

## *The Jacob Narrative: The Conflicted Call of God*

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### *Twelve*

## **32:1-34:31 Jacob at the Jabbok**

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### **Background from the Author**

Our study of the Jacob narrative concludes with a chapter on Jacob at the Jabbok and his reconciliation with Esau (32:1-34:31). In this part of Genesis the story of Jacob's conflict with Esau continues. Here we see an account of human reconciliation juxtaposed with a deeply religious encounter. The way the narrative is structured highlights its theological dimension.

One part of the story deals with the preparation for the meeting. First, Jacob encounters the angels (32:1-2); then he makes contact with his brother (32:3-8). By placing the stories back to back the narrator reminds us that Jacob's movement toward God cannot be separated from his movement toward his brother. Make sure your group understands this dimension of the text. As noted in the *Resource Book*, Jacob's prayer is the only extended prayer recorded in Genesis. As such, it merits serious study. Brueggemann's notes on this important passage are found on pages 263-266.

Jacob makes careful preparations for his meeting with Esau, but he does not anticipate a meeting with the "stranger" in the night. The latter encounter is one of the most famous texts in the entire Bible. The text does not reveal the identity of the "man" (v. 24). This lack of identification allows for many diverse interpretations of the narrative. The *Resource Book* takes the position that the "man" is God and moves to a discussion of the implications of that identification. This "God of the night" is different from the promise-oriented "God of the day." This aspect of the story deserves serious attention so that your group can clearly perceive that Jacob, God, and this story are extraordinary! For a detailed discussion of this encounter, see Brueggemann (pp. 266-272).

Jacob's meeting with Esau concludes the chapter. Here the theme of reconciliation moves to center stage. Clearly Jacob's encounter with God is connected to his reconciliation with his brother. This is the

appropriate time to consider several of the New Testament passages which relate to the theme of reconciliation.

Some time at the end of the session should be reserved for a review of the Jacob narrative. This review should enable the members of the group to perceive how the individual Jacob stories fit into the overall structure of the narrative. Again, emphasis should fall on the theological claims of the text.

## Session Plans

### Learning Objectives

It is intended that this session will enable the participants to:

1. Describe the feelings of Jacob and Esau prior to and during their meeting.
2. Compare Jacob's spiritual preparations with his practical preparations for the meeting with Esau.
3. Express their understanding of how Jacob's limp is related to God's blessing and indicate how they think an encounter with God may "mark" someone.
4. Explain how reconciliation was accomplished between Jacob and God and between Jacob and Esau.

### Resources That May Be Necessary

Copies of responsive reading worksheet.

Newsprint, markers, masking tape, paper.

Copies of *Today's English Version-Good News Bible* or prepared transparency, overhead projector, and screen.

Copies of 1 John 4:12, 20-21.

### Teaching Strategy

#### SETTING THE STAGE

1. When Jacob fled to the land of his uncle, Laban, he was filled with terror. He had not only tricked his twin brother Esau into giving him the birthright, he also had used deception to gain his father's blessing. This final trickery brought about Esau's plan to kill him. Review this information with the participants. Then ask them to consider and respond to the following questions:
  - a. Twenty years have passed and Jacob is now returning to his family. What kind of a reception might he realistically expect from Esau?
  - b. What feelings may Jacob be experiencing?
  - c. What resentments may Esau still harbor?

- d. Twenty years earlier at Bethel God promised Jacob that he would someday return to the land of his birth. Read Genesis 28:13-15 again. What might have given Jacob the confidence necessary to take this step now?

and/or

In the midst of Jacob's preparation for the meeting with Esau he turns to God in prayer (Genesis 32:9-12). The prayer identifies Jacob's fears and uncertainties, but it also recalls promises God made to Jacob twenty years earlier (see Genesis 28:13b-15). Divide the participants into two groups (Group 1 and Group 2). Provide copies of "Preparation through Prayer" found below and invite them to read responsively. Then invite them to respond to the questions listed below the responsive reading.

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### Preparation through Prayer

While Jacob needed to make many physical preparations for his meeting with Esau, his most important preparation was spiritual. This responsive reading reflects Jacob's prayer found in Genesis 32:9-12 and the echo of God's promises received by Jacob twenty years earlier (Genesis 28:13b-15).

- Group 1 God of my grandfather Abraham and God of my father Isaac, hear me!
- Group 2 *I am the LORD, the God of Abraham and Isaac.*
- Group 1 You told me, LORD, to go back to my land . . .
- Group 2 *. . . I will bring you back to the land. . . I will give to you and to your descendants this land on which you are lying.*
- Group 1 and to my relatives, and you would make everything go well for me.
- Group 2 *. . . I will be with you and protect you wherever you go . . .*
- Group 1 I am not worth all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown me, your servant. I crossed the Jordan with nothing but a walking stick, and now I have come back with these two groups. Save me, I pray from my brother Esau. I am afraid -- afraid that he is coming to attack us and destroy us all, even the women and children. Remember that you promised to make everything go well for me . . .
- Group 2 *Remember, I will be with you and protect you wherever you go. . . I will not leave you until I have done all that I have promised you.*

- Group 1 . . . and to give me more descendants than anyone could count, as many as the grains of sand along the seashore.
- Group 2 *They will be as numerous as the specks of dust on the earth. They will extend their territory in all directions and through you and your descendants I will bless all the nations.*
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Write brief responses to these questions.

