

# Walking in Prayer: Old Testament

## Lesson 2: Prayers of Jacob

### Vocabulary:

to wrestle	to struggle	to prosper (n. prosperity)	despite
to produce	character	to catch up with	hard stance
blessing	overnight	to take a stand for	generous
custom	to confront	to move on from	peace offering
to be proud of	over time	obligation	to “test the waters”
to trick	expectation	to reject	to resolve
to age (adj. aging)	anxious	to move forward	to reconcile (n. reconciliation)
to pretend	restless	to run away from	to deal with
to depend on	to take charge of	to pursue	identity
to confirm	livestock	to initiate	to ignore

### Discussion:

In Lesson 1, we learned lessons from Adam about how to take responsibility for our problems and humbly confess our problems to God. We learned from Enoch how to walk with God in obedience, deeply seeking his Word and direction for our lives. From Abraham, we learned how to devote our lives fully to the Lord and saw God’s desire for us to love and multiply his people.

Share one way that you were impacted by the last lesson. In what ways do you still want to grow?

In this study, we will look at the life and prayers of Jacob and how he **wrestled** in his walk with God.

### The Prayers of Jacob (Genesis 27-33)

We see in the Old Testament that God’s plan for Abraham to **produce** a nation of children is continued through Isaac, who then gives birth to Jacob. As a young man, Abraham’s grandson Jacob does not trust and obey the Lord the way his grandfather did. Throughout his young life, Jacob uses lying as a way to get what he wants. Jacob lies to his father Isaac to receive the **blessing** that belongs to his brother Esau. Esau is the first born son, a position that in Jewish **custom** comes with special blessings spoken to him by his father.<sup>1</sup> By Jewish law, the first born son also receives twice the amount of the inheritance.<sup>2</sup> Jacob wants his father **to be proud of** him and to love him more than he loves his brother Esau, so he **tricks** his blind, **aging** father by **pretending** to be Esau so that he might receive Esau’s blessings.

Yet, God has a vision for young Jacob and a plan for his life that doesn’t **depend on** his father’s blessing, but Jacob is still learning to trust God. To encourage Jacob, God sends him a dream to **confirm** the promise he made to Abraham and that he is now making to Jacob: “I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying” (28:13b). God promises to be with Jacob and to watch over him throughout his life. When Jacob realizes that God spoke to him in a dream, he gives his life to the Lord, worships him, and sacrifices a tenth of all possessions.

<sup>1</sup> See Genesis 27:27-29.

<sup>2</sup> See Deuteronomy 21:15-17.

We have all **struggled** wanting the approval or blessing of a parent or authority (teacher, boss, pastor, etc.), yet never receiving it. How have you struggled wanting this approval? How did you try to get it?

Even though Jacob commits his life to God, Jacob's sinful **character** doesn't change **overnight**. He hasn't learned to trust God and turn to him for his needs. When Jacob faces challenges, he continues to use lying, instead of prayer and honesty, to overcome his struggles. When seeking a wife, Jacob falls in love with a woman named Rachel. Rachel's father Laban, however, requires Jacob to work for him for seven years to earn Rachel as a wife. When it comes time to marry, Laban tricks Jacob into marrying his first daughter Leah and forces Jacob to work for him seven more years to earn his other daughter, Rachel. During this time, Laban even decreases Jacob's wages ten times, causing Jacob great suffering. Instead of praying and **confronting** Laban with courage and honesty, Jacob acts obedient on the outside but hides his true feelings of bitterness and anger. **Over time**, he turns to lying and stealing to get what he wants.

Can you think of a situation in the past when you hid your true desires, **expectations**, thoughts, or feelings from another person? Perhaps you agreed to a situation that you didn't really want. What happened? Why did you hide your true thoughts?

How did hiding your true desires, expectations, thoughts, or feelings from another person make you feel? How did it affect the situation or your relationship with this person?

Is there a situation now where you are hiding your true desires, expectations, thoughts, or feelings from another person? Explain.

After seven more years of working for Laban, Jacob is **anxious** and **restless** to have his own home and to **take charge of** his family. Even though God has promised Jacob that he is with Jacob and will give him this new home, Jacob uses deception to steal **livestock** from Laban to increase his own wealth and **prosperity**. When he has enough livestock, he secretly runs away from Laban's house with his two wives and stolen animals. Laban **catches up with** Jacob and confronts Jacob about his behavior, but Jacob is honest with Laban and **takes a stand for** what is right – that it is time for him **to move on from** his father-in-law's house and build his own home without guilt or **obligation** to Laban. Laban respects Jacob's courage, and the two men make peace with each other that day. On the way to his homeland, God gives Jacob the ability to see the "camps," or armies, of angels walking with him. At that moment, Jacob realizes that God is truly leading and protecting him.

Jacob is finally honest and firm with Laban about his decision. Imagine if Laban had **rejected** Jacob's decision to leave. What would Jacob have to do to reach the land God had promised him and continue building his family? How could this situation become confusing and difficult?

Think about the situation now where you are hiding your true desires, expectations, thoughts, or feelings. How can you be like Jacob: express your thoughts clearly and **move forward** with God's plans for your life?

