

JACOB: DEALING WITH NATURAL STRENGTH

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A study of the life of Jacob from Genesis 25 through Genesis 35. This is a compilation of Bible Study lesson notes from various times over the past 25 years.

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JACOB: DEALING WITH NATURAL STRENGTH

In our study of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob we learn how God deals with us as His people. Abraham was sovereignly chosen by God when he was in Ur of the Chaldees. Isaac was not the first born of Abraham but was sovereignly chosen by God to be the son of the promise that God had made to Abraham. Jacob as not the first born of Isaac but was sovereignly chosen by God (even before he was born) to be the one through whom God's promises would be fulfilled. Each of these was chosen by God, not based on their own merit but was based on the merit of God. This is a threefold picture of grace. And just in case we still don't "get it" He did it again with the sons of Jacob – Judah was selected for the fulfillment of the coming of the Messiah rather than Reuben.

In Abraham we see something of the nature of God the Father. Abraham is described as the father of all them who believe (Rom 4:11). Abraham is the beginning or the starting point for God's plan of redemption that would deal (not just with individual sins) but with the sin problem of the human race. In referring to Abraham as the father, we see that the solution to the sin problem is a matter of birth and not of anything we can do.

In Isaac we see a type of Christ. All Isaac had, he got by inheritance. Everything was bestowed upon him and he accepted. In the experience of Isaac we see the old nature being taken care of. The bond woman and her son are cast out and the new life was given.

Having chosen us and having made provision to remove the old nature, God is still not through with us. We understand that the old nature is dealt with by death on the Cross of Christ. The Cross is God's provision and means of taking away the old nature and imparting new life to us as exemplified in the Resurrection. The Cross is the starting point and not the end point of God's salvation. There is more to be accomplished and this is what we see in the life and person of Jacob. In Jacob, we see that God deals not only with the old nature and its sinfulness but also with our natural strength and the strength of self.

In unregenerate mankind, the old nature and its sinfulness are indistinguishable from our natural strength and the strength of self. For the Christian, the Scriptures separate "old nature" and "natural strength." For example, before the fall, Adam had natural strength as a result of being created by God. However, he did not have an "old nature" – before the fall. Consider the life of Jesus. He was born (but not of the seed of Adam) without an "old nature" but He did have natural strength. He had a self and a personality and individualism but He did not abuse that natural strength and He did not choose to live by Himself. He said "I can of Myself do nothing." We can take that a step further and apply it to ourselves and we recall the words of Jesus that said "Apart from Me, you can do nothing."

For us, we start out with both an "old nature" and natural strength. While the Cross takes care of the "old nature" the natural strength must be dealt with. As Christians, we may be dedicated to doing God's will and have the best of intentions of being pleasing to God; yet, we fail by being mistimed, misdirected and misunderstood with a result of NOT being pleasing to God. This is where we are trying to build upon the Foundation but what we are putting up are wood, hay and stubble (1 Cor 3:12). We may be doing "God's work" but we are doing it in our own strength. Such work will not stand the test of judgment. This may be why we see so many programs in churches that come upon the scene and look impressive at the beginning but they fail to last because they are not built of gold and silver and precious stone but of wood, hay and stubble.

The gold represents the goodness of God that manifest itself in what He does for us.

Every good and every perfect gift comes from God. These are lasting. We can think of silver as the redemption we have in Christ. That is lasting. The precious stones are not pure elements like gold and silver but are compounds that are formed from fairly common element (what we might call dirt) that have been exposed to long periods of heat and pressure. Then they have to be cut and polished. This is a figure of the work of the Holy Spirit in and on the life a believer.

Whatever comes our way, the Holy Spirit uses it as heat and pressure and stress to transform the common elements into compounds that are precious. That is what Romans 8:28 is talking about. Now what is God going to do with these precious stones? What does Romans 8:29 say? “We are being conformed to the image of His Son.” Our tendency is to think of this as an individual transformation that will transform each one of us into a complete image of Jesus. That MAY be what it means but consider that as precious stones we collectively form a mosaic picture of Jesus. Collectively, we are the church, the body of Christ.

A TROUBLED FAMILY

Genesis 25:19-34

I think it is rather odd that children in a family, people who grew up together and loved one another, would have a major falling out over which child received their deceased mother's rocking chair. I just made up that example, but each of us has seen petty things cause significant rifts in family relationships. Maybe it is not so much the value of the rocking chair as it is a sense of being treated unfairly that is the root of such problems. We tend to have a very well tuned sense of fairness and unfairness especially when we think we are being treated unfairly. Children are especially sensitive to the action of their parents toward their brothers or sisters. The perception that our brother or sister is being favored tends to cause us to build resentment toward them. This kind of feeling of bitterness developed in the twin sons of Isaac.

We all know the story of how Abraham did not want Isaac to marry a Canaanite woman and consequently sent his servant to his homeland to find a bride for Isaac. God led the servant to a relative of Abraham and a daughter of this relative named Rebekah agreed to go with Abraham's servant to Canaan to be the wife of Isaac.

Isaac's Sons – 25:19-21

¹⁹ Now these are the records of the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham became the father of Isaac; ²⁰ and Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife. ²¹ Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD answered him and Rebekah his wife conceived. Genesis 25:19–21 (NASB95)

Marrying cousins was not uncommon among the people of that time. This practice was probably for the purpose of keeping racial purity in the extended family. The text refers to these people as being Syrians (KJV) or Arameans (NIV). They were descendants of Noah's son Shem who was given a blessing over his brother Canaan. So, there may have been some feeling of superiority on the part of Abraham's family when it came to the Canaanites.

Rebekah appeared to not be able to have children. As in the case of Sarah, this woman was considered to be barren. Isaac and Rebekah did not try to solve the barrenness problem the way Abraham and Sarah did. Instead Isaac asked God to solve the problem and God answered his prayer.

Answered Prayer – 25:22-23

²² But the children struggled together within her; and she said, “If it is so, why then am I this way?” So she went to

inquire of the LORD. ²³ The LORD said to her, “Two nations are in your womb; And two peoples will be separated from your body; And one people shall be stronger than the other; And the older shall serve the younger.” Genesis 25:22–23 (NASB95)

God answered Isaac's prayer in a double measure. Rebekah became pregnant with twins. While she carried these babies they were so active that it seemed to her as if they were fighting each other. Of course, she wondered if they really were fighting and if so, what this meant relative to the lives of her offspring. There used to be a lot of concern or thought about experiences that a woman would have during a pregnancy influencing the life of the child.

