STUDY QUESTIONS
Lesson 34 — Genesis 33:1–20
Jacob meets Esau

Monday

1. What does the sequence of people in verses 1–2 indicate about Jacob’s priorities? How do you think you would have felt if you had been Bilhah or Zilpah?

2. All was not completely negative, however. What does verse 3 say about Jacob’s character? What evidences of spiritual progress do you see here?

Tuesday

3. Do you think Jacob’s demeanor (i.e. body language) had any bearing on Esau’s actions in verse 4? Why or why not?

4. Why do you think Esau brought 400 men with him to meet Jacob?
Wednesday

5. Do you think Jacob’s gift was sincere, or was it an attempt to bribe Esau to leave him alone?

6. Assuming that verse 11 represents Jacob’s true feelings, what does the passage teach us about God’s purpose in providing wealth for us?

Thursday

7. What do Esau’s words in verse 12 seem to assume about a future relationship between the brothers?

8. What do you think lies behind Jacob’s words in verses 13–15? Did he really intend to settle down in Seir near Esau?

9. Where is Succoth (vs. 17)? (You will need a Bible dictionary and/or an atlas.) Where is it from Seir?
Friday

10. What does the word “Succoth” mean? Why is it suggestive of the life of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?

11. What later happened at Shechem (Josh. 24:32)?

Saturday

12. The patriarchs now own two pieces of property in the Holy Land. What do those properties have in common? What spiritual principle do you see here?
INTRODUCTION
Most Christians learn that for the growing believer, life consists of brief respites sandwiched between tests. The principle certainly proved true in Jacob's life. No sooner was he free of Laban's interference and dishonesty than he found himself preparing to meet a military force headed by a man with a grudge. Jacob had matured somewhat, however, by this time. Just as he was encouraged by God's appearance before his departure from Laban, he is encouraged by angelic messengers on the eve of his meeting with Esau. He understands from this event that God has not abandoned him. Still, circumstances make him wary. Has Esau forgiven him for stealing the inheritance? Has his brother's large force been assembled to destroy Jacob and his family? These questions linger until God Himself makes an appearance. He—present as the Angel of the Lord—wrestles with Jacob on the eve of his reunion with Esau. The patriarch emerges from the encounter with a fresh attitude toward life. He will limp for the rest of his days, but his wound in reality is a tender gift from God. Jacob now sees that self-reliance has its limits. It is better to be weak and trust the Lord than to be strong and ignore Him.

COMMENTARY
32:1-2. 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. Soon after Laban's departure, Jacob headed west toward the Jordan. Once across it, he might meet Esau anywhere along the way. Before his crossing, however, God sent angels to meet him. He recognizes in their appearance the sign of God's protection. He will survive the encounter with Esau and live to see God's promises fulfilled. He marvels that God had again sent angels to meet him, much as He had done when Jacob had left the land (28:12). Their appearance serves as a subtle reminder of the vow that Jacob made at Bethel. It was time to fulfill his oath. The patriarch considers the location of this encounter to be worthy of a new name. He calls it Mahanaim, "Two Camps," or "Twin Camps." The name suggests the new proven friendship between God's camp and his own. David would later pitch his tents at Mahanaim while on the run from Absalom (2 Sam. 17-18) in another and much larger Hebrew family dispute.
32:3. Then Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. Jacob does not use God’s promise of protection as a pretext for irresponsibility, however. He seeks a genuine reconciliation with his brother, and makes a series of good will gestures to meet that goal. How he knew that Esau had left Beer-sheba and settled in Seir the text does not disclose. In the intervening twenty years, it is likely that Rebekah (or perhaps her servants) had sent messages to Bethuel mentioning this fact.

32:4–5. Jacob 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. He instructs a series of messengers to Esau to inform his brother that he has become a wealthy man. He is not returning with a view to taking anything that Esau owns, since he already has become enriched by God. He addresses Esau as “my lord,” and calls himself Esau’s servant. This marks a refreshing change from the superior attitude he sometimes evidenced toward Esau in their earlier dealings.

32:6. We came to your brother Esau, and he also is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him. The returning messengers bring no communication from Esau, but do convey a frightening fact: Jacob’s older brother is approaching with an entourage of 400 men. Jacob’s temperament inclines him to interpret this as a harbinger of trouble. The patriarch had sent the messengers to Seir, a place that Esau had captured by force (Deut. 2:12). The elder brother is already a proven warrior. With Laban at his back, however, Jacob has little choice but to press ahead.

32:7–8. 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. At least he can plan an approach that will make it harder to Esau to kill everyone (if that is his intent). He divides his family and possessions into two companies. If one is attacked, he reasons, perhaps the other can get away.

32:9–10. 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. In this new crisis Jacob (for the first time) does more than trust his cleverness. He prays with humility and gratitude and asks for God’s pro-
tection. Jacob is making progress: 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. Jacob’s reference to his penniless condition is a revealing one. He once thought that his inheritance from Isaac was critically important; but where is it now? Jacob possesses none of it. The wealth of Isaac probably is in Esau’s possession; but Jacob will not covet it. God has made him wealthy in unexpected ways. More importantly, there are still the promises. Those promises are more valuable than all the gold in Canaan; and nothing can take them away from him.

