

Genesis Chapters 32-36

metronymic - means to derive your name from your mother or a maternal ancestor - as opposed to a patronymic - Greek - metro - mother + onuma - name, a variant spelling of matronymic.

Chapter 32:1-21 - You go here, you go there, I'll run around in a circle

This section is about Jacob facing his biggest fear and his worst enemy. His biggest fear, of course, is Esau. His worst enemy is himself and his lack of faith.

This is nothing new to his family. You'll recall that his father Isaac had to face a lack of faith when he tried to pass off his wife as his sister and his grandfather Abraham had to face his lack of faith several times: going to Egypt; passing his wife off as his sister not once but twice; worrying after he defeated the five kings and rescued Lot; making Ishmael instead of waiting on Isaac.

Did Jacob have any reason to worry? He has the promises of God already given to him and now at the very first of the chapter he's met by angels. If God has sent his angels to meet you, then do you really have to worry about what mere mortals are gunning for you?

Consider some of the other times when God has sent angels for reassurance and/or protection:

Joshua 5:13 - Joshua
II Kings 6:15-17 - Elisha and his servant
II Kings 19:35 - 185,000
Matthew 1:20 - Joseph
Acts 27:23 - Paul

Still, when Jacob sends messengers to greet Esau and they come back with a report that he's on his way to meet Jacob with 400 armed men, Jacob is terrified.

And, being terrified, he does what he always does, he tries to think and connive his way out of a problem. The first thing he does is to divide everybody and everything into two groups, figuring if Esau attacks one, then the other one might escape. And we all know who's going to be in the most protected group, don't we?

The next thing he does is to pray. He admits his unworthiness to have been blessed the way he has been but then he admits that he's afraid of his brother and reminds God of His promise of so many years ago.

His final preparation is a plan worthy of Mel Brooks' Blazing Saddles. He selects a gift from his livestock for Esau and sends each one out in separate groups and tells the servants in each to drive them to Esau and when he asks about them they're to give them to him from Jacob. There's two things this may accomplish: 1) it'll mellow out hot-head Esau but also 2) it'll buy Jacob some time because Esau will have to stop and talk to the servants and then all the animals will cause confusion and break up the advance of his men and he may have to leave some men to guard the animals or else drive them along with his party.

Chapter 32:22-31 - You goin' down, sucker!

Jacob has sent his family and all his servants and possessions across the creek and he's alone in the camp. You know enough about human nature to know what's on his mind. He's thinking about Esau and how he's treated him wrong and of everything that's he's amassed in the past

twenty years and worrying about tomorrow. In the middle of all that some stranger jumps him in the dark and they have a fight. Some of your older commentaries try to dignify this as Jacob wrestling through the night in prayer, praying it through, the old timers called it, but the word used for wrestle means to roll in the dirt, so they're have a real knock down drag out.

Here's the traditional interpretation of the fight: Jacob and the angel tussle. The angel sees that he can't win so he knocks Jacob's hip out of socket and tells Jacob to let him go before it becomes daylight. Jacob refuses until he gets a blessing, so since he's won the fight his blessing is that his name is changed to Israel because he's struggled with man and God and has won.

Here's the new interpretation: Jacob and The Angel of God (Jesus) are indeed fighting physically but Jacob is also fighting himself as he's already been wrestling with all that he's done and been through. The Angel could easily win, but that's not the purpose of the fight. After the wrestling has gone on and Jacob is still struggling the Angel takes it up a notch and dislocates his hip by just touching it. Jacob realizes now (if he hadn't before) who he's been fighting against, but now he's not fighting as he's told not to stop fighting but to stop clinging to him. This is where Jacob has actually lost the fight, but he realizes his need and dependence on God and for the first time in his life clings to him.

You've seen this happen in the movies, where the hero picks a fight with the tough young punk and everything that's bottled up in the punk comes out as they're fighting and the punk's about to win but winds up clinging to the hero in tears as all the issues that's come out get resolved.

