

Genesis chapter thirty-one concluded with [an account](#) of Jacob's treaty with his uncle Laban. That treaty created a "demilitarized zone" that separated the two parties. A large pile of stones served to memorialize their agreement as summarized in Genesis 31:51: "***This heap... stands between us as a witness of our vows that I will not cross this line to attack you and you will not cross it to attack me***" (*Genesis 31:51 TLB*).

So, the good news was that Jacob was free of Laban and his treacherous behavior. The bad news was that a dangerous adversary lay ahead. That adversary was Jacob's brother, Esau. [Esau had earlier threatened to kill Jacob](#), and his extended stay with Laban provided Esau with ample time to nurse his grievances and allow his resentment to smolder and grow.

This may explain why God provided Jacob with some additional encouragement, as seen in the opening verses of Genesis chapter thirty-two...

"So Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. When Jacob saw them, he said, 'This is God's camp.' And he called the name of that place Mahanaim" (*Genesis 32:1-2*).

This encounter offers an opportunity to discuss the mysterious divine messengers known as angels.

"Angels" are beings created by God who surpass human beings in power and intelligence. Contrary to the views held by some in popular culture, angels are a distinct class of beings. Because of this, human beings do not become angels when they pass from this earthly realm.

This is important, especially for those who seek to comfort the bereaved with the idea that "heaven has gained a new angel" when a loved one passes away. Since that concept is Biblically inaccurate, it lacks genuine empathy, for a fictional belief cannot bring real comfort to those who mourn.

The Biblical book of Psalms offers some insight into the origin of the angelic realm...

"Let them praise the name of the Lord, For He commanded and they were created. He also established them forever and ever; He made a decree which shall not pass away" (*Psalms 148:5-6*).

So, this portion of Scripture tells us that angels were created at the command of God. It also implies that angelic beings cannot die, for "...***God set them in place always and forever***" (*NIV*).

The Scriptures also [identify angels](#) as beings who [possess capabilities](#) that are [far superior](#) to [ordinary human beings](#). In addition, the final [verses](#) of Hebrews chapter one use the phrase "***ministering spirits***" to describe angelic beings. This indicates that angels do not normally [possess a material form](#). However, angelic beings do have the ability to assume the physical appearance of human beings when necessary.

That capability was displayed in the life of the Old Testament patriarch Abraham when three men (who proved to be God, accompanied by two angels) appeared to him (see [Genesis 18:1-2](#) and [Genesis 19:1-26](#)). Hebrews 13:2 elaborates upon that capability when it says, "***Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels.***"

It is also interesting to note that the word "angel" is related to the concept of a messenger in the original Biblical languages. Thus, we can say that angels serve as emissaries, representatives, or agents for God. We find one such example in the New Testament gospel of Luke, where the angel Gabriel was sent to announce the impending births of John the Baptist and Jesus ([Luke 1:5-38](#))

Angels also appeared to a group of shepherds to announce Jesus' birth, saying, "***Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord***" (see [Luke 2:8-20](#)).

Although they have done so on occasion, angels rarely communicate directly with human beings. In this instance, it seems that God sought to encourage Jacob through this angelic show of support. Therefore, he replied by saying, "... ***This is the army of God: so he gave that place the name of Mahanaim***" (BBE).

"Mahanaim" means "two camps." While the first camp comprised Jacob and his household, this angelic interaction led Jacob to the realization that a second camp had been established among them. So Jacob had God's promise of a safe return to his ancestral homeland, as well as the assurance of a protective camp of angels as well.

Portions of this study originally appeared [here](#).

The main point of contention between Jacob and his brother Esau stemmed from Esau's belief that Jacob had unfairly obtained an inheritance that was rightfully his. That led to Esau's murderous response: "... ***My father will soon be gone, and then I will kill Jacob***" (Genesis 27:41 TLB).

Fortunately for Jacob, their mother Rebekah discovered Esau's plan...

"...when Rebecca heard about Esau's plan, she sent for Jacob and said, 'Listen, your brother Esau is planning to get even with you and kill you. Now, son, do what I say. Go at once to my brother Laban in Haran, and stay with him for a while, until your brother's anger cools down and he forgets what you have done to him. Then I will send someone to bring you back...'" (Genesis 27:42-45 GNB).

Unfortunately, it was now two decades later and the messenger who was to inform Jacob that it was safe to return never arrived. So, to help ensure his safety, Jacob dispatched a reconnaissance team to conduct a preliminary assessment before he returned home...