It may have been just coincidence that the twins that Rebekah had struggled with each other before they were born; however, this coincidence had significance in that it was a prediction of the strife and competition that would surround the life of these two people. When Rebekah asked God what it meant she learned that these children were part of a grand plan of God to make two nations. One of these nations would be used to fulfill the promise of God to Abraham regarding the fact that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him. Tradition would have had this honor to go to the first born, but God is sovereign and He chose to bypass tradition. In His omniscience, God knew which child would develop the set of values that would be needed to be the head of the nation out of which the Messiah would come. Isaac and Rebekah did not have a clue as to why God made the choices that He did. It is also unlikely that they realized that the series of events that happened in the family was all part of God's plan. So many times we think that "things just happen" and do not see the hand of God at work in our lives.

Promise Delivered – 25:24-26

²⁴ When her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵ Now the first came forth red, all over like a hairy garment; and they named him Esau. ²⁶ Afterward his brother came forth with his hand holding on to Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob; and Isaac was sixty years old when she gave birth to them. Genesis 25:24–26 (NASB95)

When the children were born, Isaac and Rebekah had been married about 20 years. The fact that Rebekah was barren was mentioned earlier and this lapse of 20 years confirms the difficulty she had in conceiving. The first born was described as being reddish. This may have been red hair or just a ruddy complexion. The child also was covered with hair. This sometimes happens when babies are born that they have a lot of very fine body hair that soon comes out. The child was named Esau, a name which may mean hairy. As it turns out, as he grew up, he had a nickname of "red." This is the origin of the name Edom (red) that was given to the nation that was the descendants of Esau.

When the second child was born, he grabbed the heel of the first one. This seemingly insignificant event took on great meaning in that he was named Jacob which could mean "grabber."

Differences Matter – 25:27-34

²⁷ When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the field, but Jacob was a peaceful man, living in tents. ²⁸ Now Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. ²⁹ When Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished; ³⁰ and Esau said to Jacob, “Please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished.” Therefore his name was called Edom. ³¹ But Jacob said, “First sell me your birthright.” ³² Esau said, “Behold, I am about to die; so of what use then is the birthright to me?” ³³ And Jacob said, “First swear to me”; so he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴ Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; and he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright. Genesis 25:27–34 (NASB95)

It is interesting to see the different interest that children develop as they grow up.

Obviously, Esau and Jacob were not identical twins. They did not have the same appearance and they certainly did not have the same interests. Esau enjoyed hunting and being outside. Jacob was more interested in things at home. It is not unexpected that Isaac would be closer to Esau and Rebekah would be closer to Jacob.

Esau was like so many young men today. Their whole life is sports. They have very few serious thoughts and have no extra time for career or family or community. Jacob was probably like a few children you see who behave as adults and have mature, adult interests by the time they are six years old. It is not difficult to figure out which person is really going to be successful in life. This difference in ability to recognize and see priorities and to live a disciplined life in order to accomplish what is worthwhile was dramatically illustrated in an incident that happened involving Jacob and Esau.

Esau thought only of the present moment and what it would take to make him happy now. Jacob, on the other hand, was always on the lookout for opportunities to get in a better position or to be more successful. He wanted to be successful more than anything. Admittedly, his definition of success needed to be directed and refined, but he had the "fire in the gut" type drive that is a key factor in being successful. He was focused on goals in his life and he looked at every situation relative to how he might accomplish his goal.

Can we apply this same type of intensity and focus in our Christian walk? Absolutely! First of all we need to get our goal right and that is *to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ*. Christ is to be our very life as Paul said, "The life I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God Who loved me and gave Himself for me." (Gal 2:20, Rom 8:29) Next, we are to look in every situation for ways that this goal is being accomplished in our lives. Again, as Paul said in Romans 8:28, "For we know that all things work together for good to them who love the Lord, to them who are called according to His purpose." This changes our whole outlook on life and causes us to cooperate with God as He goes about molding us and making us after His will.

THE DECEIVER

Genesis 27:1-45

The birth of Isaac's sons was unusual. He was about 60 years old and the birth of these twins was an answer to prayer. Before they were born Rebekah received a message from God that she had two nations in her womb and that the elder would serve the younger.

- Do you think that Rebekah wanted to do God's will? Absolutely. As a consequence, Jacob was her favorite while Esau (being the first born) was Isaac's favorite.
- Do you think Rebekah told Jacob that he was chosen by God to be the leader in the family? Absolutely.
- Do you think Jacob wanted to do God's will? Absolutely. If he had been asked to write a purpose statement for his life, it would have been centered around obtaining the birthright and blessing. So, it is not surprising that Jacob was looking for any opportunity to achieve this goal. We don't know how many times he had tried to get the birthright from Esau but we have the account of his buying it for a bowl of beans.
- Do you think that the birthright was important to Esau? Not at that time. What was Esau's purpose in life? He was the type person that we see being appealed to in the beer ad that says, "You only go around once in life, so grab all the gusto you can." It is a "live for the moment and forget about tomorrow" type outlook on life. It is truly a tragic way

to live life and waste the opportunities in life. Many of our churches are filled with people who see no value in their spiritual inheritance and things of the spirit do not matter to them.

Question: Did Jacob need to buy the birthright from Esau? NO! He either did not need it or God had a way to transfer the birthright to him. How would that happen? We have no idea, since Jacob intervened with a “natural strength” solution, he nor we will know the way God would bring about what He had predetermined to make happen. From Jacob’s and Rebekah’s viewpoint, they could check off “Obtain Birthright” on their “To Do” list. The next item on the list was “Obtain Blessing.”

Isaac’s Plan – 27:1-4

¹ Now it came about, when Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, that he called his older son Esau and said to him, “My son.” And he said to him, “Here I am.” ² Isaac said, “Behold now, I am old and I do not know the day of my death.” ³ “Now then, please take your gear, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me; ⁴ and prepare a savory dish for me such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die.” Genesis 27:1–4 (NASB95)

How old was Isaac at this time? Some say 100, others 137 and one reference has him at 160 years old. He eventually lived to be 180. If he were 100, then Jacob and Esau would have been about 40 years old. About 20 years or more had passed since Esau sold his birthright. Isaac was preparing to give Esau his blessing.

Rebekah’s Opportunity – 27:5-10

⁵ Rebekah was listening while Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game to bring home, ⁶ Rebekah said to her son Jacob, “Behold, I heard your father speak to your brother Esau, saying, ⁷ ‘Bring me some game and prepare a savory dish for me, that I may eat, and bless you in the presence of the LORD before my death.’ ⁸ “Now therefore, my son, listen to me as I command you. ⁹ “Go now to the flock and bring me two choice young goats from there, that I may prepare them as a savory dish for your father, such as he loves. ¹⁰ “Then you shall bring it to your father, that he may eat, so that he may bless you before his death.” Genesis 27:5–10 (NASB95)

Rebekah knew God’s will and she and Jacob were working to bring about that will by their natural strength and wit. Never do we see them ask God for His instruction about what to do about the blessing going to Esau.

