

Men of Integrity

Bible Study

LEADER'S GUIDE

Wrestling God

Jacob: The man who was hard to bless.

Jacob wasn't an easy man to bless. It wasn't that he didn't want God to bless him. It was just that he went about it all wrong. And that is why he is so valuable to study. Jacob is what writers call "Everyman." Reading through the stories of Jacob in the last half of Genesis, we get the impression that he is more sly and slippery than the rest of us. But at his core, Jacob may be the most typical person in the Bible.

One thing is sure—he personified the chosen people, Israel. Before the Jews were called Israel, God called Jacob Israel. Given after their famous wrestling match, it means, "God prevailed." By studying the stories of Jacob, we see how relentless God's grace is—and can save ourselves some grief by learning how to humbly receive the blessed life God wants to give those he loves.

Men of Integrity Lesson #1

Scripture:

Genesis 27:1–45; 28:10–22; 32:22–32; Hosea 11:12–12:6



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Based on:

"Jacob: A Man Who Manipulated Everyone but God," the profile on Jacob in the MEN OF INTEGRITY DEVOTIONAL BIBLE



PART 1

A Man's World

Note to leader: Provide each person with the article "Jacob: A Man Who Manipulated Everyone but God" from the MEN OF INTEGRITY DEVOTIONAL BIBLE.

Years ago, in the days of outdoor prizefights, one Australian fighter wired his father after a bout: "Won easily in 84 rounds." That might well be what God would say about his experience with Jacob. Maybe with you, too. "Won easily in 38 years." "Won easily after four job changes, a near-death experience, and 14 lost relationships." God wins, but sometimes the match is long indeed!

Jacob was born trying to get ahead. Even while they were still in Rebekah's womb, he and his twin brother Esau were fighting. When they were born, Genesis 25:26 says, Jacob was hanging on to his tiny brother's heel! And that was the story of Jacob's life. Heel Grabber. The kind of guy who steps on your heel in a race so you stumble as he scoots ahead. The thing Jacob was so determined to win in life was God's blessing. The irony of Jacob's life was that he was always scheming to get the blessing God had promised him even before he was born (Genesis 25:23). The rub was that God only blesses on *his* terms, and that took Jacob about 60 years to learn.



Discussion starters:

- [Q] Describe a time you were determined to get ahead of someone else. What did that experience do to you?
- [Q] What do you think men most want from God?
- [Q] Describe a time when you wrestled with God. What was it like?

PART 2

A Man's Word

Teaching point one: We pay a steep price for grabbing for the God-blessed life in the wrong way.

The central fact in the stories of Jacob, his father Isaac, and his grandfather Abraham was that God determined to bless them. That meant that God would protect them from enemies, prosper them, give them their own land, make their descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, and bless all the world through them—which came true through Jesus the Messiah. Like an infinitely precious family heirloom, this blessing was passed from Abraham to Isaac, and then, surprisingly, to Jacob. By rights, Esau should have received the blessing, since he was the firstborn. But God's pattern is often to bless the person you wouldn't expect.

Read Genesis 27:1–45.

- [Q] Everyone in this story was trying to win the blessing, but in the end they all lost—even Jacob. What did Jacob lose?

Leader's Note: First, Jacob lost his integrity. In a sense, he gave up his identity. He lost his family. (Jacob apparently never saw his doting mother again. Her promise that he would only be away a few days turned into 20 years). He had to flee the very land



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that was promised to him. Instead of his brother serving him, his brother remained at home while Jacob fled and ultimately became the servant of his unscrupulous uncle, Laban. Perhaps most damaging, Jacob did not really see God solve his problem. Nor, for that matter, did the rest of the family. Had God been free to bless Jacob without interference, perhaps Esau would have been softened toward God instead of cultivating a murderous, self-righteous revenge.

- [Q] When Rebekah and Jacob found out that Isaac was planning to bless Esau, they felt they had to act quickly or all would be lost. Their plan was audacious and it worked. What else could they have done, knowing that God wanted Jacob to be the one who was blessed?

Leader's Note: Some might feel that the end justified the means in this case. After all, it is pretty difficult to think of anything else they could have done to save the day. A student asked a professor of Old Testament that question: "What else could they have done?" The professor replied simply, "They could have prayed."

- [Q] Name some ways that Christians today manhandle circumstances or people to get God's blessing.

➤ What consequences do Christians who do these kinds of things experience?

