

# Lesson19

## Genesis 32, 33, 34, 35, 36

### Chapter 32

**Obedient to God's direction, Jacob is returning with his sons to the land of promise after a 20-year absence. He is leaving conflict behind him and may expect more with Esau. What immediate assurance does he get that God is with him (vss. 1-3)?**

The angels of God, last seen at Bethel as Jacob was fleeing Esau, met Jacob as he left Gilead. The presence of God's army must have been an enormous assurance as he prepared to face Esau again. It was a tangible reminder that God had promised to bring him safely back to Canaan, and evidence that He had not forgotten.

**Think back to the circumstances leading to Jacob's flight from Canaan. What kind of reception might he expect from Esau?**

Jacob fled his homeland because Esau was determined to kill him for stealing the birthright and blessing. With Jacob out of the picture for 20 years, Esau would have enjoyed if not the blessing, then essentially the rights of the first-born in his brother's absence. He could hardly be expected to welcome the supplanter's return, which would put him out and force him to play second fiddle to his younger brother.

**Knowing that God was sending him back to claim the land and his position as heir to the promise, Jacob might have ridden proudly home, triumphantly showing off his family and flocks, proof of God's blessing. What does he do instead (vss. 3-5)?**

Jacob, fortified by seeing the angels, sent a message ahead to Esau. He does not take advantage of his position but instead is a model of humility, calling himself "your servant" and Esau "my lord," and begging his brother's favor. This seems to be an honest attempt to put out any lingering coals of anger by being meek and non-threatening. Perhaps hoping enough time has passed to cool Esau down, he wants to be reconciled.

**Do you think Jacob acted out of fear or prudence? (Prudence, which is much maligned these days, is one of the cardinal virtues. It has nothing to do with being a prude: for a good definition, read paragraph 1806 in your Catechism.)**

Jacob's fear seems to come only after he hears Esau is coming to meet him with "400 men," which was a way of referring to a good-sized fighting force. St. Thomas Aquinas called prudence "right reason in action;" Proverbs 14:15 says "the prudent man looks where he is going." Jacob is prudent like the modern Boy Scout, who is always prepared. Anticipating the possibility of a hostile response, he presents a meek and gentle face, hoping not to provoke but to damp the flames of Esau's anger.

**However Jacob hoped Esau might receive him, he is clearly distressed by Esau's response. The last time Esau came after him, Jacob fled. Even though he is afraid, how does Jacob respond this time (vss. 7-21)?**

What Jacob does with his fear shows how far he's come in 20 years. He takes immediate action to protect his family and herds by dividing them up, and then attempts to pacify his brother and perhaps hold him off a bit by sending ahead a series of herds as presents to him. But most importantly, he prays. He prays to the God of his fathers, who he recognizes as the God who told him to take this trip and promised to be with Him.

What Jacob prays is important, but it is equally important that he prays. The young Jacob longed for what God promised him and did anything and everything in his power to get there. The mature Jacob continues to want what God has for him and does what is prudent to move ahead, but his prayer shows that he knows he is in God's hands and wants to work with Him. We can learn from Jacob's example. "Prayer is a vital necessity," the Catechism tells us. It and "Christian life are inseparable (CCC 2744- 2755)."

**Jacob's prayer in vss. 9-12 is the first recorded since he made his vow at Bethel. How does Jacob show humility in his prayer?**

Jacob humbly recognizes his unworthiness and acknowledges his debt to God. He knows he is where he is not because of anything he has done but because of God's steadfast love and faithfulness. And he recognizes that he is dependent on God to be delivered from Esau.

**Is there anything about Jacob's prayer that makes you believe it will be answered?**

The fact that Jacob is where he is because God led him there, coupled with the way he prays according to God's will, repeating His promise back to Him, makes us confident that the prayer will be answered. Jacob is praying for something that he knows God wants because God promised it to him. By lifting his voice to God and asking for it, he is cooperating with God's plan for him.

**Does this sound like the Jacob of Gen. 25-31?**

Gone is the sense of entitlement we saw in his youth, when Jacob saw the blessing and birthright as being there for the taking. He clearly acknowledges his debt to and dependence on God. There is an element of trust that was missing in his prayer at Bethel, where he made his vow contingent on God's faithfulness. Jacob is praying to someone he now knows and has a relationship with. He has experienced this God in his life and no longer needs to depend on the word of his fathers.

