

Jacob
#struggleswithgod
Read Genesis 25-36:43
Particularly Genesis 28:10-17; 32:22-32

Background Information for Study Leaders:

Note to Teachers: We highly recommend that you read the entire story! Honestly, it's as much fun as a soap opera and the twists and turns of this family's story will make you feel better about your own family stories that you might want to ignore. Encourage your class members to read it all as well.

Genesis: The English title of the first book of the Bible is Genesis, which means beginnings. The book of Genesis not only tells the story of the beginning of all creation, but it also tells the stories of the beginnings of the people of Israel. In fact, the vast majority of the book is dedicated to the stories of Abraham, his son, his grandson, and his great-grandson. And in each story, God works in surprising ways with surprising people. Jewish tradition tells us that Abraham was the son of an idol-maker in Ur, yet because of his righteousness God made a special covenant with him. His son, Isaac, was born to his parents in their old age. His name means laughter, because his parents laughed when the angel of God told them they would have a son at their age. And, in chapter 25, we read the story of Isaac's sons. A story which begins and is defined by conflict.

You could also say that the Book of Genesis is the story of the beginning of sibling rivalry as well. In Chapter 4, Adam and Eve's oldest son, Cain, killed his younger brother, Abel. This murder was not only the first murder in the history of humanity, but it is also the first mention of the word "sin" in the Bible. And each generation has its complicated sibling rivalry. Yet despite the pain and struggle of these conflicts, God works through them to accomplish his will. We touched on the struggle between Ishmael and Isaac in our last study. In this study, we will touch on two of the other rivalries that helped shape the future of God's people. In this lesson, we will learn a little about Jacob and his brother, Esau, and in the next we'll learn about Joseph and brothers.

Mom loves me best!

Jacob and Esau were the twin sons of Abraham's son, Isaac. We can assume that they were fraternal twins because not only did they not look alike, but their personalities were as different as night and day! From the beginning (seriously before they are even born), they fought!

Esau was born first. But even as Esau was making his first appearance in the world, Jacob was grabbing his heel trying to keep him from being born first. Thus, Jacob got his name, which means "seizing by the heel" or more simply, and as you will see just as accurately, "supplanter." And Jacob spent the majority of his life struggling to grab what he wanted.

Esau was a man's man, an impetuous outdoorsman, who was his father's favorite. Jacob, on the other hand, was his mother's favorite. He was "momma's boy" who stayed in the kitchen with the women apparently scheming how to get what he wanted.

In those days, the order of birth was extremely important. The first son received a double portion of the father's inheritance. So, it was no wonder that Jacob was resentful of his older, not quite so smart, brother. Not only did his dad love Esau more, but Esau was also going to inherit the bulk of Isaac's wealth.

In those days, words were also extremely important. They believed that words had power. They made things happen. So, if you blessed or you cursed someone, you couldn't simply say, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that!" Once the words were out of your mouth, they were believed to have the power to truly bless or curse someone.

So when Esau came home very hungry one day, Jacob was not playing around when he said he'd give Esau a bowl of soup in exchange for his birthright. And Esau impulsively agreed!

But apparently that wasn't enough to ensure the inheritance, so Jacob and his mom, Rebecca, hatched a scheme to steal Esau's blessing and, as a result, his inheritance. While Isaac was on his deathbed and his eyesight was failing, they tricked him into thinking that Jacob was Esau. Esau was a hairy man, so they covered Jacob's arms with sheep wool. Rebecca cooked up Isaac's favorite wild game soup. Then Jacob went to Isaac's bedside with the soup and asked for and received his father's blessing. Once Esau realized what happened, he begged his father to rescind the blessing given Jacob, but it was too late. Needless to say he was furious with his brother. So furious, that Rebecca sent Jacob away for fear of his life.

