

# Lesson 3 | September 17, 2023

## God Blesses Jacob (Israel)

**Study Text:** Genesis 32:21–32; 35:1–15

**Central Truth:** God patiently draws sinners to repentance and submission.

**Key Verse: Proverbs 3:5–6**

Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.  
In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths (KJV).

Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding.  
Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take (NLT).

**Learning Objectives:**

- Students will explore the many Christian life lessons found in Jacob’s story, including persistence, restoration, and appreciation for God’s promises.
- Students will examine their lives to see whether they have submitted all areas to God, trusting Him to reveal any areas that need to be submitted to Him.
- Students will praise God for His many blessings, most importantly, the gift of salvation.

## Introducing the Study

**Say:** The more life experience we gain, the more we are able to look back and see the countless ways we have changed, grown, and matured.

**Opening Activity—I’ve Changed**

*Ask: Think about the ways you’ve changed throughout your life. What changes stand out most? What brought these changes about? Examples include physical growth, emotional maturity, new perspectives, and life experience.*

**Say:** We all grow and change throughout our lives. Things we once thought were important now seem trivial and vice versa. This is also true in our spiritual lives as we are discipled and develop maturity in ways we did not expect. This lesson looks at the later portion of Jacob’s life, particularly his decision to lay aside past wrongs and humble himself before the Lord. In his story, we see God’s restoring grace and are reminded that His promises endure. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

In last week’s lesson, Jacob fled from Esau to live with his uncle Laban in the area of Paddan Aram in northern Mesopotamia where the family had originated (see Genesis 24:4,10; 25:20). Twenty years later, Jacob had established a large family, made his way back to Canaan, and sought reconciliation with Esau. God’s covenant promise to Abraham was marching forward. In this portion of the story, we see Jacob turn from his ungodly past and become the person of persistent faith God called him—and us—to be.

# Part 1—Jacob Wrestles with God

## Jacob Persists

Genesis 32:21–26

**Say:** Sometimes life is messy—even for those who follow the Lord. We struggle and fall short, nevertheless believing confidently that God is who He says He is. This was true in Old Testament times as well. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Jacob is arguably one of the most complicated figures in the Old Testament. He was deceptive—even manipulative—in his relationships with family and his trust in God seemed to waver. However, as he fled from a vengeful Esau, he vowed: “If God will indeed be with me and protect me on this journey, and if he will provide me with food and clothing, and if I return safely to my father’s home, then the LORD will certainly be my God” (Genesis 28:20–21, NLT). Jacob expressed a level of confidence here, since the word translated “if” carries with it the sense of “when.” While Jacob did not know when the promise would be fulfilled, he had an eye toward that day. Jacob was growing and learning.

Genesis 32:21–26 picks up the story of Jacob a full two decades after we last saw him. He married both Leah and Rachel, fled from Laban in Mesopotamia, and set out with his family to return to Canaan (chapter 31). Upon his return, he sent a message to his estranged brother, Esau, and received a reply that Esau (and four hundred of his men) would soon be heading to meet him. Then Jacob attempted to appease Esau by sending ahead a collection of gifts.

Jacob could not sleep as he anticipated the meeting with Esau, so he took his family and crossed the Jabbok River, which flows into the Jordan River from the east around midway between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. He sent all his possessions over the river as well (32:22–23). Alone in the darkness, Jacob was suddenly grabbed by a man who wrestled with him until daybreak. Hosea 12:3–4 calls this being an angel, though the Old Testament often uses the phrase “angel of the LORD” in reference to God himself (see Genesis 16:7–14; 22:11–15).

As the wrestling match continued, the angel could not win, so he dislocated Jacob’s hip. This left Jacob unable to wrestle; he could only keep the angel from escaping (32:24–25). Jacob then recognized this being was more than a mere man, and he continued to hold on until a blessing came (verse 26). As dawn approached, the angel cried out to be released, but Jacob insisted that he receive a blessing first.

### **Discuss**

? What can we learn from Jacob’s persistent wrestling with God?

? Have you ever felt the need to be persistent in seeking God’s blessing? Explain.

## God Empowers Jacob

Genesis 32:27–32

**Say:** We've all had transformational moments in our lives, including spiritual encounters. Genesis 32:27–32 records one such famous moment in the life of Jacob. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

When Jacob was asked, “What is your name?” (32:27, NLT), it wasn't just a matter of a passing introduction. The name *Jacob* means “supplanter” or “replacer” and is linked with deception (see 27:36). Asking Jacob his name forced him to come face-to-face with his devious past. Answering was an admission of guilt.

But then God did something wonderful, even transformational. He said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob. . . . From now on you will be called Israel, because you have fought with God and with men and have won” (verse 28, NLT). The name *Israel* might be defined as “he struggled with God.” Hosea expands on this: “He wrestled with the angel and won. He wept and pleaded for a blessing from him” (12:4, NLT). Such is the name of a victor, one who has matured spiritually. It is also fitting that the name *Israel* became the name of the nation comprised of God's chosen people. They would contend for the faith. Victory over their enemies would come as they trusted God.