**Alone again as he was at Bethel, Jacob came face to face with God, who came in the form of a man and wrestled him. Do you think this is how Jacob expected God to respond to his prayer? Why do you think God wrestled Jacob and hurt his hip?**

Imagine the scene: Help me, God, Jacob prayed. Deliver me from Esau - I'm afraid he'll kill us all! But you promised to give me as many descendants as there is sand at the sea. You can't let us die! Jacob did everything he could to protect himself and his family then retired for the night. Perhaps he lay wondering how God would intervene and help him fight Esau. Did he imagine the battle? How surprised he must have been when a man appeared – to wrestle him! God's answer got his attention as surely as if He had shouted down from heaven. Jacob! Esau isn't the one you have to fear. He's not the one you have to wrestle for blessing, or birthright, or land or power or life for your children. That's all in my hands. I'm the one who gives, who takes away. Wrestle with me if you want blessing.

All his life, Jacob has fought others for what he wants - first Esau and his father, then Laban. But before he can reenter Canaan and take his place as the one with the birthright and heir to God's blessing he must learn that it is GOD he must wrestle with to get it. The struggle will leave its mark: God touched his hip as a permanent, tangible reminder as well as to show that however well Jacob could wrestle, God was still in control.

**What does Jacob want from God (vss. 26-29)? What does he get?**

Jacob wants two things: God's blessing and to know God's name, or who He is in His innermost being. Jacob gets the blessing, but not God's name. (God's name is shrouded in mystery; it is too great for us to comprehend. He cannot be encompassed within the meaning of a name.) Instead God asks him his name, then gives him a new one before blessing him.

**As we learned in Gen. 17 with Abraham and Sarah, when God gives someone a new name, He marks them in a special way as His servant. This is a significant name change, for the nation that comes from Jacob, God's chosen people, will bear his name. What is the significance of God calling Jacob "Israel?"**

All his life Jacob has wrestled with men, and his given name ("he supplants") reflects that. Now he has struggled with men and with God (Israel means "he who strives with God") and he has overcome. He has achieved the blessing.

This struggle to hold on to God for a blessing, to get to know His name, marks not only Jacob's character but will mark the character of the nation of Israel throughout her history, in her ceaseless striving to know God and be blessed. It will also serve as an example to her in her own years of exile, when she is longing to return. From whom must she wrestle the promise and the land? Not from those who have taken it from her, or who live in the land in her stead; she must claim it from God who promised in the first place, hold fast to His promise and not let go until He answers.

### **Chapter 33**

**By bowing seven times before Esau, Jacob was making a gesture of total submission. Do all his elaborate precautions to appease Esau and humble himself before him turn out to have been necessary? Why or why not?**

No. Esau is warm, generous, loving, forgiving. He runs to embrace Jacob, caring only that his brother has returned.

**What might account for the change in Esau?**

Perhaps time has healed the wounds, as Rebecca had hoped. Perhaps the gifts appeased him - although he looks past them to his brother, and must be convinced to take them at all. It seems most probable that God has changed his heart, either during those 20 years or (more likely, or why did he start out to meet Jacob with a small army?) in response to Jacob's prayer and wrestling with God.

**When Jacob sets up an altar, he calls it El Elohe Israel – "Mighty is the God of Israel." What is noteworthy about this title?**

Jacob is acknowledging that the God of his fathers now is his God as well. Not "the God of Abraham and Isaac" only, but "the God of Israel." The God of Jacob, the Jacob who has struggled with God and who has been given a new name and a blessing. God has kept His promises; now Jacob is calling Him his God.

### **Chapter 34**

**What was Jacob's reaction when his daughter was violated? Who initiated reconciliation? What does this suggest to you about Jacob?**

It is surprising that Jacob, the leader and spiritual head of his family, would remain quiet about Dinah's disgrace. In contrast, Shechem's father goes straight to Jacob with an offer to make good for his son's violation. Jacob, usually so quick to take action, apparently does nothing, not even consult God. Instead he allows his sons free reign to negotiate with Hamor and handle the situation. This suggests a weakness in Jacob: he may have fought for the position of first-born, but he is not living up to it now that he has it (and curiously his own first-born son Reuben, whom one would expect to take charge in his place, is not mentioned in relation to this incident).