"Then Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. And he commanded them, saying, 'Speak thus to my lord Esau, 'Thus your servant Jacob says: "I have dwelt with Laban and stayed there until now. I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight"'" (Genesis 32:3-5).

The sincerity of Jacob's effort to show respect and courtesy toward Esau is clearly apparent in his approach. Notice that Jacob didn't refer to himself as "your brother" in his message to Esau. Instead, Jacob humbly identified himself as "your servant." He then went on to say, "... ***now I own cattle, donkeys, flocks of sheep and goats, and many servants, both men and women***" (Genesis 32:5 NLT).

While it's possible that Jacob was simply boasting about possessions, it's more likely that he sought to communicate something else: "*I have all I need. I'm not coming to ask for anything, or take anything from you. A friendly meeting is all I seek.*"

Since two decades had passed since Jacob's last encounter with Esau, he might have been dead, for all Jacob knew. However, Jacob was about to find that Esau was still very much alive.

"Then the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he also is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him'" (Genesis 32:6).

This was definitely *not* what Jacob wanted to hear. It's easy to imagine Jacob's thought process when he heard this news: "*I left home because my brother was planning to kill me. Now he is coming to meet me with four hundred men, and they are probably not coming to welcome me.*"

While it may sound as if Esau was planning to confront Jacob with a small army, let's consider this meeting from Esau's perspective. For instance, what was true for Jacob was true of Esau as well. Esau hadn't heard from Jacob in twenty years either; and Jacob didn't have a good reputation when he left. For all Esau knew, Jacob might have been plotting to deceive him, just [as he deceived their father](#) decades earlier.

So Esau likely felt the need to be prepared for his meeting with Jacob. That meant bringing four hundred additional reinforcements as a precautionary measure.

“So Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies. And he said, 'If Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the other company which is left will escape'” (Genesis 32:7-8).

While it is wise and prudent to [prayerfully anticipate](#) the challenges we face in life, it seems that Jacob had forgotten [God's promise](#) to accompany him on this journey. It also seems that he had forgotten the angelic beings [who were embedded](#) with him on this trip. Unfortunately, the only thing Jacob seemed to have in mind was this: *“I'd better prepare for the worst.”*

So Esau and his contingent of four hundred men were heading towards Jacob and his family as they came from the other direction. Jacob responded by dividing up his family before he finally addressed a matter he should have prioritized from the beginning....

“Then Jacob said, 'O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, the Lord who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your family, and I will deal well with you': I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, and now I have become two companies.

Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and attack me and the mother with the children. For You said, 'I will surely treat you well, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude'” (Genesis 32:9-12).

There are several important insights contained within Jacob's prayer. For instance, we should notice that Jacob addressed his prayer to God as a personal Being. Unlike those who seek direction from an ambiguous force or power, Jacob prayed to a God who can think, feel, and communicate.

Next, Jacob approached God in a spirit of humility by saying, ***“I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant” (Genesis 32:10 CSB).*** Jacob did not begin his prayer with a series of complaints or a list of requests. Jacob didn't treat God like a cosmic servant, nor did he make any demands. Instead, Jacob addressed God with the respect and reverence that the omnipotent Creator of the universe deserves.

Jacob also demonstrated his appreciation for God's provision by saying, ***“When I first crossed the Jordan, all I had was my walking stick and now I have two camps of people...” (CEV).*** Even though Jacob worked for decades to earn his possessions, he understood that God was the ultimate source of his success.

“He spent the night there, and from what he had with him he selected a gift for his brother Esau...” (Genesis 32:13 NIV).

The [following verses](#) tell us that Jacob's gift to Esau comprised at least five hundred and fifty animals of various types. So it's clear that God had blessed Jacob with many possessions that carried great value in that culture.

“He put (the animals) in the care of his servants, each herd by itself, and said to his servants, ‘Go ahead of me, and keep some space between the herds.’

He instructed the one in the lead: ‘When my brother Esau meets you and asks, ‘To whom do you belong, and where are you going, and who owns all these animals in front of you?’ then you are to say, ‘They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift sent to my lord Esau, and he is coming behind us.’

He also instructed the second, the third and all the others who followed the herds: ‘You are to say the same thing to Esau when you meet him. And be sure to say, ‘Your servant Jacob is coming behind us.’ For he thought, ‘I will pacify him with these gifts I am sending on ahead; later, when I see him, perhaps he will receive me.’