The **blessing** and the **birthright** are not significant issues in our society. These were extremely important in the world in which Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived. The **birthright** was the assurance that the first born son would receive the largest share of the inheritance. Usually, this share was a double portion. If there were nine heirs, then the birthright would give the eldest son 20 percent of the estate while the others would get 10 percent each. The first born son could not be denied this right without cause since it was protected by custom or law. If there were sufficient causes, then the right might be lost as in the case of Reuben who committed incest by sleeping with his father's concubine. The birthright could also be sold as in the case of Esau who sold his favored position to Jacob for a piece of bread and a bowl of soup. The **blessing** did not involve the inheritance of wealth but the conferring of power or the right of leadership in the extended family or clan. Apparently, Isaac was thinking that his effectiveness as the leader of the family was nearing an end and he was ready to pass on the mantle of leadership to Esau.

Here, as often in Genesis, this new step forward in the history of salvation is set against the backdrop of unscrupulous behavior by the patriarchs involved. Once again, it is God’s mercy, not human merit, that is the ultimate hope of redemption (cf. Rom. 9:10–18).

Deceptions Develop – 27:11-17

¹¹ Jacob answered his mother Rebekah, “Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man and I am a smooth man.” ¹² “Perhaps my father will feel me, then I will be as a deceiver in his sight, and I will bring upon myself a curse and not a blessing.” ¹³ But his mother said to him, “Your curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice, and go, get them for me.” ¹⁴ So he went and got them, and brought them to his mother; and his mother made savory food such as his father loved. ¹⁵ Then Rebekah took the best garments of Esau her elder son, which were with her in the house, and put them on Jacob her younger son. ¹⁶ And she put the skins of the young goats on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. ¹⁷ She also gave the savory food and the bread, which she had made, to her son Jacob. Genesis 27:11–17 (NASB95)

One lie leads to another, it has been said and we could add to that "deception begets deceptions." Usually one bit of trickery is not enough. First it was goat meat disguised as venison, next it was wearing the clothes of someone else and covering up the bear spots with goat skin. So often in life we attempt to flavor up the common place to make it appear to be something that it is not. Many people put on the garb of Christianity (go to church, sing in the choir, serve on the board) without ever having been born again. There is plenty of deception still around. Sometimes the tragedy of deception is that we are the ones being deceived.

It is one thing to appear to be something that we are not (image is everything or so the adage goes); it is quite another thing to act the part of something you are not. Jacob was all dressed up but he still needed to play the role to pull off the deception.

A Deceitful Son – 27:18-23

¹⁸ Then he came to his father and said, “My father.” And he said, “Here I am. Who are you, my son?” ¹⁹ Jacob said to his father, “I am Esau your firstborn; I have done as you told me. Get up, please, sit and eat of my game, that you may bless me.” ²⁰ Isaac said to his son, “How is it that you have it so quickly, my son?” And he said, “Because the LORD your God caused it to happen to me.” ²¹ Then Isaac said to Jacob, “Please come close, that I may feel you, my son, whether you are really my son Esau or not.” ²² So Jacob came close to Isaac his father, and he felt him and said, “The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau.” ²³ He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau’s hands; so he blessed him. Genesis 27:18–23 (NASB95)

Apparently, Esau and Jacob sounded enough alike that Isaac could not be sure who was speaking to him when Jacob called to him. When he responded to Isaac's question, he had to lie about who he was to keep up the deception. He then lied about what he had done, he lied about the nature of the food that Isaac was to eat and finally he invoked the name to God to try to give all of the deception some credibility.

I think there are many nominal Christians who live in this kind of deception all the time. They have never been born again and yet when asked if they are saved will tell you a resounding “yes!” They brag about all that they have done for the kingdom of God and if it were examined it would be found to be work for the Boy Scouts and the Kiwanis Club – not that there is anything wrong with these fine organizations, they are not the kingdom of God any more than goat meat is deer meat. A lot of churches have sermons delivered in them Sunday after Sunday that are all very interesting, but the source of the message and the philosophy behind it is humanism rather than the principles and message of the word of God. All this goes on under the umbrella of the “church” and many fail to see the deception that it there since the name of God is invoked about what is being done.

Isaac was suspicious that something was amiss. Though he could not see well, he could tell that everything did not fit together really well. He tried to check out his concerns by getting closer to Jacob and because he could not see, he had to rely on feeling. His conclusion was that he sounded like Jacob but he felt like Esau. Based on his feeling, he was going to bless Jacob.

A precaution for us in the church is that many are being deceived by what has been called the “feel-good gospel.” Don't tell anyone about sin and the consequences of it. Don't mention anything that is negative, but we just want everyone to feel good about themselves. Even though it sounds like humanism it makes us feel good and we give our blessing to it by saying, “that was a really good message.”

What Rebekah and Jacob did was completely unnecessary! At the brothers' births God had told Rebekah that the older would serve the younger (25:23). Yet as the critical time drew closer and closer, mother and son felt impelled to “help God out.”

What was the result? Jacob did receive the blessing—which he would have received anyway. Bitterness was heightened between the brothers, and Esau's hatred became so intense that he planned to kill Jacob after their father died. Rebekah, who had plotted to help her favorite son, was forced to send him away for 20 years, and did not live to see him return. True, it worked out in the end. But the anger, the fear, the separation—all these might have been avoided had Jacob and Rebekah simply trusted God and rejected deceit.

A Deceived Father – 27:24-27

²⁴ And he said, “Are you really my son Esau?” And he said, “I am.” ²⁵ So he said, “Bring it to me, and I will eat of my son's game, that I may bless you.” And he brought it to him, and he ate; he also brought him wine and he drank. ²⁶ Then his father Isaac said to him, “Please come close and kiss me, my son.” ²⁷ So he came close and kissed him; and when he smelled the smell of his garments, he blessed him and said, “See, the smell of my son Is like the smell of a field which the LORD has blessed; Genesis 27:24–27 (NASB95)

Though Isaac had suspicions, the deception was done so well that further checking was not able to prove anything. Isaac was relying on all the senses he had: His hearing, his feeling, and his sense of smell. The three were giving him mixed signals: hearing said "no" and feeling and sense of smell said "yes." So Isaac took a vote and it was two to one in favor of the deception. This may be a good lesson for all of us to learn. If what we are being told causes serious questions about its validity – it doesn't sound right, or it doesn't feel right, or it doesn't smell right, then we need to be reluctant to bless it.

What Isaac was lacking was the ability to see. If he could have seen clearly, then he would have been able to tell the difference between Jacob and Esau and he would not have been deceived. Our best protection is to have spiritual insight that is provided by the Holy Spirit (one of the Gifts of the Spirit is discernment) in our lives.

