

## By His Stripes

<sup>1</sup> Now Jacob heard that the sons of Laban were saying, “Jacob has taken all that was our father’s, and from what was our father’s he has gained all this wealth.” <sup>2</sup> And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him with favor as before. <sup>3</sup> Then the Lord said to Jacob, “Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you.”

<sup>4</sup> So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah into the field where his flock was <sup>5</sup> and said to them, “I see that your father does not regard me with favor as he did before. But the God of my father has been with me. <sup>6</sup> You know that I have served your father with all my strength, <sup>7</sup> yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times. But God did not permit him to harm me. <sup>8</sup> If he said, ‘The spotted shall be your wages,’ then all the flock bore spotted; and if he said, ‘The striped shall be your wages,’ then all the flock bore striped. <sup>9</sup> Thus God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me. <sup>10</sup> In the breeding season of the flock I lifted up my eyes and saw in a dream that the goats that mated with the flock were striped, spotted, and mottled. <sup>11</sup> Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, ‘Jacob,’ and I said, ‘Here I am!’ <sup>12</sup> And he said, ‘Lift up your eyes and see, all the goats that mate with the flock are striped, spotted, and mottled, for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. <sup>13</sup> I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now arise, go out from this land and return to the land of your kindred.’” <sup>14</sup> Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, “Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father’s house? <sup>15</sup> Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and he has indeed devoured our money. <sup>16</sup> All the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children. Now then, whatever God has said to you, do.”

– Genesis 31:1-16 ESV



Once again, Jacob finds himself with more enemies than friends, all because of his own self-serving actions. Nearly two decades earlier, Jacob had been forced to flee Beersheba because his older brother wanted to kill him for having stolen his birthright and blessing. Now, Jacob discovers that his brothers-in-law are furious because he has managed to abscond with most of their father’s flocks. Through a rather stranger process of selective breeding and what appears to be a healthy dose of luck, Jacob amassed a sizeable flock of speckled, spotted, and black sheep. And this unexpected transfer of wealth has left Laban’s rightful heirs furious.

Their brother-in-law has cheated them out of their inheritance.

*“Jacob has robbed our father of everything!” they said. “He has gained all his wealth at our father’s expense.”* – Genesis 31:1 NLT

This should all sound eerily familiar. Nearly 20 years earlier, Esau had expressed his own frustration after having discovered that his twin brother, Jacob, had not only left him with no claim to their father's inheritance but had stolen his blessing as well.

*"No wonder his name is Jacob, for now he has cheated me twice. First he took my rights as the firstborn, and now he has stolen my blessing. Oh, haven't you saved even one blessing for me?"* – Genesis 27:36 NLT

It's quite obvious that Jacob never read Dale Carnegie's classic work, *How To Win Friends and Influence People*. His penchant for self-promotion coupled with his uncanny talent for deception resulted in great success as well as a growing list of enemies. When Laban and his sons finally realized what Jacob had done to them, it was too late. He had robbed them blind. And recognizing their anger, Jacob knew it was time to go. He seems to have operated by the old American proverb: "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." But while that adage promotes brave action in the face of difficulty, for Jacob it meant "run for your life." Things had heated up, so it was time to go – again.

But somewhere along the way, Jacob received a word from God. All the while Jacob had been building his earthly empire by less-than-honest means, the Almighty had been watching and waiting. Now, God provides His young covenant partner with divine confirmation that the time has come for him to return to Canaan.

*"Return to the land of your father and grandfather and to your relatives there, and I will be with you."* – Genesis 31:3 NLT

So, Jacob called his two wives and informed them of his plan to leave Haran. He begins by recounting the many ways in which their father had taken advantage of him over the years.

*"I have noticed that your father's attitude toward me has changed. But the God of my father has been with me. You know how hard I have worked for your father, but he has cheated me, changing my wages ten times. But God has not allowed him to do me any harm."* – Genesis 31:5-7 NLT

Jacob is painting himself as the victim and staking out the moral high ground by claiming to have God on his side. And while all that he says is true, it still has a slightly dishonest and deceitful feel to it. Jacob positions himself as fully innocent of any wrongdoing. He insists that it never really mattered what criteria Laban established for their agreement because God would have ensured that the outcome was in Jacob's favor.

*"For if he said, 'The speckled animals will be your wages,' the whole flock began to produce speckled young. And when he changed his mind and said, 'The striped animals will be your wages,' then the whole flock produced striped young. In this way, God has taken your father's animals and given them to me."* – Genesis 31:8-9 NLT

He wasn't guilty of stealing Laban's flocks. God had done it all. And, once again, while there is a ring of truth to Jacob's claim, he appears to be using God to justify his own actions. But this is where Moses discloses an important, as-yet-unrevealed aspect of the story. It seems that Jacob had received another divine encounter in which he was given detailed instructions from God. It's difficult to ascertain exactly when this conversation between Jacob and the angel of the Lord took place but Jacob indicates that it occurred sometime "during the mating season" (Genesis 31:10 NLT).

One night, as Jacob had been shepherding Laban's flocks, he had a dream in which it seems he received the idea for breeding the speckled and spotted sheep.

*"The angel said, 'Look up, and you will see that only the streaked, speckled, and spotted males are mating with the females of your flock. For I have seen how Laban has treated you. I am the God who appeared to you at Bethel, the place where you anointed the pillar of stone and made your vow to me. Now get ready and leave this country and return to the land of your birth.'" – Genesis 31:12-13 NLT*

This is the first time that Jacob has divulged this information. Notice that the angel doesn't explain to Jacob how the vision will take place. Perhaps the angel had given Jacob the idea about placing the multicolored branches in the water troughs. This would provide a plausible explanation for Jacob's actions and portray the entire process as nothing less than a supernatural miracle orchestrated by God Himself.

So often in Scripture, God performs His extraordinary activities on earth by using common, everyday objects. He used Moses' shepherd's staff to turn the water of the Nile into blood.

*"Look! I will strike the water of the Nile with this staff in my hand, and the river will turn to blood. The fish in it will die, and the river will stink. The Egyptians will not be able to drink any water from the Nile." – Exodus 7:17 NLT*

That very same staff would be used to create a plague of frogs.

*"Raise the staff in your hand over all the rivers, canals, and ponds of Egypt, and bring up frogs over all the land." – Exodus 8:5 NLT*

And when it came time for the people of Israel to return to the land of Canaan, God ordered Moses to use that same wooden staff to part the waters of the Red Sea.

