11

SESSION ELEVEN

The God Who Gives New Names

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session we follow the story of how Jacob received a new name from God. His old name meant "deceiver" and was an apt description of his life. But after a mysterious encounter with God, Jacob was never the same. He received a new name that reflected God's grace to him and his descendants. Like Jacob, we are flawed and sinful, in need of an encounter with God that will transform our identity and give us a new mission in life.

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 32:24-32; 35:9-15

THE POINT

Encountering God leads to a fundamental change of identity and purpose.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Many people use the beginning of a new year as an opportunity to get in better shape. They purchase exercise equipment, work out every day, start eating healthy meals, and eventually start to feel better. But like most New Year's resolutions, within a few months people start to slack off and eventually wind up back where they started.

The human heart longs for lasting change, and this longing goes beyond faddish New Year's resolutions. For students, it might be a reputation they want to be free from; for some, it may be a pattern of bad grades. Whatever the case, most of us wonder if transformation is possible.

It's easy to lose hope in change because so often we've tried to make changes only to be disappointed. We are tempted to give up and think, *What's the use?* For this reason, we love transformation stories. Shows like "The Biggest Loser" and "Extreme Home Makeover" tap into our desire for transformation. Even sports channels offer pre-game shows, such as ESPN College GameDay, that reveal players' life stories, how they have overcome adversity, and how their life has been changed for the better. We love seeing someone bring his family out of poverty or seeing an obese man no longer have heart problems or seeing a down-and-out family have their home remodeled. It reminds us that dramatic change is possible.

- **Looking back over your life, what kind of transformation have you seen take place in your family? in the life of a friend? in your own life?**
- **What kind of transformation would you like to see take place in these areas?**

Option 2

Prior to the session, gather a baby bottle, a jar of baby food, bite-size crackers, peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and a hamburger. (Pictures of these items will work, as well.) Display the foods on a table at the front of the room. As students arrive, draw attention to the different food items, then ask:

- **Which of these foods did you prefer to eat as a baby? as a toddler? as a grade school student?**
- **Are you the same person you were as a baby? How have you changed? Did this transformation take place all at once or over time?**

Point out that as we grow in our relationship with Christ, God desires for our thoughts and behavior to change so that we can better serve Him. In today's session, we'll see the transformation that took place in Jacob's life and why change was necessary. Like Jacob, God also wants to use us to fulfill His mission, but that may mean we have to make some changes first.

HIS STORY 15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Encountering God leads to a fundamental change of identity and purpose.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Jacob:** youngest son of Isaac and Rebekah; tricked his father into giving him Esau's birthright

PLOT

The good news from the Bible is that life-change is possible, and it is not dependent on you. We might be able to mask behavior for a while, but such acting never amounts to true transformation. Only God has the capability of changing hearts and lives. God is the life-changer, and we see this in His interactions with Jacob.

As we continue the story of Jacob we see that an encounter with God leads not only to brokenness, but to lasting change within someone's life. As a result of this encounter, Jacob is forever changed, and even receives a new name from God highlighting the transformation that God had done in his life. Where his old name meant "deceiver" and was an apt description of his former ways, Jacob receives a new name that will speak now to the grace of God in his life.

Like Jacob, we are flawed and sinful, in need of an encounter with God that will transform our identity and give us a new mission in life.

JACOB'S OLD NAME REFLECTED HIS FLAWED CHARACTER

As we will see, Jacob became the namesake for God's chosen people, Israel. Yet the account of Jacob reveals a deeply flawed man. He cheated his brother out of his blessing and lied multiple times to his father.

> In the east, Jacob met his future wife Rachel at a well. He loved Rachel and wanted to marry her, so he served her father, Laban, for seven years to win her hand in marriage. But Laban deceived Jacob. Laban tricked Jacob into marrying his oldest daughter, Leah, and Jacob had to work another seven years for Rachel.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

The author of Genesis provides markers that indicate Jacob's sinful, wandering heart. Genesis often presents traveling east as a bad thing, as a signal that a person was moving away from God (i.e., exile). When Adam and Eve sinned, they were banished to the east, away from God's garden (3:24). After Cain murdered Abel, he went east (4:16). When Lot chose the land near Sodom and Gomorrah, he went east (13:11). After Jacob cheated his brother and deceived his father, he traveled toward Paddan-aram and came to the eastern country (29:1).

Despite Laban's deception, God kept His promises to Jacob. Remember, the promise was land, offspring, and blessing. God gave Jacob financial blessing (though Jacob had schemed to get it), and God blessed him with children. So Jacob had offspring, and he had blessing, but he did not have the land yet.

