

## I am Unworthy Genesis 32

*Jacob also went on his way, and the angels of God met him. <sup>2</sup> When Jacob saw them, he said, "This is the camp of God!" So he named that place Mahanaim.<sup>a</sup>*

*<sup>3</sup> Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. <sup>4</sup> He instructed them: "This is what you are to say to my master Esau: 'Your servant Jacob says, I have been staying with Laban and have remained there till now. <sup>5</sup> I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, menservants and maidservants. Now I am sending this message to my lord, that I may find favor in your eyes.'"*

*<sup>6</sup> When the messengers returned to Jacob, they said, "We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him."*

*<sup>7</sup> In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups,<sup>b</sup> and the flocks and herds and camels as well. <sup>8</sup> He thought, "If Esau comes and attacks one group,<sup>c</sup> the group<sup>d</sup> that is left may escape."*

*<sup>9</sup> Then Jacob prayed, "O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,' <sup>10</sup> I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two groups. <sup>11</sup> Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. <sup>12</sup> But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'"*

*<sup>13</sup> He spent the night there, and from what he had with him he selected a gift for his brother Esau: <sup>14</sup> two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, <sup>15</sup> thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. <sup>16</sup> He put them 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."*

*<sup>17</sup> 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?' <sup>18</sup> 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.'"*

*<sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> 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." <sup>21</sup> So Jacob's gifts went on ahead of him, but he himself spent the night in the camp.*

*<sup>22</sup> That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup> After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. <sup>24</sup> So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. <sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."*

*But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."*

*<sup>27</sup> The man asked him, "What is your name?"*

*"Jacob," he answered.*

<sup>28</sup> Then the man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel,<sup>a</sup> because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.”

<sup>29</sup> Jacob said, “Please tell me your name.”

But he replied, “Why do you ask my name?” Then he blessed him there.

<sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the place Peniel,<sup>b</sup> saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.”

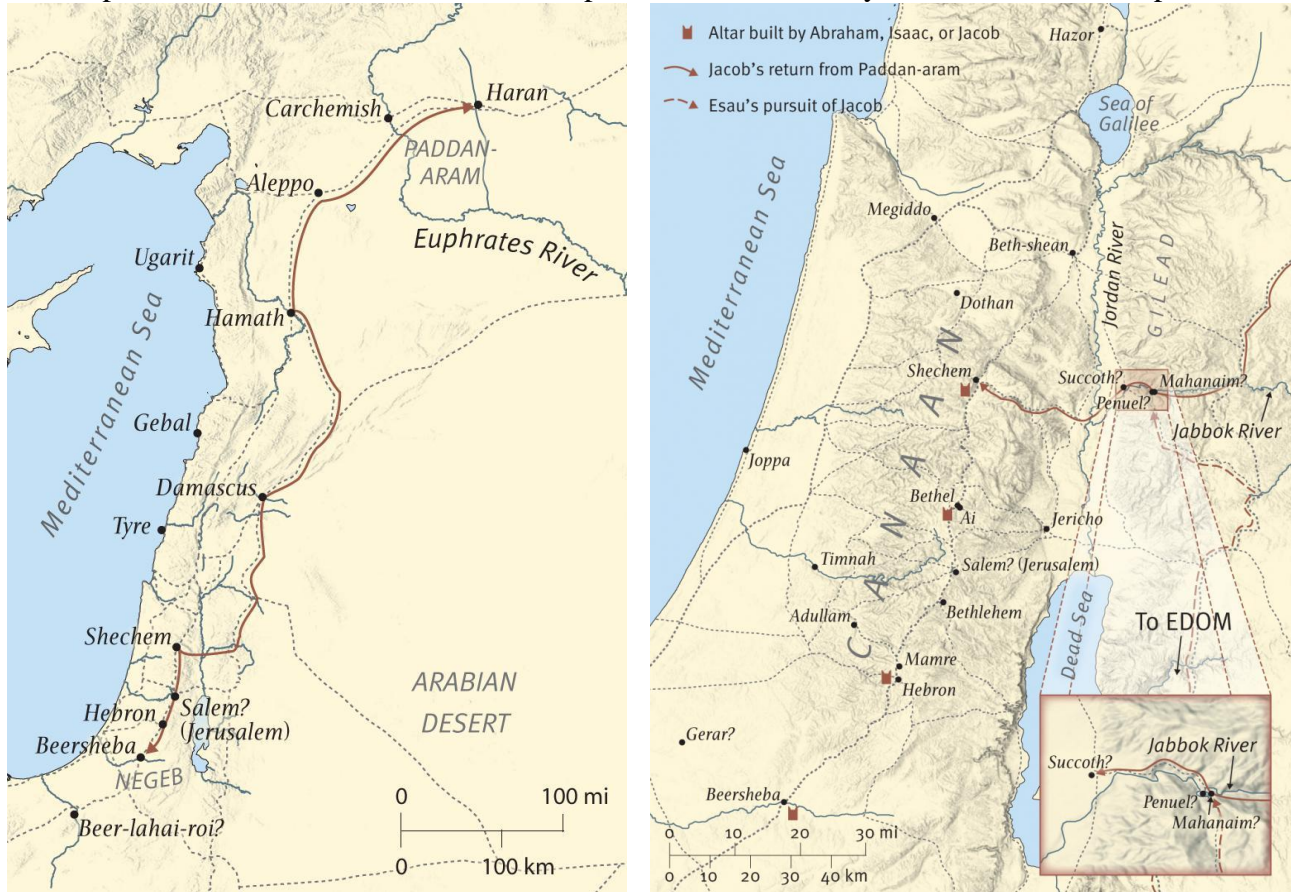
<sup>31</sup> The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel,<sup>c</sup> and he was limping because of his hip. <sup>32</sup> Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob’s hip was touched near the tendon.