In Genesis 32:29, Jacob asked the mysterious figure to give his name. His response implied Jacob ought to have known it already. And indeed, verse 30 shows that he did. Jacob named the place Peniel, which means “face of God.” Jacob had encountered God face-to-face in the darkness and lived to tell about it, even received God's blessing. That blessing was both simple and indescribably profound. God changed Jacob's name, reaffirming that his descendants—God's people, the seed of Abraham—would be blessed by God, and through them the entire human race would be blessed. God's covenant plan and promise continued to unfold and move forward.

### **Discuss**

? Jacob's encounter left him both humbled and exalted by God. According to James 4:10 and 1-Peter 5:6, what is the relationship between being humbled and being exalted by God?

? Jacob's story reminds us that God's people share a personal, interactive relationship with Him. How can this help when our faith is challenged?

## **Part 2—Jacob Submits to God**

### **“Get Rid of Your Idols!”**

Genesis 35:1–3

**Say:** One important part of spiritual growth is getting rid of things that bring spiritual harm and dishonor God. Jacob faced this very issue in Genesis 35. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

By Genesis 35, Jacob had reconciled with Esau. God was directing him back to Bethel, where He had affirmed the covenant decades earlier (see 28:10–22). There Jacob had

made a vow that the Lord would be his God. He had sealed that vow with a memorial pillar, which would become a place of worship to the Lord.

By directing Jacob to return to Bethel, God was acting to renew the covenant promise. Upon his arrival, Jacob was to build an altar “to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother, Esau” (35:1, NLT). This was a reminder of how God had protected and provided for Jacob. It also served as a rebuke.

Genesis 33:18–19 records that after his reconciliation with Esau, Jacob eventually settled in Shechem. Shechem was a Canaanite city about twenty miles north of Bethel. Chapter 34 records the tragedies that occurred during the family’s time in Shechem, including the rape of Jacob and Leah’s daughter Dinah. By returning to Bethel, Jacob would be where God had commanded him to go.

Jacob commanded every pagan idol should be destroyed and every household member should go through ritual cleansing. Genesis 35:2–3 provides a useful description of repentance and renewal—even for us today. First, the members of the household were to get rid of the idols they carried with them. This included the idols Rachel had taken from her father’s household (see 31:34–35) and the pagan religious items other members of the clan had undoubtedly collected from Shechem (35:4).

After purging the false gods, they were to purify themselves and change their clothes (verse 2). This is an interesting instruction, because this mention of ceremonial purification comes before the Law was given. Purity before God is always necessary, even beyond the Law. In the case of Jacob’s family, this cleansing would enable them to move from idolatrous influences—which are detestable to the Lord (see Deuteronomy 7:25)—into a right standing before Him. We also must be pure before the Lord. Our purity is imparted through Christ (see 1 Corinthians 6:11; Hebrews 9:14), although it does involve a personal response (see James 4:8).

For Jacob’s household to rid themselves of impurity, they would also need to change their garments (Genesis 35:2), symbolizing a new way of life that included trusting in God alone. Then Jacob would build an altar to the one true God, who had been so faithful to him and his family (verse 3).

### **Resource Packet Item 1: No Other Gods**

Distribute the worksheet and complete it as a class. Emphasize the definition of what would make something a false god to us today. Discuss ways we can resist the false gods that tempt us.

#### ***Discuss***

? Why do you think God is so insistent that Christians separate themselves from the sinful influences of the world around them?

? How would you explain what it means to be pure before God?

## **God Protects Jacob**

## Genesis 35:4–7

**Say:** God cares for His own. We tend to forget this simple fact—especially when we’re in the middle of difficult situations. Genesis 35:4–7 reminds us of God’s loving care for His people. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Jacob dealt straightforwardly with the problem of his household’s idols and pagan religious items. He buried them “under the great tree near Shechem” (verse 4, NLT). The word translated “buried” (NLT) or “hid” (KJV) is a rare Hebrew word, different from the word translated “buried” in verse 8. It conveys the sense of hiding, implying that they would leave the gods they worshiped in the past and worship only the Lord. A new season was awaiting Jacob’s family in Bethel.

As Jacob and his clan made their way south, God miraculously prepared the way (verse 5). He caused a sense of panic to grip the population around Bethel, squelching any desire the Canaanites and Perizzites might have had to attack and slay Jacob’s household (see 34:30).

Jacob’s arrival in Bethel (known as Luz in Canaan) illuminated the fact God had been with him each step of the way, faithful through every high and low. So Jacob turned his attention to worshiping God. He built an altar and named the place El-bethel, meaning “God of Bethel.” This was the place God profoundly blessed Jacob by renaming him Israel a second time. His physical travels and his spiritual journey had come full circle.

We may be able to relate to Jacob. Our Creator has a plan for each of our lives—that we would walk with Him and live in His presence. Sometimes we stray far from that purpose, but God can restore us, redeem us, and give us new life.

