



As we consider the story of Jacob as he wrestled with the angel, how he asked for the angel to bless him,
we, too, come to you, God, for blessing.

There are times in our lives in which we have felt alienated, downtrodden, alone.

It is easy for us to wallow in our misery, to complain about all the perceived injustices that have been heaped upon us.

Be with us again, O God; **ble**ss our lives,
bless the lives of those near and dear to us,
those far from us in situations of need,
those who wrestle and struggle in life. **Amen**

But you encourage us to stand strong;
to seek the blessings that you have provided for us;
to recognize the many ways you are with us, giving us strength and courage.

Please read Genesis 31–32 before the study, if you are able:

The questions we may discuss are listed on the following pages.

31:1 Now Jacob heard that the sons of Laban were saying, "Jacob has taken all that was our father's; he has gained all this wealth from what belonged to our father." 2 And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him as favourably as he did before. 3 Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred, and I will be with you." 4 So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah into the field where his flock was, 5 and said to them, "I see that your father does not regard me as favourably as he did before. But the God of my father has been with me. 6 You know that I have served your father with all my strength;

7 yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times, but God did not permit him to harm me. 8 If he said, 'The speckled shall be your wages,' then all the flock bore speckled; and if he said, 'The striped shall be your wages,' then all the flock bore striped. 9 Thus God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me.

10 During the mating of the flock I once had a dream in which I looked up and saw that the male goats that leaped upon the flock were striped, speckled, and mottled. 11 Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob,' and I said, 'Here I am!' 12 And he said, 'Look up and see that all the goats that leap on the flock are striped, speckled, and mottled; for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. 13 I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and return to the land of your birth.'" 14 Then Rachel and Leah answered him, "Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father's house? 15 Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and he has been using up the money given for us. 16 All the property that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children; now then, do whatever God has said to you."

17 So Jacob arose and set his children and his wives on camels; 18 and he drove away all his livestock, all the property that he had gained, the livestock in his possession that he had acquired in Paddan-aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan.

22 On the third day Laban was told that Jacob had fled. 23 So he took his kinsfolk with him and pursued him for seven days until he caught up with him in the hill country of Gilead. 24 But God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night, and said to him, "Take heed that you say not a word to Jacob, either good or bad." 25 Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsfolk camped in the hill country of Gilead. 26 Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done? You have deceived me and carried away my daughters like captives of the sword. 27 Why did you flee secretly and deceive me and not tell me? I would have sent you away with mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre. 28 And why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters farewell? What you have done is foolish. 29 It is in my power to do you harm; but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Take heed that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad.' 30 Even though you had to go because you longed greatly for your father's house, why did you steal my gods?"

31 Jacob answered Laban, "Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. 32 But anyone with whom you find your gods shall not live. In the presence of our kinsfolk, point out what I have that is yours, and take it." Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen the gods.

33 So Laban went into Jacob's tent, and into Leah's tent, and into the tent of the two maids, but he did not find them. And he went out of Leah's tent and entered Rachel's. 34 Now Rachel

had taken the household gods and put them in the camel's saddle and sat on them. Laban felt all about in the tent but did not find them. 35 And she said to her father, "Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me." So, he searched but did not find the household gods.

55 Early in the morning Laban rose up and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them; then he departed and returned home. 32:1 Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him; 2 and when Jacob saw them, he said, "This is God's camp!" So, he called that place Mahanaim.

3 Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, 4 instructing them, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, 'I have lived with Laban as an alien, and stayed until now; 5 and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves; and I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favour in your sight.'"

6 The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him."

7 Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies, 8 thinking, "If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape."

9 And Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,' 10 I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. 11 Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. 12 Yet you have said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.'"

13 So he spent that night there, and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother

Esau, 14 two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, 15 thirty milch camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. 16 These he delivered into the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass on ahead of me, and put a space between drove and drove." 17 He instructed the foremost, "When Esau my brother meets you, and asks you, 'To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these ahead of you?' 18 then you shall say, 'They belong to your servant Jacob; they are a present sent to my lord Esau; and moreover, he is behind us.'" 19 He likewise instructed the second and the third and all who followed the droves, "You shall say the same thing to Esau when you meet him, 20 and you shall say, 'Moreover your servant Jacob is behind us.'" For he thought, "I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me." 21 So the present passed on ahead of him; and he himself spent that night in the camp.

22 The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. 24 Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25 When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. 26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." 27 So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."

28 Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." 29 Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. 32 Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

Rachel, Jacob, and wrestling in the night (Genesis 31–32)

1 Starting with last week's question

In chapter 29, Jacob goes to Haran in search of a wife. He desires Rachel, but Laban manipulates things so that he works for seven years and then marries Leah. Laban then controls things so that Jacob works for another seven years before he finally marries Rachel. Leah, Zilpah, and Bildad all produce children; Rachel remains barren. Eventually, Rachel bears two children, but dies in giving birth to the second.

Does this story of cunning, deceit, and tragedy have anything to say to us today? If so, what? How would you preach on this story so that it stands as “the word of God” to those gathered for worship?