This month is the thirtieth anniversary of my conversion. I don’t recall the exact date that I was saved, but I know that it was in August of 1980. Like you, I am eternally grateful for my salvation. “I will never know how much it cost to see my sin upon that cross.” But there is something else for which I am grateful. I am grateful that I have had thirty years to grow as a Christian. I am thankful that I did not have to be mature in an instant or else be kicked out of the faith. I am thankful that the Lord has been patient with me for thirty years because spiritual growth takes time. Genuine spiritual fruit borne of the Holy Spirit cannot be cooked in a microwave. Now sometimes life change can happen quite quickly. If you were a serial killer or a bank robber before you became a Christian, God expects that you stop killing people and robbing banks, things like that. ☺ But for most of us, spiritual growth takes time.

I love this story in Genesis 32 because we get to witness the spiritual growth in Jacob over a period of twenty years. We’ve watched Jacob since the day of his birth when he grasped the heel of his brother. The name Jacob means “he grasps the heel” which is a figurative way of saying that he is a deceiver. The Greek legend of the Trojan Horse cannot compare to Jacob’s ruse. So what that an army hid inside of a wooden horse and tricked their enemies—Jacob hid inside his brother’s clothes and tricked his own father! In my opinion, only his mother Rebekah was better at playing the game of deception. Jacob ran for his very life to flee the murderous intent of Esau. The likelihood of Esau carrying out his desire to kill Jacob was so certain that Jacob left the Promised Land in order to return to the place where his grandfather Abraham was called out of. Do you see the significance of this? It was a bit like the Israelites wanting to return to Egypt after God rescued them and led them out. Why would you want to go back to the very place from which God had called you out? Only desperate times would call for such desperate measures, and at that stage of his life, Jacob was a desperate man.

Last week we witnessed the birth of Jacob’s twelve sons and one daughter and the war of the wombs between his two wives and two concubines. These children were born under a cloud of parental rivalry so it is no wonder that they also developed a strong dose of sibling rivalry, which we will see in later weeks. During the events of chapters 28-30, twenty years of Jacob’s life passes. In chapter 31 Jacob finally threw off the oppressive yoke of Rachel’s uncle Laban and decided to return to his homeland, which God had promised he would.

In chapter 32, we see the first sign of Jacob's maturity comes in verse three when we learn that Jacob plans to meet his brother Esau. In chapter 28 Jacob ran away from Esau but in chapter 32



he ran toward Esau. Let's look at these two maps so that you can see the significance of this encounter between the two twins. On the map on the left we can see the route that Jacob took when he left his homeland and went to Haran. It was a long journey that took him across the Jordan River and far north to Haran. On his return trip he would have taken the same basic route, but before he crossed the Jordan River and headed southwest to his homeland, he purposefully sent messengers on direct southern route to the land of Edom where Esau had lived and had raised his own family and amassed his own wealth. The point I am making is that Jacob went out of his way to meet up with Esau when he could have just as easily avoided seeing him. Perhaps their meeting would have been inevitable as Edom was not that far from where Jacob would have settled, but Jacob didn't wait for a chance meeting but instead intentionally went to meet his brother.

