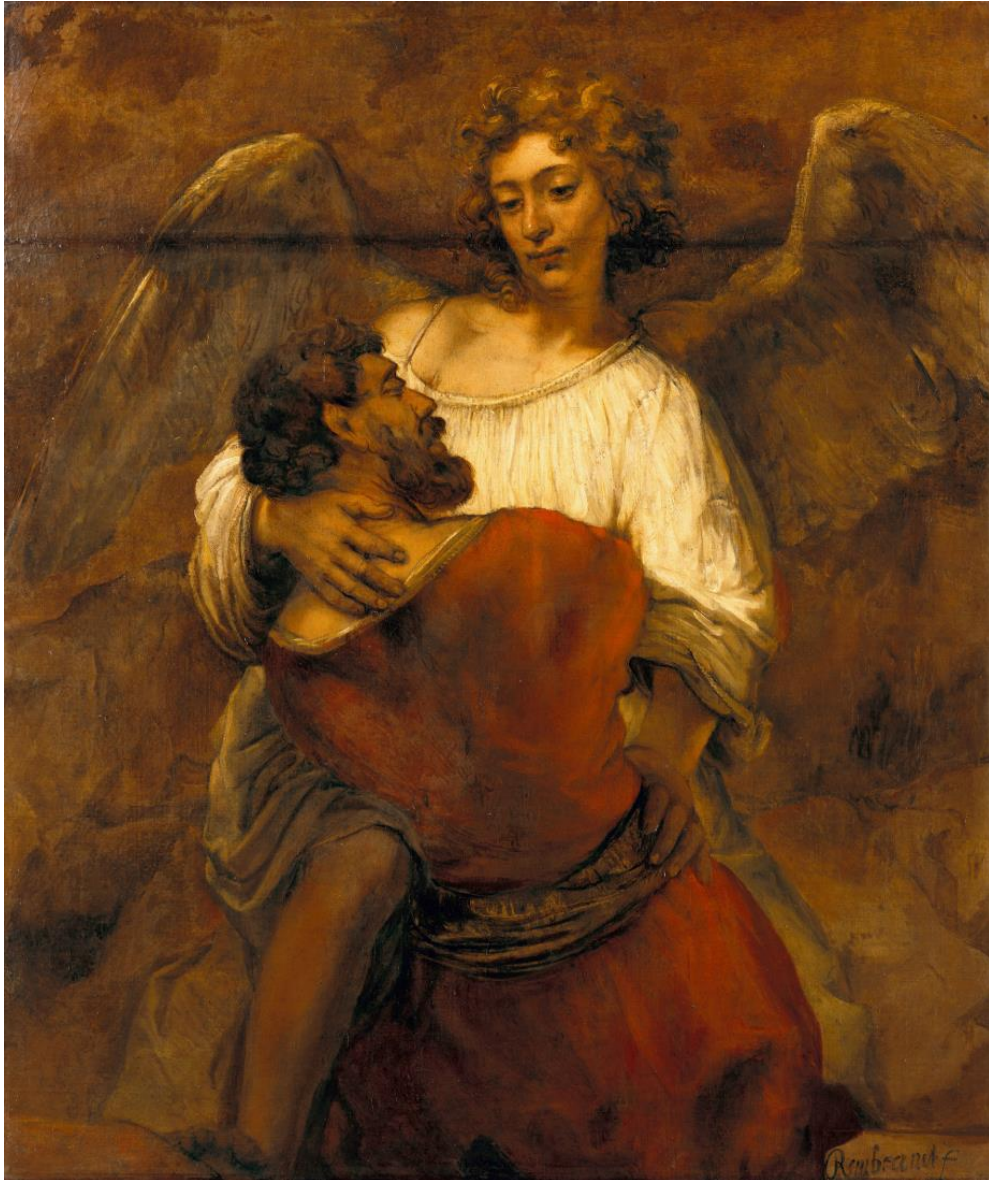


GENESIS—WEEK 27

JACOB'S TRANSFORMATION



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Cover Picture is Jacob Wrestling with the Angel by Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606–1669) on display at Gemaldegalerie der Staatlichen Museen, Berlin, Germany

God takes Jacob down completely, until he totally hits bottom. Time for a reboot. In a mysterious wrestling match with an unidentified man (presumably an angel), Jacob is reborn as Israel. At last, he's transformed into a man of God.

But he's still just a newborn man of God, and his brother's maturity will make him look silly.

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Thank you.

Genesis 32:1–33:11 — Jacob's Transformation
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1 Genesis 32:1–8 (NIV)

Jacob also went on his way, and the angels of God met him. When Jacob saw them, he said, "This is the camp of God!" So he named that place Mahanaim.

Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. He instructed them: "This is what you are to say to my lord Esau: 'Your servant Jacob says, I have been staying with Laban and have remained there till now. I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, male and female servants. Now I am sending this message to my lord, that I may find favor in your eyes.'"

When the messengers returned to Jacob, they said, "We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him."

In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and herds and camels as well. He thought, "If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape."

The US Marine Corps has a magnificent method for making Marines; they break people. When candidates have been pushed physically, mentally, and emotionally farther than they thought possible and they fail, then they're ready to be rebuilt into Marines. This is mainly for military purposes—the USMC needs to test someone's ability to handle fear and stress, and train them to handle more, but this breakdown concept is broad. It's similar to the Alcoholics Anonymous concept of hitting bottom. Major change needs major repentance, and failure triggers major repentance. To build a house, you have to clear the lot first.

Jacob is deathly afraid of Esau (for good reason), and now he has to meet him. When he hears that Esau is bringing 400 of his "closest friends" to the meeting, Jacob figures he's a goner. So, he prepares for a wipeout. God is reducing Jacob to a simpering, obsequious, thumb-sucking baby.

But beware of *schadenfreude* here. Yes, Jacob deserves (and needs) all this pain, but we're no better. Paul wrote Ephesians 4:22-24 to Christians, not unbelievers.

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (NIV)

Jacob is being set up for a painful and transformative trial, which will become the cornerstone of his life. This is one of the reasons why the Bible is full of quotes telling us to treasure our most painful moments.

Consider it all joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, — James 1:2 (NIV)

If you haven't had a trial recently, do you feel like you're missing out? Maybe you should. While we aren't expected to actually want trials, we should seek to appreciate their higher purposes.

Ask God to help you be more of a "connoisseur" of trials.

2 Genesis 32:9–12 (ESV)

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,' 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. 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. 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.'"

Repentant at last. Repentant at last. Thank God almighty, he's repentant at last.

Notice that it's Jacob's lack of faith that makes this work. If he really believed God's promises, he wouldn't be afraid at all. Instead, he's so scared that he divides his family into two camps to ensure that there will at least be some survivors.

What Jacob does here is unimpressive. Despite many incredible direct encounters with God, his faith is so weak he has little hope. He's argumentative when he says, "*But you said ...*" He's manipulative in addressing God as, "*O LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country.'*"

But he says the magic word—please. He's on his knees this time, really on his knees. "*Please deliver me.*" Please, please, please! He's totally broken. He even says, "*I am not worthy.*" Like the prodigal son, he has "come to himself."

True repentance isn't saying, "I need to grow;" it's saying, "I need to become someone else."

Jacob is, at last, ready for the great reboot of faith. He's ready to become Israel.

Jacob isn't a non-believer; he's an immature believer. His faith is weak, but it exists. We tend to look down on Jacob. That's a mistake. It's easy to criticize his beginner attitudes, but are we any better?

Pick a subject you feel pretty knowledgeable about—one that you've been expert in for a long time. Now think back a year or two. Did you think you were an expert then? Were you? Or have you learned so much that your former expertise looks weak in retrospect?

This exercise works particularly well with theological subjects (because they run infinitely deep). You never stop growing in Christ, and each new year makes the previous one look immature. Eventually, we get used to rediscovering that we're still learning, and we stop thinking so highly of ourselves. We know that next year will bring new epiphanies. Thus, we get used to the idea that there are things we don't know, even in our strongest subjects. We don't even know which things we don't know.

True humility is an advanced goal, but all Christians should strive for it.

Exercises are not the answer either; you have to ask for help.

3 Genesis 32:13–21 (NKJV)

So he lodged there that same night, and took what came to his hand as a present for Esau his brother: two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty milk camels with their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten foals. Then he delivered them to the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass over before me, and put some distance between successive droves." And he commanded the first one, saying, "When Esau my brother meets you and asks you, saying, 'To whom do you belong, and where are you going? Whose are these in front of you?' then you shall say, 'They are your servant Jacob's. It is a present sent to my lord Esau; and behold, he also is behind us.' " So he commanded the second, the third, and all who followed the droves, saying, "In this manner you shall speak to Esau when you find him; and also say, 'Behold, your servant Jacob is behind us.' " For he said, "I will appease him with the present that goes before me, and afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me." So the present went on over before him, but he himself lodged that night in the camp.

It's striking how Jacob refers to Esau as "my lord" and himself as "your servant." It's almost as if he's saying, "You can have your stupid birthright back." Isn't this just the most pitiful display of cowardice that you've ever seen?

Jacob has hit bottom. Everything has collapsed—even his faith. He has little confidence in God's deliverance, even though he just prayed for it specifically.