Life in Exile

Jacob leaves his home and goes to live with Rebecca's family. Along the way, he has dream in which he sees angels and receives a promise from God. Finally, he arrives at his uncle's home, where he falls in love with his cousin, a beautiful woman named Rachel, and asks for her hand in marriage. Her father agreed as long as Jacob would be willing to first work seven years to earn her. So Jacob worked for Laban for seven years, increasing his future father-in-law's wealth! And at the end of the seven years, Jacob eagerly looked forward to his marriage to Rachel. So you can imagine his response when on his wedding night when Jacob lifted his bride's veil only to discover that rather than marrying the love of his life, he had married her older sister, Leah. The trickster had been tricked! When he confronted Laban about the trick, Laban again agreed to Jacob marrying Rachel in exchange for another seven years of work!

The end result of this trick is a very messy story of sibling rivalry between Rachel and Leah and the birth of 11 sons and one daughter. Then after 20 years in response to God's urging, Jacob heads home to Canaan with his wives and children and a large flock (which he acquired through by tricking Laban).

You can't go home again. . . or can you?

But as he gets closer to home, he (rightfully) becomes afraid that Esau might harm him and his family. So he prepares gifts to appease his brother and he sends the family ahead of him to greet his brother. There he encounters a man with whom he wrestles all night. He wins the fight and demands the blessing only to find that he has been wrestling with God, who not only renames him Israel, or "he who struggles with God," but God also leaves him walking with a limp for the remainder of his life.

The next morning, Jacob is reunited with Esau, who much to his surprise is happy to see him. He settles nearby but his story is not over. His daughter is raped. In response, his sons tricked the men in the village where it happened and killed all the men. And as you will see in the next lesson, his beloved son, Joseph, disappears and is assumed dead. His parents die. Rachel dies in childbirth as she delivers his twelfth and final child. And finally, he dies in Egypt after fleeing a famine in Canaan and finding his long-lost son, Joseph.

Unexpected Encounters—God shows up and shows out!

There are many lessons to learn from the story of Jacob, but today we want to focus on his two night-time encounters with God. These encounters are called “theophanies,” from the Latin “theos” for God and “**phainein**” meaning “bring to light, cause to appear, show.” In other words, a theophany is an appearance of God to a human. (A related term is Epiphany, which is a more general appearance of God.) These appearances take on a variety of forms throughout Scripture. For instance, Moses encounters God in the burning bush, Elijah encounters God in the still small voice. Abraham, like Jacob, encounters God through what appear to be men. But in all these cases, God shows up in a way to build relationship with people and people are changed by their encounters of God.

Jacob’s ladder (Genesis 28:10-17): Jacob’s first encounter with God is when he is running away from his brother Esau. He stops for the night near the city of Luz. He is so tired that he uses a stone for a pillow. During the night, he dreams that he sees a ladder (or a stairway depending on the translation) between the earth and heaven with angels climbing up and down the ladder. Then God speaks. Most Bibles have translated verse 13 to say that God is above the ladder; however, the verse can also be translated to say that God was beside Jacob. God begins by identifying himself as the God of Abraham and Isaac and then promises Jacob that he and his descendants will inherit the land. In addition, God assures Jacob that God will remain with him in his exile from the land until God brings him back to the land. When Jacob wakes, he is amazed and acknowledges that the Lord was present in what had appeared to be a God-forsaken place. He is amazed and names the place Beth-el or “House of God” and sets up a pillar to mark the spot he had encountered God. Then, Jacob promises that IF God remains with him, provides for him, and brings him back to his father’s land THEN the Lord will be his God and the pillar will be a pillar for God’s house and he will give God back a tithe (10%) of everything God gives him.

Jacob’s All-Night Wrestling Match (Genesis 32:22-32): Jacob’s second encounter with God occurs as he is running away (yet again) from his father-in-law, Laban, and running toward home. As he nears his home, he sends messengers to tell Esau that he is coming with his family and all he had accumulated during his exile. When the messengers inform him that Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men, he becomes very frightened! He divides his wives, children, and possessions into two groups so that if Esau comes to slaughter and steal one part of the family, the others will survive. He then prays to God reminding God of God’s promise to watch over him and bring him home safely. He then sent three groups of messengers back to Esau along with gifts which he hopes will pacify Esau’s anger. Then he stays overnight in the camp.