I believe that long before Jesus spoke these words in Matthew, Jacob was seeking to obey them. *Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift* (Matt 5:23-24). Technically speaking, Jacob was not en route to a worship service but he was taking his first opportunity to be reconciled with his brother. Jesus' words fit amazingly well with Jacob's situation. "If...you remember that your brother has something against you." That's quite the understatement, for I doubt that a single day

in those twenty years passed when Jacob did not remember that his brother had something against him. Theirs' was no mere church feud over the color of the carpet. In essence, Esau had taken a vow to kill his brother. His anger and bitterness toward Jacob was so strong that the thought of killing Jacob was actually a comfort to him. Esau's bitterness sustained him and gave him a sense of purpose in life.

Jacob's desire and commitment to reconcile with his brother demonstrates his repentant attitude and spiritual maturity that developed over twenty years time. It was quite remarkable for Jacob to have attempted reconciliation since he would have had no idea how Esau would respond. Would he be just as angry as the day he left, or perhaps many times more angry? Jacob sent messengers to Esau to feel out the situation. The description of the report from the messengers leaves the reader believing that Esau was bent on revenge. *When the messengers returned to Jacob, they said, "We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him."* That doesn't sound very good, does it? Why would Esau send 400 men if he had planned to reconcile and make peace with Jacob. Four hundred men sounds like an army bent on revenge and it must have sounded the same to Jacob. Jacob's response to this report is quite clear—"In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups." Jacob's was certain that Esau had an evil intent, so he reasoned that if Esau attacked one group of people and animals perhaps the second group would survive. After setting his plan into action, the very next thing he did was to pray a desperate prayer.

Notice how he begins his prayer: *O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac...* The way in which he addressed God was rooted in over 200 years of family history. The Lord had called his grandfather Abraham out of pagan worship and into the Promised Land. Isaac was the first generation to exclusively worship Yahweh. Isaac had pagan ancestors but had never practiced paganism himself. Jacob was instructed in the ways of Yahweh and as we said last week, he no doubt told all of his stories to his wives and family during the twenty years in Haran. Leah seemed to have a genuine faith in Yahweh but I am not sure that Rachel ever did. In chapter 31, Rachel stole the gods of her uncle Laban and hid them in the saddle bag of her camel. We are not told why she stole them, but perhaps she was still attached to them since they were the gods of her family. The reason she stole them is not certain, but the implication of stealing and hiding these gods is quite clear, especially given the fact that Rachel claimed to be having her period as she sat on the gods. The implication is this—pagan gods which can be hidden away in a small bag, sat upon and made unclean through menstruation are no gods at all. What kind of gods can be stolen away? The very fact that Laban had to look for his gods should have alerted him to their utter uselessness.

Jacob did not pray to these impotent gods in the saddlebag but rather to the sovereign, creator God of his fathers. It was this God, the LORD Yahweh who had made him a promise twenty years earlier: *Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper.* Do you recall this promise from Jacob's ladder dream? Interestingly, Jacob left off the second half of the Lord's promise from that vision. The Lord had said, "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go and I will bring you back to this land." The Lord had promised to bring about prosperity for Jacob in Haran and this part had already come true. Jacob left Haran as a very wealthy man. But the Lord had also promised to bring him back to his homeland. Therefore, if God was to keep this promise it would mean that Esau would not kill Jacob.

I love the next part of Jacob's prayer. *I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two groups.* His words are an amazing combination of his own sinfulness and the Lord's great mercy. He entered Haran with only a staff and a promise of prosperity from the Lord. He could have selfishly take credit for his great success but instead he fully admitted that every last sheep, every last piece of silver and certainly every child was an underserved gift from the Almighty. That phrase "I am unworthy" is particularly telling. When he deceived his father in order to steal his father's blessing, he felt that he deserved what was coming to him. He grasped all that his greedy little hands could hold on to. Now Jacob figuratively lets go of everything he has and claims that all is of the Lord. Moreover, because of his sinful ways he is all the more aware that he was not worthy to receive anything. Of course this is exactly in line with the prayers and psalms of worship found throughout Scripture. We sing, *You are worthy, our Lord and God to receive glory and honor and power* (Rev. 4:11). The Lord is worthy and we are not.