Wait a minute, we didn't say anything about tears....Hosea 12:1-4 is speaking of Jacob and says that through his strength he was a prince with God, and in verse four says: "Yea, he is a prince unto the Messenger, And he overcometh by weeping, And he maketh supplication to Him, At Bethel He doth find him, And there He doth speak with us..."

So in the new interpretation Jacob wins the match by losing, by surrendering and clinging to God.

Jacob is renamed Israel - meaning "he struggles with God" because he has struggled with man and God and has prevailed, overcome, endured.

Jacob renames the place Piniel - meaning "face of God" because he says that he's seen the face of God and lived. Actually he saw God's face behind the cloak of darkness or in the form of the Angel, not the full glory and holiness of God or he wouldn't have lived.

Chapter 33 - Come here, you big galoot!

When he does meet Esau he's still not taking any chances but puts the most expendable wives and children first, then Leah and those children and finally Rachel and Joseph in the rear. Talk about playing favorites.

He bows before Esau seven times, but Esau grabs him and kisses him and they both cry and then he introduces with wives and kids to Esau. He and Esau discuss all the gifts he sent and his travel plans.

Jacob says two things that we don't want to miss. Remember he's just has an all-night face to face with the Angel of God where he's thrashed out his entire life and he's proclaimed that he's seen the face of God. He now tells Esau that seeing him welcoming him is like seeing the face of God.

The next thing is in verse 11. When they're discussing the gift and Esau is trying to decline it, Jacob refers to it as the blessing and then Esau accepts it. What was the big fight over all those years ago? A stolen what? And now Jacob is returning it, just as he's presented himself as the servant of Esau. He's not just repentant, he's also righting the wrongs. That's called atonement.

This is just too important a concept for us to gloss over, even if we are running out of time. It's not enough to just be repentant; otherwise we wouldn't need Jesus and the cross. It's not enough to be sorry for a crime, somebody has to pay the penalty for that crime for justice to be restored. If that's true of our imperfect system, then how much more true is it of God's perfect sense of justice.

Anyway, Esau wants Jacob to come with him to Edom but Jacob says that they're traveling too slowly and that Esau should go ahead and he'll be along directly. After Esau leaves Jacob goes instead to Shechem and buys some land. And he digs a well - John 4.

Chapter 34 - Don't go messin' with our sister.

Was Jacob wrong in lying to Esau? Maybe, who's to say what else happened that wasn't recorded in the text that led him to Shechem. But, if he did sin against Esau, then it's a good time to point out that every sin has legal cost and natural consequence. Jesus wants to pay the cost, but we still have to face the consequences. Chapter 34 tells of the consequences of living in Shechem

Chapter 35:1-14 - Back at last

After the disaster of chapter 34 God orders Jacob to return to Beth-el. Jacob recognizes this as a holy calling and a holy ground and orders everyone to get rid of all their idols and to wash and get purified and put on clean clothes. They camp there and his name change is repeated.

There's also an interesting detail mentioned in passing when Deborah dies. Wonder where she came from?

There's also another account of Jacob's name change, although it's not clear if this is a second appearance at Bethel or just a repeat of the first account followed by a recap of the naming of Bethel.

Chapter 35:15-26 - One last son and trouble with the first kid

Remember that Rachel hoped for another son. Well, she has one and he's literally the death of her. She names him "Son of my trouble" but Jacob renames him "Son of my right hand."

This is a shattering moment for Jacob, and Reuben will try to take advantage of his grief by attempting to take over leadership of the clan. Jacob doesn't do much in response, but remains as head of the clan, although this is the second time that his sons take matters into their own hands and it won't be the last.

Chapter 35:27-29 - end of Isaac

We're told that Jacob and Isaac are reunited and then after some time passes Isaac dies at the age of 180. This is only about ten years before Joseph disappears. Just as Isaac and Ishmael reunited to bury Abraham, so Jacob and Esau bury Isaac.

Chapter 36 - The line of Esau

This chapter is a lot of names that we're not going to look at. It serves as a break between the story of Jacob and the story of Joseph.