

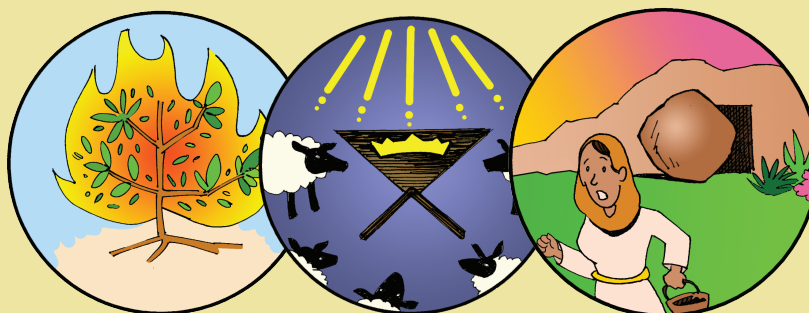
**SMALL GROUP
GUIDE**

**GUIDE
#2-3**

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LIVING THE WORD

Narrative Lectionary



Small Group Guides

Discussion Guides

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Jacob Wrestles

God Creates Family

About the Story

Jacob and Esau were the twin grandsons of Abraham and Sarah. Since Esau was born first, it meant that Esau would get the full inheritance of his father. But Jacob's mother helped Jacob trick his father into giving him the blessing instead of Esau. Jacob got everything and Esau got nothing. Jacob would go on to be quite successful. However, it came at a cost—Jacob and his brother had a deep rift in their relationship causing Jacob to leave home with no plans of going back. God had other plans and told Jacob to return to his homeland. Jacob reluctantly started the journey back home, afraid of how his brother would react at his return. Would Esau meet him with violence? Our story today picks up right after Jacob sent appeasing gifts to his brother Esau, hoping it would help smooth things over. Jacob decided to send everyone ahead of him, perhaps to allow him time to mentally prepare for the meeting.

The Point:

God changes us. Today's story is about a broken family that God is working to reunite. Jacob begins this story nervous and afraid but ends this story having wrestled and prevailed. Jacob's new name, Israel, will become the name of an entire nation of people, all descended from his family. God changes us, too, transforming us with hope and love so that we can go into the world to transform the lives of those in need.

And then a mysterious figure appeared in the night and the two get in a fight. Who is this mysterious person? The Bible is not clear. This person is only described as a wrestler and a blesser. He arrived as if by magic and left in the same way, but not before giving Jacob a new name: Israel. The wrestler told Jacob that he received this new name because he has "striven with God and with humans" (32:28). The word "strive" means to make great effort to achieve something or to struggle or fight violently. To use this word to describe Jacob's relationship with God and other people may seem strange to us. How is it that we would ever think to struggle violently with God?

At the end of the story, we are left wrestling with several questions. Is the wrestler God? An angel? Esau? How will Esau and Jacob's reunion go? One thing is clear, though: God is with Jacob, because one cannot strive with an absent God. We, too, are left with the assurance that God is with us in our striving. We are given hope that the struggles we have with one another and with God are part of the heritage.

Opening Prayer

God of blessing, you were with Jacob as he journeyed home to meet his brother and whatever fate would come. Be with us as we strive with you and one another in our journey through life. We pray this in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Last Week/ Next Week

Last week, God appeared in the form of three strangers and promised to Abraham and Sarah that they would have a child. A year later, their son was born, and they named him Isaac. Isaac would become the father of Jacob and Esau, and the covenant God made with Abraham is passed on to Jacob. Today's story features Jacob on a journey to meet his estranged brother when he encounters a mysterious stranger. Next week, the story picks up 400 years later as the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the Israelites—are enslaved in Egypt. God comes to Moses in the form of a burning bush and sends Moses to deliver God's people from slavery.

Into the Story

Many people found Jesus' teachings on God's kingdom tremendously radical. This is true of both those outside his movement and his own disciples. As a group, take some time to discover the "fault lines" within any group's preferences by playing a game called "Either/Or." Have the group stand in the middle your space and then divide by preference on two different items. This can start simply (and safely) but become more serious depending on the relationships in the group.

Examples: Coke/Pepsi, crunchy peanut butter/smooth peanut butter, traditional/contemporary worship, being busy/being peaceful, etc.

Learning the Story

On a journey to reunite with his estranged brother, Jacob encountered an unknown man. The two wrestled and Jacob is injured. Before the man left, Jacob demanded a blessing and received one along with a new name: Israel.

Read Genesis 32:9-13 – Heading Home

- ❓ How would you feel if you were Jacob? How would you feel if you were Esau?
- ❓ Looking at Jacob's prayer in verses 9-12, do you think he trusts God to keep him safe? Why or why not? What do you think of his fear of potentially being killed by his brother? Is it legitimate?
- ❓ If you have time, read verses 14-24. Why do you think Jacob sent the party ahead of him, while he stayed behind?