*Then the Lord said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the people to get moving! Pick up your staff and raise your hand over the sea. Divide the water so the Israelites can walk through the middle of the sea on dry ground." – Exodus 14:15-16 NLT*

So, it takes no stretch of the imagination to consider that God had been the one to give Jacob the idea to use the "striped" branches.

*Then Jacob took some fresh branches from poplar, almond, and plane trees and peeled off strips of bark, making white streaks on them. Then he placed these peeled branches in the watering troughs where the flocks came to drink, for that was where they mated. And when they mated in front of the white-streaked branches, they gave birth to young that were streaked, speckled, and spotted. – Genesis 30:28-30 NLT*

God had miraculously used the “striped” branches to produce striped sheep. And, as always, God had a purpose for performing this inexplicable miracle in such an unlikely manner. It brings to mind the words of Isaiah prophesying the coming Messiah of Israel. In Isaiah 53, Moses presents the Messiah as the suffering servant, describing the gruesome death He would face as Israel’s Savior. He opens by describing the Messiah as being “like a young plant” (Isaiah 53:2 ESV).

Then Isaiah records in detail the excruciating and humiliating suffering of this “young plant.”

*He was pierced for our offenses,  
He was crushed for our wrongdoings;  
The punishment for our well-being was laid upon Him,  
And by His wounds we are healed. – Isaiah 53:5 NLT*

But the Hebrew word translated as “wounds” is חַבּוּרָה (*ḥabûrâ*), which can also be translated as “stripes.” Now, look closely at what Isaiah is saying. The “striped” young plant would be used to bring healing and restoration to the wandering sheep.

*All of us, like sheep, have gone astray,  
Each of us has turned to his own way;  
But the Lord has caused the wrongdoing of us all  
To fall on Him. – Isaiah 53:6 NLT*

Now, look closely at verse 37 of Genesis 30.

*Jacob took **fresh** sticks of poplar and almond and plane trees, and peeled white streaks in them, exposing the white of the sticks. – Genesis 30:37 ESV*

The Hebrew word for “fresh” can also be translated as “new.” These were tender young shoots that Jacob “striped” and placed in front of the sheep. And the result was many offspring. Now, look back at Isaiah’s prophecy.

*Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him;  
he has put him to grief;  
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,  
**he shall see his offspring...** – Isaiah 53:10 ESV*

God performed a miracle. He guided the “wandering” Jacob and showered him with undeserved blessings. And the means by which God performed this miracle points to the future blessing that God will shower on the descendants of Jacob in the form of the “tender young shoot” – Jesus Christ. He will be “the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious” (Isaiah 11:10 ESV). He will be “a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land” (Jeremiah 23:5 ESV). And He will come from the line of Judah, one of the 11 sons of Jacob born while he lived in Haran.



## Leaving the Past Behind

*<sup>17</sup> So Jacob arose and set his sons and his wives on camels. <sup>18</sup> He drove away all his livestock, all his property that he had gained, the livestock in his possession that he had acquired in Paddan-aram, to go to the land of Canaan to his father Isaac. <sup>19</sup> Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's household gods. <sup>20</sup> And Jacob tricked Laban the Aramean, by not telling him that he intended to flee. <sup>21</sup> He fled with all that he had and arose and crossed the Euphrates, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead.*

*<sup>22</sup> When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled, <sup>23</sup> he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him for seven days and followed close after him into the hill country of Gilead.*

*<sup>24</sup> 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."*

*<sup>25</sup> And Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsmen pitched tents in the hill country of Gilead. <sup>26</sup> And Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done, that you have tricked me and driven away my daughters like captives of the sword?*

*<sup>27</sup> Why did you flee secretly and trick me, and did not tell me, so that I might have sent you away with mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre? <sup>28</sup> And why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters farewell? Now you have done foolishly. <sup>29</sup> It is in my power to do you harm. But the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.' <sup>30</sup> And now you have gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house, but why did you steal my gods?" <sup>31</sup> Jacob answered and said to Laban, "Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force.*

*<sup>32</sup> Anyone with whom you find your gods shall not live. In the presence of our kinsmen point out what I have that is yours, and take it." Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them. – Genesis 31:17-32 ESV*



Having convinced his two wives that it was in their best interest to leave their father's household and return with him to Canaan, Jacob loaded his family on camels and surreptitiously snuck out of Haran. Due to the large size of his herds and flocks, and the number of servants he possessed, it would have been quite a challenge for Jacob to leave without being noticed. Yet Moses indicates that it took Laban three days before he realized that Jacob had departed.

It appears that Laban had been busy sheering sheep, but when he returned home, he discovered that he was missing far more than just his daughters and grandsons. Someone had

stolen one of his household gods. This would seem to indicate that Laban was not a Yahweh worshiper.

Moses uses a clever play on words when he describes Rachel's crime and Jacob's actions. He writes that Rachel "stole" Laban's household god. The Hebrew word is גָּנַב (*gānab*) and it can mean "to steal" or "to steal away, as by stealth." That is why he uses the same word to describe Jacob's deception of Laban. It could be translated, "Jacob **stole the heart** from Laban the Aramean by not telling him that he was fleeing" (Genesis 31:20 TLV).

Jacob took what was near and dear to Laban, his daughters, and grandsons. But it seems that Laban was more upset about his missing idol. Angered by this injustice, Laban formed a posse and set out to rescue his stolen god.

*...he gathered a group of his relatives and set out in hot pursuit. He caught up with Jacob seven days later in the hill country of Gilead. – Genesis 31:23 NLT*

But before he could begin his journey, Laban had a surprise visit from the one true God, Yahweh. While Laban's idol was mute and had proven to be incapable of protecting himself from Rachel's greedy hands, the God of Jacob was quite vocal and very clear in his warning to Laban.

*"Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad." – Genesis 31:24 ESV*

God knew Laban's heart and was fully aware that he intended to do Jacob harm. But essentially, God warned Laban not to touch Jacob. More importantly, Laban was not to threaten Jacob or pronounce a curse on him. But this didn't keep Laban from speaking his mind when he finally caught up to Jacob. He confronted his son-in-law, demanding to know why he had chosen to slip away in secret.