- [Q] God's blessing on Jacob is expressed in vv.27–29, and more fully in 28:3–4. What promises make up the spiritual birthright of the Christian? What blessings come with our new birth in Christ?

Leader's Note: Abundant life (John 10:10); everlasting life (John 3:16); sins forgiven and forgotten (Psalm 103:10–12); a new identity as "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (1 Peter 2:9); the indwelling Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9); a family in the church (Ephesians 2:22); power over the devil (1 John 4:4); peace of mind and heart (Philippians 4:7); the privilege of coming to God our Father boldly in prayer (Hebrews 4:15–16); the word of God in Scripture and in Christ (2 Timothy 3:16; John 1:1).

Teaching point two: When God has promised to bless you, he will relentlessly pursue you.

So Jacob fled his home in Beersheba with only the clothes on his back and his walking stick. He was heading for Paddan-Aram, some 500–600 miles to the northeast, where he hoped to find his mother's family. It was wild country, and he must have been terrified that Esau was hot on his heels. He finally collapsed at a place north of what would eventually be Jerusalem. Read what happened in Genesis 28:10–22.



- [Q] Imagine you are writing this story as a novel, and you had just described Jacob's deceit in stealing God's blessing and his escape from his murderous brother. You are now writing of how Jacob sleeps and has a dream of stairs, with angels going up and down. God speaks from the top of the stairs. What do you think you would have had God say if you had never read this account?

Leader's Note: Most of us would have expected God to condemn Jacob. It is hard to imagine that God would be this kind, this gracious. There's not a hint of displeasure. Surely a good scolding would have been in order. Maybe even a revocation of the blessing, given Jacob's underhanded way of getting it. God's grace here is almost jarring; it seems almost ... well, too good to be true!



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Jacob seems to have thought he'd stumbled upon the one place on Earth where God had a portal—God's secret stairway into our world. But, of course, the stairway from heaven was there because Jacob was there, and God was with Jacob.

[Q] Before we even look at what God said, what did this dream communicate to Jacob?

- Are any of these things true for us? How do you know?

Leader's Note:

- *God has a stairway, as it were, to us. He has direct access. Jesus himself is our ladder (which many think was Jesus' meaning in John 1:49–51). Jesus brings God's presence right to where we are (Hebrews 4:15–16).*
- *God's angels travel his stairway to your life (Psalm 91:11–12; Hebrews 1:14).*
- *God himself watches over you (Psalm 139:1–3, 7–10).*

Now look more closely at what God said in vv. 13–14. Here God repeats the promises he made to Abraham, and that Isaac passed on to Jacob. Each of these promises to Jacob ultimately found fulfillment in Jesus Christ, and then came to us as believers. However, let us focus on God's great and timeless promise in v. 15: "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land." God made this promise of his presence many times in the Bible, for example in Isaiah 43:1–2 and in Matthew 28:20.

[Q] Recall specific times when God's promise to be with you was especially precious.

[Q] How do people who really trust this promise live life differently from other people?

[Q] God promised Jacob that he would eventually bring him back home to the Promised Land. God makes an even greater promise to us when he promises us heaven (John 14:1–4). What is one reason that promise from God is meaningful to you?

Teaching point three: Sooner or later, we will all face a dark night of wrestling with God over his blessing.

Teresa of Avila was a saintly woman living in Spain in the 1500s. Once, when she was traveling, she was miserably ill, it was raining, and the river she had to cross was swollen and dangerous. The story is that she looked disgustedly toward the sky and said, "Lord, if this is how you treat your friends, it is no wonder you have so few of them!"

The next 20 years of Jacob's life were like that. God was blessing him, but there seemed to be no end of hassles. He found his way to his mother's brother, Laban, but Laban spent the next 20 years doing his level best to outfox Jacob at every turn. Jacob was reaping what he had sown. He ended up married to Laban's two daughters, but they feuded bitterly and relentlessly. Eventually, they and their two servants bore Jacob 11 sons and a daughter—the beginning of God's promised blessing that he would be the father of a great nation. Then, true to his word, God blessed Jacob with great prosperity—at Laban's expense. When Laban and his sons grew angry, God told Jacob it was finally time to head for home. Now all that stood between Jacob and the land God had promised him was his brother and nemesis, Esau. At least, that's what Jacob thought. Little did he know that the great conflict before him would not be with Esau, but with God himself.

Read Genesis 32:22–32.