2 The Context for the dream: Jacob, Laban, and Esau

In chapter 31, Jacob has taken his family and left Laban and the homeland of his two wives, Haran in Mesopotamia (today, it is near the south-eastern border of Türkiye). They are travelling south, back to Canaan, the homeland for Jacob (today where Israelis and Palestinians live). Jacob is concerned about possible revenge from Esau; he prays to God, asking to be saved from Esau's murderous wrath.



A significant part of the story is wrapped up in handling conflict. This is never easy and living in constant conflict is not a good situation. Jacob decides to leave the conflict with Laban in Haran. But he is heading towards conflict with Esau.

How should Jacob have left Laban's house to minimise any conflict?

In the story of Jacob, how is God involved in managing conflict?

Where do you see conflict in your local community or church?

How is God involved in such conflict situations? What does that tell you about God?

3 Leaving behind, heading to an encounter

Jacob takes his family across the Yabbok stream to move them out of harm's way; he remained behind alone. He is in an uncivilised area, in the wilderness— a “thin place”. We have already thought about these “thin places” before, and how an experience of being in a liminal space might contribute to effecting a change in our lives.

A brief opportunity for any further thoughts about “liminal spaces” or “thin spaces”?

One interesting feature is that, whilst Jacob takes all his flocks and property on the journey south (vv.17–18), Rachel took the household deities with her on this journey (v.19). These were small figurines, commonly found in many ancient near eastern households, often associated with domestic work, divination, or inheritance rights.

These were the traditional deities of Laban, not an Israelite, but an Aramean living far north in Haran. Yet Rachel, we presume, wants this memento of her upbringing and heritage to be with her in Canaan. *(We hear a reflection from Rachel's point of view)*

What does it mean for Rachel to bring these household goddesses into Israel? What implications might that have had for ordinary Israelites in the years following, seeing such figurines in her household?

4 Household deities

However, we do know from archaeological finds that there were many such figurines in ordinary Israelite houses over the centuries (see examples at right). They were not out of the ordinary, even though we might think of them as anything but ordinary. The Hebrew Bible calls them *terafim*, usually translated as “household gods” or “idols”. We find such references in Genesis, Judges, 1 Samuel, 2 Kings, Ezekiel, Hosea, and Zechariah. They were everywhere, in all the ordinary households.



What do you think is the significance of the fact that such figurines were common in Israelite houses for centuries? What does this mean when we think about how the ancient Israelites related to the spiritual realm?

5 Who is the man in the dream?

So, who is this mysterious man or divine being whom Jacob wrestled?

The wilderness—away from all the securities of familiar life—is the place where real struggles take place. It requires being vulnerable. It requires self-reflection. It requires honesty. It is the place where we encounter God and begin to know ourselves. It is the place of blessing and discerning. The ancient Hebrews understood liminal, in between spaces. They understand it is precisely when you feel lost and in the wilderness that the divine can emerge.

Have you experienced a “wrestling in the dark” like Jacob did? What happened for you in such an experience?

6 Wrestling with God; taking a new name

At daybreak, Jacob's combatant pleads with him to let him go. Jacob says: "I will not let you until you bless me." The man accedes and confers upon him the name Israel, "for you have striven with divine and human beings, and you have prevailed." The name Israel, *Yisrael* in the Hebrew, means "he who prevails over the divine."

The struggle is conducted on two planes: "with the divine and with humanity." The struggle with humanity includes the nearly 4000 years of exile that Israel wrestled with the Egyptians, the Canaanites, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Romans, the Spanish Inquisition, Nazi Germany and in more recent times, threats of terrorist strike. Despite these many attempts to overcome Israel, they have managed to survive.

This history does not, however, excuse what the current State of Israel is perpetuating. It is a tragic fact that, in an effort to strengthen their self-identity and protect their citizens against terrorist groups, the policies of Israel have been excessive and damaging. The military aggression, expanding settlements in the West Bank displacing more Palestinians, the mass devastation in Gaza, and now the genocide that is occurring, are indeed a modern tragedy. Israel itself has become a terrorist state.

How might this history of the Jews over the centuries help us to understand the way that they see themselves in the world today?

7 Emerging from our struggles

Long dark nights are always followed by sunrise. The stranger being in the story is afraid of being exposed to daylight. This story is one of a number that shows that this community of ancient people had faith enough to trust God with their raw feelings of anger, grief and palpable nastiness. The story of Jacob recognises destructive emotions such as fear, cowardice and desire for vengeance are part of every human life. Imagine how life might change if we, like Jacob in this passage, spent more time wrestling with our fear and anger in prayer to God. How many of us can be so brave as to face the divine with all our human flaws intact?

How do you bring your flaws and inadequacies before God?

How do such encounters work out?

John's blog on this passage is at

<https://johntsquires.com/2023/08/03/limping-priests-and-the-counsel-of-perfection-gen-32-pentecost-10a/>