

Genesis 32

In the previous chapter, we saw the parting of Laban, Jacob's uncle. Laban kisses his grandchildren goodbye, sets up a stone pillar, and gives a heavy-duty charge to Jacob: "You take care of my girls and my grandkids. If you do anything wrong, may God watch over you." Laban then departs and returns to his own lands.

As we open chapter thirty-two, Jacob continues his journey toward the Promised Land, but he's heading straight toward a confrontation he's been dreading for twenty years: his brother, Esau.

The Two Camps

The Bible tells us in verse one:

So Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. (Genesis 32:1)

Jacob has just finished with the host of Laban, and as he sets out again, the Bible tells us the angels of God met him. Now, try to put yourself in his sandals for a moment—how incredibly encouraging that must have been!

We have to remember that Jacob didn't have a leather-bound Bible in his pack. The Scriptures hadn't been penned yet. For the patriarchs, knowing God's will meant listening to what He revealed directly or through His messengers. While the text doesn't describe their appearance here, we know from the consistent testimony of the Word that angels have the ability to materialize and communicate clearly with men.

It makes you think of that exhortation in the book of Hebrews, where we're told to be hospitable to strangers, because some have actually entertained angels without even realizing it! It's a beautiful reminder that God's heavenly host is much closer than we often think, actively ministering to those who belong to Him.

Now, I'll be honest with you—I've never knowingly seen an angel with my own eyes. But we have to be so careful in this area, because we're called to be a discerning people. The Apostle John tells us, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God." Why? Because even Satan himself can transform into an "angel of light" to deceive.

Listen, if an angel ever shows up at the foot of your bed and starts telling you there's some "new revelation," or that there's another way to the Father besides the shed blood of Jesus Christ, or that your sin doesn't really matter to God—you reject that message immediately. A true angel of God will never, ever contradict the revealed Word of God. The Bible is our final authority; it's the plumb line by which we measure every experience.

But isn't it a beautiful thing to realize that God has a heavenly host at His beck and call? The Scriptures describe them as "ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation." I truly believe that when we give our lives to Jesus Christ—when we surrender to Him as Savior and Lord—God assigns His angels to watch over us. They are there, encamping around those who fear Him, protecting us and working behind the scenes in ways we won't fully understand until we get to glory.

Jacob sees them and says:

"This is God's host." And he called the name of that place Mahanaim. (Genesis 32:2)

"Mahanaim" means "two camps" or "two hosts." Jacob is looking at his own group—his family and servants—and then he sees God's supernatural army surrounding him. You'd think that would be enough to make him rest easy, wouldn't you? But Jacob is still Jacob.

The Strategy of the Flesh

Jacob sends messengers to Esau, calling him "my lord Esau" and referring to himself as "your servant." He's trying to be humble, trying to show Esau he doesn't need the inheritance or the wealth. But the messengers return with terrifying news:

"We came to your brother Esau, and he also is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him." (Genesis 32:6)

Four hundred men. That sounds like a war party. Jacob is "greatly afraid and distressed." He immediately goes into "management mode." He divides his people and flocks into two companies, thinking that if Esau attacks one, the other can escape.

Then, Jacob prays. And it's a good prayer! He reminds God of His promises:

"O God of my father Abraham... the Lord who said to me, 'Return to your country... and I will deal well with you.'" (Genesis 32:9)

I love to remind the Lord of His promises. Not because He forgets, but because it builds my faith to stand on what He has said. Jacob confesses his unworthiness, noting that he crossed the Jordan years ago with nothing but a staff, and now he has become two companies. He asks for deliverance.

But notice what happens next. After praying, Jacob goes right back to scheming. He prepares a massive gift—over 550 animals—and sends them in waves to "appease" Esau.

This was Jacob's great struggle. He believed in God, but he felt God needed his help. He was a manipulator, a conniver. He would pray, "Lord, help me," and then stay up all night trying to fix it himself. Do you ever do that? We hand our burdens to the Lord in prayer, and then we snatch them right back so we can worry about them some more.

The Wrestling Match

Jacob sends his family across the ford of the Jabbok, and finally, he is left alone.

And a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. (Genesis 32:24)

This "Man" was a Theophany—an appearance of the Lord. All night long they wrestled. Jacob was a strong-willed man. His greatest strength was his determination, but that was also his greatest weakness because it kept him from total surrender.

When the Lord saw that Jacob would not give up, He did something drastic:

He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of joint. (Genesis 32:25)

He crippled him. In one touch, Jacob's ability to "run" was gone. He couldn't flee from Esau anymore. He couldn't rely on his own strength. He was broken.

The Prophet Hosea tells us that at this point, Jacob wasn't demanding a blessing from a place of power; he was weeping and pleading. He was hanging onto the Lord because he had nothing else left. He says, "I will not let You go unless You bless me!"

The Lord asks him, "What is your name?" Jacob has to confess: "My name is Jacob." In those days, your name represented your character. He was saying, "I am the Heeltaker. I am the Deceiver. I am the Schemer."

But the Lord says:

"Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed." (Genesis 32:28)

"Israel" means "Governed by God." The blessing wasn't more money or more cattle. The blessing was a changed nature. God broke the man so He could make the prince.

Practical Application and Challenge

Jacob limped away from that encounter as the sun rose. He carried a permanent reminder of his dependence on God.

For the believer: What is your "strength" today? Is it your intellect? Your bank account? Your personality? Sometimes God has to touch the thing we rely on most so that we will finally rely on Him. Don't wait for the "crippling" to surrender. Let Him be the Lord of your strategies and your fears today. Stop trying to "help" God and start trusting Him.

For those who don't know Jesus: Jacob met God face to face and his life was preserved. You and I can only meet God through the person of Jesus Christ. We are all like Jacob—schemers trying to run our own lives. But Jesus went to the cross and shed His blood to pay for our deception and our sin.

He didn't stay in the grave; His resurrection declares that He is the Living God, the Savior, and the Lord. He wants to give you a "new name" today. He wants to change your nature from a servant of sin to a child of God.

The Invitation: If you've been wrestling with God, stop fighting. Surrender to Him. "Lord, I'm a sinner. I've been running my own life, and I'm broken. I believe Jesus died for me and rose again. Wash me in His blood. Take my life and govern it."

If you pray that from your heart, He will receive you. He will change you. You might walk with a "limp" in the eyes of the world, but you'll be walking with the King of Kings.