantly assumes the worst?

A: Because Jacob has never reconciled his past sins against Esau of stealing his birthright and blessing. Although 20 years have past, the last thing Jacob knew of Esau's opinion about him was, "I will kill my brother Jacob". (Genesis 27:41-43) This was affirmed by his mother Rebekah who instructed Jacob to flee to Laban's in the first place to avoid Esau. Jacob has no information that anything has changed.

⁶The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and furthermore he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him."

⁷Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and the herds and the camels, into two companies; ⁸for he said, "If Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the company which is left will escape."

Q: What is Jacob's initial action? How does it parallel his spiritual shortsightedness?

A: Jacob splits his people into two companies. Whereas he named this place "Two Companies" after the fact that God had reinforced Jacob's company with a company from God, now Jacob divides his forces, a parallel to the fact that he is rendering spiritual strength ineffective by dividing from it as well.

Q: Why do you believe that Jacob defers to being fearful of man rather than relying on his fear of God?

A: Jacob has come face-to-face with unresolved sin in his life. It might not be so much that he doubts God as much as he knows that he has done things deserving of punishment.

Application: Do you have—or have you ever had—unresolved issues with anyone? How did you handle being in that person's presence or how do you think you will handle it? How does God's grace play a role in such situations?

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⁹Jacob 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 relatives, and I will prosper you,’ ¹⁰I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You have shown to Your servant; for with my staff only I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies. ¹¹Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, that he will come and attack me and the mothers with the children. ¹²For You said, ‘I will surely prosper you and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which is too great to be numbered.’”

¹³So he spent the night there. Then he selected from what he had with him a present for his brother Esau: ¹⁴two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, ¹⁵thirty milking camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. ¹⁶He delivered them into the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, “Pass on before me, and put a space between droves.”

¹⁷He commanded the one in front, saying, “When my brother Esau meets you and asks you, saying, ‘To whom do you belong, and where are you going, and to whom do these animals in front of you belong?’ ¹⁸then you shall say, ‘These belong to your servant Jacob; it is a present sent to my lord Esau. And behold, he also is behind us.’”

¹⁹Then he commanded also the second and the third, and all those who followed the droves, saying, “After this manner you shall speak to Esau when you find him; ²⁰and you shall say, ‘Behold, your servant Jacob also is behind us.’” For he said, “I will appease him with the present that goes before me. Then afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me.” ²¹So the present passed on before him, while he himself spent that night in the camp.

²²Now he arose that same night and took his two wives and his two maids and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream. And he sent

[Read v.9-12]

Q: How would you characterize Jacob’s prayer? What is his attitude?

A: Jacob is extremely honest as to how he feels about and perceives the situation before him. Essentially his question concerns how God will reconcile the promises for the future made to Jacob with the fact that Jacob’s past is looming large to destroy the future. “*I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You have shown*” indicates that Jacob knows that he is worthy of punishment for his past sins and that they can only be overcome by God’s grace.

Q: Why does Jacob express only fear for himself, his wives, and children? Why isn’t he concerned about all the wealth that accompanies them?

A: Because it goes directly to God’s promise as pointed out by Jacob to “*make your descendants as the sand of the sea*”. This cannot come about if they are all killed. It reveals a deep concern by Jacob for God’s will, and that it might be in conflict with Jacob’s past life.

[Read v.13-23]

Q: Jacob prays to God, but what is the first thing that he does after? How might this be different from other spiritual examples in Scripture?

A: Jacob makes his own preparations to deal with the situation. It appears to be different from many other scriptural examples in that he seems to be taking courses of action before getting a reply from God to his inquiry.

Q: What is the goal of Jacob’s strategy?

A: To appease Esau enough to get a chance to talk to him face to face. With a force of 400, it’s likely that if they’re hostile they’ll just attack without any regard or stopping.

Q: What is the final thing that Jacob separates from the rest?

A: First he separated and sent ahead the presents, then he separated his wives and children and sent them across the stream, and finally he has separated himself. It’s a conscious or subconscious separation of the innocent from the guilty, Jacob knowing that he alone is responsible.

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across whatever he had.

²⁴Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob's thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. ²⁶Then he said, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking."

But he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

²⁷So he said to him, "What is your name?"

And he said, "Jacob."

²⁸He said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed."

²⁹Then Jacob asked him and said, "Please tell me your name."

But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And he blessed him there.

³⁰So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved."

³¹Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Peniel, and he was limping on his thigh. ³²Therefore, to this day the sons of Israel do not eat the sinew of the hip which is on the socket of the thigh, because he touched the socket of Jacob's thigh in the sinew of the hip.

[Read v.24-32]

Q: How do we know that this is God?

A: Beside the fact that Jacob will ask for a blessing, from a reference to this event in Hosea:

*Yes, he wrestled with the angel and prevailed;
He wept and sought His favor.
He found Him at Bethel
And there He spoke with us,
Even the Lord, the God of hosts,
The Lord is His name.
Hosea 12:4-5*

Q: What is the irony here about Jacob's statement, "I have seen God face to face"?

A: His own plans were designed to meet Esau face to face, but God's plan was to do so Himself first.

Q: What is the irony here about Jacob wrestling? What are the similarities to this in his life?

1. He wrestled with Esau in the womb.
2. He wrestled away Esau's birthright and blessing.
3. He wrestled with Laban first for wives and then possessions.

Point: *Jacob has been wrestling with man his entire life. But only by wrestling with God and coming to terms with spiritual issues could Jacob come to terms with human issues.*

Q: When Abram and Sarai are renamed, their old names are never used again in Scripture. Why do you suppose that this is not true for Jacob who is referred to by both names?

A: It represents the tension of someone still earth-bound in their struggle (Jacob) versus someone having achieved reconciliation with God (Israel).

Overall Application

- *Have you ever considered that at least some of your earthly strained or broken relationships may be speaking about a strained or broken spiritual relationship on your part?*
- *What have you done to prepare for the moment of reconciliation with someone you've offended/sinned against? Are you making your own plans or first seeking to make things right with God?*
- *So often we refer to our relationship with God as a spiritual "walk". Have you considered that it may also be a "struggle", something to be wrestled with, striven for, endured at all cost? Is it possible that one can "stagnate" or cease to grow in the Lord because they cease struggling for His blessing like Jacob?*

Epilogue

Consider the following points regarding Jacob's life and make application to your own:

1. Jacob stole an earthly birthright and blessing that turned out to be of little or no practical benefit. God took him through the process of providing a spiritual birthright and blessing of greater and more personal value.
2. Although his inheritance through Abraham and Isaac would have been very great, God separated Jacob so as to build for him his own legacy and possession, both earthly and heavenly.
3. Jacob's struggle with man was really his struggle with God.
4. The transfer of the birthright and blessing was thought to be the end of the future for Esau, but it turned out that during the time God was working on Jacob, so He was working on and blessing Esau. Neither needed what their earthly father offered but that of their heavenly Father.