A Stolen Blessing – 27:28-29

²⁸ Now may God give you of the dew of heaven, And of the fatness of the earth, And an abundance of grain and new wine; ²⁹ May peoples serve you, And nations bow down to you; Be master of your brothers, And may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be those who curse you, And blessed be those who bless you.” Genesis 27:28–29 (NASB95)

Think about the moral and theological problems. Does God approve of Jacob's cheating? Will he endorse a blessing gained under false pretenses? Isaac was clear that his blessing was irrevocable: that since it was pronounced over Jacob it belonged to him. Despite the underhanded way in which Jacob obtained the blessing, it was still valid.

The Missed Blessing – 27:30-40

³⁰ Now it came about, as soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, and Jacob had hardly gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, that Esau his brother came in from his hunting. ³¹ Then he also made savory food, and brought it to his father; and he said to his father, “Let my father arise and eat of his son's game, that you may bless me.” ³² Isaac his father said to him, “Who are you?” And he said, “I am your son, your firstborn, Esau.” ³³ Then Isaac trembled violently, and said, “Who was he then that hunted game and brought it to me, so that I ate of all of it before

you came, and blessed him? Yes, and he shall be blessed.”³⁴ When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, “Bless me, even me also, O my father!”³⁵ And he said, “Your brother came deceitfully and has taken away your blessing.”³⁶ Then he said, “Is he not rightly named Jacob, for he has supplanted me these two times? He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing.” And he said, “Have you not reserved a blessing for me?”³⁷ But Isaac replied to Esau, “Behold, I have made him your master, and all his relatives I have given to him as servants; and with grain and new wine I have sustained him. Now as for you then, what can I do, my son?”³⁸ Esau said to his father, “Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father.” So Esau lifted his voice and wept.³⁹ Then Isaac his father answered and said to him, “Behold, away from the fertility of the earth shall be your dwelling, And away from the dew of heaven from above.⁴⁰ “By your sword you shall live, And your brother you shall serve; But it shall come about when you become restless, That you will break his yoke from your neck.” Genesis 27:30–40 (NASB95)

We know “rest of the story.” About the time Jacob left, Esau came in with the venison to find that Isaac was filled with food and fresh out of blessings. He was devastated. He felt that his brother Jacob had not been fair. The results on the relationship were predictable.

We can look at what Esau did many years before this time and be amazed by it. But what we need to realize is that this act of selling the birthright was an action that is in character, not out of character. It was the result of a long process of character formation, a long history of choice after choice which shaped Esau’s personality.

Right now we may look at Esau with wonder and say, “We’d never do that.” Instead we ought to look at the action as an expression of character, and wonder: In what direction are our daily choices leading us? Do we so value our present experiences that we fail to discipline ourselves to wait when waiting is best? Is God high enough on our priority list to cause us to spend time with Him, or do other things push Him out of our thoughts?

We can shake our heads in wonder at Esau, but we had better realize that unless we make a daily habit of rejecting Esau’s values, we might someday be faced with similar choices – and make the wrong one!

There are two important lessons in the story of Jacob and Esau. We don’t have to take Jacob’s road to blessing. Instead, we can trust God and commit ourselves to do the right thing at all times. Truth, not lies, will serve us far better. God’s will still will be done, and we’ll be able to live in harmony with those around us. How great it is to shrug off all sense of pressure and to commit our way to God, confident that as we daily do His will, His good purposes will be performed.

Deceit’s Consequences – 27:41-45

⁴¹ So Esau bore a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him; and Esau said to himself, “The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob.”⁴² Now when the words of her elder son Esau were reported to Rebekah, she sent and called her younger son Jacob, and said to him, “Behold your brother Esau is consoling himself concerning you by planning to kill you.”⁴³ “Now therefore, my son, obey my voice, and arise, flee to Haran, to my brother Laban!”⁴⁴ “Stay with him a few days, until your brother’s fury subsides,⁴⁵ until your brother’s anger against you subsides and he forgets what you did to him. Then I will send and get you from there. Why should I be bereaved of you both in one day?” Genesis 27:41–45 (NASB95)

Doing “the what” of God’s will without regard to doing things “the way” of God’s will create havoc, controversy, and animosity. Esau hated Jacob. He had every intention of killing him, but not until his daddy died. We can fall into this same error of attempting to do what God wants done and ignoring God’s way. Even in sharing the gospel with people, we can come across as prideful, condemning, arrogant, and self-serving. The result: those who are lost hate the church.

Esau was angry because he was tricked and treated unfairly. He did not really care about the long-term significance of the outcome. The blessing of God goes with those who want His

will. The discipline of God works to bring us into doing things His way.

NOT ALONE Genesis 28:10-22

Some of us are uncomfortable with the realization that our TV or computer monitors may be watching us and listening to us and our cell phones are tracking everywhere we go. More and more people are buying gadgets that they have in several rooms in their house to which a person can give commands such as “turn off the lights in the living room” or “play soothing Christmas music.” Just think about it. If the device can hear your commands to do something, then it can hear everything else you are saying. When we think about all these newfangled things, we may long for a simpler time.

As it turns out, having everything we say, where we go and what we do being watched and remembered is not something new. This has been happening forever. Not only are what we say and do being tracked, everything we think is also known. We are not alone! The idea that this physical world is coexistent with a spiritual world or realm could make us somewhat uncomfortable. At the very least, this idea should make us more careful. Oh, I forgot, even beyond what we think, our motives are known.

If all this sounds and seems a bit eerie just think how Jacob felt when he waked up from the vision/dream he had when he was on a long trip from where his family lived to a place that was about 500 miles away from home.

We are familiar with the account of why Jacob had left the area where his family clan lived. Thus far in his life, Jacob had managed to buy a birthright that he was not going to be able to use, he had stolen a blessing that God had already promised to give him, he had caused his father to be so emotionally upset that he literally shook, he had made his twin brother Esau so mad that he intended to murder him as soon as his father Isaac passed away.

I wonder if it ever occurred to Jacob, life was not supposed to be this way. I wonder if it ever occurred to him that he did not have a clue as to how God operates. He had a lot to learn not only about God, but also to know God and to have a face-to-face encounter with God. The learning and encounter are the fruits of discipline.

Because of the pending threat, Jacob and his mother Rebekah came up with a reasonable excuse of why Jacob needed to leave home and that was that he wanted to find a wife that was not associated with the Canaanite people. His brother Esau had married two Canaanite women and his mother was very displeased with them. The plan was for Jacob to go to Rebekah’s brother’s home (500 miles away) to find a wife.

Purpose Revealed – 28:10-15

¹⁰ Then Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ He came to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place. ¹² He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. ¹⁴ “Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. ¹⁵ “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.” Genesis 28:10–15 (NASB95)

Jacob’s situation when he began this trip was that his life was in danger; he was traveling alone, his future was very uncertain and maybe his conscience bothered him, but that was

unlikely. Jacob was the able, seemingly clever, natural man. He was God's choice to inherit the blessing – not because he was clever – but just because God in his sovereignty wanted it. All Jacob's cleverness did not help him to realize or receive what God had for him. Jacob's intention was that God's will would be done. This was right and good. However, Jacob did not wait for God's time and look to God to accomplish it. No matter how perfect the heart's intentions may be, if it is man using his natural strength to do it, the result is failure to please God. Jacob had not learned to know and to quietly wait for the God Who said, "I will work, and who shall hinder it?" (Isa 43:13 ASV)

Jacob had it relatively easy up to now in his life. Now he was on his way to Haran and had lost the support of his family and perhaps realized for the first time that he was vulnerable and was not self-sufficient. That first night was spent sleeping out in the open with a rock for a pillow. He had a strange dream or vision during the night. You've heard of Jacob's ladder, well this is where he saw the ladder or as some suggest stairs were spanning between heaven and earth. The descriptive phrase "top reached to heaven" is like that used to describe the Tower of Babel which was a ziggurat or a stepped pyramid-like structure.

The vision or dream used imagery that was consistent with the general thinking of people of that day that heaven (the home of the gods) was up in the sky and that it could be reached by climbing up. The imagery also showed that there is a connection between heaven and earth and messengers are going back and forth between these two spiritual realms. We do not know how much understanding Jacob had about the spiritual realm and the concepts that were developed in an attempt to explain spiritual things in terms that we as mortal humans can understand.

Since the messengers were spiritual beings (normally referred to as angels) were ascending and descending, their originating and terminating places were also spiritual. Ideas were developed that there were three spiritual realm levels: the first heaven, the second heaven and the third heaven. The first heaven was the spiritual realm in which we reside as humans. The third heaven is said to be the dwelling place of God and the realm between the first and third is the "air" (second heaven) as the spiritual realm of angels (both good and evil). We can recall the description of the devil as being the "prince of the power of the air" which is thought to be where spiritual battles happen. We may also recall the incident mentioned in Daniel chapter 10 regarding an angel that brought a message to Daniel. The angel told Daniel that he was delayed twenty-one days by the prince of Persia which was a reference to the evil spiritual being (angel) ruling in that area of the world. The angel that came to Daniel was assisted by another (higher ranking) angel named Michael and that allowed the messenger to come to Daniel.

As Jacob (in this dream or vision) was allowed to look into the spiritual realm and see things in images to which he could relate, he "saw" above it all the Lord identified as the "God of your fathers." God repeated the covenant he had made with Abraham and had confirmed with Isaac. That covenant was unconditional in that God made no demands on Jacob for its fulfillment. This message from God confirmed the blessing and the birthright with comments about Jacob's descendants and the land. In addition to what Abraham and Isaac had been told Jacob was given a new promise. Perhaps the greatest part of the message that was of immediate and ongoing benefit to Jacob was the promise of God's persistent presence and his protection in whatever Jacob might encounter. The promise of Jacob returning to the land that was promised to him provided a sense of destiny that would keep him focused on the outcome that God was working to accomplish through the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Because of this promise, Jacob was not satisfied to just live out his life in Haran with his family but was motivated to go back to the land of Canaan.

It is thought that Jesus made a comment regarding Nathaniel that was related to the dream that Jacob had. Not long after His public ministry started Jesus saw Nathaniel and referred to him as an “Israelite indeed in whom there is no guile.” Of course, Israel was the new name given to Jacob after he had wrestled with God at the Brook Jabbok. Before that wrestling encounter, Jacob had operated with guile and afterwards was a different person. A little later in the conversation Jesus told Nathaniel that before long he would “see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.” In the vision that Jacob had the “ladder” was the connecting link between heaven and earth and Jesus was telling us that He was the true connecting link or the “way” between the spiritual and the physical or between God and man.

Presence Realized – 28:16-19

¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.” ¹⁷ 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.” ¹⁸ So Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on its top. ¹⁹ He called the name of that place Bethel; however, previously the name of the city had been Luz. Genesis 28:16–19 (NASB95)

When the dream or vision was over and Jacob awakened, he was in awe of what he had “experienced” during that dream. The statement he made sounds as if he thought that he had accidentally found a place where a person could go from the physical realm to the spiritual realm; that is, he had found the “gate of heaven.” When he arrived at the place and prepared to sleep for the night, he had no awareness of the presence of God.

Just how much the patriarchs understood about the omnipresence of God is uncertain. Many of the accounts in Old Testament would cause us to think that many viewed God as somewhat localized. After the dream he was convinced that he was in God’s house and he was humbled or awestruck with that realization. Some have suggested that Jacob may have been concerned that by his casually coming to this place and sleeping there that he had profaned or not shown proper reverence to God’s house.

Some authors of secular books have suggested that certain places exist that a person might go from the physical realm into the spiritual realm as in *Alice Through the Looking Glass* and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. That sort of thinking might have been around in ancient times and if that was the case, then these places became worship centers where people might have built altars to mark the spot for future encounters. Abraham erected altars at places where he had encounters with the Lord. Certainly, Jacob marked the spot by standing up the stone he has used for a head rest and pouring oil on it maybe as a sacrificial offering or as an act of acknowledging that the location was a sacred place.

Jacob went to sleep fearfully and full of anxiety, but he should have awakened with a sense of assurance and confidence. This was such a powerful experience that when he waked up he had a reverential fear about what he had seen in the dream. This was by no means a complete conversion of the schemer that he was; however, he did realize the possibilities of being in God’s camp. Now, instead of just being full of fear, he was full of awe. He named the place Bethel, which means the House of God.

Commitment Made – 28:20-22

²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, ²¹ and I return to my father’s house in safety, then the LORD will be my God. ²² “This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God’s house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.” Genesis 28:20–22 (NASB95)

What are we to conclude regarding Jacob's vow? Was it a good thing that showed his surrender, acceptance, and devotion to the Lord or was it an attempt to maintain control and to manipulate God with a covenant that he initiated?

Matthew Henry saw this vow as a really good thing that Jacob did. He pointed out that "Jacob had just experienced a gracious visit from heaven. God had repeated the covenant made with Abraham and Isaac with him, and the covenant is mutual. When God ratifies his promises to us, it is proper for us to repeat our promises to him." One might question the idea that the covenant was mutual and the propriety of our repeating our promises to God. The covenant that God made was unconditional and neither Abraham nor Isaac thought it necessary to offer a vow (or covenant) in return.