> The Lord told Jacob to return home to the land promised to his fathers, so he journeyed toward Canaan as a rich man with a large family. In order for Jacob to receive the promises of God, however, a transformation needed to take place. Jacob was fearful that his brother, Esau, would seek revenge, so he sent gifts with an envoy ahead of him to soften the blow. As Jacob remained behind, he encountered an unusual man who would change his life forever.

And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." (Gen. 32:24-27)

Later on in the text, it is revealed that this man is God Himself.

This wrestling match is instructive in at least two ways. First, the fact that God confronted Jacob hints at the reality of Jacob's flawed character and the truth that God will not allow sin to go unpunished. We see a similar event in the life of

TIMELINE

JACOB WRESTLES WITH GOD
Jacob, the deceiver, is forever changed after being broken through His encounter with God.

JOSEPH'S HARDSHIPS
The sufferings of Joseph and the mercies of God.

THE SALVATION OF MANY
God brings good out of the evil done to Joseph.

Moses when he failed to obey God's command (see Ex. 4:24-26). God wanted to use Jacob, but He would have to change him first.

Second, the fact that the man dislocated Jacob's hip, in what seemed to be a desperate act to get away before sunrise, may point to the reason God held Jacob accountable and wanted to transform him. Before the blessing could be carried forward, this sinful man—Jacob—had to be broken. Perhaps that is why the man asked Jacob about his name, which meant "cheater." Jacob's life up to this point had been in line with his name.

- **What are some areas in your life where brokenness needs to occur?** *(p. 72, PSG)*

JACOB'S NEW NAME REFLECTED THE GRACE GOD SHOWED HIM

It is one thing for a person to show grace to someone else. But the effects are multiplied when the God of the universe shows grace to a wretched person. Grace ensures we will never be the same. We see this truth in the life of the cunning deceiver Jacob. Despite Jacob's repeated lying and scheming, God poured out grace upon him, and we see its effect here in Genesis 32.

Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh. (Gen. 32:28-32)

Even though Jacob was injured in the wrestling match with the man, he grabbed him and would not let him go. Jacob had already told the man his name, which revealed the deceptive nature of his character. But here, in an act of amazing grace, the man who happened to be God Himself allowed Jacob to prevail, and then He renamed him.

Today, parents often choose names that are popular or have family significance. But in the ancient world, names indicated character. Names told you about a person's makeup. Therefore, being renamed indicated a change in character—a new start!

Jacob's new name would be "Israel" because he had struggled with God and prevailed (32:28). In a battle of great endurance through a painful injury, Jacob had struggled with God for a blessing and had not given up. Though He would not tell Jacob His name, God blessed him. Then Jacob named the place "Peniel" because he had seen God face to face and been saved (32:30).

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

Naming the place Peniel indicated that Jacob actually wrestled with God, not a man. Of course, this truth raises all kinds of theological questions and concerns, such as "How could a man wrestle with God and not be killed instantly?" But the text is not concerned with these matters; rather, its purpose is to show us that Jacob was a transformed man because of his encounter with the gracious Lord. Jacob walked away with a limp, but he walked away a changed man. He did not return to the promised land the same scoundrel that left it years before.

JACOB'S NEW NAME REFLECTED THE TASK GOD GAVE HIM

Everyone wants God's blessing. That's why we pray and ask God for health or for provision or a thousand other things. Asking for blessing is not wrong, of course. It shows how dependent we are on God, and asking Him to bless us is one way of communicating what a good and gracious God He truly is. We ask Him to bless us because we know He delights in blessing His children.

The problem, though, is that many of us do not understand why God blesses His people. We want God to change our lives, but when He does we don't understand why or for what purpose He has changed us.

In Scripture, we see that God's purpose in blessing His people is not so they will hoard the blessing to themselves. God blesses His people so that they will be a blessing to others. God changes people so that they can be agents of change for others.

We see in Jacob's life that God blessed and changed him so that Jacob—Israel—would be the means by which God brought change and blessing to the whole world. Watch how God reappeared to Jacob and again gave him his new name, which implied the continuing nature of God's promised blessing to Abraham:

God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him. And God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." So he called his name Israel. And God said to him, "I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body. The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you." Then God went up from him in the place where he had spoken with him. And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he had spoken with him, a pillar of stone. He poured out a drink offering on it and poured oil on it. So Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken with him Bethel. (Gen. 35:9-15)

Notice the progression for Jacob: Blessing (v. 9), New Identity (v. 10), Responsibility (v. 11). In the same way, God blesses us with salvation and transformation so that we can then fulfill His calling on our lives.

TIMELINE

Beginning Winter 2015-16

MOSES SPEAKS TO GOD
God reveals Himself to Moses and promises redemption.

GOD'S GLORY IS REVEALED
God displays His glory among all the peoples.

JUDGE AND SAVIOR
Even in the midst of His judgment, God provides a means of salvation.

