

# Lesson 39

## Hosea 12:1

1 Ephraim feeds on the wind and pursues the east wind all day long; they multiply falsehood and violence; they make a covenant with Assyria, and oil is carried to Egypt.

Chapter 12 starts off with a translation issue. The Hebrew word translated “feed” in the ESV means “feed” when used for an animal, but otherwise means “shepherd.” We see both uses in the Psalms.

**Psalms 23:1** – The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

**Psalms 80:13** – The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it.

So what is the metaphor in verse 1? Is Israel like the sheep or is Israel like the shepherd?

I think the second verb in verse 1 (“pursues”) answers that question. I think what we see in verse 1 is a shepherd that is trying to control the wind the same way he controls his sheep and that is pursuing the east wind the same way he pursues his straying sheep.

I like the RSV translation:

Ephraim herds the wind, and pursues the east wind all day long.

And so what then is the point of this metaphor?

The point is that Ephraim is trying to control something that is uncontrollable. Ephraim is trying to manage something that is completely out of its control and out of its ability to manage in any way. In short, Ephraim is playing with fire.

And how are the people doing that? The end of verse 1 answers that question: “they make a covenant with Assyria, and oil is carried to Egypt.”

Ephraim was operating way out of its league. They were trying to make agreements with Assyria while secretly courting Egypt. And we know the result of that folly – when Assyria heard about it, they invaded and carried the people off into permanent exile while Egypt watched and laughed.

And finally what about that phrase in the middle? “they multiply falsehood and violence.”

I think that phrase shows what happened when Ephraim tried to manage things on its own apart from God – what happened when Ephraim found itself holding a tiger by the tail. That precarious situation led to falsehood and violence.

The falsehood is most likely the duplicity of Ephraim as it tried to keep both Egypt and Assyria happy while it courted the one and lied to the other.

And the violence, of course, is what resulted from the lies that Ephraim told to Assyria. The

Assyrian army showed up with great violence to put an end to Ephraim's lies. And this was all a result of Ephraim trying to manage things all on its own – by Ephraim trying to shepherd the wind.

And I think there is a lesson here for us. Philippians 4:13 does not say, "I can do all things." Instead, that verse says, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." With God, we are powerful. Without God, we are powerless.

## **Hosea 12:2**

2 The LORD has an indictment against Judah and will punish Jacob according to his ways; he will repay him according to his deeds.

Earlier we wondered whether Hosea 11:12 was a compliment or a criticism of Judah, and Hosea 12:2 (being just two verses later) caused us to lean toward that earlier verse being a criticism of Judah, which I think it is.

Here, there is no doubt. This verse is certainly a criticism of Judah. "The LORD has an indictment against Judah and will punish Jacob according to his ways; he will repay him according to his deeds."

The word translated "indictment" in the ESV just means a complaint or an accusation. There is no need for us to picture a formal courtroom scene as some commentaries suggest.

The big question for us here is not what Judah had done to deserve this accusation – we already

know that Judah was following the bad example of her sister, Israel.

Instead, the big question for us here is why we see a switch from Judah to Jacob. The accusation is against **Judah**, but the punishment and the repayment are directed against **Jacob**. Why the switch?

So far, most of Hosea has been directed against Israel in the north, with only a few passing references to Judah in the south.

Here, by referring to Jacob, I think that Hosea is looking at both Judah and Israel at the same time. By talking about Jacob, Hosea is taking us back in time prior to the tribal divisions and prior to the divided kingdom.

Like a psychologist, I think Hosea is wondering here what he might learn about the people of his own day by examining their parents.

And I think what Hosea finds is that their famous namesake, Jacob, had both good traits and bad traits. But the people of Hosea's day had inherited only Jacob's bad traits.

And so we read that "Jacob" would be punished according to his ways and repaid according to his deeds.

In that statement, I think Hosea is using the name "Jacob" primarily to refer to the descendants of Jacob (both Judah and Israel) – but I think there is also in that statement a reference to Jacob the man, and to his ways, and to his deeds. Why? Because in the next few verses

Hosea is going to describe the ways and the deeds of Jacob the person.

And I think the reason for this is that Hosea wants us to see the **bad** traits of Jacob that are evident now in the descendants of Jacob. And I think Hosea also wants us to see the **good** traits of Jacob that are **not** evident in the descendants of Jacob.

