

## Genesis 32 Jacob Prepares to Meet Esau

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### Overview

The point of this chapter and the next is Jacob's reunion with Esau. He prepares in this chapter, and the reunion occurs in the next. This is a terrifying experience for Jacob, and is a turning point in his relation with the Lord.

At the beginning and end of this chapter, Jacob confronts the Lord. Thus this chapter recalls 28:10-22, when God appeared to him as he left Canaan. There, it was a dream. Here, he is fully alert.

Birth of Sons	25, Jacob and Esau	35, Benjamin
Relations with the People of the Land	26, Isaac in Gerar	34, Jacob in Shechem
Alienation and Reconciliation with Esau	27:1-28:9	33
<b>Jacob Meets with God</b>	<b>28:10-22</b>	<b>32</b>
Jacob comes to, and departs from, Padan-Aram and Laban	29:1-14	31
Each out bargains the other	29:15-30, for wives	30:25-43, for flocks
The birth of Jacob's Children	29:31-30:24	

### 1-2, Encounter with Angels

**1, And Jacob went on his way.**—Grammatically, this is tightly connected with the previous clause, “and Laban departed, and returned unto his place.” Haran is now behind, and all the focus is on Canaan.

The grammatical coupling encourages us to note the difference between Laban's “place” and Jacob's “way.” Laban, the unbeliever, has a place on earth, but Jacob is a pilgrim, constantly on the road toward his heavenly home. Cf. Gen 18:33; used of Israel's place in the land.

**and the angels of God met him.**—As on his departure from Canaan, so when he returns, he witnesses the angels of God.

“Met him” *pg( b-* suggests a hostile or at least a threatening encounter. This is what the revenger of blood does to the murderer, Num 35:21, or the pursuers want to do to the spies, Jos 2:16; or a misfortune that might befall Ruth if she departs from the field of Boaz, 2:22. Compare also Moses' experience when he returned from exile having acquired a wife and family in Exod 4:24-26, and to a lesser extent the angel that confronted Balaam on his way to curse Israel, Num 22:22ff. In all three cases,

- a wanderer or foreigner
- is approaching the people of God (Moses, Balaam; Jacob is returning to his father, and to the land of promise)

- with something amiss (Balaam on a mission of cursing; Moses with an uncircumcised son; Jacob with idols in his baggage).

Commentators often quote Ps 34:7 to elucidate this passage, “The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them.” It is appropriate, but it is likely they are guarding the land of promise, not Jacob. They confront him like customs officers at the airport. He is entering holy ground, and must realize that there will be consequences for stepping out of line.

Jacob recognizes them as “God’s host,” lit. “God’s camp,” as tangible as his own encampment, and names the place after the encounter of these two camps, “Mahanaim,” which means “Two encampments.”

### **3-21, Preparations for Esau**

Jacob is fast approaching the meeting he has been dreading. Will Esau still seek to kill him? The next 19 verses concern his preparation for this reunion.

#### **3-6, Initial Message**

**3 And Jacob sent messengers.**—He attempts to gain some advance intelligence by sending messengers. He does not want to sneak back into the land; that would only aggravate any residual anger.

By this time Esau has made his residence in “the land of Seir, the country of Edom.” We are not told how Jacob knows that he is there, rather than in the area around Beersheba. He must have received some intelligence from Canaan over the years. Such communications would make it all the more disappointing that he never received the call his mother promised him in 27:45, “then I will send, and fetch thee from thence.” How he must have longed for that call that never came.

**4, Thus shall ye speak.**—He presents himself in a way calculated to disarm Esau, and showing how much his attitude has changed since he left home. In effect, he drops his claim both to the birthright and to the blessing.

- He assumes the subservient position, calling him “lord” and himself “thy servant,” and asking “that I may find grace in thy sight,” the position of an inferior. He was willing to risk all to win the blessing by which he would be made lord over his brethren (27:29, 37), but God has now humbled him to the point that he is willing to subject himself to Esau. He effectively undoes the theft of the blessing that he carried out in ch. 27. Leupold: “Jacob, well aware of his pre-eminence as rooted in God’s blessing, is ready to concede to Esau every outward advantage and honour.” When we rest in God’s provision, we are freed from human strife.
- He explains that he has been with their mother’s family. This detail would demonstrate that Jacob now places more value in family ties than he did with his deceptive conduct four decades earlier.
- He describes his wealth, not to boast, but to show that he does not need to claim his father’s wealth. This statement effectively undoes the purchase of the birthright from ch. 25. There may also be the hint here of a gift, to encourage Esau to treat him kindly.