What led to the events in this passage? After Jacob returned to the land, he reconciled with Esau and blessed him. Later, God commanded Jacob to settle in Bethel and exhorted him to repent of his idolatry. So Jacob got rid of all his family's false gods. In these events, we see the gradual transformation in Jacob's life. Yes, the transformation was slow, but it was progressive. (The same is true with us!)

God would keep His promises to Jacob. Jacob was indeed fruitful and multiplied. He had 12 sons who would become the 12 tribes of the nation of Israel. And God would keep His promise that through Jacob's offspring would come a King—a Messiah—who would bring salvation to the world.

CHRIST CONNECTION

Genesis 32 should encourage us because it reveals that no matter how messed up our lives may be, no matter how many bad decisions we have made, and no matter how much we have wrecked the relationships around us, if we encounter the living God, we can be given a new life. The New Testament teaches that we can encounter God through His Son, Jesus, and that in Christ we bear His name! Therefore, our identity will no longer be wrapped up in our sin, but rather, our identity will be that of beloved children of God.

Just as God had done with Jacob, his firstborn son would not carry the promises forward. The promises passed to Judah (see Gen. 49), and through Judah would come the Messiah—Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus would fulfill God's calling on Israel to be a light to the nations, and through His death and resurrection, He would bring salvation to the world.

God chose this man with all of his wretched past to be the agent through whom He would bring His saving blessing to the whole world. Because Jacob would have a son, and his son would have a son, and his son would have a son, and his son would have a son, until eventually a virgin peasant girl would have a Son named Jesus—the Savior of the world! Through Jesus, God can change your life forever and use you to bring blessing to the world around you. He will give you a new identity and a new purpose that fuels your life like never before.

God's renaming of individuals in the Old Testament reflects both privilege and responsibility. As Christians, we bear the name of Christ. We receive both the privilege of salvation and the responsibility of mission.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

New Identity of the Believer

When a person places faith in Christ, that person undergoes a fundamental change of identity. He or she goes from being an enemy under God's wrath (Eph. 2:1-3) to being welcomed into God's family as a beloved child (Eph. 2:19). The believer in Christ is declared righteous on account of Christ's perfect life and substitutionary death and resurrection. No longer is the person a slave to sin, defined by past failures or present struggles. The person has been delivered from the realm of darkness and now belongs to the kingdom of light (Col. 1:13). Anyone who is in Christ is a "new creation" in whom the old, sinful self is passed away and the new, redeemed self is alive and progressing, until the person becomes more and more like Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **In what ways do our past mistakes haunt and define us?** *Answers will vary, but the basic idea behind it is the idea that we often feel, even though it isn't true, that past mistakes do define us. Like Jacob, see if students can identify with this mind-set.*

- **Why is it difficult for us and for others to forget past mistakes?** *Answers will vary.*

- **In what ways has your life or someone you know been changed by an act of grace from another?** *Answers will vary, but the point of this question is to emphasize that grace is able to transform one's life and the decisions that he or she makes.*

- **Have you ever wanted to be someone else or to have a fresh start or to receive a new reputation? What ways did you go about accomplishing that?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

HIS STORY
God's Story of Redemption through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY
Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES

HEAD

What we think about ourselves and how we understand our identities plays a significant role into other parts of our lives. How we view ourselves significantly influences the type of person we think we are becoming.

- **How is God's "renaming" us similar to or different than trying to change our reputation?** *The biggest difference between the two lies in the fact that in and of ourselves, we are incapable of producing lasting transformation. God, however, is able to produce transformation, and He does so in one sense by pronouncing a fundamental change in name in the life of a believer, a change that carries over to other parts of that person's life.*
- **In one sense, Jacob's story teaches us that an encounter with God results in brokenness. How has this been true in your own life?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

HEART

Jacob's story encourages us that difficulty in life can have positive benefits at a later time. In fact, they may be exactly what God uses to stir our hearts toward Him, leaving behind a life of sin.

- **What difficult circumstances in your life has God used to lead you to repentance?** *Answers to this question will vary. The main point is to help students internalize this truth.*
- **Why were those struggles necessary to get you to the point of repentance?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

HANDS

Like Jacob, if we have received a new identity from God and have been led to repentance through difficult circumstances, we are called to display the same love and grace to others that we have received. We are no longer living for ourselves, but for the God who saved us and is calling us to be a blessing to others.

- **Describe a time you made a difference in someone else's life by an act of grace.** *Answers to this question will vary.*
- **What are some areas in which we ask for the blessing of God without giving thought to how God might want us to bless others?** *Answers to this question will vary.*

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, item #10 can be used during group time. Item #10 contains a map that will help students to visually grasp the landscape and journeys of many of the characters they are learning about.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- Leader Training Videos
- One Conversations
- Midweek Studies
- Circular Timeline Poster
- App (for both leader and student)

Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at
GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject