

THE LONG AND FIGHTING ROAD

GENESIS 32:1-32 SEPTEMBER 7, 2022

How many different ways could you take home tonight? The farther you live, the more options you have. I live about a mile from here and there are two direct ways we use. If I were trying to go in a roundabout way, say to avoid certain spots, there are all sorts of detours we could take.

God told Jacob to go back to Canaan. He didn't give him a specific address. We'll find he doesn't return to Hebron where Isaac is. He's got a lot of options. But, as we read, we'll see he takes the *one* road that puts him on a collision course with his brother, Esau. That might be a problem because the last Jacob heard, Esau was in a killing mood.

Jacob's route home is even more conspicuous than we realize. Sartell Prentice writes:

"From Mahanaim there are two roads by which Jacob may enter Palestine. One road turns westward...this is the easy road, the safe road, and the natural one for Jacob to follow. It [would] bring him...into a land of walled towns and fenced cities, where his ancestors lived in alliance and friendship with kings and peoples. The other road runs...to the south...[turning and] plung[ing] down the steep descent of nearly 5,000 feet...This road is difficult and dangerous...Here weakness finds no place of refuge. [For] Jacob the risk is doubly acute, for he cannot travel that Southern route without coming face to face with Esau. When there are two roads running out from Mahanaim, why does [Jacob] reject the easy, safe, and natural path, and choose the one which is full of danger?"¹

The answer is: While there were many roads he *could've* taken, only *one* led to *Israel*. Not Israel the land - Israel the *man*. A tremendous *spiritual* journey will take him from *Jacob* to *Israel*. There was only one way to get there. It was God's road of surrender, submission, and reconciliation. Physically, Jacob would be weaker than ever before. But on the *spiritual* level, he would finally be strong - finally be where he was supposed to be, all thanks to *this* road and the encounters along the way.

Genesis 32:1-2 - Jacob went on his way, and God's angels met him. ²When he saw them, Jacob said, "This is God's camp." So he called that place Mahanaim.

We tend to think this was a reassuring rendezvous that reminded Jacob of God's protection. But that may not be what's happening. Prentice suggests this wasn't a friendly meeting at all. One Hebrew scholar translates verse 1: "The messengers of God *accosted* him."² Other linguists admit that the best sense of the word "met" is to oppose or harm.³

Something *is* going on here. The term Jacob uses for "camp" has a military sense to it.⁴ These angels make sense of why Jacob took the dangerous, straight-toward-Esau road to the south out of

¹ Sartell Prentice *The Angels Of God At Mahanaim (Journal Of Biblical Literature)*

² Rober Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

³ Bruce Waltke *Genesis: A Commentary (see also Prentice)*

⁴ Eugene Roop *Genesis (Believers Church Bible Commentary)*

Mahanaim instead of taking the easy road to the west. Remember: God drove Adam and Eve from Eden, then placed cherubim to bar them from returning to the Garden. And so, Jacob turns south.

Genesis 32:3-5 - ³Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the territory of Edom. ⁴He commanded them, “You are to say to my lord Esau, ‘This is what your servant Jacob says. I have been staying with Laban and have been delayed until now. ⁵I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, and male and female slaves. I have sent this message to inform my lord, in order to seek your favor.’ ”

Jacob had no army - no 318 armed men like his grandfather had. His brother, on the other hand, had always been a hunter. Jacob had probably heard that while *he* was developing livestock, *Esau* was developing might. So Jacob sends out a diplomatic delegation to assess Esau’s mood.

Our primary focus tonight is on Jacob and how following God means surrendering to Him and allowing Him to direct the course of our lives. But there *is* a sub-theme about serving the Master that comes from these servants. They provide some exceptional insights for us. Jesus once told His followers that He was sending them out “as lambs among wolves.”⁵ Jacob’s servants look like that. They’re sent into hostile territory with a message to share and no certainty they would succeed.

It’s evident that the angels of verse 1 made *no* promises to Jacob. God did not appear and say, “Don’t worry about it, Esau isn’t going to harm you.” Jacob makes these plans because he is *afraid*. And he has good reason to be afraid. In this message, he hints to his brother, “Hey, I’ve got a lot of wealth to spread around. If you’re mad about the birthright thing, let’s talk.”