So Jacob’s gifts went on ahead of him, but he himself spent the night in the camp” (Genesis 32:16-21).

So Jacob sought God in prayer and followed with a reasonable, justifiable, God-honoring response. These actions also suggest a deliberate attempt to show Esau that he desired nothing from him. In fact, Jacob provided five separate gifts to Esau, one right after the other, to show he meant no harm. But would it be enough to convince his brother that he held no malicious intent?

“And he arose that night and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed over the ford of Jabbok. He took them, sent them over the brook, and sent over what he had” (Genesis 32:22-23).

So Jacob arose, prepared his family, and sent them across the Jabbok river on the way to the land of his youth. Then he sent all their possessions over as well. That left Jacob as the only remaining person on the other side of the river.

But before Jacob crossed over to join the rest of his family, a mysterious stranger suddenly appeared.

“Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day” (Genesis 32:24).

Who is this mysterious stranger who seemingly appeared out of nowhere to grapple with Jacob? The verse quoted above simply identifies him as “a man,” but further investigation only deepens the mystery surrounding this stranger. When the Old Testament prophet Hosea chronicled Jacob's experience, he identified this person as “...*the Angel*” in [Hosea 12:4](#). But later, in verse thirty, Jacob will declare, “...*I saw God face to face.*”

So, which is it then: a man, an angel, or God? Some who have studied this passage have answered that question by associating this Man with a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus Himself. With this in mind, we can identify each of these designations as follows.

First, the term “man” is used to describe Jacob’s wrestling opponent based on His physical appearance. Next, this reference to an angel stems from the theological understanding that Jesus, in his pre-incarnate state, is associated with the “Angel of the Lord” mentioned earlier in [Genesis 16:7](#). The Angel of the Lord will later appear to Moses in [Exodus 3:2](#) and to another man named Gideon in the Old Testament book of Judges (see [Judges 6:11-12](#)).

Finally, this enigmatic wrestler is called “God” in recognition of Jesus’ divinity (see [John 20:28-29](#), [Titus 2:3](#), and [Hebrews 1:8](#)).

While it might have been easier for Jacob and this mysterious stranger to engage in a simple conversation, it's possible that God orchestrated this experience to help communicate an important lesson. For instance, Genesis 32:24 tells us "...*a man wrestled with [Jacob],*" thus suggesting that this Man served as a divine instigator. But what did He seek from Jacob?

Let's consider this question from Jacob's perspective. Jacob's [ingenuity](#) and self-reliance had always enabled him to navigate life successfully. It seems, however, that God would not permit Jacob to continue without a definitive understanding that his reliance had to be placed in God, and not within himself. The venue for that lesson was an all-night wrestling match.

Unlike a modern-day professional wrestling extravaganza with bright lights, loud music, and a raucous audience, God and Jacob wrestled alone, one on one. The physicality of this encounter revealed God's determination to eliminate the manipulative, deceptive, and self-sufficient qualities inherent in the [meaning of Jacob's name](#). It also showed Jacob that God was willing to use force to accomplish His objective if necessary.

So, this wrestling match continued until daybreak- and that's when this mysterious stranger brought an end to their engagement...

"When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man" (Genesis 32:25 NIV).

Some translations of Genesis 32:25 (like the New International Version quoted above) may leave us with the impression that this Man could not prevail in His wrestling match with Jacob. But it's not that He *could not* overpower Jacob; it's that he *did not* overpower Jacob. In other words, it's not that this Man failed to overpower Jacob because He lacked the ability to do so. Instead, this passage references the fact that Jacob refused to concede.

It also appears that this match was a draw until the Man dislocated Jacob's hip simply by touching it. This should prompt us to consider an important point: if this Man possessed the ability to disable Jacob by touching his hip, He clearly had the ability to defeat Jacob at any point during their match if He desired to do so.

So if all this man had to do was touch Jacob's hip in order to incapacitate him, why didn't He do so from the start? Well, God may have allowed Jacob to wrestle throughout the night to illustrate the futility of relying solely on his personal strength and/or capability. While Jacob was a shrewd and clever individual, this wrestling match demonstrated the insufficiency of those qualities alone.

Although many choose to rely on their strengths and abilities to overcome life's challenges, Jesus provided us with an important reminder: ***"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:4-5).***

As we're also told in the New Testament book of Philippians, ***"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).*** Since Jacob's opponent clearly possessed the ability to defeat him easily, it seems that God arranged this demonstration to show Jacob that he would have to place his faith in God alone going forward.