*"You've deceived me and carried away my daughters as if they were captives of war! Why did you run away secretly and deceive me? Why didn't you tell me so I could send you off with a celebration complete with singing, tambourines, and harps? You didn't even allow me to kiss my daughters and my grandchildren goodbye. You have acted foolishly!" – Genesis 31:26-28 NET*

Laban used the same word, גָּנַב (*gānab*), to describe Jacob's actions. By stealing away in the dead of night with his father-in-law's daughter and grandchildren, Jacob had effectively "stolen" Laban's heart. According to Laban, Jacob had deliberately and maliciously deceived him and, in so doing, had broken his heart.

It is difficult to feel much sympathy for Laban because he has proven himself to be just as untrustworthy and manipulative. This is a man who had deliberately taken advantage of Jacob on multiple occasions. But now that he was on the receiving end of the deception, he didn't like it. And he let Jacob know that the only thing preventing him from getting even was the warning

he had received from Yahweh. If Jacob's God had not stepped in, Laban would be meting out vigilante justice.

But the real motivation behind Laban's anger was not his heart for his family, but his passion for his false god. The confiscation of his household idol had been the deal-breaker. And Laban clearly believed that Jacob was the guilty party.

*"I can understand your feeling that you must go, and your intense longing for your father's home. But why have you stolen my gods?" – Genesis 31:30 NLT*

But Jacob declared his innocence. He admitted that his secretive departure had been because he had feared what would happen if Laban discovered his plans to return to Canaan. Jacob knew his father-in-law well and assumed that he would do anything to prevent his daughters and grandchildren from leaving. But as far as the missing idol was concerned, Jacob knew nothing about it. And he challenged Laban to instigate a search to see if anyone had the idol in their possession. If the missing idol was found, Jacob agreed to have the guilty party executed. But little did he know that he was sentencing his own wife to death.

This entire scene provides a fitting summary of this portion of Jacob's life. For nearly 20 years, he has lived with his uncle, Laban. During that time, he had found the wife he had set out to find and had also ended up with an unexpected second wife and two concubines. The two decades had been filled with deceit and trickery as the various parties manipulated and defrauded one another to get their own ways. No one in this story comes out as squeaky clean and free from blame. They each bear responsibility for their particular sins and stand before God as guilty and deserving of His judgment.

But despite all the subterfuge and selfish scheming, God has been at work. And as Jacob faces off with Laban in the hill country of Gilead, God is preparing to end this phase of Jacob's life of exile. He is on his way back to Canaan, the land that God had promised to give to his grandfather, Abraham. It is his divinely ordained inheritance. The days of exile are over. It is time to go home, but God wants Jacob to leave behind everything associated with his stay in Haran. From this point forward, Jacob will be expected to separate himself from his father-in-law and his false gods. He will be required to leave behind his dependence upon trickery and deceit to get ahead. From this point forward, God will be leading Jacob back to Canaan and into a deeper and fully sold-out relationship with Him. This current crisis will come to an end. But the days ahead will not be easy. Leaving behind his old ways will prove to be far more difficult for Jacob than leaving Haran. But God is preparing Jacob for another exile that will last far longer than his stay in Mesopotamia. And it will be in keeping with God's promise to Abraham.

*"You can be sure that your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land, where they will be oppressed as slaves for 400 years. But I will punish the nation that enslaves them, and in the end they will come away with great wealth." – Genesis 14:13-14 NLT*

Jacob was returning to Canaan with 11 sons. And one of those sons, Joseph, would play an integral part in the fulfillment of God's promise. What Jacob did not realize was that his entire life was to be a foreshadowing of the nation of Israel. Just as Jacob had fled to a foreign land to escape certain death, so too the people of Israel would flee to Egypt to escape a famine in the land of Canaan. And like Jacob, their forefather, the people of Israel would find themselves living as little more than captives in their new homeland. But God would eventually redeem them, just as He was doing for Jacob. He would faithfully fulfill His covenant commitment and return His exiled sons and daughters to the land of promise.

## A Fight to the Finish

<sup>33</sup> So Laban went into Jacob's tent and into Leah's tent and into the tent of the two female servants, but he did not find them. And he went out of Leah's tent and entered Rachel's. <sup>34</sup> Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them in the camel's saddle and sat on them. Laban felt all about the tent, but did not find them. <sup>35</sup> 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.

<sup>36</sup> Then Jacob became angry and berated Laban. Jacob said to Laban, "What is my offense? What is my sin, that you have hotly pursued me?" <sup>37</sup> For you have felt through all my goods; what have you found of all your household goods? Set it here before my kinsmen and your kinsmen, that they may decide between us two. <sup>38</sup> These twenty years I have been with you. Your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, and I have not eaten the rams of your flocks. <sup>39</sup> What was torn by wild beasts I did not bring to you. I bore the loss of it myself. From my hand you required it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. <sup>40</sup> There I was: by day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes. <sup>41</sup> These twenty years I have been in your house. I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times. <sup>42</sup> If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God saw my affliction and the labor of my hands and rebuked you last night." – Genesis 31:33-42 ESV



Reading this portion of the story is like watching a fight between two heavyweight boxers. Both Laban and Jacob are seasoned veterans of the ring, with an arsenal of well-honed skills at their disposal. And they each have proven themselves more than willing to resort to cheating if the circumstances call for it. They're not afraid to fight dirty if that is what it will take to come out victorious.

So, as the angry and offended Laban confronts his nemesis, Jacob, tempers are at an all-time high. Upon discovering that Jacob had stolen away in the night, carrying his daughters, grandchildren, and personal household gods, Laban had set out in hot pursuit. Now, he was standing in front, full of fury and righteous indignation, accusing his son-in-law of everything from ingratitude and insensitivity to outright theft. But Jacob countered with a declaration of innocence and a vow to put to death anyone found in possession of Laban's property.

Convinced of Jacob's guilt, Laban ordered a thorough search of Jacob's belongings. He began in the tents of Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah. But his efforts proved fruitless. He could find no trace of the missing household gods. And there is a certain sense of irony in all of this because Laban was in the strange and helpless position of having to "search" for his own gods. All the while he looked, they remained hidden and silent, because they were powerless and incapable of speech. Laban's gods couldn't reveal, much less, save themselves. All during this story, they remain invisible and impotent, hidden away and unable to come to Laban's aid. And it is not surprising that God's Word has much to say about the idiocy of idols.