At the same time, we can already see a new Jacob emerging. When had his servants ever seen him speak with this kind of humility? We’ve seen Jacob struggling for twenty years to *throw off* his last master - Laban. Now he’s talking about being Esau’s servant. Something is going on in his heart that hasn’t happened before.

There’s an application for us: The more truly spiritual a person is, the more they are willing to serve. Jesus was a Servant, and *He* is the image we’re being conformed into. He didn’t come to be served but to serve.⁶ If you want to know if someone is truly spiritual, look to see if they’re serving others.

Genesis 32:6 - ⁶When the messengers returned to Jacob, they said, “We went to your brother Esau; he is coming to meet you—and he has four hundred men with him.”

This would’ve been terrifying news. Esau sends no message back but instead mounts up with 400 men, which was the typical number in a militia or raiding party.⁷ Think about it: You don’t get 400 guys together *just because*. That’s a *lot* of effort and gear and hassle. Esau is making a statement.

⁵ Luke 10:1-3

⁶ Mark 10:45

⁷ See *Alter, Walthke*

After all these years, after all he had worked for, all he had clawed to make for himself, all he had overcome to get to this point - Jacob is powerless to defend any of it with nowhere to run.

Your life is not your own. You cannot control what today holds, let alone tomorrow. So, in all your efforts, engrave Psalm 127, verse 1 on your heart:

Psalm 127:1 - Unless the Lord builds a house, its builders labor over it in vain; unless the Lord watches over a city, the watchman stays alert in vain.

Genesis 32:7-8 - ⁷ Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; he divided the people with him into two camps, along with the flocks, herds, and camels. ⁸ He thought, "If Esau comes to one camp and attacks it, the remaining one can escape."

Jacob is in panic mode, but he's also in *prudent* mode. Some of you are facing very scary situations or dangers of one kind or another. While we trust the Lord and allow His peace to rule in our hearts, making prudent plans is ok. Jacob assumes Esau is coming to kill him, so he puts together a plan hoping that at least *some* of his family might survive.

Being prudent isn't a bad thing. Proverbs 14 says, "The sensible [person] watches his steps." If the Lord has given you direction in life, follow it and don't turn back. If you're *waiting* for His direction or His deliverance, wait in *hope*, but also use sanctified common sense as you wait.

The walls are closing in. He can't go west from camp - there are angels there. He can't go *back* the way he came - that would violate his treaty with Laban, who *also* might kill him.⁸ Now, not only is he heading toward Esau, he knows Esau is charging toward *him*. So Jacob pairs prudence with prayer.

Genesis 32:9-12 - ⁹ Then Jacob said, "God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, the Lord who said to me, 'Go back to your land and to your family, and I will cause you to prosper,' ¹⁰ I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. Indeed, I crossed over the Jordan with my staff, and now I have become two camps. ¹¹ Please rescue me from my brother Esau, for I am afraid of him; otherwise, he may come and attack me, the mothers, and their children. ¹² You have said, 'I will cause you to prosper, and I will make your offspring like the sand of the sea, too numerous to be counted.' "

This is Jacob's first recorded prayer, but it's a beautiful debut. It's so different from how he spoke about God back in chapter 28. In this prayer, Jacob acknowledges who he is and Who God is. He recognizes that God has *already* done many incredible things on his behalf. He presents God as One Who intervenes and is long-suffering, One Who understands and Who speaks and Who gives generously. This is a God Who helps and loves and Who restores and Who forgives and Who approaches and is approachable.

⁸ *Walke*

As he prays, Jacob holds firm to the spoken word of God. Jacob moors himself to those promises as if they were true and literal. Jacob also recognizes that he has *no hope* outside of God's salvation. He says, "Lord, You have to save me like you have before." We are watching him pour out his heart to the Lord. He's completely open and honest. He says, "I'm afraid, I'm helpless, and I'm unworthy." But in this prayer, we also see God's tender, loving care. Jacob *realizes* that this is Who God is. He calls Him *Yahweh* in verse 9. Not just some powerful Being, but the revealed, personal God of heaven and earth - the God of *this* family - of Abraham and Isaac and now, *finally*, of Jacob, too. He prays about the Lord's kindness and faithfulness. These are key terms in the Old Testament. One of them you might have heard before, it's the Hebrew word "hesed." These terms describe when a superior freely acts to help an inferior who is in need, *not* out of obligation but out of *love* and loyalty. Scholars tell us that these terms speak of love, action, forgiveness, certainty, and mercy.⁹ *This* is Who God is. And Jacob asks *this* God to rescue and *prosper* him.

