

Transformed Characters **Jacob Transformed – Graciously Dealt with by God** **Gen 33:1-20; 35:1-15**

We last left Jacob limping from his all-night wrestling match with God at Peniel, and preparing to meet Esau, the brother he wronged. He had sent a procession of goats, ewes, rams, camels, bulls, cows and donkeys ahead of him as gifts to Esau. But Jacob's safety was not a done deal; the possibility that Esau would refuse his peace offering and attack him remained.

Jacob meets Esau

As Esau approached, Jacob takes pains to make known his subjection to his older brother. First, he bows himself to the ground seven times (33:3), a sign of obeisance to his brother. Second, he refers to Esau as lord (33:8,13,14,15) and to himself as Esau's servant (33:5, 14). Third, three times he asks to find favour in the sight of Esau (33:8,10,15).

Nonetheless, the writer of Genesis makes it plain that it was not Jacob's calculated display of submission that saved him. God's grace did. Even before Jacob opened his mouth, we are told "but Esau ran to meet him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept." The conjunction "but", the fact that Esau *ran*, the affection and the tears all suggest that God had softened Esau's heart towards his brother even before this reunion at Jabbok. In fact, some commentators find parallels between this event and the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Do we find any evidence that Jacob has been transformed after wrestling with God at Peniel? Certainly Jacob ascribes his affluence to the grace of God (33:5,11). But what do we make of his cryptic statement to Esau in 33:10b "For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me"? Less generous commentators dismiss it as over-the-top ingratiation. More charitable commentators, such as Ronald Wallace, interpret it differently:

...the night experience at Peniel brought about a profound change in Jacob's attitude to life and to other people, as well as to God. He resolves that from now on in every new emergency he meets and in each new life situation into which he enters the men and women he has now to encounter will be approached with reverence on his part. From now on his life will be lived as if he were at every moment under the grace and judgment that he has just experienced in the presence of this strong, gracious friend-adversary.

Esau accepts Jacob's gifts, signifying that he accepts the olive branch extended to him. Still, it is not prudent that the two expanding families live together, and here we see remnants of the old wily Jacob as he deftly manoeuvres it such that Esau returns to Seir while Jacob journeys on to Shechem. Indeed, transformation is never complete this side of eternity.

Dedication of the Family

Trouble seems to follow Jacob. At Shechem his daughter Dinah is raped; in retaliation his sons Simeon and Levi trick the Shechemites into circumcising themselves before they proceed to massacre and raid them (Gen 34). Because of this, the family is in peril again.

God tells Jacob to go up to Bethel, make an altar and dwell there (35:1). Ralph Wilson observes that "this isn't just an escape from the danger of staying in Shechem. This is a renewed invitation to faith. Jacob sees it as a call to holiness and separation, and so he commands his household and other servants to purify themselves." We are not told whether Jacob intuitively knew what to do to purify himself and his family, or that God gave him precise instructions which prefigure the Mosaic laws. What we know is that this is another sign of transformation – Jacob gets himself and his house in spiritual order.

In Gen 28:21-22 Jacob had vowed that God would be his God and Bethel would be God's house when all four conditions he set out were met (the last being to return to his father's house in peace). In all likelihood, Jacob would have forgotten this vow that he made in the exhilaration of the amazing dream at Bethel. At this point, it would have felt like a lifetime ago – pre-Laban, before Jacob had his own family. But God remembers where man forgets and instead of taking Jacob to task for forgetting, He allows events to happen so that Jacob's vow can be fulfilled.

How can we not marvel at such a gracious, loving God?

God appears to Jacob again in Bethel

And God's grace to Jacob does not run out. He appears to Jacob again at Bethel and blesses him (35:9b). All his life Jacob sought to be blessed, whether by his father or the stranger he wrestled at Peniel, and here God gives Jacob what he yearns for. God reiterates that Jacob is to be called Israel, and again promises him land and fruitfulness (35:35:11,12). In contrast to the encounter at Peniel where God refused to tell Jacob His Name, here He reveals His Name to Jacob: He is El Shaddai, or God Almighty (35:11a).

Most importantly, God promises that kings shall come from Jacob's own body. That includes King Jesus, the Saviour of the world.

"Few and evil are the days of my life" (Gen 47:9)

But there is no happily ever after for Jacob. He suffers great anguish late in life when he is given the impression that his favourite son Joseph was mauled and killed by a wild animal (37:33-35). And he has to live through a famine, during which his second-favourite son, Benjamin, along with another son, Simeon, are taken away to Egypt (42:36-38). By the time Jacob is reunited with Joseph he is so old and frail he has to be carried by his sons (46:5).

"The God who has been my shepherd" (Gen 48:15b)

But God never deserts Jacob. He blesses Joseph with favour from the pharaoh and Jacob's entire clan is invited to Egypt to escape the famine. Jacob is understandably afraid to make the arduous journey, so God appears to him again to assure him that He Himself will go with Jacob, and that Joseph's hands will close his eyes (46:3-4). The same God who wrestled Jacob in his prime at Peniel appears to the now-feeble Jacob to assuage his fears.

That is why at the end of his life, Jacob calls God “the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil” (48:15b-16a). The outpouring of God’s grace upon his life overflows; where he used to cheat and wrestle his way to get blessings, he now gives blessings to his sons (49:1-27), his grandsons (48:15-16), and even the pharaoh (47:10).

Conclusion

When we examine the life of Jacob, we are amazed how often God literally barges into his life to guide, encourage, protect and sustain. In addition, God gives Jacob a new identity, which reveals a much bigger picture of what his life is meant to be. And because of God’s faithfulness and grace, Jacob is slowly transformed into a man who relies on God, from Jacob the Grabber and Cheater to Israel, “May God Prevail”.

Like Jacob, we too have been given new, secure identities – we are children of God because of Christ’s atonement for us on the cross (Rom 8:16-17)! That ought to radically change how we live our lives in the bigger picture of God’s will for us. Let us too learn to daily recognise the many ways God has been gracious and faithful to guide, encourage, protect, sustain, and empower us. For if we do not, it will be difficult to trust Him enough to allow Him to begin the painful but necessary work of transformation in us.

In fact, we don’t need to look far to find God’s faithfulness and grace; we just observed Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter. The cross is an excellent place to start.

*“For from His fullness we have all received, **grace upon grace**” (John 1:16).*

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

Questions for Cell Discussion

Question 1

Read the passage in Gen 33:1-20.

- a) How does Jacob show deference to Esau?
- b) Why do you think he does this?

Question 2

Read Gen 35:1-15.

- a) What does Jacob tell his household and all with him to do?
- b) What is the significance of these instructions to Jacob and his family?
- c) How do we apply them to our lives?

Question 3

Reflect on what you have learnt from the life of Jacob. Share with the cell what speaks most to you about his life, and why.