**6 the messengers returned.**—The messengers return with ominous news. They have found Esau, and he is coming to meet Jacob ... accompanied with an army. Waltke: “Four hundred men ... is a round number for a standard militia.” David becomes a notable threat to Saul when his retinue reaches this number, 1 Sam 22:2, and he twice takes a force of this size from a larger number when going out on a raid, 1 Sam 25:13 (against Nabal) and 30:10 (against the Amalekites). Recall that a force of 318 was adequate for Abraham to recover Lot from the kings of the north (14:14). We do not know Esau’s intentions at this point. Perhaps he himself is uncertain, and wants to be prepared for any eventuality.

Faced with this news, Jacob makes three preparations.

### **7-8, Division of the Company**

He divides the company into two bands, so that if one is attacked, the other may survive.

### **9-12, Prayer**

God has on several occasions spoken to Jacob, but now for the first time he speaks to the Lord. God has put him in a circumstance where he has no alternative but faith. Several features of this prayer are patterns for us.

- It begins and ends with focus on God’s word, vv. 9, 12. Calvin: “Jacob, recalling the command and promise of God to memory, is supported as by two pillars.” “Lord, you told me to return, so I am returning. And you said you would take care of me. I need you to fulfill this promise.” He recalls in particular the promise that his seed would be numerous. This cannot happen if Esau wipes him out. This reliance first and last upon the word of God is the essence of biblical prayer, which always rests on God’s promises. It is the surest way to know that we are praying according to God’s will, 1 John 5:14.
- It candidly acknowledges his need in v.11. He is not ashamed to tell God, “I fear him.”
- It rests on grace, not on merit. V.10 acknowledges that Jacob doesn’t even deserve what he has received thus far. How much less does he have any claim on what he is now requesting. “Mercies and truth” is a hendiadys, “truthful covenant love.” God has been faithful to what he promised before.

Jacob no longer takes refuge in his own abilities and cleverness, but rests in the Lord and in his promises.

### **13-21, The Present**

This paragraph is marked off by an inclusio stating that he remained there that night, to let the present that he prepared go on ahead.

**13, a present.**—This present consists of 580 animals (each nursing camel would have its young with it), divided into five droves by the class of animal: goats, sheep, camels, cows, and asses. This is a princely gift. Calvin notes that it shows the value Jacob places on returning to the land of promise:

Certainly it would not have been difficult to find some nook where he might live with his property entire: and an equally commodious habitations might have been found elsewhere.

But, that he might not lose the benefit of the promise, he purchases, at so great a price, from

his brother, a peaceable abode in the land of Canaan. Therefore should we be ashamed of our effeminacy and tardiness, who wickedly turn aside from the duty of our calling, as soon as any loss is to be sustained.

**18, then shalt thou say.**—The servants are instructed what to say when they meet Esau, v.18. Note once again “thy servant Jacob,” “my lord Esau.” The gifts, like military tribute, acknowledge the superiority of Esau. Compare his later gift to the ruler of Egypt (actually Joseph) in 43:11. There is no need for him to take vengeance on Jacob; Jacob already accepts his hegemony.

**20, I will appease.**—Jacob’s motive is couched in sacrificial language.

- “present” is *minxa*, “cereal offering”
- “appease” is “cover the face.” The verb is the same that is often translated “atone,” but the object is unique. Usually, what is covered is sin, guilt, transgression, hiding it from God’s view. Here Jacob seeks to hide the anger that he would otherwise expect to see in Esau’s visage. Waltke reports an Akkadian cognate meaning “wipe [the anger from] the face.”
- 33:10 seeks to be accepted *rch*, another sacrificial term, and declares that seeing Esau is like seeing the face of God.

This language suggests that Jacob recognizes that his treatment of his brother has a spiritual as well as a social dimension. By appeasing him, he seeks to right the spiritual wrong he has done. Compare Matt 5:24, which declares that peace with a brother is a prerequisite to worship toward God.

