

Journey INTO THE Bible

Leader's Guide

Genesis, Part Two: Lesson Four

Genesis 32—37

Suggestion: When you are ready to begin the Bible study, it is appropriate to open with a prayer. The one given below is merely recommended. You may very well have one of your own. If so, please do not hesitate to use it. It would seem to be practical to connect your prayer to some aspect of the lesson, for example, God's presence in our lives not only as protector, but also as challenger (Genesis 32:22-32), or God's hidden but real presence in family tensions and problems.

Opening Prayer

Gracious and loving God, you make yourself known to us in such a variety of ways. Throughout Genesis, we have come to recognize your presence in the protection and consolation you offer to our mothers and fathers in faith. We also become aware of your presence when you dare to challenge us as you challenge Jacob to a wrestling match. Most of all, we acknowledge your presence in your Son who pitched his tent in our midst and became one of us (John 1:14). In turn, we ask you to empower us to manifest your presence to those who constitute our community. May we demonstrate your presence through consolation, protection, hope, and also challenge. We ask this through Christ our Lord, your abiding presence.

Suggestion: This may be the right time to welcome newcomers and returning participants. This is also a good opportunity to make announcements. Afterwards, read aloud "Setting the Stage."

Setting the Stage

As Jacob is on his way home to the land of Canaan, he encounters "a stranger in the night." This *man* challenges Jacob to a wrestling match that lasts all night. Having held his own, Jacob listens to his opponent's plea to be released. Although this adversary has not overcome Jacob, he still manages to dislocate his thigh joint. When Jacob presses his advantage by asking for a blessing, the opponent responds by asking his name. Once Jacob has

disclosed his identity, this man changes his name to Israel, explaining that he has striven with divine and human beings. In turn, Jacob/Israel asks for his opponent's name. However, this request is rejected. Jacob/Israel now realizes his worthy adversary is none other than God himself. Jacob's new name implies a transition of power from the divine combatant to the patriarch. In the process, Jacob/Israel has received a wound—he must limp away from the field of battle. This limp is a reminder of the blessing he has gained for his people.

In Genesis 37 we begin the Joseph story, a consistent short story of sorts that differs considerably from all the previous brief self-contained units. This story has a consistent plot with a variety of twists and turns. It begins with all the trappings of an incredibly dysfunctional family. Jacob has doted on Joseph, his favorite son, and demonstrated that favoritism by the gift of a long robe with special sleeves. After the baby boy of the family has recounted his dreams, his brothers are incensed and his father confused. This powerless one dares to imply that he is to have dominion and reign over his brothers. Hatred and jealousy are the results of the dream episodes. When a favorable opportunity develops to be rid of this master dreamer, the brothers resolve to kill him, but eventually settle with selling him to passing Midianites/Ishmaelites. To deceive their father, they dip Joseph's long robe in the blood of a newly slaughtered goat. The patriarch recognizes the robe, concludes that it belongs to Joseph, and conveys his grief by rending his garments. In the last verse, we learn that the Midianites have sold him in Egypt. Actually this passing detail is central to the whole story since it provides the setting whereby the family will move from Canaan to Egypt and eventually return from Egypt to Canaan.

Text (Genesis 32:22-32)

Suggestion: It may be useful to divide the text among three readers: (1) narrator; (2) the "man" (32:26a, 27a, 28, 29b); and (3) Jacob/Israel (32:26b, 27b, 29a, 30b).

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Think and Talk Questions

1. Does a wrestling match seem inappropriate for a divine encounter?
2. Does it seem that Jacob receives the blessing because he has prevailed in the combat? What symbolic value does Jacob's limp have?

Additional Questions

1. What changes can you note in the character of Jacob by this time?
2. Perhaps the leader could point out Jacob's original identity as the heel-gripper and usurper (see Genesis 25:26; 27:36), his transforming experience at Bethel (see Genesis 28:10-22), and his prayer about confronting Esau (see Genesis 32:9-12).
3. What folkloric and ancient Near Eastern traditions serve as a possible background to this episode? The leader may find it opportune to refer to popular traditions about crossing rivers and encountering river demons. The leader may also choose to point out that in Canaanite literature one of Baal's greatest enemies is Prince Sea/Judge River. Finally the leader may opt to note that in the Gilgamesh epic, the hero's divine protector assumes an adversarial role in a dream.

Break

At this point, you may wish to break for about ten minutes. Afterwards, reassemble the group and begin the next text.

Text (Genesis 37:1-36)

Suggestion: Since the passage may be too long to read in its entirety, it may be beneficial to abbreviate it and assign it to four readers as follows: (1) narrator (37:1-5, 8b, 9a, 10a, 11, 31-32a, 33a, 34-36); (2) Joseph (37:6-7, 9); (3) brothers (37:8a, 32b); and (4) Jacob (37:10b, 33, 35b).

Think and Talk Questions

1. In what ways does the Joseph story differ from the preceding patriarchal accounts?
2. Do you think that Joseph's long robe with special sleeves powerfully symbolizes Jacob's love while it fuels the brothers' hatred?

3. Do you understand dreams as vehicles for change, especially changes in power structures?

Additional Questions

1. Do you think that the Joseph story makes a good bridge between the promises to the patriarchs (Genesis 12—36) and the Book of Exodus? Perhaps the leader can point out that since the Exodus is the liberation from bondage in Egypt, the Israelites must first be in Egypt.
2. Would you agree that this dysfunctional family badly needs reconciliation? The leader can perhaps indicate that within five verses the verb "to hate" is used no less than three times (37:4, 5, 8). The leader may also note that the brothers' jealousy appears in Genesis 37:8.

Wrapping Up

When there are about twenty minutes left, bring the discussion to a close. You may wish to ask if any participants want to briefly share something they have learned.

Closing Prayer

Perhaps the section of the Sermon on the Mount dealing with anger (Matthew 5:22-24) is a fitting way to conclude in light of the brothers' hatred in Genesis 37. The translation in the New Revised Standard Version reads as follows:

"But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

Suggestion: Remind everyone about the next meeting time and place. Encourage them to read through Lesson Five before the next Bible study session.