Matthew Henry also noted "Jacob's modesty and great moderation in his desires. He will cheerfully content himself with bread to eat, and raiment to put on." We could argue that this was admirable in that he did not ask for great wealth and power. It appears that this request for food and clothing was mentioned by Jesus in Matthew 6:31-32 where He said "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans strive after all these things, and your Heavenly Father knows that you need them...." In defense of Jacob we should also not that Jesus did instruct His followers to pray "Give us this day our daily bread."

Albert Barnes Notes as well as *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown* include comments that support the idea that Jacob's vow was an appropriate response and more or less an acknowledgment of God's gracious promise to him. The latter commentary points out that if we start the vow with the word "Since" rather than "If," then the vow becomes a statement of faith rather than a conditional quid pro quo contract.

An alternative view which seems to be supported by the evidence that Jacob was still a schemer over the next twenty years of his life as he interacted with his uncle Laban. Some see his vow as "classic Jacob." God has just given him the greatest unconditional, no-strings-attached covenant promise that anyone could have and Jacob responded with "Let's Make a Deal." His deal was something to the effect of "If you will provide for my needs and keep me safe, then I will let you be my God and I'll name this place in your honor and I'll become a thither." What Jacob was offering to God was not his to give. First of all, God is God. It is not a question of our letting Him be God. (In the same way, it is not a question of our "accepting" Jesus as Lord. He is Lord! One day, every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God.) We could argue that naming a place in honor of God is redundant. All of creation already bears the mark of the Creator. The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork. Tithing is not a bargaining tool that we can use with God. It already belongs to him. In fact, all of everything belongs to him.

Alexander MacLaren noted that Abraham believed God but "Jacob barely believed, and will wait to see whether all will turn out as it has been promised. That is not the glad, swift response of a loving, trusting heart. Nor is he contented with repeating to God the terms of his engagement, but he adds a couple of clauses which strike him as being important, and as having been omitted. There was nothing about 'bread to eat, and raiment to put on,' nor about coming back again 'in peace,' so he adds these. A true 'Jew,' – great at a bargain, and determined to get all he can, and to have no mistake about what he must get before he gives anything!"

The experience at Bethel made a significant impression on Jacob but it did nothing to change the basic Jacob. *Miracles may impress people and get their attention, but they are not necessarily life changing.*

We cannot know if this response of Jacob was self-serving or not. The real question that we need to address is whether or not our responses to God are self-serving. When it comes to “bargaining with God” we need to start with a realization that we have nothing that God does not provide. We cannot give a tithe to Him until He has first given to us. This reinforces the fact that God is the owner of everything and that we are not the source of what we have. A realization of this relationship is a statement of faith. The work of faith that should follow this realization is that we tithe. This is what Jacob promised to do.

Much of Jacob’s life was spent in trying to outsmart other people or to manipulate them. None of this was necessary! *By impatience, we run ahead of God and cause ourselves all kinds of grief. All Jacob’s scheming and cleverness did not help him to realize or receive what God had reserved for him.* The birthright (the double inheritance) did him no good since he was in exile for 20 years. The blessing did him little good with regard to leadership of the family since he had so thoroughly alienated his brother that any kind of civil interaction was impossible at the time. We can argue that Jacob’s intentions were good in that he wanted to see God’s will worked out. However, *it does not matter how perfect the heart’s intention is, if all our actions are simply the result of our using our natural strength because the result is failure to please God.*

FAMILY?

Genesis 29:15-30

A Russian proverb became well known in the late 1980s when Ronald Regan used it with regard to dealing with the Soviet Union in the area of arms control. The proverb (stated in English) is “Trust But Verify.” This proverb likely came about because people had learned that many times others cannot be trusted to keep their word unless inspections are done and accountability measures are in place. A similar adage that gained popularity during the emphasis on quality control was “You don’t get what you expect, you get what you inspect.”

Life is full of uncertainties. If we find ourselves in a situation that we need to trust someone with our well-being, then we would do the due diligence and check out those being considered. We can still find ourselves in situations where the truth about these things cannot be discovered and we still have uncertainty. If we think that we have to have absolute certainty, then we might find that we are paralyzed with fear of the unknown.

The converse of being overly cautious is being reckless and thinking that we are so well-liked, so smart, so strong or so well armed that we don’t need to exercise the “inspection and accountability” option in dealing with others. Another point of vulnerability or peril is when we put implicit trust in someone when that trust is not deserved. We are more likely to do this when we are dealing with family members since we expect family members to love each other and that is not always the case. Families can be dysfunctional especially when questions of material wealth and perceptions of unfairness are involved.

When we think we have things figured out and are sure what is going to happen next, then when it doesn’t happen that way we wind up being either pleasantly surprised or disappointed. We are surprised when things work out better than we expected and disappointed when they are not as good as we expected. We are especially disappointed when things fail after we have worked to make something happen and were thinking all along that it would just be a matter of time.

We all have been disappointed and usually we handle it pretty well. We may complain and fuss about it, but eventually go on with our lives. A few people never get over their

disappointments and it this inability to “let it go” and move to the next challenge or to try a different approach to accomplishing the same goal that causes bitterness and resentment in their lives. On the other hand, if we can properly handle the disappointment and not give up nor lose our enthusiasm then we can be successful. Abraham Lincoln was born into poverty, was not very handsome, was a failure in business, and lost more elections than he won and yet he is recognized as one of the great people in the history of the world. He dealt with his disappointments by not giving up but continuing to try to reach his goals.

How should we deal with our disappointments? As we study the Bible, we can see examples of people who God used to accomplish His purposes. They experienced “set backs” and what appeared to be failures in their lives, but because they didn't just give up and give in they eventually found fulfillment in life and even greater success than what they had envisioned for themselves. We can see in the life of Jacob, how he encountered many disappointments and how he dealt with these. Because he didn't just give up, he was used by God as a key person in the creation of the nation of Israel.

As Jacob was living out one of the disappointments of his life of having to leave home to avoid being killed by his brother, he encountered God Who renewed the covenant that He had made with Abraham. God promised to be with him and bless him and it was faith in this promise of God that helped him through the disappointments that he would encounter while living as part of the household of his uncle Laban.

Jacob's Proposal – 29:15-20

¹⁵ Then Laban said to Jacob, “Because you are my relative, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?” ¹⁶ Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷ And Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful of form and face. ¹⁸ Now Jacob loved Rachel, so he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” ¹⁹ Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than to give her to another man; stay with me.” ²⁰ So Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her. Genesis 29:15–20 (NASB95)

After about a month of living with his uncle's family, it became apparent that Jacob was not going home anytime soon. He was handy around the house or the tent in this case. Even though he was a guest and probably helped out in the home and with the flock, it was strictly a voluntary situation. As such, Laban could not be sure how much Jacob would do and when. So he attempted to formalize the relationship by hiring Jacob to work for him. Jacob was given the option of making the first proposal for what he should be paid. I would imagine that Laban was expecting Jacob to want money, sheep, or cattle and was not expecting Jacob to ask only for room and board and his youngest daughter.