32:11–12. He now invokes one of those promises: 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. He places little trust in Esau’s kind intentions or even in his decency, but he does trust in Yahweh. When Jacob had left the land years before, Yahweh was known to him mostly by reputation. As he re-enters the land, however, he brings the blessings of Yahweh with him. He had possessed nothing when he departed. Even after years of Laban’s dishonesty, however, he is returning a rich man. This could only be attributed to the God of Abraham and Isaac. In his prayer, Jacob reminds the Lord of his earlier promises of prosperity and offspring. If those are still valid, Jacob will need God’s protection greatly, and very soon. Jacob’s appeal is the longest prayer recorded in the book of Genesis.

32:13–16. So he lodged there that same night, and took what came to his hand as a present for Esau his brother: two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty milk camels with their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten foals. It must have seemed obvious to Jacob that Esau was unlikely to be deflected by graciousness or humility. He decided to sweeten their meeting by extending lavish gifts to his brother. His enormous present gives a hint of the magnitude of Jacob’s wealth. In order to allow his 550 animals to have their maximum impact, he segregates them into herds whose arrivals at Esau’s camp will be staggered, every drove by itself. Esau could hardly fail to be impressed both with the sincerity of his brother’s humility and with the size of his estate.

32:17–19. Jacob commanded the first one, saying, When Esau my
brother meets you and asks you, saying, To whom do you belong, and where are you going? Whose are these in front of you? then you shall say, They are your servant Jacob’s. It is a present sent to my lord Esau; and behold, he also is behind us. So he commanded the second, the third, and all who followed the droves. Each herdsman is given instructions to defer to Esau and make it clear that the livestock is intended as a present to show good intentions. He will not take the easy way out, however, as he had so often done in the past. He is on the way, and he will face Esau and do whatever is right to reconcile with him. Jacob does not leave camp until his gifts are en route.

32:20–21. Jacob’s tells the messengers to Esau to say, Behold, your servant Jacob is behind us. His thinking is clear: I will appease him with the present that goes before me, and afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me. His gifts go ahead of Jacob, who lodges that night in the camp.

32:22–23. Jacob 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. He finally sends his wives and maidservants ahead during the middle of the night. After helping his family and his goods across the Jabbok, Jacob recrosses the stream and finds himself alone at Mahanaim.

32:24–25. And yet he is not alone. Verse 24 tells how a Man wrestled with him—not just for a moment, but all during the waning hours of the night. The remaining context makes clear (as does the capitalized word Man) that the identity of this figure is none other than the LORD Himself. As so often in Genesis, He appears as the Angel of the Lord, a figure with divine attributes but with His glory veiled. Indeed, in verse 25 He seems unable to overpower Jacob, and insists that their wrestling cease. By this time Jacob has concluded that his antagonist is the one upon whom his whole life depends. He began life struggling against Esau. That competition continued until they parted years later. Then Jacob, because of Isaac’s discomfort with the prediction that Jacob would inherit, engaged in a struggle against his father. Then Jacob picked up the struggle against his uncle Laban. Now he is returning home, and God is attempting to teach him that the true struggle of his life is with God rather than with men.

32:26–28. The Angel said, Let Me go, for the day breaks. But Jacob said, I will not let You go unless You bless me! Jacob seems to get the message, for he insists that the Visitor bless him before leaving. The Angel of God compli-
es—it was, after all, what He wanted to do all along—by changing Jacob’s name. The occasion is too significant to be forgotten. God will give Jacob two lasting memories: a new name and a limp. All his life the patriarch has been known as Jacob, “the supplanter.” Henceforth, others will call him Israel: “he struggles with God.” (The oft-repeated derivation prince of God is not correct.) Jacob was to be remembered as a man who struggled with God and prevailed—by losing. Once confronted with the reality of God’s intimate involvement in his life, he is an altered man: Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God. The alterations go farther than his name. He is altered in his outlook, recognizing that he has survived a rare if not unique privilege, a close encounter with God Himself. He is altered physically as well, for the Angel touches him on the hip and wounds him.

32:29. 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. Jacob still had some of the old manipulator in him, however. He asks the Angel to reveal His name, thus granting Jacob a divine insight, an edge into the divine mystery. The Angel will have none of it, however. This event is about Jacob. The time is over for playing games. Jacob/Israel now knows more of God than most people ever know. The question is, What will he do with that knowledge? The Angel blessed Jacob and allowed him to return to his old pursuits with a new name, a new purpose, and a new direction. Israel now understands: you can only “win” with God by losing. Self-assertiveness, craftiness, manipulation, have no place in godly living. Believers who will find a meaningful place in God’s plans are those who have discovered the great joy of losing. As Jesus said, “The one who seeks to save his life will lose it; and the one who will lose his life for My sake will find it.”

32:30–31. 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. Jacob does some renaming of his own, dubbing the place Peniel, “the face of God.” Jacob/Israel finds the sun of blessing rising on his new life as he crossed the ravine on his way to a meeting that he now could face with confidence. Every step he took reminded him that he had lost a wrestling match, and won a new life in the process.

30:32. 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. The repercussions of Peniel will outlive Jacob. His offspring will repeat his mistakes, for one thing. They will have to learn through the most painful “winnings” the true blessing of losing. Even their diet will be affected. For many generations, Israelites will refuse to eat the tendon in question when they slaughter an animal for food. The national refusal to eat the muscle that shrank will become a permanent reminder of Jacob’s life-changing encounter.

Jacob’s contest captures in a beautiful way the common experience of Christian believers. Jacob was born into a position of privilege and blessing, but failed to enjoy it fully. He struggled along from conflict to conflict until he realized that the real challenge lay in committing his future into God’s hands. The divine blessing, in the end, would be all he really needed. Though he would need to re-learn this lesson often—as all believers do—Peniel proves to be a turning point in his life.