What does that mean? To us, *prosper* has such an economic quality to it. It doesn't help that the "prosperity gospel" is so prevalent in the pseudo-Christian culture around us. Biblical prosperity is more than sheep and goats. The word means "deal well" or "do good," and it indicates a purpose or result.¹⁰ One source says that verse 12 is literally translated, "You have said, 'I will do good for you.'"¹¹ *True* prosperity is when God accomplishes what He desires in your life to make you spiritually strong and fruitful. It is independent of your physical circumstances. It is independent of your bank account, or your blood work, or your career track. Of course, God *may* enrich those areas for His glory, but *prospering* is not about getting. It is about the good-ing of God in your life.

I wish we could spend more time in this prayer. Just one more thought: Jacob clearly *believed* and yet he was afraid. It is natural for us to be afraid of death, afraid of suffering, afraid of the unknown. But, God doesn't want us to *live* in fear. He wants His peace to rule in our hearts and minds. And so, *when* we are afraid, we can follow Jacob's example. Call out to the Lord. Remember what He has already done. Remind yourself of the Word God has spoken, and believe those promises. Ask the Lord to save. Remember that He is in covenant with you and will not leave you, but He is a Savior.

Genesis 32:13-21 - ¹³**He spent the night there and took part of what he had brought with him as a gift for his brother Esau: ¹⁴two hundred female goats, twenty male goats, two hundred ewes, twenty rams, ¹⁵thirty milk camels with their young, forty cows, ten bulls, twenty female donkeys, and ten male donkeys. ¹⁶He entrusted them to his slaves as separate herds and said to them, "Go on ahead of me, and leave some distance between the herds." ¹⁷And he told the first one, "When my brother Esau meets you and asks, 'Who do you belong to? Where are you going? And whose animals are these ahead of you?' ¹⁸then tell him, 'They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift sent to my lord Esau. And look, he is behind us.' "** ¹⁹**He also told the second one, the third, and everyone who was walking behind the animals, "Say the same thing to Esau when you find him. ²⁰You are also to say, 'Look, your servant Jacob is right behind us.' "** For he thought, "I want to appease Esau with the gift that is going ahead

⁹ *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*

¹⁰ *NET Study Bible Notes*

¹¹ *ibid.*

of me. After that, I can face him, and perhaps he will forgive me.”²¹ So the gift was sent on ahead of him while he remained in the camp that night.

Do you remember in *Aladdin* when Prince Ali comes to town with his “white Persian monkeys” and “purple peacocks” and “world-class menagerie?” Imagine *that*. There was less singing and dancing, but we’re talking about more than 550 *animals* moving in herds down the road. This is a *huge* gift.

Again, the servants are sent out as living sacrifices. This time there is even *less* hope that they’ll return safely. But I love their faithful obedience. They go, armed only with the message and the gifts that they’ve been assigned. This is an excellent devotion about how to serve the Lord. *He* assigns which gifts we’ll get. Some had cows, some had bulls, some had goats, some had donkeys. Each would move at its own pace, depending on the type and size of the herd. But, they *all* had the exact same message. As Jacob sent them out, he said, “I’m entrusting you with this duty, but say *this*. Not *your* message, *mine*, because lives depend on it.” And then the master sent them out in wave after wave¹² to speak to their adversary with humility and generosity and grace.

Was this plan one final fleshly scramble on Jacob’s part? Was he failing to trust God? In the end, this gift was unnecessary - Esau refused it. The Lord was also working on *his* heart the whole time.

On the other hand, Jacob did take the family blessing by deception. Jacob, it seems, is trying to make things right. I don’t think we can say he was doing a bad thing. It wasn’t a *bribe*, but it demonstrates that fear often makes us do unnecessary things. Jacob assumed some things about Esau’s heart that were no longer true. But he also owns up to his guilt before his brother and is seeking forgiveness. When he says “appease” there it’s a word used for atonement.¹³

God’s way will always include admitting when we’re wrong. Our culture hates that idea. But real Christianity includes confession and reconciliation. It’s not that we have to *keep* asking forgiveness from God for the same sin, but that we’re humble enough to admit when we’ve made mistakes. Jesus’ letters to the seven churches are full of pleas that they would admit their failings and turn back to the Lord so they could spiritually prosper. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks about settling disputes and how we should reconcile when we have wronged those around us. So, while Jacob’s strategy here wasn’t ultimately *necessary*, it came from a place of humility and repentance.