### **Resource Packet Item 2: Where Did God Go?**

Distribute the case study and discuss it in class. Remind students that God faithfully restores us when we seek Him, even if we have strayed far from His presence and His will.

#### **Discuss**

? How can we identify and symbolically bury the idols we worshiped in the past or are worshiping now?

? Describe a time you realized God had protected you.

## **Part 3—Abrahamic Covenant Reaffirmed “I Am El-Shaddai—God Almighty”**

### Genesis 35:8–13

**Say:** As God’s people, we must never forget that His promises are not based on our circumstances or worthiness, but on His sovereign goodness. Jacob had certainly not proven any worthiness on his part. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

After the death of Rebekah's nursemaid (35:8), God again affirmed His covenant with Jacob and his family. Verse 9 states that God appeared to him again. The wording alerts us to the unique importance of this moment. God is mentioned as actually appearing to Jacob!

This was a key moment for Jacob. God restated his name change, a firm reminder of God's blessings on this man who was once a deceiver. Then God declared, "I am El-Shaddai—'God Almighty'" (verse 11, NLT). He would later explain to Moses, "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El-Shaddai—'God Almighty'—but I did not reveal my name, Yahweh, to them. And I reaffirmed my covenant with them" (Exodus 6:3–4, NLT).

God's next words might seem odd: "Be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 35:11, NLT). This was the same instruction God had given Adam and Eve (1:28). God was still concerned with bestowing His blessings on all people. He was building one nation—but for a purpose as wide-reaching as the world He had created. The purpose related back to creation and the Fall. God was moving to restore and redeem what had been lost.

Not surprisingly, then, this command was followed by a recap of what God told Abraham in 12:1–3 and again in 17:4–6, plus one further point of clarity. Jacob would become "many nations. Kings will be among your descendants!" (35:11, NLT). This (along with 17:6) likely foreshadows Abraham's role as a spiritual as well as a biological father. Both Galatians 3:6–9 and Romans 9:8 clarify that God's promise encompasses both Jews and Gentiles. Every nation—that is, every people group—is invited to become heirs of the promise.

This promise found its physical reality in the land God would give Abraham and Jacob's descendants. In Genesis 35, Jacob was still a resident alien in the land of Canaan. Yet it was, in fact, his Promised Land (verse 12). It would become the possession of his descendants. Despite many unfortunate circumstances and unwise choices, Jacob found himself in the place Almighty God had intended, as he received the Lord's promise.

### ***Discuss***

? What does the name El-Shaddai (Genesis 35:11) tell you about God's nature and character? Why do you think He called himself by this name when speaking with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?

? Why is it important to recognize God always had the Gentiles in view as part of His covenant promise, even as He worked through the patriarchs in the Old Testament?

## **Jacob Sets a Stone of Remembrance**

Genesis 35:14–15

**Say:** Have you ever saved something as a reminder of a precious moment in your life—perhaps some piece of memorabilia like a baseball from a World Series, a piece of

jewelry, or a photo? These memorials can fill us with gratitude and remind us of the ways God has blessed us. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Jacob knew this incredible covenant moment had to be remembered for generations, so he again set up a stone memorial in Bethel, just as he had done years earlier (Genesis 35:14; see 28:18). He then poured wine over it and anointed it with olive oil as an offering to God. The place would fittingly be called Bethel, or “house of God,” for God had met Jacob there and affirmed His enduring promises. Bethel would continue to be a significant location throughout Old Testament times and is mentioned fifty-nine times after the events of Genesis 35.

### **Resource Packet Item 3: Stone of Remembrance**

Complete the worksheet together. Encourage students to respond to the personal reflection question and then look for an opportunity to share their experiences of God’s faithfulness.

#### ***Discuss***

? What special memories do you have of the things God has done? How can you effectively share those stories as a testimony to His faithfulness?

? What tools could you use to better remember the blessings of God and respond with gratitude?

## **What Is God Saying to Us?**

**Say:** Jacob’s journey toward the Promised Land in Genesis 32–35 brings the larger story of God’s covenant promise full circle, adding physical reality to the promise of Genesis 12. There are times in our own lives when God’s promises seem far away, and we might struggle to believe they will come to pass. But we can be assured that God will continually guide and bless us according to His unfailing promises.

## **Living It Out**

### **Ministry in Action**

- Pray and study God’s Word to prepare yourself to reach people who struggle with feelings of regret and guilt over past sins. Ask God to help you know what to say in those situations.
- This week, tell someone about a miracle God has done for you.
- Pray for fellow believers who are struggling in their faith. Believe God to draw them back to himself.

## **Daily Bible Readings**

Monday:

Worship God Alone.  
Exodus 23:23–33

Tuesday:

Consequences of Not Submitting to God.  
Psalm 81:11–16

Wednesday:

Every Knee Will Bow.

Isaiah 45:18–23

Thursday:

Christ's Obedience Brings Life.

Romans 5:12–21

Friday:

Humble Yourselves before God.

James 4:1–10

Saturday:

Submit to Earthly Authority.

1 Peter 2:13–20