Why are the people so different from Jacob? Because Jacob knew God, while Hosea's listeners did not.

Yes, Jacob had his faults, but Jacob had an encounter with God and was forever changed by that encounter.

And to make that point, Hosea, in the next two verses, gives us an extremely abbreviated summary of Jacob's life.

## Hosea 12:3-4

3 In the womb he took his brother by the heel, and in his manhood he strove with God. 4 He strove with the angel and prevailed; he wept and sought his favor. He met God at Bethel, and there God spoke with us--

These verses seem straightforward, but there is a surprising amount of controversy about them in the commentaries. Why?

- First, there is some disagreement about which events in Jacob's life are being described here.

- Second, there is some concern about the possibly non-chronological order of the events in these verses.
- Third, there is some confusion about the subjects of some of the pronouns in these verses.
- And fourth, there is some discussion about the origin of some of the words in these verses.

So, to unravel these two verses, let's look at three questions.

- First, what does the Bible (outside of Hosea) tell us about Jacob?
- Second, what does Hosea tell us about Jacob?
- Third, why did Hosea tell us these things about Jacob?

**Question #1: What does the Bible (outside of Hosea) tell us about Jacob?**

We all know that Jacob was the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham, and we all know that Jacob had a twin brother, Esau. And we also all know that there was an almost constant struggle between Jacob and Esau, beginning even before they were born.

**Genesis 25:21-26** – And Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren. And the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived. **The children struggled together within her**, and she said, "If it is thus, why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger." When her days to give birth were

completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau. **Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel**, so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

Later, we know that Jacob managed to obtain Esau's birthright by taking advantage of his brother's hunger.

**Genesis 25:29-34** – Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was exhausted. And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted!" (Therefore his name was called Edom.) **Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright now." Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?"** Jacob said, "Swear to me now." So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. **Thus Esau despised his birthright.**

And we know that Jacob also managed to obtain Esau's blessing through lying and trickery directed at his father, Isaac.

**Genesis 27:18-24** – So he went in to his father and said, "My father." And he said, "Here I am. Who are you, my son?" Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, that your soul may bless me." But Isaac said to his son, "How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?" He answered, "Because the LORD your God granted me success." Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Please come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not." **So Jacob went near to Isaac his father, who felt him and said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." And he did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands.**

**So he blessed him.** He said, "Are you really my son Esau?" He answered, "I am."

And we know that Jacob then fled from Esau and had an encounter with God at Bethel as he was on his way to live with Laban in the east, where he would marry Leah and Rachel.

**Genesis 28:10-19** – Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. **And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!** And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. **The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring.** Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. **He called the name of that place Bethel,** but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

And we know that Jacob later had a very unusual encounter with an angel of God at Peniel while on his way back from Laban to be reunited with Esau.



**Genesis 32:24–30** – 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." 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."

And we know that Jacob met with Esau his brother and that the two were reconciled.

**Genesis 33:1–4** – And Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two female servants. And he put the servants with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. **He himself went on before them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother.** But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, **and they wept.**

And, finally, we know that God once again met with Jacob at Bethel to restate and reaffirm the promises that he had earlier made to Jacob there.

**Genesis 35:9–15** – **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.

There are certainly other important events about Jacob that we could review, but I think those are the only events we need for our purposes here.

Our next task is to match what we just reviewed with what we find here in Hosea 12:3–4. And let’s start by re-reading those two verses.

In the womb he took his brother by the heel, and in his manhood he strove with God. He strove with the angel and prevailed; he wept and sought his favor. He met God at Bethel, and there God spoke with us.

**Question #2: What did Hosea say in verses 3–4 about Jacob?**

***“In the womb he took his brother by the heel.”***

This event is easy to identify in the life of Jacob. As we read earlier, the struggle between Jacob and Esau began prior to their birth when Jacob grabbed Esau’s heel in a seeming attempt to prevent Esau from being born first.

But we need to remember something important about Hosea – Hosea usually does not teach us by explaining things, but instead Hosea usually teaches us by reminding us about things.

If Hosea wants to tell us three things, sometimes he will do so by reminding us about the first thing, with the expectation that we will then remember (or perhaps go look up) the other two things.

