STUDY QUESTIONS
Lesson 33 — Genesis 32:1–32
Jacob wrestles with an Angel

Monday

1. Why would meeting angels at this time (vs. 1) have proven a special encouragement to Jacob?

2. Why was it important that Jacob should face Esau at this time? What does this passage teach you about resolving personal conflicts?

Tuesday

3. What is the mood of Jacob’s message to Esau (vss. 4–5)? Do his words show us any biblical principles of how to calm someone’s hostility? How do the following verses illustrate biblical principles of calming animosity (hostility)?

- 2 Timothy 2:25 -
- Titus 3:2 -
- 1 Peter 5:5 -
- Proverbs 15:1 -
- Proverbs 10:19
- Hebrews 12:14 -
4. Is Jacob simply back to his old manipulative self in verses 7–8? What signs of spiritual growth does he show as he prepares to meet Esau?

Wednesday

5. List several (at least three) useful principles of godly prayer that emerge from your study of verses 9–12.

6. What were Jacob’s motives in preparing to meet Esau (vs. 20)? Is there any contradiction between praying for God’s help on the one hand and making careful preparations on the other?

Thursday


8. What benefit was God seeking to impart to Jacob when He injured Jacob’s hip? (vs 25)
9. In what sense did Jacob “prevail” over the Angel of the Lord (vs. 28)? How do we “win” in our struggles with God?

Friday

10. Why does the Angel of the Lord refuse to discuss His name (vs. 29)?

11. Did the sun rise on Jacob in more than one sense (vs. 31) as he re-entered the Promised Land?

Saturday

12. Why do you think verse 32 is included with this account of Peniel? What does it add?
INTRODUCTION
Chapter 30 described how God allowed Jacob’s flocks to increase. Though Jacob says little there that tells the reader how he is thinking, Genesis 31 shows that the patriarch is well aware of God’s gracious kindness in his life. He does see God at work, carefully protecting him from the predatory intentions of his uncle/father-in-law. That means that the vow that Jacob made at Bethel (Gen. 28:20–22) will have to be fulfilled, for God has done exactly as Jacob asked. Nowhere does this emerge more clearly than in the story of the patriarch’s removal from Laban’s household. In the account, two leading themes emerge: human obedience and divine protection. Jacob obeys God, and God blesses Jacob. He does so in spite of Laban’s rage and hostile intentions. Though the state of Esau’s mind is unknown, Jacob concludes that meeting Esau poses fewer dangers than remaining near the persistent crookedness of Laban. Jacob parts from his father-in-law secretly, taking wives, children, and flocks. Though Laban eventually overtakes him, God protects Jacob by rebuking Laban in a dream. The two families edgily agree on parting terms, and Jacob is at last free to face his brother. God’s protection will soon be needed again—and it will be there. Genesis 31 demonstrates that the one who knows God’s blessing and obeys His call can count on His protection.

COMMENTARY
31:1. Jacob has taken away all that was our father’s, and from what was our father’s he has acquired all this wealth. Jacob’s inclinations to return to Canaan were fueled by rumors of what his brothers-in-law were saying about him. As far as they were concerned, the remarkable wealth that Jacob had accumulated was the product of theft. Jacob had arrived in Padan Aram penniless (32:10), while Laban was wealthy; now Jacob is rich, and Laban’s wealth is declining. Jacob, as far as they are concerned, now possesses the property they had planned to inherit.
31:2–3. The brothers may have concluded this on their own, but the odds are that their envy had been encouraged by Laban, whose own attitude toward Jacob had become hostile. Jacob’s concerns are confirmed by a revelation of Yahweh, who speaks to him and instructs him to return to Canaan.
31:4–9. The moment of truth finally arrives. Jacob is about to leave, and he is sure that Laban will disapprove, and might even
insist that Rachel and Leah remain behind. To determine what his wives wish to do, Jacob calls them both out into the field. (This action suggests that some of the servants in Jacob’s camp were Laban’s spies.) In their presence, he gives his rationale for leaving Padan Aram, and it mostly has to do with their father’s dishonesty. Laban has changed the rules of their partnership over and over again throughout their dealings, always in an effort to line his own pockets. Jacob has rendered honest labor, but Laban is unwilling to see Jacob prosper. It seems to Jacob that God has spoken His mind in the matter by making him wealthy. If Jacob’s wages were spotted sheep, then the spotted sheep tended to multiply. God could have increased Jacob’s wealth while adding to Laban’s, but He had not done this: God has taken away your the livestock of your father and has given them to me.

