

Transformed Characters **A Turning Point for Jacob – Wounded & Broken** **Gen 32:22-32**

A good 20 years have passed when we encounter Jacob in Gen 32:22-32. We see Jacob here wrestling with a mysterious man, his hip put out of joint. Let us imagine we freeze-frame this scene. Then we rewind to where we last left him – at the point when he had just stolen the blessing meant for Esau, hurrying from the presence of Isaac with animal skins still draped on him, narrowly missing Esau.

The Dream at Bethel

Rebekah had found out about Esau's intention to kill Jacob. Using the excuse that Jacob should find a wife who was not a Canaanite, she sent him away to her brother in Haran (27:41-28:5). How ironic it must have been for Jacob to find himself all alone and on the run for his life after being blessed by his father! As he lay his head to sleep on the cold, hard stone he must have wondered whether he would even live to see the blessings come true.

That night Jacob had a strange dream in which God appeared to him and promised to bless him with land and offspring. God also promised that He would be with Jacob to protect him and that He would bring him back to Beersheba one day (28:10-17). We read that when Jacob awoke he set up a pillar and poured oil on it. He renamed the place where God had revealed Himself to him, Bethel or the House of God.

Here we have another irony: the dream at Bethel awakened Jacob's spiritual consciousness. In the words of Ronald Wallace:

Up till now he has certainly thought of God as intimately involved in his own family's little history, and in the history of the earth. But here is God above all history, with bigger plans and infinitely greater resources at His disposal than Jacob has ever dreamt of. This is the God who appears 'to me' – the God who still loves His Jacob, and speaks to him!

And it is after this first encounter with the God who reaches out to him that Jacob stops his cheating ways. Transformation begins in Jacob's life.

The Treachery of Laban

Perhaps the biggest irony of all was that Jacob was tricked into marrying Leah, his uncle's older daughter, in much the same way he tricked Isaac. The original agreement between Jacob and Laban, his uncle, was that he would marry the younger daughter, Rachel. Laban simply omitted to inform Jacob that in his culture, younger daughters do not marry before their older sisters. So Laban further cheated Jacob into working another seven years on top of the seven Jacob had already worked to marry Rachel (29:18-30). Laban even removed the striped and spotted goats and lambs that he agreed would go to Jacob, and changed the terms of Jacob's wages ten times (31:6-7, 41). It was as if Jacob was

made to experience multiple times over what Esau suffered when he was cheated. One could argue that until then, Jacob never really understood the sense of injustice and fury Esau must have felt.

Whether it was because Jacob finally got a taste of his own medicine, or as a result of God's appearance to him at Bethel, we see that the Jacob in Haran lived an almost irreproachably honest life, in spite of the ways Laban keeps cheating him. Because of that Jacob was able to declare: "My honesty will answer for me later" (30:33a).

In the life of Jacob, Laban provides the contrast between two habitual cheaters: one who allows himself to be transformed by trusting in God and another who stays unregenerate.

The Faithfulness of God

Jacob had witnessed God's miracles in the husbandry of the flocks (30:37-43). And so we are not surprised in Gen 32:9-12 to find him crying out to God to deliver him. Jacob was stuck between a rock and a hard place. He had brokered an uneasy truce with Laban when he left Haran and there was no turning back (31:51-54). But what was ahead? Esau, who was coming to meet him with four hundred men (32:6). On top of that, when Jacob left Beersheba he was alone. Now there were many more lives at stake: two wives, two concubines, 11 sons and at least one daughter, not to mention servants and livestock.

Jacob cried out to God because God had been faithful to him. We know that because God had graciously fulfilled three out of the four conditions that Jacob laid out at Bethel:

Condition	Jacob acknowledges fulfilment
28:20a If God will be with me	31:5b But the God of my father has been with me
28:20b (if) He will keep me in this way that I go	31:7b But God did not permit [Laban] to harm me 31:24 But God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night and said to him, "Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad."
28:20c (if) He will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear	30:30 For [Laban] had little before I came, and it has increased abundantly, and the Lord has blessed [Laban] wherever I turned.
28:21 I come again to my father's house in peace	Not yet in Gen 32

Jacob knew that he could trust God to fulfil the last condition. Yet God had a lot more in store for Jacob: land (28:13b) and countless offspring who will bless the entire world (28:14). However, being human Jacob was more concerned about the immediate issues pertaining to his family's survival. He did not grasp the bigger picture that God had in store for him. Just the very fact that he *had* offspring was all part of God's plan for Jacob, to bless the world through him.

Wounded & Broken

But now it was time to initiate Jacob to God's plan! And it couldn't have come at a worse time for Jacob. Desperate to ensure his family's safety, he had sent them across the ford at Jabbok and stayed behind, alone, to face the music. And here comes this strange man to wrestle with him.

We are told that they wrestled until daybreak and the man did not prevail against Jacob. So he touched Jacob's hip and dislocated it. Our protagonist refuses to give up even though he is hurt and asks instead for a blessing from his opponent. What he receives – the new name Israel - is of greater significance than he would ever have expected. Walter Brueggemann explains:

Something happens in this transaction that is irreversible. Israel is something new in the world. Power has shifted between God and humankind. Israel is the one who has faced God, been touched by God, gained a blessing, and been renamed. There is something new underway here about the weakness of God and the strength of Israel. The encounter will not permit a neat summary of roles, as though God is strong and Jacob is weak, or as though things are reversed with Jacob strong and God weak. All of that remains unsettled. In the giving of the blessing, something of the power of God has been entrusted to Israel.

But Jacob is also wounded for life. That is what wrestling with God results in: new power, but also wounds and brokenness. "Weakness is broken into submission, and submission is where there is strength—submission to God's leading and God's control, realizing that there's nothing stronger or more determinant than this" (Daniel Parkins).

Sources:

Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1982).

Ronald S. Wallace, *Isaac & Jacob: Genesis 24-36* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1982).

Ralph F. Wilson, *Discipleship Lessons from the Life of Jacob* (Loomis, CA: JesusWalk© Publications, 2010).

The ESV Study Bible

<http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/practical-faith/cost-wrestling-god>

Questions for Cell Discussion

Question 1

Read Gen 28:10-17.

- a) What can we observe about the setting of the dream and the promises God makes to Jacob here?
- b) How would these observations encourage Jacob in his particular circumstances then? (Interpretation)

Question 2

Read Gen 32:22-32.

- a) What can we observe about the man who wrestled with Jacob?
- b) What is the significance that Jacob's name is changed?

Question 3

- a) Was there a time in your life when you wrestled with God?
- b) How do you relate that to the bigger picture of transformation that God has for you?