I think that may be what is happening here, and I think the point Hosea wants us to remember is that Jacob struggled with Esau throughout most of his life, starting even before he was born!

Yes, Hosea could have said that. Yes, Hosea could have listed all the times that Jacob and Esau struggled, including the time when Esau lost his birthright, the time when Esau lost his blessing, and the times when Jacob feared that Esau would kill him.

But Hosea does not do that. Instead, Hosea just mentions the first time they struggled, and he expects us to then remember all of the other times they struggled. If we have come to Hosea to be spoon-fed, then we can come to the wrong place!

And I think Esau would have agreed with us here because Esau also saw that first struggle in the womb as an early indicator of the later struggles that occurred between the two.

**Genesis 27:36** – Esau said, **“Is he not rightly named Jacob?”** For he has cheated me these two times. He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing.

“Is he not rightly named Jacob?” Why did Esau ask that? Because the Hebrew verb translated “grasping his heel” is the root word of the name

“Jacob” and is also similar to the word “deceived.”

I think that, like Esau clearly did, Hosea wants us to also see the entire life of Jacob in that short description of his birth.

***“And in his manhood he strove with God.”***

At this point, we might have expected Hosea to say, “and in his manhood he strove with **Esau**.” That is, Jacob struggled with Esau before his birth, and then Jacob continued to struggle with Esau in his manhood.

But that is not what Hosea tells us. Instead, Hosea tells us that Jacob struggled with Esau at his birth, and Jacob struggled with God in his manhood.

In fact, despite seeing the word “God” three times in the ESV translation of these two verses, this is the only phrase where the word “God” actually occurs. Elsewhere “God” is either referred to in the Hebrew with a pronoun or as an unstated subject.

But even though this struggle with God is seemingly a different struggle than the struggle with Esau, I think we are starting to see a theme in these two verses – the theme of **struggle** or **striving**! Let’s keep that theme in mind as we proceed.

What is this struggle or striving with God that occurred in Jacob’s manhood?

I think that without doubt this description is intended to at least include Jacob's most famous struggle.

**Genesis 32:28** – Then he [the angel] said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.”

The Hebrew word translated “striven” in Genesis 32:28 is used in only one other place in the Bible – right here in Hosea 12:3.

Although there is much debate on this point, many commentaries say that Jacob's new name “Israel” either means “he strives with God” or, more likely, “God strives.”

And I think that a better translation of Genesis 32:28 is that “you have striven with God, and with men have you prevailed” rather than “you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.”

And I think this verse in Hosea confirms that understanding. Here Hosea says that Jacob strove with God, but in the next phrase Hosea will say that Jacob strove with the angel and prevailed.

I'm sure we have many questions about that strange event, but most of those questions will have to wait for an equally detailed study of the book of Genesis! (Maybe someday!)

Here, I think all we need to do is focus on the word “struggled” or “striven.” So far, that is all we have seen Jacob doing. He **struggled** with

Esau, he **struggled** with God, and (as we will see with next phrase) he **struggled** with an angel.

And why do I say that this phrase **includes** that most famous struggle? Because I think once again Hosea intends for us to see something else in the short phrase that he uses here. I think Hosea wants us to see, not just Jacob's one-night struggle with God, but rather Jacob's life-long struggle with God.

Yes, Jacob is listed in Hebrews 11 on the great roll call of faith, but Hosea tells us that Jacob struggled with God. And I think there is a wonderful message for us in that – it is okay to struggle with God. Jacob is an example of that, and so is Job.

In fact, Job said some things to God that we might expect to have resulted in a swift lightning bolt from heaven!

**Job 9:22–24** – He destroys both the blameless and the wicked. When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity of the innocent. The earth is given into the hand of the wicked; he covers the faces of its judges – if it is not he, who then is it?

That is Job struggling with God. But we don't see any lightning bolts. Instead, what we see is that Job repents in Job 42:6 and that in the next verse God commends Job for speaking what is right.

So what is the message to us? It is this: we can struggle with God and still be faithful to God.

Jacob is an example of that, and Job is an example of that.

***“He strove with the angel and prevailed.”***

Again, I think the focus here is the wrestling match at Peniel.

Not only did Jacob struggle with Esau in the womb and throughout his life, and not only did Jacob spiritually struggle with God, but Jacob physically struggled with an angel – and Jacob won!