*"What good is an idol carved by man,  
or a cast image that deceives you?  
How foolish to trust in your own creation—  
a god that can't even talk!  
What sorrow awaits you who say to wooden idols,  
'Wake up and save us!'  
To speechless stone images you say,  
'Rise up and teach us!'  
Can an idol tell you what to do?  
They may be overlaid with gold and silver,  
but they are lifeless inside." – Habakuk 2:18-19 NLT*

*"Don't go back to worshiping worthless idols that cannot help or rescue you—they are totally useless!" – 1 Samuel 12:21 NLT*

*Their idols are merely things of silver and gold,  
shaped by human hands.  
They have mouths but cannot speak,  
and eyes but cannot see.  
They have ears but cannot hear,  
and noses but cannot smell.  
They have hands but cannot feel,  
and feet but cannot walk,  
and throats but cannot make a sound.  
And those who make idols are just like them,  
as are all who trust in them. – Psalm 115:4-8 NLT*

One can only imagine Laban's growing frustration as his search for his "lost" gods came up empty-handed. But his stubbornness would not allow him to give up and admit defeat. So, the search continued, this time to Rachel's tent. And while Laban had been busy ransacking the tents of Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah, Rachel had taken the household gods she had stolen and hid them in the saddle of her camel. Then, as Laban approached, she took a seat on the saddle. Verse 25 indicates that Jacob "had pitched his tent in the hill country," so it seems likely that the saddle was lying on the ground near Rachel's tent. And her pilfering of her father's household gods seems to suggest that Rachel shared her father's reverence for them. While the

names of these gods are not revealed, it is readily apparent that they were of great value to Laban. He had traveled for three days in an attempt to recover them. And Rachel was willing to risk her life to keep them. The idols would have represented hope for future blessings and fruitfulness. Perhaps Rachel was hoping that one of these household gods could help her produce another son. Up to this point in the story, Rachel has only been able to conceive one time, and at the birth of that son, she had exclaimed, “May the Lord add yet another son to my family” (Genesis 30:24 NLT).

Perhaps Rachel believed that her first pregnancy had been the work of her father’s gods and she hoped that they would bring her further good fortune. She was willing to risk a great deal in order to keep the gods in hiding and in her possession.

Firmly seated upon the saddle, with the idols hidden underneath her, Rachel begged her father’s forgiveness for not rising to greet him, using “the way of women” as her excuse. Laban remained unsuspecting of his daughter’s treachery and continued his search, “but he could not find the household idols” (Genesis 31:35 NLT).

And Jacob, completely oblivious to what his wife had done, must have been gloating on the inside as he watched his father-in-law’s frustration reach a fever pitch. But at some point, he lost his patience and demanded that the search end.

*“What’s my crime?” he demanded. “What have I done wrong to make you chase after me as though I were a criminal?” – Genesis 31:35 NLT*

Jacob had endured enough of his father-in-law’s insulting behavior and demanded an apology for the last 20 years of abuse he had been forced to endure.

*“For twenty years I have been with you, caring for your flocks. In all that time your sheep and goats never miscarried. In all those years I never used a single ram of yours for food. If any were attacked and killed by wild animals, I never showed you the carcass and asked you to reduce the count of your flock. No, I took the loss myself! You made me pay for every stolen animal, whether it was taken in broad daylight or in the dark of night.” – Genesis 31:38-39 NLT*

Jacob had Laban on the ropes, and he was pulling no punches. With each powerful blow, Jacob attempted to deliver the knock-out punch that would send his opponent to the mat. He recounted his tireless and selfless efforts to serve Laban. He reveled in his sense of self-righteousness, detailing the many ways he had treated Laban with nothing but respect. Jacob paints himself as the consummate victim, even describing himself as a helpless slave.

*“Yes, for twenty years I slaved in your house! I worked for fourteen years earning your two daughters, and then six more years for your flock. And you changed my wages ten times!” – Genesis 31:41 NLT*

He had Laban staggering under a steady barrage of accusations. Those watching this epic battle would have observed that Laban was about to go down for the count. And then, Jacob delivered the final blow that would bring this fight to an end.

*“In fact, if the God of my father had not been on my side—the God of Abraham and the fearsome God of Isaac—you would have sent me away empty-handed. But God has seen your abuse and my hard work. That is why he appeared to you last night and rebuked you!” – Genesis 31:42 NLT*

Jacob’s decisive one-two punch was Yahweh, the God of Abraham, and the fearsome God of Isaac. Laban’s household gods had been no match for the Almighty. For 20 long years, as these two men had done battle, Jacob had enjoyed the blessings of Yahweh. Jacob concedes that all his success had been the work of Yahweh. And Jacob wanted Laban to know that Yahweh could and would undermine any attempts to keep him from returning to Canaan. There was no going back. Jacob would not be tricked again. And the scene seems to end with Jacob standing over his defeated foe as Yahweh raises his gloved hand in victory. That match is over but, for Jacob, the real fight is about to begin.

## With Friends Like This...

<sup>43</sup> Then Laban answered and said to Jacob, “The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day for these my daughters or for their children whom they have borne?” <sup>44</sup> Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I. And let it be a witness between you and me.” <sup>45</sup> So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. <sup>46</sup> And Jacob said to his kinsmen, “Gather stones.” And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. <sup>47</sup> Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed. <sup>48</sup> Laban said, “This heap is a witness between you and me today.” Therefore he named it Galeed, <sup>49</sup> and Mizpah, for he said, “The Lord watch between you and me, when we are out of one another’s sight. <sup>50</sup> If you oppress my daughters, or if you take wives besides my daughters, although no one is with us, see, God is witness between you and me.”

<sup>51</sup> Then Laban said to Jacob, “See this heap and the pillar, which I have set between you and me. <sup>52</sup> This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass over this heap to you, and you will not pass over this heap and this pillar to me, to do harm. <sup>53</sup> The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us.” So Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac, <sup>54</sup> and Jacob offered a sacrifice in the hill country and called his kinsmen to eat bread. They ate bread and spent the night in the hill country.

<sup>55</sup> Early in the morning Laban arose and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned home. – Genesis 31:43-55 ESV



Laban’s desperate search for his missing idols proved to be a bust. So, he had no other recourse but to let Jacob continue his journey to Canaan. This meant saying goodbye to his two daughters and his 11 grandsons. And he was not happy about it. In fact, he let Jacob know that the whole affair was nothing less than a form of highway robbery.