## **22-32, Encounter with the Lord**

**22 And he rose up that night.**—Having prayed and prepared a gift for Esau, he now advances to meet his brother. Crossing the Jabbok is a major commitment. A river is a major barrier. He might stay north of it and force Esau to cross it in approaching him, thus using it as a defense. By crossing it himself, he makes retreat almost impossible. Calvin: “By which example the faithful are taught, that whenever any danger approaches, this order of proceeding is to be observed; first, to resort directly to the Lord; secondly, to apply to immediate use whatever means of help may offer themselves; and thirdly, as persons prepared for any event, to proceed with intrepidity whithersoever the Lord commands.”

**23 he ... sent over that he had. 24 And Jacob was left alone.**—The rest of the band goes on ahead, while he remains on the north bank. Presumably he moves across several times to help conduct the party over, group by group, and remains on the north bank to be sure there are no stragglers.

**there wrestled a man with him.**—This mysterious attack is a major turning point in Jacob’s life. Hosea 12:4 memorializes it, compares it with his struggle with his brother in the womb, and presents it as an example to later Israelites.

From v.30, we learn that the one with whom Jacob wrestles is God. It is clear from the entire history of Jacob that God has his hand on him for good, yet here God comes to him and wrestles with him. The encounter must have been terrifying to Jacob, but God intended it to strengthen and instruct him.

**25, he prevailed not against him.**—Superficially, Jacob appears to be winning, or at least holding his own. Jacob is a man of considerable strength, as we know from his moving of the stone from the well (29:10).

- In the early stages of the battle he no doubt thinks he is doing well. Here is Jacob the self-sufficient, master of his own fate. He does not realize the identity of the one with whom he struggles.
- As the struggle wears on, he must grow apprehensive, but he is able to hold his own.

We *do* know who it is with whom Jacob struggles. How is it that Jacob is able to match him? The answer, and the motive for the episode, is in 1 Cor 10:13.

- God modulates the trials he gives us to suit our strength. Here, he restrains his power to match Jacob.
- There is always an “outcome.” *Ekbasis* refers to the outcome of an episode (cf. Heb 13:7), not “a way of escape.” When God tries us, it is for the purpose of producing a good result in us. In Jacob’s case, the outcome is his acknowledgment that he needs God’s blessing rather than his own cleverness.

**he touched the hollow of his thigh.**—With a single touch the mysterious adversary lames Jacob. The hip joint is the pivot of a wrestler’s strength. One moment Jacob is holding his own; now he is powerless. The adversary has simply been sparring with him, restraining a far greater power, and now effectively brings the contest to an end. Jacob must now realize that whatever victory he enjoys in this struggle is only by permission of his adversary. For the first time he must confront who it is with whom he wrestles.

**26, let me go.**—A change has taken place. With his hip out of joint, Jacob can no longer effectively restrain the angel. Instead, he is clinging to him, as the women had held the risen Lord by the feet (Matt 28:9) and had to be told not to restrain him (John 20:17). Hos 12:4 suggests that at this point, Jacob has broken down into tears. The Lord has brought him to the point of exhaustion in the exercise of the flesh, then humbled him decisively with a touch to the hip. His pride and self-confidence have been destroyed, as he realizes who it is against whom he has been struggling. In an instant he is overwhelmed with a sense of dependency. Now he holds the angel, not with the grip of a self-confident wrestler, but with the imploring embrace of complete surrender.

**the day breaketh.**—What does daybreak have to do with Jacob’s releasing the angel? Not so that he could get back in time to sing in the heavenly choir (Jewish midrash)! Perhaps to protect Jacob from seeing the deity directly (cf. Exod 33:20).

**I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.**—This request shows two important attitudes on Jacob’s part.

1. He acknowledges his ultimate helplessness. “The less is blessed of the better,” Heb 7:7.
2. He is no longer the passive recipient of God’s grace, but now desires it actively and seeks after it. He has become one who “hungers and thirsts after righteousness” (Matt 5:6). There are many who think themselves pious because they look back and say, “God was good to me.” But how many of them sought his goodness and followed after him? Up to this point, God’s grace has pursued Jacob; now he desires it and asks for it.