**Nothing can excuse Shechem's violation of Dinah. Vs. 7 is a clear denunciation of his actions. How do Shechem and Hamor propose to make good, not just with Dinah but with Jacob's family Israel? What threat did this generous offer present to Israel?**

Shechem loves Dinah and wants to marry her. Hamor not only asks for her on Shechem's behalf, he suggests to Jacob that Israel settle among them, intermarry and make their home among them. On the surface this seems a generous offer. But what did Hamor's people have to gain? Why were the men of that city willing to submit even to circumcision so that Shechem could marry Dinah? Clearly they wanted to absorb Israel, which was a potential threat to them, and benefit from God's blessing in people and possessions. This would prove a continuing problem for Israel as it is to us today: the world, if not attacking God's people, seeking to absorb them into itself.

## Chapter 35

### What did God tell Jacob to do? What might this directive accomplish?

God told Jacob to return to Bethel, to settle there, and to build an altar to the God who has been so faithful to him. Doing that would do more than remove the family from the scene of the crime, where they could expect further trouble. It would put them where they should have been to begin with, and focus them back on God and on His plan for them.

It might seem a small thing that Jacob built his altar and settled at Shechem instead of at Bethel. After all, Abraham received the promise of the land at Shechem (Gen. 12:6-7). Jacob did all the right things, just not at the right place. He followed the spirit of the law, we might say in his defense. But God has His reasons for asking particular things, and He requires obedience. Jacob did what God asked but he did it on his own terms. Not going as far as Bethel may be a small thing in and of itself, but it indicates a huge problem inside him: His way, not God's way, took first priority. By returning to Bethel, Jacob will not just obey the letter of God's law, he will humble himself to do things God's way. By settling there he will separate his family from Canaanite influence. And by building an altar and worshiping God he will have the chance to repent, to be purified, and to start again.

### What steps did Jacob take to get right with God?

In Jacob's response we see that in spite of his mistakes, his heart desire is for God. He acted immediately to move his family to Bethel. In the process he did four important things:

1. He had everyone get rid of their foreign gods. Before anything else, they had to get rid of anything that kept them from giving themselves totally to God. Jacob's family divided their allegiance between God and the household gods that were part of the culture they came from and settled in. The other gods had to go.
2. Next Jacob had them purify themselves, and change their clothes. That external act was a sign of what they needed on the inside before they could be reconciled to God.
3. Now they were ready to go to Bethel, the "house of God." This meant not just doing what had been left undone, it meant putting themselves physically in God's presence in a conscious way. Jacob took them to the place where God appeared to him and gave him the promises, and sought His face there.
4. Finally, Jacob worshiped God at Bethel. When you worship, you acknowledge who God is and His greatness and your dependence on him. You accept His will. You throw yourself before Him. You pray when you worship, and as the Catechism says, "Prayer restores man to God's likeness (CCC #2572)." In prayer and in worship, Jacob got back on the road to following God and to becoming more like Him.

### What was the real significance of Reuben's sin? (For help with this, recall the discussion of Ham's sin in Gen. 9:20-27.)

In Genesis 9 we conjectured that Ham's sin may well have been incest, with which he tried to lay premature claim to the rights of the first-born (See lesson 10). In I Chron. 5:1 is a similar situation, in which Absalom, son of King David, aims to assume power from his father by sleeping with David's concubines. Evidently Reuben, by sleeping with Bilhah, is trying to solidify his rights as the first-born son of Jacob. This reference follows on the account of Rachel's death; perhaps Reuben takes action in response to increased attention paid by Jacob to Joseph, the first-born son of his first love.

## Chapter 36

### When the land cannot support the two brothers together, who leaves: Jacob or Esau? What does this tell you?

Esau moved away from Jacob when the land could no longer support the two growing families. He did so apparently without a fight, perhaps to avoid further conflict. For all intents and purposes, this shows the older son ceding land-rights to the younger, a tacit acknowledgment that Jacob will inherit the land with the promise and blessing.