*“These women are my daughters, these children are my grandchildren, and these flocks are my flocks—in fact, everything you see is mine. But what can I do now about my daughters and their children? So come, let’s make a covenant, you and I, and it will be a witness to our commitment.”* – Genesis 41:43-44 NLT

He offered no confession or admission of wrongdoing. Instead, he accused Jacob of having taken what rightfully belonged to him, including his daughters, grandsons, and flocks. But sensing that he was powerless to stop Jacob’s departure, Laban decided to bury the hatchet and offered to sign a non-aggression pact with his son-in-law. Jacob was leaving Haran a very wealthy man and Laban was reluctant to completely sever ties with him, because he stood to

lose a lot more than access to his daughters and grandsons. He really did believe that Jacob was absconding with his possessions and still held out hope that he might one day get them back.

But Jacob, anxious to put as much territory between he and Laban as physically possible, agreed to the treaty.

*So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a monument. Then he told his family members, “Gather some stones.” So they gathered stones and piled them in a heap. Then Jacob and Laban sat down beside the pile of stones to eat a covenant meal. – Genesis 31:45-46 NLT*

They erected a monument to commemorate their agreement, then sealed the deal with a meal. But despite their mutual pledge, the two men couldn’t agree on a name for the location. Laban called it אִגְרֵי שְׂהֵדוּתָא (y<sup>g</sup>ar śāhădūtā), which means “witness heap.” But Jacob named it גַּלְעָד (gal’ēd), which means “heap of testimony.”

The terms of the covenant were simple. They basically agreed to let the stones to serve as a boundary marker, which they pledged never to pass with the intent to harm one another.

*“I will never pass this pile of stones to harm you, and you must never pass these stones or this monument to harm me. I call on the God of our ancestors—the God of your grandfather Abraham and the God of my grandfather Nahor—to serve as a judge between us.” – Genesis 31:52-53 NLT*

It was less a treaty than it was an agreement to refrain from doing harm to one another. There were no wounds healed or friendships made because of this act. Laban and Jacob remained distrustful of one another and were much more like enemies than co-signers of a peace agreement. Because of their mutual interest in Leah, Rachel, and the children, the two men agreed to set their animosities aside and do what was necessary to protect those whom they loved.

And it’s interesting to note that the idol-worshipping Laban was the one who chose to call upon the name of Jacob’s God as witness.

*“May the Lord keep watch between us to make sure that we keep this covenant when we are out of each other’s sight. If you mistreat my daughters or if you marry other wives, God will see it even if no one else does. He is a witness to this covenant between us.” – Genesis 31:49-50 NLT*

While hundreds of miles would separate the two men, Laban called upon Yahweh to act as witness to their agreement and as the divine monitor of Jacob’s behavior. If Jacob got out of line and mistreated Leah or Rachel, Laban asked God to intervene and pass judgment on him. As a father, Laban grieved over the thought that he would no longer be able to protect his

daughters. And it seems unlikely that he would live long enough to see his grandsons grow up and mature. He seemed to know that this would be the last time he ever saw his daughters and grandchildren.

*So Jacob took an oath before the fearsome God of his father, Isaac, to respect the boundary line. Then Jacob offered a sacrifice to God there on the mountain and invited everyone to a covenant feast. After they had eaten, they spent the night on the mountain. – Genesis 31:53-54 NLT*

Jacob would never return to Haran. And his relationship with his father-in-law would not end on the best of terms. They completed their covenant agreement, then parted ways. Laban returned to Mesopotamia and Jacob continued his journey back to Canaan. And Jacob must have felt a great sense of relief as he watched his father-in-law ride off into the distance. The last 20 years of his life had been a living nightmare, but now it was all over. But Jacob's relief would be short-lived. He had gotten rid of one enemy but had another waiting for him at home – his brother Esau.

In the two decades he had been in Haran, Jacob had never received word from Rebekah that it was safe to come home (Genesis 27:45). So, he had no idea what to expect. Was Esau still harboring bitterness for him or had his anger subsided? Would he be greeted with a confrontation or a warm welcome? Every mile he traveled must have been excruciating as the distance between he and Esau diminished. His time of reckoning was drawing near. But, as always, God had plans of which Jacob was oblivious. This trip was going to end far better than Jacob could have ever imagined, and it would all be in keeping with the promise had made 20 years earlier.

*“Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” – Genesis 28:15 NLT*



## Mixing Prayer and Payola

<sup>1</sup> Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. <sup>2</sup> And when Jacob saw them he said, "This is God's camp!" So he called the name of that place Mahanaim.

<sup>3</sup> And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, <sup>4</sup> instructing them, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, 'I have sojourned with Laban and stayed until now. <sup>5</sup> I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male servants, and female servants. I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight.'"

<sup>6</sup> And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him." <sup>7</sup> Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. He divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps, <sup>8</sup> thinking, "If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the camp that is left will escape."

<sup>9</sup> 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, that I may do you good,' <sup>10</sup> I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of 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 camps.

<sup>11</sup> Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children. <sup>12</sup> But you said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'"

<sup>13</sup> So he stayed there that night, and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau, <sup>14</sup> two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, <sup>15</sup> thirty milking camels and their calves, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. <sup>16</sup> These he handed over to his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass on ahead of me and put a space between drove and drove." <sup>17</sup> He instructed the first, "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?' <sup>18</sup> 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.'"  
<sup>19</sup> He likewise instructed the second and the third and all who followed the droves, "You shall say the same thing to Esau when you find him, <sup>20</sup> 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 afterward I shall see his face. Perhaps he will accept me." <sup>21</sup> So the present passed on ahead of him, and he himself stayed that night in the camp. – Genesis 32:1-21 ESV

After a 20-year absence, Jacob was about to come face-to-face with his estranged brother, Esau. Years earlier, they had not parted on the best of terms. Angered at having been swindled out of his birthright and blessing by Jacob, Esau had been plotting his brother's murder. But their mother had intervened and sent Jacob to go live with her brother, Laban, in Mesopotamia. She had hoped this would prove to be a temporary separation, and had assured

Jacob that, as soon as Esau calmed down, she would send word that it was safe to come home. That message was never delivered.



So as Jacob and his caravan drew closer to home, he became increasingly more concerned about what might happen when he finally encountered his brother. He had no way of knowing whether Esau had calmed down or if he would still be harboring thoughts of revenge.