31:10–13. Jacob’s suspicions had been confirmed by a dream. He dreamed of a scene in which the goats of Laban’s flock were mating, and all the males were streaked, speckled, or spotted—in other words, they were animals that were likely to produce offspring for Jacob’s flock. The Angel of God interpreted this action as God’s way of undoing the dishonest treatment that Jacob had received from Laban. (Among other things, this dream also shows the uselessness of all of Jacob’s attempts at genetic engineering [Gen. 30:37–42]). The Lord had been protecting Jacob all along, for He was the God of Bethel. There, Jacob had anointed a pillar and made a vow 20 years earlier, and Yahweh had been faithful to perform all that Jacob had requested. Now it was time to leave.

31:14–18. Rachel and Leah have agreed on very little in the last 13 years, but on the subject of leaving Haran they are of one mind. They, too, feel estranged from Laban. He views them with prejudice as well, and apparently for no other reason than their connection to Jacob. They complain that they have been excluded from any participation in their father’s estate, an observation that may be more profound than it first appears. Genesis 31:1 is the first mention of Laban’s sons. It may be that he had intended at one time to adopt Jacob and pass his wealth on to his son-in-law and daughters. If Laban’s sons came along after Jacob had arrived in Paddan Aram, they would now be adults, and Jacob’s presence there was not as critical as it had once been. As far as Leah and Rachel are concerned, God has been displaying nothing less than simple justice, and they encourage Jacob to follow God’s directive and return to Canaan. This he proceeds to do.

31:19. Jacob and his family are wise enough to recognize that Laban will oppose their departure. As a result, they leave without announcement. They reason that it should be simple to get away, since it is shearing season,
and Laban will be occupied with his flocks. Prior to leaving, however, Rachel steals her father’s household gods (Heb. teraphim). These were small idols that were typically placed in niches in private homes. They were sometimes used as representations of Yahweh (in violation of His will), but more often represented pagan deities. At the death of a father, a family’s teraphs were often given to the firstborn son to symbolize his new headship of the family. Rachel may have felt that her theft was justified, since her own inheritance rights had been violated. However, she might have simply been taking her own private revenge for her father’s rejection. In any case, her theft complicated matters, for Laban would certainly not tolerate the loss of his idols.

31:20–21. It seems clear from the text that God is not entirely pleased with the manner of Jacob’s leaving. He is following a divine directive, but God would have been better served had Jacob been open about his intentions. The writer notes that Jacob’s departure was nothing less than a deception. The patriarch ought to have reasoned that the same God who had supported him through 20 years in Laban’s employment could protect him and his family as they departed. Jacob was making spiritual progress, but an inch at a time. Instead of leaving on good terms, he flees, crossing the Euphrates River and heading for Gilead east of the Jordan. Apparently, he plans to stay there for a time and investigate the matter of Esau’s hostility before crossing the Jordan. Now, however, instead of having one powerful enemy, he has two. In the interim, Gilead will prove an excellent area for flocks and herds.

31:22–24. The enemy to the east, Laban, hears of Jacob’s deception two days after his departure. Laban is sure that he can catch up, for Jacob is traveling with women and children, flocks and herds, and cannot be moving rapidly. However, it takes Laban seven days to overtake Jacob’s company; when he does so, Jacob has nearly reached his objective, for Laban finds him in the hill country of Gilead. Laban’s intentions are hostile, but God protects Jacob by appearing to Laban in a dream. (He is called Laban the Syrian in verses 20 and 24 to emphasize his ethnic distance from Jacob. The term appears only in these verses and at the time of their original meeting in 25:20.) In the dream, Laban is sternly warned not to speak to Jacob either good or bad. He does not prove entirely obedient to this warning.

