

Teaching Plan
EXPLORE THE BIBLE

Date: January 6, 2019
Lesson Title: "Transformed"
Lesson Passage: Gen. 32:24-32

ABOUT THIS LESSON

This lesson describes a significant episode in the experience of Jacob as he made his way back home after his sojourn with his uncle, Laban. At the ford of the river Jabbok, Jacob has a night-long struggle with a supernatural being. As a consequence, he is endowed with a new name, "Israel," a name that hints at a significant transformation in character for this father of a nation.

TEACHING/LEARNING GOALS

(1) Explain why Jacob's return to his homeland was fraught with danger. (2) Explain the probable meaning of Jacob's new name, "Israel".

BEGINNING THE LESSON

Recall the closing comment in last week's lesson, the reminder of the hazards that Jacob faced as he returned to his homeland. (He was pursued by his uncle, Laban (Gen. 31:22) and would soon encounter his brother, Esau, who was meeting him with a small army (Gen. 32:6). And, now, as he traveled toward southern Palestine, he was confronted by an unexpected adversary at the place called Penuel (or Peniel). Our lesson passage focuses on Jacob's struggle with that mysterious opponent.

TEACHING PROCEDURES

1. To "set the stage" for this week's lesson, read Gen. 31:17-21, then locate the place names Paddam-aram, Caanan and Gilead on a map. Share these thoughts: (1) The spring shearing was a favorable time for Jacob's secret departure, because Laban and his men would be occupied by the heavy workload and the feasting that accompanied the event. (2) But Jacob had to move slowly, because he had acquired considerable livestock (v.17); so, after three days, Laban was able to overtake him in the hill country of Gilead. (3) Laban could have overcome Jacob with the men he had brought with him (31:29a); but, surprisingly, he simply reprimanded Jacob for not letting him give his daughters and grandchildren a proper send-off (31:25-27,55).

2. Having settled his affairs with Laban, Jacob must now attempt to straighten things out with Esau. Since he is not sure that matters have improved during his long absence, he takes the precaution of sending messengers ahead, to prepare the way for his inevitable encounter with Esau (Gen. 32:3-5). His instructions to the messengers provide two clues to his anxiety about this rendezvous: (1) He

addresses his brother as "my lord Esau" and refers to himself as "your servant Jacob." (2) He mentions his prosperity, probably to hint at the probability that he will be able to bestow rich gifts upon Esau.

3. Go next to the heart of this lesson, Jacob's struggle with the mysterious night visitor at Penuel (1) Read Gen. 32:22-23, then locate the Jabbok river on a map. (2) Explain why "Jacob was left alone" near the river ford (Gen. 32:24a): To lead a large flock over the Jabbok, which flows through a deep gorge, was a difficult task. When all the others were across, Jacob remained behind and was the last one to cross, just in case there were any strays. (3) Jacob had previously anticipated being overtaken by Laban, and was now fearful at the thought of meeting Esau; but he was completely unprepared for the surprising encounter described in the esoteric words in v. 24b, "a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day." NOTE: The word "man" does not necessarily mean this was a human antagonist. Nor can we be certain that this was an angel, as is often thought. We can know only that this supernatural antagonist represented the presence of God to Jacob, who later named the place Peniel, saying that he had "seen God face to face" there (v. 30). (4) During the long struggle, which lasted until daybreak, the strange antagonist touched Jacob's hip (the "hollow of his thigh"), putting it out of joint (v. 25).

4. Emphasize the significance of verses 27-28, which explain the origin of the name "Israel": (1) Jacob's original name, which meant "supplanter" or "holder of the heel," was given to him when he was born holding the heel of his brother, Esau (Gen.27:36). (2) But the new name, Israel, which was to designate untold generations of his descendants, commonly means "God contends" or "he that strives with God." This, of course, was an allusion to his night-long struggle with his unusual adversary.

5. Interpret verses 30-32: (1) When Jacob had received the blessing, his mysterious assailant retreated. (2) The name given to the place where this encounter had taken place reflected the remarkable thing that had taken place there--Jacob had been face to face with God, and had survived! EXPLANATION: It was a common Israelite belief that to see God meant death (refer to Exodus 33:20.)

CLOSING THE LESSON

Closing remarks: When we study Bible passages, we should grasp the meaning on two levels: First, we need to understand the biblical material as accurately as possible, without reading into it our preconceived notions. But, secondly, we should look for "take away" concepts, learnings that are applicable to our lives. For instance, Jacob's refusal to let go of his night-time adversary might remind us that we should sometimes pray with persistence about issues that are deeply troubling, refusing to "let go" before we receive an answer.