"And He said, 'Let Me go, for the day breaks.' But he said, 'I will not let You go unless You bless me!'" (Genesis 32:26).

“Let Me go...” suggests that Jacob sought to prevent the Man from leaving in some way. But there’s something unusual about this statement. Consider this: if you were involved in a wrestling match with someone who possessed the ability to disable you with a touch, would you try to hold on to that person? For most people, the answer is probably not. In fact, most people would likely try to escape from such a person.

It’s also unlikely that we would seek a blessing from a stranger following a wrestling match. In addition, a person typically seeks a blessing from someone greater and not the other way around ([Hebrews 7:7](#)). So, Jacob clearly realized that his opponent was no ordinary man.

Of course, anyone who possessed the ability to disable Jacob by merely touching him surely could have left if he desired. Instead, the Man responded by saying this...

“So He said to him, 'What is your name?' He said, 'Jacob'” (Genesis 32:27).

The celebrated playwright William Shakespeare once pondered a thought-provoking question in his renowned play, *Romeo and Juliet*: “What’s in a name?” So let’s consider that question and apply it to the meaning of Jacob’s name.

Jacob's name conveyed the image of a swindler or deceiver, as previously mentioned. That namesake was hardly complimentary, but God addressed that problem by providing Jacob with a new identity.

“And He said, Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed'” (Genesis 32:28).

Jacob's opponent revealed the truth about his identity when He said, “...**you have struggled with God...**” So, despite His appearance as a human being, this Man possessed the divine authority to make changes in Jacob’s life. Those changes included a new identity for Jacob: **“From now on, your name will no longer be Jacob. You will be called Israel...” (CEV)**. Thus, Jacob was told, **“You will no longer be known as a swindler or deceiver; henceforth, you will be known by a new name.”**

That new identity took the form of the name “Israel” or, “God prevails.” ⁽¹⁾ Jacob's opponent also provided the rationale behind that change: **“...you have struggled with God and with men and have prevailed” (CSB)**.

This logic may be difficult to understand, since Jacob was the one who was left holding on to his challenger at the conclusion of their match. How then did Jacob prevail, especially when he had suffered the indignity of a dislocated hip at the hand of His competitor?

The answer is that Jacob “won” by losing. While that may sound counter-intuitive, Jacob's experience points us to three important truths that enable us to prevail in a similar manner:

1. First, we must recognize and accept God’s reality.
2. Next, we must come to the realization that we do possess the personal resources to successfully navigate life and eternity.
3. Finally, we must look to God and seek His blessings, just as Jacob did.

As Jesus also remarked in Luke 9:24: **“...whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it.”**

(1) H3478 - yisrā'ēl - *Strong's Hebrew Lexicon* (kjv). (n.d.). Blue Letter Bible. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h3478/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

“Then Jacob asked, saying, 'Tell me Your name, I pray.' And He said, 'Why is it that you ask about My name?' And He blessed him there.

So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: 'For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.' Just as he crossed over Penuel the sun rose on him, and he limped on his hip. Therefore to this day the children of Israel do not eat the muscle that shrank, which is on the hip socket, because He touched the socket of Jacob's hip in the muscle that shrank” (Genesis 32:29-32).

So now, with the conclusion of their wrestling match, Jacob posed a question to his challenger: *“What is your name?”* But instead of providing a direct answer, God responded with a question of his own: ***“Why do you want to know my name?” (Genesis 32:29 NLT)***. While that response may seem evasive, Jacob's question had already been answered through the name he just received: *“God prevails.”*

This also explains why Jacob chose the name Peniel to commemorate the location where this encounter took place. “Peniel” means *“face of God”* ⁽¹⁾ and Jacob knew the One he wrestled all night was God in human form.

However, that would not be the last such occurrence. God would eventually take human form once again, but not as the powerful wrestler who appeared to Jacob. Instead, [He entered the world as an infant in far more humble circumstances.](#)

Jacob's experience leaves us with an important application for today. We can align ourselves with God's agenda for our lives, or we can prompt Him to wrestle with us. Jacob limped away from his wrestling match with God, but we may avoid a similar destiny if we choose to follow God's direction for our lives today.

(1) Fausset, Andrew R. Entry for 'Peniel'. *Fausset's Bible Dictionary*.
<https://www.studylight.org/dictionaries/eng/fbd/p/peniel.html> 1949.