31:25–30. Even at this advanced stage in their relationship, Laban cannot resist rebuking Jacob. He insists that Jacob’s actions are more like those of an invading chieftain than the behavior of a son-in-law. He insists—thoughtful readers will suppress a chuckle—that he would have sent Jacob away with a feast and a celebration had he known the patriarch’s
intend. Though Laban has the power to do Jacob harm, he acknowledges that God has warned him against such action. He calls Yahweh, the God of your father, placing himself at some spiritual distance from Jacob. His primary complaint, however, is that Jacob has stolen his gods. He uses the Hebrew word elohim rather than the term teraphim that appears in verse 1. The former word suggests that Laban is at his core an idolater, something that Jacob might have suspected.

31:31–35. Jacob does not, however, accuse his uncle of spiritual defection or improper beliefs. He recognizes that the theft of Laban’s property is a serious breach of etiquette as well as ethics. Jacob promises to punish the offender, and to return any of Laban’s property that might be found in his encampment. Rachel deceives her father by hiding the teraphs inside her camel’s saddle and then lying about them. Thus Laban, the Mesopotamian con artist, is in the end fleeced by his own flesh and blood.

31:36–42. Laban’s pursuit and fresh accusations provoke Jacob to charge Laban with dishonesty. In what is for Jacob a remarkable outburst of passion, the patriarch scores Laban for his crooked treatment of his own family. The suppressed bitterness of two decades of hateful treatment bursts forth. He rejects the deceitful fatherly manner of his uncle/father-in-law and accuses him of only looking out for himself. Jacob has given Laban 20 years of honest labor, but apart from God’s intervention he would be leaving Haran penniless. He calls Yahweh the Fear of Isaac, i.e., the God whom Isaac feared. Jacob here acknowledges the deep respect that his father held for the God of heaven. Now Jacob, too, can testify to the greatness and sustaining power of Yahweh. The dream that Laban experienced, Jacob insists, is nothing less than a rebuke from heaven itself.

31:43–44. Characteristically, Laban remains unrepentant. As far as he is concerned, Jacob has swindled him out of wealth and family. He cleverly rewrites history, ignoring the fact that he set up conditions that Jacob has more than met. Even Laban’s own daughters regard his behavior as contemptible. (One cannot help but wonder, in the light of his treatment of Jacob, if he saw his family as anything more than a group of unpaid servants. Laban does not lack for gall.) Still, God has restricted Laban from reprisals, so all that remains is to establish a covenant that will define the family’s future relationship. The treaty he and Jacob will agree to is quite unlike the gracious covenant of God with Abraham and Isaac. The parties to the new treaty do not trust each other, and each is prepared to watch over its conditions to the maximum extent possible.

31:45–48. That relationship will be an uneasy one, as the following events demonstrate. The families erect two memorial pil-
lars out of stones. They will serve, in effect, as border markers between their respective domains. Jacob will not travel east of the pillars, and Laban will not travel to the west of them. The two men cannot even agree on designations for the pillars. Each names his marker in his own tongue. Laban calls his monument Jegar Sahadutha, an Aramaic term that means “pile/pillar of witness,” while Jacob uses the Hebrew Galeed, having an identical meaning. (In Gilead, both languages were spoken.)

31:49-55. May the Lord watch between you and me when we are absent one from another. The same monuments were also called—later, perhaps—Mizpeh, a Hebrew word meaning “watchtower.” The words of verse 49 are sometimes strangely carved onto the necklaces and charm bracelets of sweethearts, but the sentiments of the passage are far from cordial. Laban expresses the hope that God will watch over Jacob so that he will not become a problem. He threatens Jacob with harm should he violate the terms of the agreement, asking heaven to enforce the necessary penalties in case Laban is too far away to do so. The NIV translates verse 53 as, “May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us.” The Hebrew should be rendered, however, “May the God of Abraham and the god of Nahor... judge between us.” The word judge is plural, indicating that Laban is calling on two different deities. At last he acknowledges what has become increasingly apparent: Laban is no true follower of Yahweh. Jacob does not swear in this way, instead invoking the Fear of his father Isaac. The ritual is sealed by the sharing of a common meal, the main course of which is the animals sacrificed by Jacob, who serves as the host. The next morning Laban leaves the gathering and returns home. He does not appear in the biblical narrative again. Jacob’s treatment at his hands makes it easier for the patriarch to turn his back on Padan Aram. It is time to go to Canaan, his real home.