

Jacob Wrestles with God

On his way to meet Esau, Jacob wrestles all night with a mysterious figure and receives a new name: Israel.

Genesis 32:22-32

CHARACTERS: Jacob, The Angel of the Lord

THEMES: Transformation, Persistence in prayer, New identity

TWENTY YEARS HAD passed. Jacob had worked for Laban, married Leah and Rachel, fathered eleven sons and a daughter, and acquired great wealth. Now God told him to return home.

But home meant facing Esau. Jacob sent messengers ahead, who returned with terrifying news: 'Esau is coming to meet you with four hundred men.'

Jacob was in great fear and distress. He divided his people and flocks into groups, hoping some might escape if attacked. He prayed, reminding God of His promises. He sent wave after wave of gifts ahead to appease his brother.

That night, Jacob sent his family across the ford of the Jabbok River. Then he was left alone.

A man appeared and wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw he could not overpower Jacob, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip, wrenching it. Yet Jacob held on.

'Let me go,' the man said, 'for it is daybreak.'

'I will not let you go unless you bless me,' Jacob gasped.

'What is your name?'

'Jacob.' The name meant deceiver, heel-grabber, supplanter.

'Your name will no longer be Jacob,' the man declared. 'It will be Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.'

Jacob asked, 'Please tell me your name.'

'Why do you ask my name?' And he blessed Jacob there.

Jacob named the place Peniel, meaning 'face of God,' saying, 'I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.'

The sun rose as he crossed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. The deceiver had become Israel—'he struggles with God.' He would carry the limp for the rest of his life, a permanent reminder of the night he wrestled with the Almighty and prevailed through persistence rather than trickery.