Somewhere along the way, Jacob had an encounter with some angelic beings. It had been 20 years earlier that Jacob had received a vision from God in which he saw “a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it” (Genesis 28:12 ESV). Now, as he returned to the land of promise two decades later, he had another divine encounter. Moses provides no details about this meeting, but simply states that Jacob called the place Mahanaim, which means “two camps.” Perhaps he saw the angels of God encamped in the region and decided this was a good spot to stop for the night. The presence of these heavenly messengers must have provided Jacob with a sense of comfort and security and prompted him to set up camp nearby.

But his anxiety is on full display as he instigates a plan designed to assuage the anger of his disgruntled brother. Jacob sends messengers ahead with a carefully worded greeting for Esau.

*“Humble greetings from your servant Jacob. Until now I have been living with Uncle Laban, and now I own cattle, donkeys, flocks of sheep and goats, and many servants, both men and women. I have sent these messengers to inform my lord of my coming, hoping that you will be friendly to me.” – Genesis 32:4-5 NLT*

Jacob was attempting to get some idea of his brother’s emotional state. How would he react to the news that Jacob was back in Canaan? Would it cause him to rejoice or simply reignite the long-simmering rage that lie hidden in his heart? And as the messengers departed, Jacob was left to wait, worry, and wonder about what was going to happen next. Moses doesn’t provide a timeline for how long it took the messengers to make the round-trip from Laban’s home back to Jacob’s encampment. But as the minutes stretched into hours and, possibly, days, Jacob’s anxiety must have reached an all-time high.

And when the messengers returned, the news they delivered was far from encouraging. Jacob was petrified by what he heard.

*“We met your brother, Esau, and he is already on his way to meet you—with an army of 400 men!” – Genesis 32:6 NLT*

This doesn't sound like Esau is preparing to roll out the red carpet. And the army of 400 men doesn't sound like the local welcome wagon. Moses reveals that “Jacob was terrified at the news” (Genesis 32:7 NLT). So, he immediately went into self-preservation mode, coming up with a plan for buying off his vengeance-seeking brother.

*He divided his household, along with the flocks and herds and camels, into two groups. He thought, “If Esau meets one group and attacks it, perhaps the other group can escape.” – Genesis 32:7-8 NLT*

Fearing the worst, Jacob divided his possessions, including his family members, into two separate groups, preparing to use them as guinea pigs to test the degree of his brother's anger. He was hoping that Esau would be moved to show sympathy when he encountered the innocent women and children. By staggering the departure of the two groups, Jacob hoped to test Esau's resolve. Would he be willing to slaughter his sisters-in-law and nephews or would the sight of them soften his hardened heart? If Esau proved to be inappeasable, Jacob was willing to risk the deaths of his loved one, hoping that at least one of the two groups would have time to escape and survive.

It's interesting to note that, having committed himself to his own plan, Jacob also decided to get God involved. But his prayer almost comes across as an afterthought. It's almost as if, once he had come up with his strategy, he asked God to bless it.

*“O Lord, please rescue me from the hand of my brother, Esau. I am afraid that he is coming to attack me, along with my wives and children.” – Genesis 32:11 ESV*

Jacob had not yet sent the first wave of flocks and family members to meet Esau, so he decided to ask God to step in and save the day. And, in his prayer, he reminds God of His earlier promise to protect and preserve him.

*“...you said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’” – Genesis 32:12 ESV*

It was Jacob who had chosen to divide his household into two camps, exhibiting his willingness to risk their lives to save his own neck. He was fully prepared to send them out like innocent lambs to the slaughter. Fortunately, Jacob delayed his plan and decided to sleep on it. The next morning, he changed his mind and sent a delegation with a sizeable “bribe” to soften up Esau.

*...he selected these gifts from his possessions to present to his brother, Esau: 200 female goats, 20 male goats, 200 ewes, 20 rams, 30 female camels with their young, 40 cows, 10 bulls, 20 female donkeys, and 10 male donkeys. – Genesis 32:13-15 NLT*

Jacob was a wealthy man and he attempted to use his formidable resources to buy off his brother. But, the ever-wary Jacob, chose to send these gifts in waves, creating a buffer zone between himself and Esau. He hoped that the cumulative effect of each successive wave of tribute would slowly transform his brother's desire for revenge into a growing lust for treasure.

Jacob's plan and the logic behind it were simple. When Esau encountered each caravan of servants and livestock, he would want to know to whom they belonged. And each servant had been instructed to respond, "They belong to your servant Jacob, but they are a gift for his master Esau. Look, he is coming right behind us" (Genesis 32:18 NLT). One after the other, these traveling treasure troves would come into Esau's sight and possession. And Jacob hoped that this progressive payment plan would reap huge dividends.

*"I will try to appease him by sending gifts ahead of me. When I see him in person, perhaps he will be friendly to me." – Genesis 32:20 NLT*

Jacob had asked God to rescue him but was putting all his hope and trust in his own intellectual and financial capital. He was attempting to use his sizeable, yet still limited, resources to save the day. And having invested all that he had, he was forced to wait and wonder what the morning might bring. But little did Jacob know that his next confrontation would not be with his unhappy brother but with his holy and all-powerful God.

## And in This Corner...

<sup>22</sup> The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup> He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. <sup>24</sup> And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. <sup>25</sup> When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. <sup>26</sup> Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." <sup>27</sup> And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." <sup>28</sup> Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered." <sup>31</sup> The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. <sup>32</sup> Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh. – Genesis 32:22-32 ESV

Jacob has sent his gifts on ahead, hoping their arrival will persuade Esau to forgive and forget all the injustices and inequities Jacob had committed against him. But it will take time for the gifts to arrive and for Jacob to hear how effective his attempt to bribe his brother had been. In the meantime, Jacob took one more precautionary step. He relocated his two wives, his concubines, and his 11 sons on the other side of the Jabbok River. His intention was to use the river as a natural barrier, providing his family with an extra measure of separation and safety should Esau reject his gifts and come seeking revenge.

After sequestering his family on the far side of the river, Jacob returned to the other shore alone, and waited to face his fate. And the text paints a rather sobering and sorrowful picture when it states, "Jacob was left alone" (Genesis 32:24 ESV). He was left to do battle with his inner demons, wrestling over his past indiscretions and second-guessing the many times he had attempted to determine the outcome of his life by doing things his own way.



But Jacob quickly discovered that he was far from alone. Moses indicates that "a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day" (Genesis 32:24 ESV). This unnamed intruder assaulted the weary and worried Jacob, forcing himself to fight for his life. And the two contestants seem to have been equally matched, until Jacob's opponent delivered a debilitating blow. Moses indicates that "Jacob's

hip was put out of joint as he [the man] wrestled with him" (Genesis 32:25 ESV). The Hebrew word translated as "touched" is נָגַח (*nāḡā*'), and it can also mean "to strike." This injury left Jacob incapacitated and unable to continue the fight, but he would not let go of his assailant.

But the stubborn and ever-opportunistic Jacob refused to give in, demanding that his opponent provide him with a blessing. He held on for dear life and declared, “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (Genesis 32:27 ESV).

While it’s unclear whether Jacob had somehow determined the identity of his opponent, it’s readily apparent that he was not willing to walk away empty handed. While the other man had won, Jacob demanded a consolation prize, in the form of a blessing. Jacob doesn’t elaborate, so we have no idea what kind of blessing he had in mind. But he had fought long and hard and felt he deserved something for all his effort. His demand for a blessing recalls the words of his brother, Esau, spoken after he discovered that Jacob had stolen his blessing.

*“Oh my father, what about me? Bless me, too!” – Genesis 27:34 NLT*

All his life, Jacob had been wrestling with someone over something. It had begun in the womb with his twin brother and that conflict had carried over into their adult lives. Jacob had also wrestled with Laban, his father-in-law. And, according to the prophet, Hosea, Jacob had spent his entire life wrestling with God.

*Now the Lord is bringing charges against Judah.  
He is about to punish Jacob for all his deceitful ways,  
and pay him back for all he has done.  
Even in the womb,  
Jacob struggled with his brother;  
when he became a man,  
he even fought with God.  
Yes, he wrestled with the angel and won.  
He wept and pleaded for a blessing from him.  
There at Bethel he met God face to face,  
and God spoke to him... – Hosea 12:2-4 NLT*

There seems to have been no point in Jacob’s life when he thought he had been blessed by God. Despite all of God’s promises and the content of the blessing he had tricked his father into giving to him, Jacob was still doubtful about his future. And as he stood all alone on the far shore of the Jabbok River, waiting to see if his brother would come with open arms or with a sword in his hand. Jacob was still fighting for the blessing he already possessed. It was his father, Isaac, who had declared:

*“May God Almighty bless you and give you many children. And may your descendants multiply and become many nations! May God pass on to you and your descendants the blessings he promised to Abraham. May you own this land where you are now living as a foreigner, for God gave this land to Abraham.” – Genesis 28:3-4 NLT*

But sadly, Jacob still didn't *feel* blessed. He was scared and doubtful about his future. He was operating in a vacuum, with no confidence as to what his brother might do or how his life might pan out. And this was despite all that God had promised to do.

*"I am the Lord, the God of your grandfather Abraham, and the God of your father, Isaac. The ground you are lying on belongs to you. I am giving it to you and your descendants. Your descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth! They will spread out in all directions—to the west and the east, to the north and the south. And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants. What's more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you."* – Genesis 28:13-15 NLT

But instead of reprimanding Jacob for his doubt, God changed his name.

*"From now on you will be called Israel, because you have fought with God and with men and have won."* – Genesis 32:28 NLT

The name, Israel, actually can mean "strives with God" or "God fights." This new designation was meant to signal a change in Jacob's identity and to reaffirm his God-ordained destiny. Jacob had fought with God and God had fought back – and won. His will would be done. Despite all of Jacob's clever machinations and attempts to manipulate his own fate, God had been in control all along.

It seems that Jacob had his suspicions about the identity of his more powerful opponent, and so he attempted to get confirmation by asking for his name. But his question was answered with a question: "Why do you want to know my name?" (Genesis 32:29 NLT). There should have been no doubt in Jacob's mind. He had just gone toe-to-toe with God and had lived to tell about it. And he went on to acknowledge this amazing reality, by naming the place "Peniel (which means 'face of God'), for he said, 'I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been spared'" (Genesis 32:30 NLT).

In one corner stood the conniving and manipulative trickster, Jacob. In the other stood the angel of God, representing the all-powerful and all-knowing God of the universe. It was an epic mismatch, but God graciously allowed Jacob to prevail. Despite the fact that Jacob had spent his entire life fighting with God, the Almighty still allowed him to have the upper hand in this battle. Not because he had earned it or deserved it, but simply because God was preparing to bless the nations of the world through Israel – both the man and the nation.



## The God of Israel

<sup>1</sup> And Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two female servants. <sup>2</sup> And he put the servants with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. <sup>3</sup> He himself went on before them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother.

<sup>4</sup> But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. <sup>5</sup> And when Esau lifted up his eyes and saw the women and children, he said, "Who are these with you?" Jacob said, "The children whom God has graciously given your servant." <sup>6</sup> Then the servants drew near, they and their children, and bowed down. <sup>7</sup> Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down. And last Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. <sup>8</sup> Esau said, "What do you mean by all this company that I met?" Jacob answered, "To find favor in the sight of my lord." <sup>9</sup> But Esau said, "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself." <sup>10</sup> Jacob said, "No, please, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my present from my hand. For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me." <sup>11</sup> Please accept my blessing that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough." Thus he urged him, and he took it.

<sup>12</sup> Then Esau said, "Let us journey on our way, and I will go ahead of you." <sup>13</sup> But Jacob said to him, "My lord knows that the children are frail, and that the nursing flocks and herds are a care to me. If they are driven hard for one day, all the flocks will die. <sup>14</sup> Let my lord pass on ahead of his servant, and I will lead on slowly, at the pace of the livestock that are ahead of me and at the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir."

<sup>15</sup> So Esau said, "Let me leave with you some of the people who are with me." But he said, "What need is there? Let me find favor in the sight of my lord." <sup>16</sup> So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. <sup>17</sup> But Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built himself a house and made booths for his livestock. Therefore the name of the place is called Succoth.

<sup>18</sup> And Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, on his way from Paddan-aram, and he camped before the city. <sup>19</sup> And from the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, he bought for a hundred pieces of money the piece of land on which he had pitched his tent.

<sup>20</sup> There he erected an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel. – Genesis 33:1-20 ESV

The fateful moment Jacob had been dreading for 20 years had finally arrived. His return to the land of Canaan would have to begin with an uncomfortable and potentially dangerous reunion between him and the brother he had wrongfully deceived so many years earlier. It was payback time and Jacob had no idea what to expect when Esau arrived on the scene. So, when he looked up and saw Esau headed his way with a large force of 400 men, Jacob assumed the worst. All his attempts to win Esau's favor with gifts of livestock appeared to have failed. The horde headed his way did not appear to be a welcoming party. So, he prepared for the worst.