The account narrative does not indicate that Jacob told Laban the purpose of his visit during this one month period was to find a wife. The accepted practice regarding marriages in that culture and at that time was that arrangements were negotiated between the father of the prospective bride and the father of the prospective groom. There was also an expectation of a payment by the groom's family to the family of the bride. This practice became less common than the dowry payment going from the bride's family to the family of the groom.

Since Isaac was not around to negotiate with Laban and since Jacob did not bring gifts for a payment with him, they improvised a deal. Jacob's offer to work for seven years seems very generous and Laban apparently welcomed the seven-year commitment from Jacob. However, if we carefully read Laban's words, we see that he did not actually agree to give Rachel to Jacob. He merely stated that it would be better for Rachel to marry Jacob than some other man.

In Rabbinical literature, Rachel and Leah are presented as (nonidentical) twins and Leah

was born first. This would parallel the situation that we know about Jacob and Esau. The age of these girls when Jacob arrived in Haran was either eleven years old or fourteen (depending on which commentary we read). According to the recordings regarding the age of Isaac when Jacob and Esau were born and his age when he was deceived into giving the family blessing to his younger son. Jacob would have been seventy-seven years old when he arrived in Haran. Seven years later, Jacob would have been eighty-four and Rachel and Leah would have been either eighteen or twenty-one.

Laban's Deception – 29:21-24

²¹ Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife, for my time is completed, that I may go in to her." ²² Laban gathered all the men of the place and made a feast. ²³ Now in the evening he took his daughter Leah, and brought her to him; and Jacob went in to her. ²⁴ Laban also gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah as a maid. Genesis 29:21–24 (NASB95)

When the deal was first made, it is likely that neither Jacob nor Laban thought anything about the need for the older daughter to be married before the younger daughter. As the years went by the prospect of finding a husband for Leah was apparently becoming unlikely. Laban was as well trained in the art of deception and scheming as was his sister Rebekah. His plan was to use the time of the marriage feast and the celebration along with the inability of Jacob to see in the dark to trick Jacob into a committed relationship with the firstborn daughter.

We immediately notice the similarities and contrasts of what Jacob and Rebekah had done to Isaac. There was a feast (the meal that Esau was supposed to prepare) and there was darkness (Isaac being essentially blind) that aided the deception. Just as Isaac had to rely on touch and sound and was unable to know that he was being deceived, the same thing happened to Jacob. The contrast is seen in that Isaac blessed the second-born son while Jacob consummated the marriage with the firstborn daughter. Another contrast that we see is that in the case of Esau, he was not complicit in the deceit of his mother, however, it is likely that Rachel had to know about the deceit of her father and did not protest what was being done. (In the culture of that time, she may not have a choice in the matter.)

Notice the words of Jacob's request to Laban at the end of the seven-year period. He said "Give me my wife" rather than "Give me Rachel." A lesson for all of us is that when we are dealing with a scheming person the words we use can be deliberately misinterpreted and we may find that a technicality in an agreement can be used to cheat us and we don't receive what we (in good faith) expected.

We see that Laban gave Leah a gift of his maid to be her maid. This gift is seen by some to be like a dowry payment of the bride's family to the bride. Some very old commentaries suggest that a "handmaid" was like to be the daughter of the father in the family and one of his concubines. We see (later) in verse 29 that a similar gift was made to Rachael.

Seven More Years – 29:25-30

²⁵ So it came about in the morning that, behold, it was Leah! And he said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served with you? Why then have you deceived me?" ²⁶ But Laban said, "It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the firstborn. ²⁷ "Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also for the service which you shall serve with me for another seven years." ²⁸ Jacob did so and completed her week, and he gave him his daughter Rachel as his wife. ²⁹ Laban also gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her maid. ³⁰ So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and indeed he loved Rachel more than Leah, and he served with Laban for another seven years. Genesis 29:25–30 (NASB95)

It wasn't until morning that Jacob discovered that he has been deceived. He had worked seven years for Rachel and he was greatly disappointed and angry with the trickery that his uncle

pulled. Here was a family member whom he had trusted using deceit to cheat him and deny him something that was his.

I wonder if at this time Jacob thought about the trickery that he pulled on his own father to get the blessing that his father wanted to give to Esau. We can recognize the wrongness of such trickery when we are the victims but we have difficulty recognizing it when we are the ones doing the deception. Jacob was learning that when we live by our wits, someone will come along that can and will outsmart us. Such behavior leads to distrust and more deception as Laban would later learn in his dealings with Jacob. Jacob eventually paid his uncle back by increasing the number of his own flock at the expense of Laban's flock.

Laban thought that he had tradition on his side and although he rationalized his actions he was willing to appease Jacob by giving Rachel to him to be his second wife if Jacob would work for him another seven years. This apparently worked since Jacob was so much in love with Rachel. So he married Leah one week and Rachel, the next.

I believe that it is nearly impossible to know if a particular event is good or bad at the time it happens. In retrospect, we can see that God used all the things that happened to Jacob to fulfill the promises that God had made to him. The sons of Jacob were to be the originators of the tribes of Israel. If Rachel had been Jacob's only wife, then there would have been only two sons because Rachel had difficulty conceiving and she died shortly after the birth of her second child. Instead there were twelve sons which were important for the rapid growth of this people into a great nation that was to happen over the next 500 years. One of the requests of Jacob was for God to give him material prosperity. If Jacob had not been compelled to stay an additional seven years, he would not have accumulated the great wealth that he had since all of that occurred during that period of time. Also, I would guess that during that extra time, his brother Esau had achieved some measure of prosperity and had come to forget about the loss of the birthright and the blessing which Jacob had gotten from him.

The important thing to remember is that even though things don't turn out as we expect them to, God can and will use whatever the situation and circumstances to accomplish His will in our lives if we belong to Him. The way we deal with disappointments will depend on our realization of the truth of that statement.

TIME FOR CHANGE

Genesis 30:25-32

²⁵ Now it came about when Rachel had borne Joseph, that Jacob said to Laban, "Send me away, that I may go to my own place and to my own country. ²⁶ "Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me depart; for you yourself know my service which I have rendered you." ²⁷ But Laban said to him, "If now it pleases you, stay with me; I have divined that the LORD has blessed me on your account." ²⁸ He continued, "Name me your wages, and I will give it." ²⁹ But he said to him, "You yourself know how I have served you and how your cattle have fared with me. ³⁰ "For you had little before I came and it has increased to a multitude, and the LORD has blessed you wherever I turned. But now, when shall I provide for my own household also?" ³¹ So he said, "What shall I give you?" And Jacob said, "You shall not give me anything. If you will do this one thing for me, I will again pasture and keep your flock: ³² let me pass through your entire flock today, removing from there every speckled and spotted sheep and every black one among the lambs and the spotted and speckled among the goats; and such shall be my wages. Genesis 30:25–32 (NASB95)

Jacob had fulfilled his part of the bargain with Laban and was now ready to get back to living out the benefits of the blessing and birthright. Laban was no fool, he saw that Jacob was blessed of God. He was successful in managing the affairs of Laban's farm and Laban was ready to make a deal with Jacob. He was ready to share the wealth and wealth was related to livestock.