This strange story turns out to be one of the most important stories in the Bible. It is the story of how the nation of Israel got its name, and is a picture of their entire history in a nutshell.



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More than that, it is a story that defines all God's people. This is *our* story as Christians—each of us and all of us.

The “man” Jacob wrestled with was no ordinary man. He was an angel—perhaps one of those angels Jacob had seen ascending and descending in his dream of God's staircase. Or perhaps he was God himself appearing in human form (a theophany), for Jacob would say when it was over, “I saw God face to face.”

Surely this wrestling match wasn't about muscle, for even the lowliest angel could have immediately pinned Jacob.

[Q] What were these two fighting *for*? What was the prize?

Leader's Note: *This is the crux of the story. This wrestling match wasn't about physical strength. It was a battle of wills. Read Hosea 11:12–12:6, the Bible's own commentary on this passage. Hosea likens the rebellion of the Israelite nation in his own day to the stubbornness of their forefather Jacob. Verse 4 says, “He struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favor.” Verse 6 says that the nation should do what Jacob did that dark night: “But you must return to your God; maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always.” That is the very definition of repentance. So Jacob was wrestling with God over repentance. This was not a battle of muscle, but a battle of wills. The man who was born gripping the heel of his brother, now wouldn't let go of God!*

Proverbs 11:29 says, “He who brings trouble on his family will inherit only wind.” That is exactly what Jacob feared he would inherit—nothing but the wind—because the next day he would face his brother Esau, whose murderous anger he had fled 20 years before. Jacob feared that Esau would kill all his family and seize his flocks, and then kill Jacob himself. He saw, perhaps for the first time, how all his conniving to get God's blessing had brought him to this dark and lonely night with the prospect of losing everything. When Jacob realized in the midst of the wrestling match that he had been ambushed by God himself, he knew this was his last chance. If God left him, he would have nothing. Hosea makes clear that Jacob wept and begged for God's favor.

[Q] Have you ever wrestled long with the Lord? What was that experience like for you? What were you wrestling for?

[Q] The man says a strange thing in response to Jacob's plea for his blessing in verses 27–29. What was the Lord doing in this exchange?

Leader's Note: *Jacob's name meant something like Trickster or Deceiver. Esau had said in Genesis 27:36, “Isn't he rightly named Jacob? He has deceived me these two times ...” That was the very reason why the coming day was so frightening to Jacob—the time had come for him to face the consequences of his life. But God gives him a new name. Israel is best translated “God prevails,” yet the man seems to turn the meaning the other way: “because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.” It is all a matter of how you look at it. Jacob surely had struggled with people—his father and brother, his uncle and his wives— and now he had wrestled with the Lord himself, and in the end Jacob would have the blessing he had long sought. He had overcome. But from another perspective, it was God who had wrestled Jacob into the blessing he could have so easily forfeited. Despite all Jacob's faults and faithlessness, God's grace was too great to let him go.*

[Q] If you had a name that described your character or personality before God fixed his love on you, what might it be?



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- Would the name *Israel, God Prevailed*, be a good name for you now? Why or why not?

- [Q]** How does Jesus fit into this story as it applies to our lives? How is our story different from Jacob's because of Christ?

Leader's Note: *Just as Jesus was the second Adam, so he is also the second Israel. He wrestled with God, but on our behalf. He wrestled with God in Gethsemane and was forsaken by his Father on the Cross. Rather than being blessed, he was cursed for our sake and in our place. God's blessings are ours because of Jesus.*

Optional Activity: *On a sheet of paper map or chart the contours of your life with God—the times of rebellion or scheming, the times of God's clear blessing, and the times when you wrestled with the Lord. Share your life map with one of the others in your group.*

PART 3

A Man's Work

Jacob called that lonely place by the river Peniel, meaning "Face of God." The next day he met Esau, and was astonished to find that Esau welcomed him warmly. God was indeed blessing him. Not long after, Jacob fulfilled an old promise and returned to Bethel, the place where he had the dream of the stairway from God. There he built an altar to God "who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone" (Genesis 35:3).

Near the end of his life, Jacob gathered all his sons around him and blessed each of them with promises about their future. In particular, he blessed Joseph's two sons: "May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the Angel who has delivered me from all harm—may he bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, and may they increase greatly upon the earth" (Genesis 48:15–16).

And it was that faith—faith that trusted God for the far future of his sons—that is commended to us in Hebrews 11:21: "By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff."