There's quite a bit of practical theology bound up in this phrase. When Jacob said that he was unworthy he did not mean that he was worthless, but that his worth was inextricably tied up in God's grace and God's mercy. In other words, on his own, he was worthless. A life lived independently of God's sovereign rule is a worthless life. But a life that is redeemed by the blood of Christ and lived under this grace is a worthy life. This can be a difficult balance to reach in our Christian lives, but in terms of the process of our own spiritual growth, it is vitally important that we understand how our worth is linked with God's inherent worth. We must think rightly of ourselves. We dare not demean ourselves or we run the risk of diminishing the priceless work of the cross in our lives, but on the other hand we all know the risk of thinking too highly of ourselves. Spiritual pride is certain death to spiritual growth. God promises that he will oppose us in our pride

When I preach I talk a lot about sin. I do this for more than one reason. First of all, sin is on every page of the Bible including the sin of born again saints. There was all manner of sin in the lives of the early church. Every church that received a letter from the apostle Paul was reminded of their sin. If Scripture continually points out sin then in order to be faithful to Scripture, I must do the same. But in doing so, I never want to leave the impression that we are nothing more than miserable sinners and that we cannot stop sinning. When I point out sin I also try to point us to the mercy of God and the ongoing need to turn away from our sin and turn toward God. As Paul wrote in Romans 6, we are dead to sin and no longer need to live in it.

Someone asked me about the phrase that Neil Anderson uses in his books—"We are saints who occasionally sin." Neil Anderson has written best-selling books, including *Victory Over the Darkness* and *The Bondage Breaker*. There is much that is very helpful in his books, especially the first one. *Victory Over the Darkness* was extremely beneficial to me early in my Christian life. However, I no longer agree with Anderson's phrase—we are saints who occasionally sin. Of course I agree with the first half. We are saints precisely because we have been sanctified—we have been made righteous through the righteousness of Christ that has been credited to our account. We are not saints in the Roman Catholic sense of being super-holy and workers of miracles but we are saints in the Biblical sense—sanctified by Christ. But I do not agree with the second half of Anderson's phrase—saints who "occasionally sin." I don't know about you, but I

do not occasionally sin. I occasionally go swimming, at the most a half dozen times per year. I occasionally go to the mall, less than six times per year—way less than six. I occasionally go to the movie theater but I usually rent movies because the movie prices are too high. These are some of the things I do on an occasional basis. Sinning is not something I do on an occasional basis. I habitually sin. I sin every single day, multiple times per day. If I have even one idol of the heart that I am not aware of, this means that every moment of every day is spent in idolatry, and I am guessing I have more than one idol of the heart. I hate my sin. I fight against my sin. I confess my sin and I repent of my sin but despite these things, I do not sin occasionally. If anything is true of my spiritual growth over the past thirty years it is this—the more I grow in the grace of Christ the more my sin is revealed. Praise God that he does not reveal it all at once because I have a hard enough time with the stuff I do know.

So then, how do we reconcile the fact that we are saints yet we habitually sin? I think Martin Luther got it right with his famous Latin phrase—*simul justus et peccator*. You can almost make sense of it without knowing any Latin. *Simul* means simultaneously. *Justus* means justified, or made righteous. *Peccator* means sinner or sinful. Translated it means that I am simultaneously both righteous and a sinner. The debt of my sin was paid on Calvary and the perfect righteousness of Christ was credited to my account. I am justified by Christ but I still sin. This ongoing sin is a continual reminder of two vital truths—first, I have not yet arrived at perfection and therefore I need a moment by moment mega-dose of grace, and second, it makes me all the more aware of the depths of my depravity before I was justified.

This is what Jesus taught in Luke 7 in regard to the sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet. To the Pharisees in the room, Jesus replied, *Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little*. The woman loved much because she perceived the enormity of her sin that had been forgiven. But if you perceive that your sin was not very great, then your response of love will not be very great. This is the way in which I read Jacob's confession when he declared, *I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant*. God had obviously prospered Jacob in a big way but he had also forgiven him in a big way. I think that Jacob must have felt that he was simultaneously righteous and a sinner.

Furthermore, in his prayer he confessed his fear saying, *Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children*. This is a marvelous prayer that every believer can follow. On the one hand, Jacob was genuinely terrified. His brother Esau had sworn to kill him and now he was on his way with 400 men. The facts of the story do not look good. If you had a sworn enemy who had vowed to kill you and you knew that he was marching with a small army toward your house, how would you feel? Notice that Jacob had a reason to be frightened which is unlike most of the fears that we have in life. Most of the things that you and I worry about will never happen. We worry about things that have never happened, almost certainly will never happen and about which we have absolutely no control. If we could only see the utter foolishness of most of our fears we might be able to move past them.