And, again, I’m sure we have many questions about that strange event, but we need to keep focused on the key point that Hosea is making – Jacob’s struggles.

So far, we have seen Jacob struggling before his birth and after his birth. And we have seen Jacob struggling with God and with man. And we have seen that both of Jacob’s names stem from his struggles, and we have seen Jacob struggle with an angel and win.

And so far, there is much in common between Jacob and the descendants of Jacob. Both were defined by their struggles.

The people listening to Hosea struggled with each other, struggled with the surrounding nations, struggled with the prophets of God, and struggled with God. They were certainly living up to their namesake.

But did the people prevail? Well, yes, in a way they did. They seem to have gotten just what they

wanted. They sought freedom from God, and God was cutting them loose.

Sometimes the very worst punishment we can receive from God is for God to let us have the very thing for which we are asking. I think Ephraim found that out the hard way!

And, yes, Ephraim was struggling with God, and yes, as we have seen, it is possible to struggle with God and be faithful to God. Jacob shows us that. But, of course, it is also possible to struggle with God and be faithless to God. Sadly, as we will see and have already seen, Ephraim shows us that.

***“He wept and sought his favor.”***

If struggling has been our theme so far in these two verses, I think we see a shift in that theme here. Instead of struggling, we see weeping and seeking.

But which weeping and which seeking? What event is being described here?

I think we have two choices. Either this weeping and this seeking occurred when Jacob wrestled with the angel, or this weeping and this seeking occurred later when Jacob was reconciled with Esau.

And I think the better option is the latter option – the reconciliation of Jacob and Esau. We see no weeping at the wrestling match in Genesis 32, but we do see weeping at the reconciliation in Genesis 33.



**Genesis 33:4** – But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.

And I think we also see Jacob seeking Esau's favor at that time.

**Genesis 33:3** – He himself went on before them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother.

But I don't think we see either the weeping or the seeking (at least not as clearly) during the events at Peniel when Jacob wrestled with the angel.

So what does that mean? It means that when Hosea says "his favor" in verse 4, Hosea is leaping over the angel and over God to go back to Esau ("his brother" in verse 3) for the antecedent of the pronoun "his."

Or is he? I think the answer is yes and no.

Yes, I think Esau is the immediate subject of the phrase "his favor," but I think (as usual) Hosea also has someone else in mind, and I think that someone else is God.

I think the picture Hosea is painting in these verses is that when Jacob was striving with Esau, Jacob was also striving with God – and when Jacob wept and sought Esau's favor, Jacob was also weeping and seeking God's favor.

And where did that take Jacob? It took him to Bethel.

***“He met God at Bethel, and there God spoke with us.”***

We already know how important the city of Bethel is in the book of Hosea, and we know how important Bethel was in the life of Jacob, so we are not at all surprised to see Bethel when Hosea discusses Jacob. In fact, we would have been shocked if Bethel had not been mentioned here.

And let’s review how we got to Bethel in these two verses. First, Jacob struggled with everyone around him, including God, and, second, Jacob wept and sought favor from those with whom he had struggled the most, Esau and God. And then, after struggling, after weeping, and after seeking favor – Jacob ends up at Bethel.

Now, we know that chronologically we have a difficulty here. Jacob met God at Bethel while he was fleeing from Esau, which was long before he wrestled with the angel and was reconciled with Esau.

But that difficulty evaporates when we remember that Jacob went back to Bethel much later so that God could restate and reaffirm the promises that Jacob had heard on his first visit with God at Bethel. I think that the meeting at Bethel in this phrase is the **second** meeting at Bethel.

Jacob met God at Bethel. Or perhaps we should instead say that God met Jacob at Bethel. The ESV says that “he met **God** at Bethel,” but the literal Hebrew says, “he found **him** in Bethel,” which leaves open the question of who found whom.

Either way, God and Jacob had a meeting at Bethel! And God told Jacob that the great promises he had given to Abraham now applied to him – not to his older brother, Esau, but to him, the younger brother.

**Genesis 35:11-12** – 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.

Nations. Kings. Land. Jacob **and his descendants** were promised those three great blessings by God at Bethel, which means the house of God. But were those blessings being enjoyed by Jacob's descendants? And if not, why not? That is our next issue.