Sometimes we fail to move forward into God's plans because we don't know what his plans are for us. Has God ever given you a dream for your life: a way to serve him, a special job, a family of your own, a way to impact others? What sacrifices and firm decisions will you need to make to fulfill God's plans?

Even though Jacob has many problems with his sinful character, God continues to encourage Jacob to give Jacob the strength he needs to obey the plans God has for his life. Before reaching his promised land, however, Jacob has one more assignment: to make peace with his brother Esau. Yet, Jacob is fearful about how his brother will respond. Unlike his situation with Laban, however, Jacob doesn't **run away from** Esau. Filled with courage that came through obedience, Jacob boldly **pursues** peace with his brother. He doesn't secretly avoid Esau the way he did with Laban, but he actually **initiates** the peacemaking process, **despite** his fear! Unlike Jacob's "**hard stance**" with Laban, Jacob humbly prepares a **generous** gift for Esau as a **peace offering** and sends the gift and kind note to his brother before their meeting. In a sense, he "**tests the waters**" of Esau's heart.

Why do you think God wants Jacob to **resolve** his issues with Esau before starting his own family in his new land?

Like Jacob, we can feel afraid about resolving conflict with family members or friends. Why does resolving conflict with difficult people make us afraid? Why is it important to try?

Discuss what it means to "test the waters." How does Jacob's approach show wisdom and humility?

Do you have a relationship with a family member, friend, teacher, boss, etc. that needs **reconciling**? What would humility, honesty, and true **reconciliation** look like in your situation?

If you are afraid to reconcile with this person, what could you do to "test the waters" before approaching them? Pray to God about a way to encourage them.

When Esau learns that Jacob is returning home, he goes to meet Jacob taking four hundred men with him. For the first time, we see Jacob praying to God with great fear that Esau will attack him:

"O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, Lord, you who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you **prosper**,'<sup>10</sup> I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff\* when I crossed this Jordan [River], but now I have become two camps\*.<sup>11</sup> Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children.<sup>12</sup> But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'" (Genesis 32:9-12, NIV)

\* A *staff* in ancient times was a stick used to guide sheep. A *camp* in this situation is a group of people who follow a particular person.

What promises of God does Jacob remember during his prayer? How might these promises give him courage to face Esau?

In Jacob's prayer, we see that even though Jacob knows God is with him, he is still afraid of his brother Esau. This feeling is normal. Yet, instead of lying, running away, or trying **to deal with** the situation by himself, he cries out to God for help. Jacob reminds himself and God of the promises that God spoke to him in the past: angels are protecting him, he will prosper, and he will have many children. We see that Jacob is now a man who is humble and honest about how he feels before God, yet he is beginning to trust God's love and protection over his life. Through this prayer, Jacob realizes that no matter how Esau responds to him, God's promises and protection for Jacob will never change. If Jacob continues to pursue God's plan for his life, Jacob *will* have children, a land of his own, and a life of his own. Nothing can change that. We see that while Jacob *wants* Esau's acceptance, Jacob does not *need* Esau's love, forgiveness, or approval to fulfill God's plans for his life.

What would it look like for you to receive God's promises for your life, yet never receive this person's love and approval? How could you still find peace in your life?

The night before Jacob meets Esau, God appears to him in the form of a man. The man wrestles with Jacob throughout the night. Jacob overcomes the man from God but won't let him go until the man blesses him. Even though God has shown Jacob the armies of angels near him and had spoken to Jacob in dreams, we see that Jacob is still searching for a blessing that God has already promised him. Even so, God gives Jacob the blessing he desires – not just land, possessions, a family, or even angels. God gives Jacob a new **identity** and a new name: *Israel*, which means "he struggles with God."<sup>3</sup> Israel becomes the name of the nation God had promised Abraham, Isaac, and now Jacob. Jacob is not just the son of his father, and he is not just the father of his own family. Jacob is now the leader of a nation: the nation of Israel. When Jacob rises from the spot where he wrestled with God, he sees Esau coming to him and they are rejoined as brothers on that day.

Throughout his life, Jacob searched for acceptance and approval from the men in his life – his father, Laban, and even Esau. How did God fully meet that deep need in Jacob's heart?

How would Jacob's situation have changed if Esau had **ignored** Joseph's peace offering or had attacked Jacob? What would Jacob need to do to reach the land God had promised him and continue building his family?

Making peace does not always work out the way it did with Jacob. Why is moving on important when others don't want to make peace?

Read a few lines from the *Identity in Christ* and *Promises of God* handouts. How have you tried to find your identity and security in what people think of you instead of what God thinks?

Are there any situations in your life where you are still trying to receive a blessing from someone that is unwilling to accept you?

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<sup>3</sup> See Genesis 32:28, footnote d, *The Holy Bible, New International Version*, 1996 (Zondervan: Grand Rapids).

**This Week:**

Write in your journal:

1. Continue praying through the prayer cards you wrote from the last lesson. Each day, read some lines from the *Identity in Christ* and *Promises of God* handouts to remind yourself of how God sees you and what he promises for your life.
2. Follow through with your plan to be honest with another person this week. If you need to reconcile with a difficult person, test the waters with them this week. Continue reaching out to them if they respond well to your efforts.
3. Write down the dreams and plans you feel God has for you. Make a list of the sacrifices and firm decisions you need to make to pursue those dreams, even if it means saying “No” to other things or people.