

REFLECTION GUIDE

GENESIS 32:1-21 | INTO THE UNKNOWN

KEY TERMS

Mahanaim - *Mahanaim* (v. 2) means “two camps.” Jacob chooses this name when he comes to see that—in addition to his own camp—God is present with him as well.

Angels/messengers - In Hebrew, the word for angel (v. 1) and messenger (v. 3 & 6) is the same. This sets up a word play where God sends “messengers” to Jacob and then Jacob sends “messengers” to Esau, highlighting the combination of human and divine action in this story.

BACKGROUND

After parting ways with Laban, Jacob heads home to Canaan and on the way *angels of God met him* (v. 1). This is now the third time angels have appeared to Jacob (see Gen 28:10-17 & 31:11-12), and not much detail is included about this encounter. Jacob responds to the angels by saying *This is God’s camp!* and naming the place *Mahanaim*—meaning two camps (v. 2). This beginning to chapter 32 highlights God’s presence with Jacob in what follows. After seeing the angels—spiritual messengers from God—Jacob sends messengers of his own to his brother Esau seeking *favor* from Esau (v. 3-5). When Jacob left home twenty years prior, Esau wanted to kill Jacob and he has no reason to expect anything has changed. Jacob’s messengers return and tell him that Esau is on his way and he has 400 men with him, which is not what Jacob wanted to hear (v. 6). This leads Jacob to take his camp and divide it into two—another play on words since he’s currently in *Mahanaim* (“two camps”)—thinking if Esau finds one camp the other will escape (vv. 7-8). But Jacob doesn’t just plan. He also prays a prayer that expresses his own unworthiness and his reliance upon God to *deliver him from the hand...of Esau* if God is going to be faithful to do what he said and bring Jacob back home to establish a new people (vv. 9-12). The next morning Jacob begins sending a gift to Esau consisting of around 500 animals sent out in several droves (vv. 13-20). Jacob’s prayer reveals that he likely feels genuine remorse for his actions towards Esau and wants to make things right. At the same time, this plan shows Jacob’s shrewdness because if Esau is surrounded by animals that keep showing up all day long and if Jacob can plant some of his own servants in Esau’s camp, Esau will be unable to easily attack Jacob. This section ends on a cliffhanger in verse 21 with the present (the gift of animals) going ahead to Esau and Jacob staying *that night in the camp* (v. 21).

GOING DEEPER

Read 2 Kings 6:15-19. How is this story similar to Jacob’s experience with angels in Genesis 32? Why is it often difficult for us to recognize God’s presence in our lives? How does it encourage you to imagine God’s angels and armies going with you during the ups and downs of your life?

DID YOU KNOW?

This is the first time Jacob uses the personal name *Yahweh* for God (v. 9; translated *LORD*). Calling God *Yahweh* in his prayer may suggest a growing personal relationship with God.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

GENESIS 32:1-21 | INTO THE UNKNOWN

LEARNING THE WORD

1. Read Genesis 32:1-21. What initially jumps out to you from this section of Jacob's life?
2. What is the significance of Jacob naming the place where he is staying *Mahanaim* ("two camps") after seeing the angels? How does this theme run throughout the story?
3. How does Jacob address God in his prayer? Why does this reveal a shift in Jacob's relationship with God?
4. Read Psalm 102. How is this prayer similar to Jacob's prayer in Genesis 32? Where do Jacob and the Psalmist ultimately ground their hope (see Psalm 102:25-28)?

LIVING THE WORD

5. Do you find it difficult to place your hope in God—instead in yourself or something else—during uncertain times of life? Why or why not?
6. How does the unchanging nature of God give you hope in the midst of our ever-changing and lives?
7. 1 Corinthians 6:19 says, "You are not your own." Why is there freedom in belonging to God and releasing control of our lives to him?
8. What rhythms do you keep in order to be with God and remind yourself of truth? How do these practices help anchor your life in God?

Practice this week: Pick one new spiritual rhythm to practice regularly this week. If you're not sure where where to start, begin by spending a few minutes each day praying to God or reading Scripture. If you already pray and read Scripture regularly, you may want to spend a few minutes in silence before God.