- a. What do you see in Jacob's prayer that leads you to believe he is not the same man he was when he ran away from Esau?
- b. In what ways has he remained the same?
- c. Some of Jacob's strength comes from the assurance he has received that God will be with him. When have you found strength because you have known God is with you?

**Share your answers with one other person.**

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Allow a few minutes for personal sharing. You can ask for general comments when the sharing is completed.

### EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. Jacob's spiritual preparation for the meeting with Esau is combined with practical preparations. Ask the participants to brainstorm a list of things Jacob did to insure that his meeting with Esau would be successful. If necessary they can refer to Genesis 32:1-6, 13-21 to refresh their memories. Write the responses on newsprint.

and

With the preparations for his meeting with Esau completed, all Jacob can do is wait alone. As he waits, however, he has an unexpected meeting. He encounters a "man" with whom he wrestles until daybreak. Although Jacob is not successful in gaining knowledge of the man's name, as the sun rises, Jacob faces the day with a blessing, a new name, and a limp to remind him of his encounter.

In the *Resource Book* under the heading "Jacob at the Jabbok" the author raises a number of questions that can be pursued. However, he indicates that the text does not answer any of these questions. Some you may choose to discuss are:

- a. If this "man" is somehow a messenger representing God, what does it mean that Jacob wrestles him to a draw?
- b. What does this suggest about the kind of man Jacob is?
- c. How may this incident demonstrate a relationship between God and our most serious struggles?
- d. Jacob names the place to indicate he has seen God "face to face." What does this unusual designation signify?
- e. Jacob comes out of the struggle with a limp. How is Jacob's limping related to God's blessing?
- f. In what way does Jacob's struggle with his sacred vocation anticipate Jesus' struggle with his calling?
- g. The mark of Jacob's struggle with God was a limp. What "marks" have you received in your encounters with God?

or

Divide the members into small groups. Give each small group three sheets of paper. At the top of the first sheet ask them to write the word GOD, at the top of the second JACOB, and the top of the third US. Instruct the group members to read Genesis 32:22-32 and then discuss this question, writing their responses on

the appropriate sheets of paper: “What does this passage seem to say about God, about Jacob, and about us?”

When the groups have completed the listing of their responses, invite them to hang them on the wall or bulletin board. Allow time for the participants to read the contributions of each group. Conclude by asking the group members to share any insights gained during the exercise.

2. The actual meeting between Esau and Jacob breaks the tension that has been building up to this point. Jacob approaches Esau timidly and with humbleness. Esau, however, runs to meet his brother, embracing and kissing him. The picture that emerges is one of joyous reconciliation.

The line drawing of Esau’s response to his brother which was created by Annie Vallotton for the American Bible Society’s *Good News Bible* captures the mood of the encounter. Ask the participants to turn to page 39 of *Today’s English Version-Good News Bible* where Genesis 33:4 is portrayed. On the opposite page Ms. Vallotton’s illustration of Genesis 32:24, “A man came and wrestled with him,” recalls Jacob’s encounter the night before. Ask the participants to look at both drawings and then discuss several of these questions.

- a. What are the similarities and differences between Jacob’s meeting with the “man” and his meeting with Esau?
- b. What do these passages say to us about reconciliation?
- c. In what ways are our relationships with others and with God interrelated?
- d. What walls divide us from our brothers and sisters?
- e. What has caused you to “wrestle” with God?

or

As indicated above, the meeting of Jacob with the “man” and his meeting with Esau can be viewed side by side. Write this quote of Walter Brueggemann on the chalkboard or newsprint: “In the holy God there is something of the estranged brother. And in the forgiving brother, there is something of the blessing God.” Ask the participants to read again Genesis 32:1-12 and then discuss, “In what ways can this be true? What do these encounters demonstrate about reconciliation and grace?”

or

Invite the group members to view for two or three minutes the Annie Vallotton line drawing of the meeting between Jacob and Esau noted above. (If you have access to equipment that will process the picture onto a transparency which can be used with an overhead projector, you may want to present it that way.)

Ask the members of the group to become a part of the scene they are viewing by assuming the role of one of the people in the picture. As that person they are to write five or six sentences in the first person that explain what they are seeing or feeling. When the participants have had an opportunity to write their reflections, invite those who are willing to share what they have written while the others in the group look at the drawing.

### CLOSING

1. Quickly review with the group the major events in the Jacob narrative. One way to review is to invite the participants to look at additional drawings by Annie Vallotton for Genesis 25:34; 27:27; 28:12; 31:18; as well as 32:2 and 33:4. If possible, create a montage of these pictures and provide a copy for each participant. Instruct them to look at the pictures to recall the important events associated with Jacob.

Jacob's narrative is "good news" to "fallen people living in a fallen world." Invite the participants to write a headline for the montage that explains this good news received from the stories about Jacob.

2. Read 1 John 4:12, 20-21 in unison. Close with a prayer asking for reconciliation in all areas of the conflict.

### **Supplementary Readings**

*Genesis*, pp. 260-274.

### **Looking Ahead**

Two ways of providing an overview of the Joseph narrative are suggested in item 1 of Exploring the Scripture in Session 13. You will need to prepare a transparency of the line drawing, "Highlights of Joseph's Life," found on page 45 of *Today's English Version-Good News Bible* and a worksheet or a set of 26 large cards on which you have written the worksheet sentences.