**27 What is thy name? ... Jacob.**—The angel certainly knows Jacob’s name. He asks it to remind Jacob of it and what it has come to mean: supplanter. Esau makes this connection explicitly in 27:36. Jacob has asked for a blessing; the angel elicits from him a confession of his unworthiness, so that he will realize that the blessing is a gift of grace alone.

**28 Israel ... hast thou power with God.**—Understanding his name requires two insights.

1. The reference to “prince” is not borne out philologically. The verb *srh* means “to struggle, to fight.” Thus the second half of the verse means, “you have fought with God and with men.”
2. The name makes God, not Jacob, the subject: “God fights.”

The point is that Jacob, the supplanter, needs to expand his understanding of those whom he engages. He has seen himself locked in struggle with Esau and Laban. In fact, it is God who has been struggling with him, to bring him to the end of himself and into submission to his creator. With this realization, he is to change from “he [Jacob] supplants” to “God fights.” The first name acknowledged his struggle with men, prophetically indicated by grasping his brother’s heel in the womb (25:26); the second recalls this wrestling match with the angel of the Lord.

**and hast prevailed.**—What a gift it is for God to say to him, “thou hast prevailed ... with God”! As the touch on his hip showed, the Lord could have vanquished him at any time—and did, in fact, physically. So in what sense did he prevail with God? Not in the strength of the flesh, but in demanding a blessing. God graciously renders himself vulnerable to the prayers of his people. Consider our Savior’s wonderful assurance that whatever we ask in his name will be granted us (John 14:13).

**29 And Jacob asked him.**—Having answered the angel’s question about his name, Jacob now returns the question, but is rebuffed. The angel’s refusal to identify himself places in perspective the statement that Jacob has prevailed against God. While God may deliberately allow us to prevail over him, yet he remains the master of secret things (Deut 29:29), unsearchable (Job 11:7), whom we cannot know unless he reveals himself to us, and whom we must always approach with reverence and godly fear. We are not on a first-name basis with God; trite references to “the man upstairs” are blasphemous. We, unlike OT saints, have boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, but it is still the holy of holies.

**30 Peniel.**—The angel’s refusal to reveal his name finds a parallel in the experience of Manoah in Judg 13:16-18. There, it was part of what led Manoah to realize that the one he encountered was divine (v.22), and Jacob has this same realization. The name of the place has been “Penuel,” but Jacob makes a pun with “the face of God” and calls it “Peniel.” Like Manoah, he realizes that such an encounter is life-threatening—he certainly realizes in what sense he has and has not prevailed over God.

**31 he halted upon his thigh.**—In the morning he crosses the river to rejoin his company, but limps from the angel’s touch. For the rest of his life, this impediment will remind him of this encounter. Waltke: “The limp is the posture of the saint, walking not in physical strength but in spiritual strength.”

For summary, see Waltke’s entire comment p. 448 (paragraphing and emphasis mine):

“Jacob’s incredible encounter teaches us much about God’s presence ....

## Genesis 32 Jacob Prepares to Meet Esau

1. First, it may be marked with *ambiguity*. Jacob wrestles with “a man”; only as the episode develops does he realize that he is wrestling with God ....
2. Second, God’s presence does not mean ease of conflict; in fact, it often brings unexpected *difficulties*. Both encounters with the angels... seem hostile ....
3. Third, there is a *mystery* about God’s presence .... Jacob cannot see God nor know his name in order to control the situation. ...
4. Fourth, God in *humility* makes himself available to humanity. Jacob is able to wrestle the man to a draw.

Jacob’s remarkable encounter reminds saints that they too may encounter God in ambiguity, even in apparent hostility, in mystery cloaked in darkness, and in such humility that he restrains himself from dominating their lives. When they stop wrestling with God and start clinging to him, they discover that he has been there for their good, to bless them.”

Compare this record from the wife of Jonathan Edwards when she hears of her husband’s death of March 22, 1758 at the age of 54. Her first letter written after this to her daughter: “My dear child! What shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. O that we may kiss the rod, and lay our hands on our mouths! The Lord has done it. He has made me adore his goodness, that we had him so long. But, my God lives; and he has my heart. O what a legacy my husband , and your father, has left us! We are all given to God; and there I am, and love to be. Your affectionate mother, Sarah Edwards”