When God steps into someone's life, he is in it for the long haul. God often takes a long, long time to bestow on us his best blessing—a deep trust in his love and faithfulness. We often think these stories point to Jacob's sly and tricky ways, but the fact is, these stories show forth the God Who Prevails, not by force, but by grace.

- [Q]** Sometimes the God-blessed life is not the life you would have chosen. What are some ways you've learned that lesson?

Frederick Buechner wrote about this story in a book called *The Magnificent Defeat*. In it he writes, "Power, success, happiness, as the world knows them, are his who will fight for them hard enough; but peace, love, joy, are only from God. And God is the enemy whom Jacob fought there by the river, of course, and who, in one way or another, we all of us fight—God, the beloved enemy. Our enemy because, before giving us everything, he demands of us everything; before giving us life, he demands our lives—our selves, our wills, our treasures."¹

Action Point: At first, Jacob and Esau both wanted God's blessing because they wanted the temporal benefits—prosperity, peace, and a prominent family. Esau never wanted anything more; the Bible says, "Esau despised his birthright." Gradually Jacob came to understand that God's best blessing was his presence and grace, and the hope of a glorious future. Read Jacob's

¹ HarperOne, 1985, p. 18.



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blessing on Joseph's sons in Genesis 48:15–16 again. Then write your own paraphrase of that blessing—perhaps for your own children, or for a spiritual son or daughter. Share what you've written with someone else in your group.

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Additional Resources

- *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*, Allen P. Ross (Baker, 1988; ISBN 0-8010-7748-6)
- *Great Men of the Bible, Vol. 1*, F. B. Meyer (Zondervan, 1981; ISBN 0-551-00905-5)
- *The Message of Genesis 12-50*, Joyce G. Baldwin (IVP, 1986; ISBN 0-87784-298-1)
- *Son of Laughter*, Frederick Buechner (HarperCollins, 1994; ISBN 0-06-250116)—a novel on the life of Jacob
- *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16-50, Volume 2*, Gordon J. Wenham (Thomas Nelson, 1994; ISBN 0849902010)



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Jacob

A man who manipulated everyone but God.

The other twin was born with his hand grasping
Esau's heel. So they called him Jacob.
GENESIS 25:26

When Isaac prayed for a child (Genesis 25:21), he got twice as much as he bargained for—Esau and Jacob. Both were troublemakers. Jacob, the “heel grabber,” showed his wily character early as he tried to beat his twin out of his mother’s womb. Esau, “Big Red” (Genesis 25:25, 30), was so spiritually insensitive that he gave up his birthright for a bowl of spicy stew (Genesis 25:29–34; Hebrews 12:16).

Even though Jacob’s brains outfoxed Esau’s brawn, the trade-off symbolized the values of each brother. Not only did Jacob scheme for Esau’s birthright (Genesis 25:29–34), but he also stole his blessing (Genesis 27:25–29). Genesis 27 describes a classic dysfunctional family—a compliant father (Isaac), a conniving mother (Rebekah), a careless son (Esau), and a conning son (Jacob). And each parent played favorites.

While Esau was out stalking prey (Genesis 27:5), Jacob was indoors stalking prey. He fooled his feeble father in every sense. He cheated Isaac’s sight (27:23), taste buds (27:14), touch (27:21–23), hearing (27:22), and smell (27:27). One day Jacob would be conned by his sons into believing his favorite son was killed by wild animals. He would be deceived by goat’s blood (Genesis 37:31–34), just as he had fooled his father with goat’s meat (27:14) and goat skins.

When Esau found out he had been outsmarted, he went after his brother to kill him. Jacob was forced to run four hundred miles away. He would never again see his mother alive.

While away from home, the fugitive met God (Genesis 28:10–22), his wife-to-be (Genesis 29:9–14), and Uncle Laban. Jacob loved Rachel at first sight (Genesis 29:18), but his future father-in-law proved to be more than his match. After working seven years for his bride, Jacob discovered in a pitch-black tent that Laban had deceived him by giving him the older Leah rather than her sister. Jacob had to work seven more years for Rachel.

Jacob returned to Bethel, where he had made a deal to worship God if God would protect him and bring him back to his father. What’s your response when God says to you: “Go back to what you heard and believed at first; ... turn to me again” (Revelation 3:3)? Like Jacob, will you return to Bethel to see Christ, the ladder that extends up to heaven?

The profile on Jacob in the Men of Integrity Devotional Bible





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