But he doesn't stay in the camp alone for long. At some point early in the evening a man appears and Jacob wrestles with the man all night long. When the sun begins to rise and the man realizes that he is not going to defeat Jacob, the man disarms Jacob by touching and dislocating Jacob's hip. But even with an injured hip, Jacob refuses to give in until the man blesses him. Rather than blessing him, the man asks Jacob his name and then renames him Israel, which means "he struggles with God" because Jacob "has struggled with God and with humans and has overcome." Jacob asks the man's name, but he refuses to give it. He does, however, give Jacob a blessing and leaves. After the wrestler leaves, Jacob finally recognizes that the man was God so he names the place "Peniel" which means "face of God," because Jacob had come face to face with God yet again and his life was spared.

What Can We Learn from Jacob's Encounters with God?

Sometimes we only recognize our encounters with God in hindsight. Twice Jacob encountered God but didn't recognize God until after the event! The theologian Soren Kierkegaard famously said that **"Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards."** God has promised to be with us always, but there are times in our lives when we fail to recognize God's presence. Often when we are frightened or stressed or when we are relying too much on our own ability to take care of ourselves, we miss the signs of God's presence with us. Yet, if we take the time to reflect on our lives, we often can see glimpses of God at work even in the times we thought God was not present. This is one of the many reasons that journaling and reflecting on your day or the painful times in your life can be very important because the reflection can often show you where God was in your life when you did not even know it!

Struggles with God and faith can strengthen us. Things happen in life that sometimes cause us to question God. Why did God allow this bad thing to happen? Where was God in this situation? Some people will tell you that asking these questions is somehow wrong. They may tell you that God will never put anything on you that you can't bear by misusing or misquoting 1 Corinthians 10:13: "No testing [or temptation depending on your translation] has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it." However, Paul is discussing life's struggles and difficulties rather he is addressing temptation. And Paul does not say that we can bear it on our own but rather that we, with God's help, can endure it.

When God wrestled with Jacob, God didn't admonish him for struggling. In fact, God appears to affirm Jacob by renaming him, blessing him, and reaffirming the covenant with him. And Jacob is not the only person to figuratively wrestle with God in Scripture. Again and again in the Book of Psalms, the psalmist cries out to God, questioning God's presence in times of trouble. The books of Jeremiah and Lamentations document the questioning and struggle of a faithful prophet. The book of Job is often mischaracterized as the story of someone who is patient and who accepts tragedy without question. However, the book is actually the story of a man whose relationship with God allows him to question God and to trust that God will understand. Even

Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, struggles with God begging for the cup of suffering to be taken from him. If we take the story of Jacob and the Bible, as a whole, seriously, those who struggle with God find God. It's those who endure to the end of the struggle who find God. So perhaps it's not too surprising that the people of God were called Israel.

Questions (Please pick and choose which questions your group would like to cover)

1. We see throughout the book of Genesis a pattern of family dysfunction. Can you name and discuss some specific examples? How do they speak into our own lives?
2. Jacob had two powerful experiences with God. When have you experienced God and was it through a dream, hearing God's voice, in nature, through the words or actions of another person, or in some other way?
3. Have you experienced a time when God was in this place and you did not know it (Genesis 28:16)?
4. After Jacob wrestles all night with God, his name is changed to Israel which means "he who struggles with God." What does that teach us about the times we struggle with God?
5. Jacob was a snake oil salesman, a trickster, and a dirty, rotten, scoundrel. Why do you think the people of God (Israel) were named after Jacob? Why not Abraham? Why not Isaac?
6. There are many lessons to be learned from Jacob's story. What parts of Jacob's story impacts you the most?