

## Lesson 44

# **Jacob Returns to Canaan**

Jacob returns to Canaan and reconciles with Esau.

# Overview

## Lesson Focus

God blessed Jacob so much that he had a large family and many possessions when it came time to leave Laban's home. To return to Canaan, Jacob knew he must reconcile with Esau. Jacob was afraid of his brother, but God protected him and Esau forgave him. God gave Jacob a new name, Israel, to symbolize his new beginning in the land of Canaan.

## Key Passages

Genesis 32:24, 32:27–28, 33:4

## Memory Verse

Proverbs 3:5–6 Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

## Prepare to Share

## Scriptural Background

Prepare to teach by preparing your heart. Read the key passages for this lesson along with this background.

Jacob worked a total of 14 years for Laban in order to marry Rachel and Leah. After working seven years for his bride, Jacob was deceived by Laban on his wedding day. Laban switched brides and gave Leah, instead of Rachel, to Jacob. But Laban agreed to also give Rachel to Jacob in marriage after one week, provided that he keep working for him. Jacob's home life was not peaceful as the sisters began a fierce competition for Jacob's love and for sons. Leah had six sons and one daughter. Rachel was jealous of her sister's children and gave her maid Bilhah to Jacob. Bilhah bore two sons, and then Leah's maid Zilpah also bore two sons to Jacob. God eventually enabled Rachel to conceive, and she bore Joseph. After Joseph was born, Jacob told Laban he wanted to return to his own country and family. Laban offered to give Jacob wages for his service. Jacob agreed and separated his flocks from Laban's. Whichever animals Jacob specified for his wages, God caused Laban's flock to give birth to them. So for six years, Laban changed Jacob's wages in an effort to keep the best of his flock for himself, but God blessed Jacob instead of Laban. This made Laban's sons jealous of Jacob and changed Laban's attitude toward him (Genesis 31:1–2).

After Jacob had been with Laban for 20 years, God told Jacob to return to Canaan. Jacob called his wives to the field and explained Laban's unfair dealings regarding his wages and told them that God said he should return to his family. The sisters agreed to go, and the family packed up and left while

Laban was away shearing sheep. Laban pursued them several days later with many men. He accused Jacob of stealing his daughters and household gods. Jacob replied that he had been afraid Laban would take his daughters by force, but that whoever had stolen his idols would die (Genesis 31:31–32). Now Rachel had stolen her father’s household gods without Jacob knowing, so she hid them from her father, and Jacob rebuked Laban for accusing him of theft and for changing his wages (Genesis 31:36–42). Because Laban had been warned by God not to speak against Jacob, he made a covenant with Jacob and returned home.

With Laban gone, Jacob still had to face his brother Esau, who had threatened to kill him for stealing the blessing. Jacob had no way of knowing if Esau was still angry after 20 years. When he neared the land of Seir where Esau was living, Jacob sent messengers to let Esau know of his return. But his messengers reported that Esau was coming with 400 men! Jacob was afraid and divided his company into two groups, thinking that one group could flee if the other were attacked (Genesis 32:7–8). But in his distress, Jacob prayed and begged God for deliverance, reminding God of his promises (Genesis 32:9–12). He then sent a present of animals to Esau with servants who delivered a humble message. Jacob sent his family across the brook at Jabbok while he remained behind alone. At this low point of Jacob’s fear and desperation, God came to him as both a Man and an adversary. God wrestled with Jacob until dawn and touched his hip to dislocate it. But Jacob refused to let go until God blessed him. God asked him his name, forcing Jacob to admit the kind of man he was—a deceiver. Then God changed his name to Israel because he had striven against God and men and had prevailed (Genesis 32:28).

With a new name and a limp, Jacob faced his brother Esau. He bowed down low, showing repentance and humility. Esau responded with love and forgiveness, and the brothers wept together (Genesis 33:4). Jacob introduced his family, and Esau accepted Jacob’s gifts. Esau returned to Seir while Jacob continued into the land of Canaan. He was now reconciled with his brother and had a new relationship with God.

## Historical/Apologetics Background

Two terms in Genesis 31–32 are difficult to translate and explain in English: teraphim and Israel. Let’s examine these terms to learn more about their meaning and context.

Different Bible translations of teraphim include household gods (ESV, NIV), household idols (NKJV, NASB), or images (KJV). Teraphim are mentioned elsewhere in Scripture: Micah having household idols (Judges 17:5, 18:17), David’s wife Michal using a household idol in a bed to look like her husband (1 Samuel 19:13), and King Josiah removing household gods from the land of Judah (2 Kings 23:24). Thus, teraphim appear to have been common enough that the author did not offer an explanation of them or their theft. Explanations for why Rachel stole them range from her trying to protect her father from idolatry to trying to protect Jacob from the teraphim, leading Laban to their location. More likely, Rachel believed the teraphim held some protective power and stole them out of a panicked desire to keep her family safe.

Whatever her motivation, Rachel was wrong to steal them from her father, which was his main complaint when he caught up to Jacob (Genesis 31:30). She was apparently the last suspect for the theft because Laban went into her tent last after Jacob's, Leah's, and the two maids' tents. Then Rachel deceived her father by using her monthly cycle as an excuse to remain seated on the camel's saddle, the location of the stolen idols. Although Jacob was unaware of her theft in this account, he would later command his family to put away foreign gods (Genesis 35:2). Jacob's family had to leave their old religion and traditions to follow the Lord.

The second challenging word to translate is Jacob's new name— Israel. The explanation in Genesis 32:28 is that Jacob had "striven with God and with men" and prevailed. Israel may mean "God fights," indicating how God had to fight against Jacob. But upon Jacob's submission, God would fight for him. Jacob's wrestling match with God was a fight Jacob lost. But he limped away with a blessing and an encounter he would never forget.

Related meanings of Israel include "he strives with God," "he struggles with God," and "he contends with God." These meanings correctly illustrate Jacob's battle with God. An important part of the fight was when God asked Jacob his name in Genesis 32:27. God was forcing Jacob to admit his character, which was that of a deceiver. Instead of seeking to deceive and supplant others to obtain a blessing, Jacob had to surrender to God and just receive the blessing. Many of us are like Jacob, striving in our own pride and power to do what only God can do. When we admit our sin and surrender to God, he is able to bless us in ways we can't imagine. Like Jacob, we can have a new beginning!

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