Read Genesis 32:25-26 – A Mysterious Stranger

- ❓ Who do you think this mysterious stranger is? What clues does the text provide?
- ❓ If the stranger is meant to be God or an angel, why does the stranger injure Jacob? Why do you the Bible does not clearly identify who the stranger is?
- ❓ Why do you think Jacob and the stranger wrestle?

Read Genesis 32:27-32 – A New Name

- ❓ What do you think is the reason for Jacob being renamed?
- ❓ Read the Bible Nuts and Bolts section about origin stories. In what ways is this an origin story? Of what is it telling the origin?
- ❓ When have you struggled with God or others? Have these experiences deepened or challenged your faith? How so?

Living the Story and Closing Prayer: Prayer

There is a moment in the story when Jacob admits to himself who he really is: a heel. In this moment, God takes all that he is, the good, the bad, the hidden, the revealed, and turns it into something far more than Jacob could ever have mustered for himself. In a sense, Jacob “came to himself” and got out of his own way. In his confession of who he was, God transformed him into something more.

Prayers of confession are meant for exactly these times. Confession helps us admit who we are so that we can get out of our own way and allow God to do what God has in mind for our lives. Take a few moments to discuss the following questions: How often does your congregation practice prayers of confession in worship? Do you practice prayers of confession in your personal prayer life? Why or why not? If God has already forgiven us, what is the point of confessing?

After discussing, take a few moments of silence so each participant can think of one thing they want to confess or have transformed in their lives. Say a closing prayer, and have each participant share a one-word summary—it does not need to make sense to anyone but themselves and God!

At Home

- ✚ If you could pick a name that describes your relationship with God, what would it be? Perhaps it is the name of a person in the Bible, or perhaps it is something else entirely! Write that name down and display it in a prominent place as a reminder of God’s love for you.
- ✚ Families are supposed to be nurturing and supportive environments, but as the story today shows us, that is not always the case. Consider donating clothing, food, or money to a domestic violence shelter or similar organization that helps people needing safety or help dealing with a broken family.

✚ There are a few stories in the Bible where people “wrestle” with God. One example is Moses arguing with God over God’s plan to destroy Israel (and believe it or not, Moses won that argument!) in Genesis 33:12-17. Can you think of any other examples? What do you make of this? Journal your thoughts.

Bible Connections

- ✚ Abraham verbally wrestles with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:16-33.
- ✚ Today’s story is referenced in Hosea 12:2-6.
- ✚ The disciples are transformed by Jesus and are instructed to proclaim the good news and provide healing for others in Mark 6.

Bible Nuts & Bolts: Israel’s Origin Stories

Origin stories are a genre of stories that explain how something came about. Sometimes origin stories show how God is interacting with the world. Genesis is an origin story. It begins with the origin of the world and then it addresses the origin of the people of Israel. It focuses on four generations, beginning with the call of Abram (Abraham) and ending with his great-grandson Joseph and the move to Egypt. Stories like today’s reading tell the Israelite people who they are as a nation and where they came from. Today’s story is also an origin story as it tells the origin of the name “Israel.”

Who Is the Stranger?

The identity of the man that Jacob wrestles with is unknown. Oddly, the Bible does not identify the stranger at all. Many people throughout history have connected the stranger to God, based on the stranger's proclamation that Jacob had "striven with God... and prevailed" (verse 28) and Jacob's own remark that he has "seen God face to face" (verse 30). However, Hosea 12:3-4 and the Wisdom of Solomon 10:10-12 interpret the stranger as an angel of God. Various other interpretations have been provided throughout history, including that the stranger is Esau, a demon, or another evil spirit. Who do you think the stranger is?

Daily Readings

Sunday – Read Genesis 32:[9-13]22-30

On the way to visit his estranged brother, Jacob wrestles with a mysterious stranger. Think of a time you have wrestled with God. What happened?

Monday – Read Genesis 33:1-11

Jacob and Esau finally reunite. Say a prayer for estranged families that they may come to know peace.

Tuesday – Read Genesis 30:22-24; 41:1-16

Jacob's son, Joseph, is living in Egypt and gains favor with the Pharaoh. DO you think God communicates through dreams? Consider keeping a dream journal.

Wednesday – Read Genesis 41:25-36

The story of Joseph continues as he interprets Pharaoh's dreams. Pray for countries experiencing famine.

Thursday – Read Genesis 41:37-45

Joseph quickly rises to power in Egypt, paving the way for the Israelites to move to Egypt. Do an Internet search for the musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and listen to a few of the songs. How do the songs tell the story of Joseph?

Friday – Read Exodus 1:8-14

The Israelites are now in Egypt and are oppressed by a new Pharaoh. Pray for all who are oppressed.

Saturday – Read Exodus 1:15-2:10

Today's story tells the origin story of Moses. The next few weeks will follow the story of Moses. Before getting into the story, write down some of the key events you remember from Moses' life. Then, as you read through the story, pay attention especially to the events you may have forgotten about or new things you learn as you go!