But Jacob's fears were very real. No one could possibly blame him for being afraid. But in the midst of his fear he prayed for salvation from the Lord and he claimed God's promise of

protection. <sup>12</sup> *But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.* If you recall, this was the promise that the Lord gave to Jacob twenty years earlier on the first night of his journey to Haran. As he was fleeing his brother's murderous threats, the Lord met him and promised him prosperity and a return to the land. Now twenty years later, Jacob claimed this same promise. You see his logic, don't you? If the Lord had promised that he would return to the land and that his descendants would be enormous, then it would mean that Jacob and his family could not be killed by the encroaching Esau and his army. In verse eleven of his prayer, he was concerned not only for himself, but for *the mothers with their children*. Jacob knew full well that Esau possessed both the motive and the means to extract genocidal revenge upon his entire family. This is why he divided them into two groups—in order to give at least half of them a chance to survive. Jacob knew then what is still true today—the world is ruled by the person with the biggest and strongest army. This knowledge was the very thing which instilled such a dependency upon the Lord.

What promises do we claim in our prayers? I recently heard of a preacher not too far from here who taught that every Christian should live until the age of 120 or else they are in sin. I can't decide if this should be labeled as insanity or heresy! There are so many wonderful promises in Scripture, why would anyone want to claim a ridiculous problem? Wonderful promises such as: I am with you always.

I will never leave you nor forsake you.

He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it.

Nothing can separate you from the love of Christ.

We have been given everything we need for life and godliness.

I want us to see that Jacob did two key things—he planned and he prayed. He set forth a master plan by dividing everyone and everything into two groups in the hopes that one part would survive and he prayed a desperate prayer of gratefulness, dependency and the claiming of promises. I don't think it is wrong to do both of these things well. Planning and praying are not mutually exclusive and usually they are mutually dependent. There is an old saying, "Pray as if everything depended on God and work as if everything depended on you." Sometimes we pray as an excuse to do no planning and sometimes we do lots of planning as an excuse to not pray. Both extremes are wrong. There is an appropriate balance between our dependent prayers and our careful planning. In fact, our plans should be submitted to the Lord in prayer. For the first several years of this church's existence, we all worked hard at making this thing work, but at the same time I used to pray, "Lord, if this is your will, then please bless this church, but if our presence will cause more harm to the people of Viroqua, like many other churches have done, then please kill this church. In your grace bless us, or else in your mercy, kill us." I submitted our plans in prayer. I no longer pray such a prayer as I feel the Lord desires our local church to exist and to be as healthy as possible, but we still submit our plans in prayer.

Jacob had twenty years to grow in his faith, to leave behind his sinful ways and trust the Lord. This chapter is remarkable evidence of this growth. How else do you explain his amazing attempt to reconcile with his brother? How do you explain him walking into the midst of danger, knowing that his brother and 400 men were marching toward him? Jacob grew in his faith and one of the lessons here is that it took a long time. I am not suggesting that God wants you to take



twenty years to learn your lesson, but he is patient with us. No matter how long you have been a Christian, you should be able to notice the growth and changes in your spiritual life. There should be growing evidence of your conversion.



This is a picture of a shelf in our basement that we have used for almost ten years to mark the growth of our kids. It's hard to believe that Ethan was ever that small. What is most obvious about this picture? It's the fact that they all grew a lot over this time. Most of you have or had similar ways to mark the growth of your children. We don't look at these things and say, "Wow, I can't believe your child grew taller in ten years." We might be amazed at how *much* they grew but never *that* they grew. It is normal and healthy to grow and anything less than this is abnormal and unhealthy. Why then are we satisfied with no growth in our spiritual lives? How could we imagine that this is normal and healthy to be the same size spiritually as we were ten years ago?

This story about Jacob offers us at the same time, one of the most challenging things in the Christian life but also one of the surest signs of growth—

reconciling relationships with others. Everyone in this room who is at least two years old has gotten into some kind of argument or disagreement with another person. Most of us have experienced serious broken relationships but none of us have had an enemy like Jacob did and therefore none of us have attempted reconciliation with such an enemy.

He was able to do this because he knew that he had caused the problem but he had also experienced the grace of God. He was able to reach out in love to Esau because he had first been loved by God. Some of you have relationships that are in great need of reconciliation. God is calling you to move ahead in grace to make the first steps.

Rich Maurer  
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<sup>a</sup> *Mahanaim* means *two camps*.

<sup>b</sup> Or *camps*; also in verse 10

<sup>c</sup> Or *camp*

<sup>d</sup> Or *camp*

<sup>a</sup> *Israel* means *he struggles with God*.

<sup>b</sup> *Peniel* means *face of God*.

<sup>c</sup> Hebrew *Penuel*, a variant of *Peniel*