Genesis 32:22-23 - ²²During the night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two slave women, and his eleven sons, and crossed the ford of Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, along with all his possessions.

This decision reveals how frightened Jacob really was. It was a perilous thing to ford waters at night.¹⁴ But it’s a risk he’s willing to take to try to give one last layer of protection to his family. His situation reminds us that we must face God on our own. When you stand before your Creator, it will

¹² *New American Commentary*

¹³ *Faithlife Study Bible*

¹⁴ R. Kent Hughes *Genesis: Beginning And Blessing*

not be in a crowd or in a family. It will be you and Him. If you are a Christian, then you will stand in your Savior. But no family member can sub for you or shield you. It's just you.

Genesis 32:24 - ²⁴ Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

The Jewish rabbinical tradition says that this was Esau's guardian angel.¹⁵ Some suggest it was a demon.¹⁶ The prophet Hosea tells us *precisely* Who it was: He declares it was Yahweh Himself.¹⁷ We call this a Theophany - a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament.

It was *Jesus* who initiated the fight. Jacob had been gearing up for a battle with his brother, then this happened. It reminded me of the scene when Johnny Ringo is waiting to fight Wyatt Earp in *Tombstone*, but instead Doc Holliday shows up. The difference is that the Lord didn't want to *kill* Jacob. Jacob had prayed for rescue, and the Lord was on the job. He was there to *save* him!

"Lord, this doesn't *feel* like salvation...it feels like You've got me in a headlock!" Maybe. But *this* was the rescue Jacob needed. Commentators point out he had been *wrestling* all his life. Wrestling his brother in the womb - wrestling with him as they grew up. Wrestling with his father and then his father-in-law. Wrestling with wives and with rocks and with herds. Now it's the *title* fight. He had admitted his need for God. He had owned up to his guilt. He had willingly followed this road to reckoning. But he still had his own *strength*. Remember, Jacob had incredible vigor. But if he was going to get to *Israel*, he could have no self-sufficiency. And so the Lord grabbed him. R. Kent Hughes writes, Jacob "was in the grip of God's relentless grace." This fight was his rescue.

Genesis 32:25 - ²⁵ When the man saw that he could not defeat him, he struck Jacob's hip socket as they wrestled and dislocated his hip.

How is it possible that the Angel of the Lord "could not defeat Jacob?" Obviously, that isn't true in the most *literal* sense because, after all, He simply touches Jacob's hip and cripples him instantly. One linguist says the term is not really "struck" but "to touch" or "to barely touch."¹⁸

What we are seeing is a lovely type of Jesus' future work. Andrew Steinmann writes, "Here God is depicted as...imposing upon Himself the physical limits of a man until the very end of the struggle."¹⁹ That is what the Lord did to rescue *you* as well. He emptied Himself, taking on the likeness of humanity and humbled Himself so that those who surrender to Him might be rescued.

Genesis 32:26 - ²⁶ Then he said to Jacob, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

¹⁵ Bereishit Sabbah 77:3

¹⁶ Alter

¹⁷ Hosea 12:4-5

¹⁸ Alter

¹⁹ Andrew Steinmann *Genesis: An Introduction And Commentary*

It may have taken hours, but Jacob figured out this is no ordinary man he's fighting. If you read it thinking Jacob is angry, allow Hosea to change your perspective. There we're told that, in *this* moment, Jacob "wept and sought the Lord's favor." And so we see the transformation. Jacob *isn't* fighting anymore. Now he's purely clinging. He isn't holding the Angel down, he's *holding on!*

More than once in the Revelation, our Lord says, "Hold on to what you have till I come." Hold on to God's grace and His word and His promises. Don't let them go. Cling to your Savior.

Even in this very difficult circumstance, even though Jacob is exhausted, crippled, and brought to the end of himself, he *still* counts on God's kindness and he realizes that personal strength isn't going to save him. Buying his way out of guilt isn't going to work. Taking some different road won't save him. Only by God's grace will he be able to survive and thrive and lay hold of goodness in life.

Genesis 32:27-28 - ²⁷"What is your name?" the man asked. "Jacob," he replied. ²⁸"Your name will no longer be Jacob," he said. "It will be Israel because you have struggled with God and with men and have prevailed."

The new name means "contends with God." But there's more: When 'El' is at the end of a name, it makes God the *subject* of the verb. The name also means "God will strive" or "God will preserve."²⁰

In this moment, God wipes away Jacob's past mistakes. 120 years of selfishness and failure *gone* because of grace. The Lord says, "You're *not* Jacob anymore. You're not defined by your sin or your shortcomings, but by My future for you." God made him new.

You and I have victory *in Christ* because He *gives* it to us when we believe by faith.

Genesis 32:29-30 - ²⁹Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he answered, "Why do you ask my name?" And he blessed him there. ³⁰Jacob then named the place Peniel, "For I have seen God face to face," he said, "yet my life has been spared."

In the Old Testament, it was assumed that if you saw God, you would die. Gideon and Manoah express this idea in Judges. Jacob is *surprised* he survived. So, what gives? Don't we read in Exodus 33, "Humans cannot see Me and live?" We do, and it's true! Human beings cannot see God the Father and live. We cannot approach God without being destroyed. *Because* that is true, God made a way to rescue *us* as He did with Jacob. He sent *His Son* to put on flesh to come to earth and interface with us so that we could be hidden in Him, redefined by grace, and reconciled to God.

Jacob recognizes that God has *already* rescued him. He says, "God should've killed me, yet my life has been spared." If you're an unbeliever here tonight, the Bible declares that you are dead in trespasses and sins, and the fact that you're not *physically* dead yet is because of the grace of God. The breath you're breathing belongs to Him. He allows you to live in hopes that you will surrender to Him, be born again, and become one of His children. It's a free gift if you're willing to take it.

²⁰ See TWOT, NASB Dictionary, & Roop

Genesis 32:31-32 - ³¹The sun shone on him as he passed by Penuel—limping because of his hip. ³²That is why, still today, the Israelites don't eat the thigh muscle that is at the hip socket: because he struck Jacob's hip socket at the thigh muscle.

The sun set when Jacob was at Bethel, running for his life *out* of the Promised Land. Now the sun rises as he returns, limping. Though the text isn't explicit, most commentators agree that this crippling was permanent. And it's commemorated in the diet of Jacob's descendants. No filet mignon for kosher Jews.²¹

God's road for Jacob led him straight to his brother, with no physical help, not even legs strong enough to run away. *That's* the kind of rescue Jacob needed - a crippling. Bruce Waltke writes, "The limp is the posture of the saint." Hughes says, "His end was his beginning. His defeat wrought victory. His weakness birthed strength. Israel prevailed when [Jacob] came to the end of himself."

Now Jacob was ready. *Now* he was safe. *Now* he had arrived.

Could Jacob have gone another way? Certainly, this is one of those stories where God's providence looks more heavy-handed than we experience in a day-to-day sense. When we are making life decisions - if you're choosing between two jobs - I doubt you've had a group of angels standing over your shoulder saying, "No, you're not doing that one." But even though God's *Providence* might not be as forceful, His *attentiveness* is equally passionate for us as it was for Jacob. God has *definite* opinions about the direction of your life and the choices you make because His desire is to *prosper* you - to do good for you and through your life. There are choices He wants you to make and others He *doesn't* want you to make. Look at Paul's missionary journeys to see a New Testament example that mimics the principles we see in Jacob's story.

So, what is the way forward? What *do* I choose? Is it south or west? Well, through Jacob and Paul, we see how to navigate these issues. There's prayer, there's the Word of God, and there's the presence of God. Jacob kept returning to what God had said and clung to those specific words. His great transformation began when he finally began to pray. All was made right when he experienced the presence of God. He *still* faced uncertainty, he went forward limping, but he became strong that night when he surrendered. He became strong as he obeyed God's directions and submitted to His charge. It wasn't his physical vigor or his flocks or his schemes that he needed. It was the Lord bringing his heart from Jacob to Israel.

God has set many directives in front of us. We have a lot of markers already in place that show us what God's heart and opinions are for our lives. It may not always be the easy road, but it's the *only* one worth taking.

²¹ https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/561078/jewish/Why-Cant-I-Find-Kosher-Filet-Mignon.htm