Revealing the order of importance that Jacob placed on his wives and their children, organized his family into three separate groups. Bilhah and Zilpah, the two slave women through whom he had fathered four sons, were placed in the first group along with their children. Leah came next, accompanied by her seven children. Then, forming the final group was Rachel and her only son, Joseph.

It seems that Jacob harbored hopes that, by placing Rachel and Joseph in the back of the line, they might be spared if Esau was out for revenge. Perhaps his anger would be assuaged long before he made it to them. Jacob was not expecting a happy reunion with Esau. The best he could hope for was some form of leniency and mercy. And he still had the option of

placating his brother's anger with additional payments in livestock.

Having taken his place at the front of the line, Jacob nervously waited to see what was going to happen. When his brother rode and dismounted, Jacob held his breath.

*But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. – Genesis 33:4 ESV*

Jacob must have been shocked and relieved by this unexpected display of affection from Esau. And an audible sigh of relief must have come from the lips of the nervous retinue standing behind Jacob. They would be spared. And when Esau looked at the long line of four women and 12 children, he asked his brother for introductions. And Jacob replied, "These are the children God has graciously given to me, your servant" (Genesis 33:5 NLT).

Jacob was a clever man and even his words reveal his penchant for cleverness and resourcefulness. Notice how he includes the name of God in his introduction of his children. By referring to them as gifts from God, Jacob was letting Esau know that they were under divine protection. It seems he was still a tad suspicious of his brother's true intentions. And then, in another subtle, but equally adroit move, Jacob refers to himself as Esau's servant. The Hebrew term he used is עֶבֶד (*'ebed*) and it literally means "slave." Jacob was verbally submitting himself as a bondservant to his older brother. What makes this particularly interesting is that Jacob had worked very hard to cheat Esau out of his birthright and blessing so that he could be the head of the family and the inheritor of all their father's possessions. But, at this point, Jacob was willing to sacrifice it all to restore his relationship with Esau.

After meeting all of Jacob's wives and children, Esau revealed his curiosity about all the livestock that Jacob had sent his way.

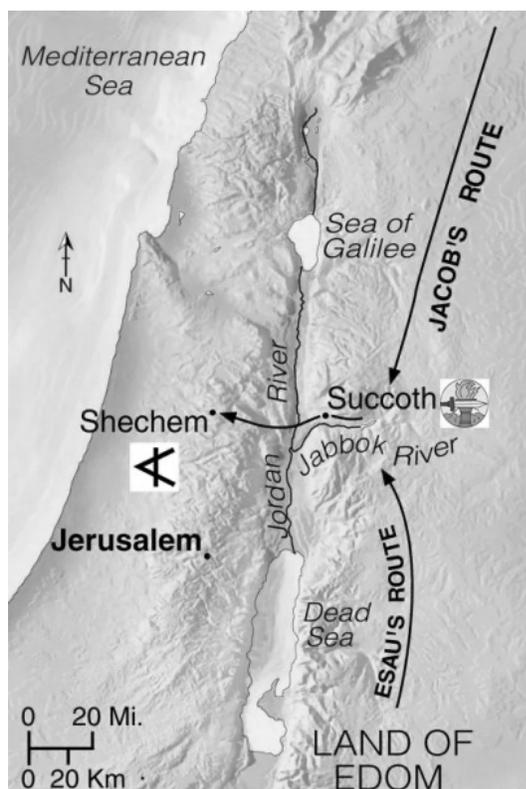
*"And what were all the flocks and herds I met as I came?"* – Genesis 33:8 NLT

Jacob explained that they had been intended as gifts for Esau, but his brother politely refused to accept them.

*"My brother, I have plenty," Esau answered. "Keep what you have for yourself."* – Genesis 33:9 NLT

There appears to be a bit of bartering going on in this exchange. Esau is playing the generous host who refuses any thought of reciprocity for his hospitality. And Jacob is the guest who insists on rewarding Esau for his kindness. So, the two brothers continued to barter over the gifts, with Jacob finally winning the day. He wanted Esau to know how grateful he was for the gracious greeting he received and told his brother, "I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me" (Genesis 33:10 ESV).

Jacob expresses his sincere desire to bless his brother. He assures Esau that God has greatly blessed him, and he desires to share divide up his blessing with him. Once again, it is important to consider how much time and energy Jacob had spent attempting to steal away his brother's birthright and blessing. But now, he is ready to share all that he has with the very one he had defrauded. The last 20 years have produced a dramatic change in Jacob.



Having successfully reunited with his brother, Jacob was determined to continue his journey to Canaan. But Esau was excited to host Jacob in his home in Seir, which was located in the land of Edom. But God had commanded Jacob to return to Canaan, the land he had promised to give him as his possession. So, when Esau offered to escort Jacob and his family to Seir, Jacob politely declined. He suggested that Esau and his men go on ahead because his flocks would need to travel at a much slower and time-consuming pace. Esau agreed to this plan and left Jacob and his retinue to continue the journey on their own.

But Jacob had no intentions of traveling to the land of Edom. He knew his destiny lie on the western side of the Jordan River in Canaan. His first stop was in Succoth, on the eastern side of the Jordan. Once there, he built a temporary dwelling place and shelters for his flocks. But his stay would not be permanent. He knew that his real home was in

Canaan so, after some undisclosed time, he set out for the city of Shechem. But like his grandfather before him, Jacob didn't take up residence in the city. Instead "he camped before the city" (Genesis 33:18 ESV). In time, he purchased the land on which he had pitched his tent, securing for himself and his family a permanent home in Canaan. And there he erected an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel, which means "God, the God of Israel."

In purchasing the land and erecting an altar to God, Jacob was staking his claim to Canaan and declaring his commitment to Yahweh. This was a watershed moment in Jacob's life. And to commemorate it, he proudly used the new name given to him by God.

*"Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." – Genesis 32:28 ESV*

The fortunes and the future of Jacob were about to undergo a remarkable change. Along with a new name and a new home, Jacob was about to experience a brand-new way of relating to and relying upon God. He had managed to escape a potential landmine with his brother, but that did not mean his stay in Canaan was going to be a cakewalk. And, as chapter 34 will reveal, things are about to heat up for Jacob.