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JACOB: HOPE FOR THE UNHAPPY

Genesis 32

When Jacob was born, he came out of his mother's womb with his hand holding on to his twin brother's heel. His name means "he grasps the heel" or "deceiver." Getting ahead was Jacob's consistent goal. When the twins neared adulthood, Jacob first persuaded Esau, his elder brother (elder by minutes), to sell him his birthright. Then he also stole Esau's blessing. To which Esau said, "This is too much! I'd like to kill that brother of mine. In due course, I will." And Rebekah, their mother, said to Jacob, "You'd better leave, or else." So off went Jacob, who spent twenty years with Uncle Laban.

As we go through the story of Jacob the adult, we find that in many ways he lived up to his name. He was something of a grabber, an exploiter, a manipulator, and a cheat. None of this brought Jacob happiness; instead, it brought tension, strain, and ill will. Only when his passion for gain was finally put second to his passion for God did his life settle down. That was after Jacob tried for many years to be both worldly and godly, on the make and under the mercy, a course of action that led to the crisis at Jabbok—the turning point of his whole existence.

But there's more to the story than this. The other side of Jacob's character, from the time we meet him, is that with his heart for gain, he also had a heart for God, given to him by God himself—God who always takes the initiative in grace. God wanted Jacob as his man, and Jacob wanted God as his God.

Group Discussion. What are some ways that you have looked for happiness—and failed to find it?

Personal Reflection. How content or hopeful are you currently in God's provision and protection for you? What affects your response?

After spending years with his uncle Laban, Jacob sensed that Laban's attitude toward him had changed. Thus the Lord said to Jacob, "Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you" (Genesis 31:3). So Jacob, his wives and sons, and all their servants and animals headed toward Jacob's homeland. *Read Genesis 32.*

1. The story of Genesis 32 has several acts. Identify and name each act.

2. If you were Jacob, would you have done anything different? Explain what you would do and why.

3. What precautions did Jacob take that might lead to a peaceful meeting with his brother (vv. 1-21)?

4. Study Jacob's prayer in verses 9-12. What do the various phrases of his prayer suggest about his relationship with God?

5. Focus on verses 22-32. In what way was this encounter with God different from the relationship suggested by Jacob's prayer?

6. In what ways do you think Jacob would have been different after his encounter with God?

7. If you were to have a wrestling match with God, what would it likely be about?

8. God reveals himself in ways most important to the person he meets—as he did to Jacob. How has God revealed himself in a way that was particularly appropriate for you?

9. Jacob limped, probably all of his life, after his encounter with God. In view of what you know of Jacob's life thus far, how was this limp likely to influence the person he was becoming?

10. What could Jacob have learned about God as a result of his experiences in this chapter?

11. How might Jacob's encounter with God give you hope in your own periods of unhappiness?



Pray, thanking the Lord for his blessings on your life as the basis of your hope.

NOW OR LATER

Divide Jacob's prayer of Genesis 32:9-12 into four parts. Use those parts as an outline for your own praying.

- Verse 9: Talk to God about your own past experiences with him, particularly as they relate to your family. Bring to him the current work that he has placed in your hand.
- Verse 10: Give thanks to God for all that he has given you, acknowledging that these gifts and skills did not come by your own efforts alone. Express praise for God's character and your own need and dependence on him.
- Verse 11: Bring to God your most serious current problem. Be honest about your fears and any sense of inadequacy. Ask for his intervention to bring about what is right and good.
- Verse 12: Remind God (and yourself) of his promises to you. See, for example, Isaiah 41:9-10.

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