What makes this so deliciously ironic is that Esau had a change of heart 20 years ago. Instead of holding a grudge, he's been missing his brother. God answered Jacob's prayer two decades before he prayed it.

But Jacob doesn't know that, so he hatches a desperate plan to appease Esau. The key part in this plan—the part that serves God's purposes—is that he spends the night alone. He's alone. He's desperate. He's repentant. He's ready.

He thinks he's about to encounter Esau. Ha!

Notice that the drama between Jacob and Esau served to set up this moment. Isaac's blessing didn't have the power everyone thought it did. Jacob didn't really steal anything of value; God's prophesy was the only effectual thing there. All he did was tick Esau off, but then Esau didn't stay ticked off for long. Now Jacob, unaware of Esau's change of heart, has set himself up for his great encounter with God.

Could all that drama really have just been to get Jacob isolated for one night? Well, could all the carnage of the battle of Antietam have just been to trigger the writing of a document (the Emancipation Proclamation)?

It sure looks like that. That is how higher purposes work.

What a comfort it is to see that God knows what He's doing. Praise Him for that.

4 Genesis 32:22–32 (ESV)

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. He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. 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. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 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." 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. 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." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. 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.

Jacob has separated from his whole family and is awaiting a meeting with his brother who had planned to kill him. Jacob may have expected a fitful, sleepless night, but not like this.

As if he doesn't have enough trouble already, Jacob ends up in an all-night wrestling match with some unknown character. This is the last thing he needs—or so he thinks. The whole thing is a complete surprise. Jacob's night is trashed, and to make matters worse, he sustains a significant injury. When Jacob finally meets Esau, he'll will look like he's been hit by a bus.

Jacob is now totally broken. He knows darn well this isn't random; it has to be God's doing. Though he's too injured to wrestle, Jacob clings to this mysterious man and insists on a blessing. That's nuts—unless the man is really God (or His angel)—as He now has total control and can inflict further injury on Jacob.

But He asks Jacob his name and then changes it to Israel, which means, "He strives with God." This confirms Jacob's suspicions about who he wrestling with, but he asks the man his name anyway. He doesn't get a straight answer, but he does get the blessing.

Jacob is a new man—who can barely walk.

Once again, God's plan involves bringing someone down. Here he disables Jacob at what looks like the worst possible moment.

This sounds like a version of Murphy's Law. There is something funny about the way things go wrong. Disasters aren't random, because there is a mind and a purpose behind them. The Bible is constantly hammering this lesson.

It's the key to peace. People who can't see God's hand in things miss much of the beauty in life.

The goal in life is not to do good works; it's to know God. Seek Him first.

5 Genesis 33:1–11 (ESV)

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. And he put the servants with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on before them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother.

But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. 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." Then the servants drew near, they and their children, and bowed down. Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down. And last Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. Esau said, "What do you mean by all this company that I met?" Jacob answered, "To find favor in the sight of my lord." But Esau said, "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself." 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. 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.

Four hundred men isn't a family; it's an army. Abraham only used 318 men to rescue Lot. Why does Esau have so many? The Bible doesn't say, but it looks like he's just a great leader. He also doesn't act like a man of war; his attitude adjustment in Gen. 28:8-9 seems to have been profound. Esau has grown a lot. He's obviously very successful, and yet he isn't arrogant about it. He's simply thrilled to see Jacob and his family. He just exudes maturity, joy, and warmth.

But something's wrong with Jacob. His plan to appease Esau with gifts is thrown completely off, but he seems incapable of assimilating the good news. He just can't let go of his original plan to give away his livestock. Esau wisely sizes up the situation and accepts Jacob's gifts.

For now, let's just chalk this up to Jacob having had a rough night. But he needs to grow past simple repentance and let go of the baggage that comes with it, so that he can embrace his new identity as Israel.

He's only had his new name for a few hours, so it's not worrisome—yet.

Notice that Esau is enjoying this, even if Jacob isn't. This illustrates a glorious principle—forgiveness is fun. The forgiver benefits as much as the forgiven.

Christians are called to both give and receive forgiveness. Esau's example here is ideal; his forgiveness is total. That frees him up to enjoy things. Jacob could be free to enjoy things too, if he'd let go of his guilt.

This is pretty advanced stuff. Completely forgiving someone isn't easy. Neither is completely accepting forgiveness—even from God. But note well, the benefits of both are huge.

Pick out something from your past that you can't let go of. Ask God to clear that baggage from your soul.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What kinds of trials are the best teachers?
2. Have you ever thought you understood something completely, only to later take your understanding to a higher level?
3. Have you ever been surprised to find yourself alone with God?
4. Have you ever detected God's hand in something too mundane to normally be described as a miracle?
5. Esau's forgiveness seems totally free of residue. Do you know of any cases where someone forgave that completely?