You know the story of how Jacob and Laban made a deal so that Jacob would have the less desirable spotted and dark colored animals and Laban would keep the white animals. Laban probably thought he had the better deal but it turned out that the genetics of cross breeding favored Jacob's part of the deal. (This was in spite of all the conniving subterfuge that Jacob carried out to put multicolored sticks in the watering troughs to influence the outcome of the breeding.)

One of the requests of Jacob was for God to give him material prosperity. If Jacob had not agreed to stay an additional six years, he would not have accumulated the great wealth that he had since all of that occurred during that period of time.

HOME! Genesis 31:1-16

From Thomas Wolfe's novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*, we find these sobering words:

"You can't go back home to your family, back home to your childhood ... back home to a young man's dreams of glory and of fame ... back home to places in the country, back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time – back home to the escapes of Time and Memory."

The idea of this quote is that once you leave your home area for an extended period of time, things change so much that home is not the same and there is no way to get back to that place that you remembered. All of us have memories of the past where we grew up and in a period of a couple of decades everything changes and sometimes it is difficult to recognize it.

Certainly things had changed in the land of Canaan that Jacob had left twenty years before. His brother had done well without the birthright and the blessing. Isaac was still living and would have been 157 years old. It is thought that Rebekah had died about the time Jacob was returning to Canaan.

Perhaps more important than the changes that had happened in the land of Canaan were the changes that had happened in the life of Jacob. He had gained a family and had accumulated much wealth and was thought to be successful even to the point of being envied by others.

Obedience Required – 31:1-3

¹ Now Jacob heard the words of Laban's sons, saying, "Jacob has taken away all that was our father's, and from what belonged to our father he has made all this wealth."² Jacob saw the attitude of Laban, and behold, it was not friendly toward him as formerly. ³ Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you." Genesis 31:1-3 (NASB95)

It is an interesting relational situation that we can all appreciate: a person works very diligently and obtains a measure of success in life and thinks that all the good he or she has done would be appreciated by others and especially by those who had benefitted from the things that had been done. Many times, however, the response that is experienced is that others assume that such prosperity could not have been achieved honestly; thus the successful person finds criticism rather than praise.

Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown commentary (originally published in 1871) notes that "It is always one of the vexations attendant on worldly prosperity, that it excites the envy of others; and that, however careful a man is to maintain a good conscience, he cannot always reckon on maintaining a good name, in a censorious world." We certainly live in a censorious world in that almost everything a person says and does is criticized and no one seems to appreciate the work some people do to make life better or, at least, easier and maybe even enjoyable for others.

Jacob encountered this same kind of criticism in the situation in which he found himself nearly four thousand years ago. He had worked diligently to help Laban and his family for fourteen years and they had prospered while Jacob had no personal material wealth increase since he was paying off a debt incurred when he married the daughters of Laban. Laban was shrewd enough to realize that God was blessing Jacob and that it would be good to keep Jacob around and have him continue managing his family business. A deal was agreed upon. The first step of that agreement was that all the mixed-color stock would be removed from Laban's flocks and herds and those animals taken several miles away (a three-day journey) and cared for by Laban's sons so that Laban's flock and herd that Jacob would care for was of uniform color. All the sheep were white and all the goats were brown (some say black). Start at that point, Jacob could have all the livestock produced from that herd and flock that had blemishes (mixed color) and that Laban and his family would get to keep all the livestock that were uniform in color. Apparently, the idea was that the uniform color was an indication of the stock being purebred and the mixed-color stock was imperfect and not as valuable. Even though the colors were uniform at the beginning of the agreement, the gene pool of those sheep and goats had already been contaminated with the non-uniform color animals that were removed by Laban's sons.

As it turned out (predictably so) the imperfect crossbred stock was more prevalent and increased faster than the purebred stock. Consequently, Jacob's flocks and herds became very large and this resulted in envy in Laban's family. They thought that Jacob had figured out a way to cheat them and, ironically, Jacob also thought he had figured out a way to give himself an advantage. Jacob would put multicolored sticks in the watering troughs during the mating season and he thought that would result in more mixed-colored births. As we know, those sticks had absolutely nothing to do with the natural changes that were happening within the genetics of the livestock.

Laban and his family (his sons) did not do a very good job of hiding their envious and suspicious attitudes toward Jacob and Jacob correctly concluded that things were not going to get better. That realization of the relationship getting worse likely caused Jacob to be more sensitive to hearing the message that God was telling him that it was time to return to Canaan.

Obedience Declared – 31:4-13

⁴ So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah to his flock in the field, ⁵ and said to them, "I see your father's attitude, that it is not friendly toward me as formerly, but the God of my father has been with me. ⁶ "You know that I have served your father with all my strength. ⁷ "Yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times; however, God did not allow him to hurt me. ⁸ "If he spoke thus, 'The speckled shall be your wages,' then all the flock brought forth speckled; and if he spoke thus, 'The striped shall be your wages,' then all the flock brought forth striped. ⁹ "Thus God has taken away your father's livestock and given them to me. ¹⁰ "And it came about at the time when the flock were mating that I lifted up my eyes and saw in a dream, and behold, the male goats which were mating were striped, speckled, and mottled. ¹¹ "Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob,' and I said, 'Here I am.' ¹² "He said, 'Lift up now your eyes and see that all the male goats which are mating are striped, speckled, and mottled; for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you. ¹³ 'I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me; now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth.' " Genesis 31:4-13 (NASB95)

The timing for Jacob's decision to leave was during the sheep shearing season which was typically in the spring before lambs were born. Apparently, Laban and his sons were a three-day journey away shearing the sheep that he had removed from his flock six years earlier. Jacob and his servants were nearer the home compound and were probably shearing sheep also. This was a time of celebration with lots of food available for the workers and this provided a good cover for Jacob to share his plan to return to Canaan with his wives, Rachel and Leah. The maidservants

of Rachel and Leah were not included in this family conference since the culture in which they lived, they really had no voice in such decisions. The fact that Jacob included Rachel and Leah in the decision is thought by some commentators to be somewhat unusual.

It was important that both wives agree with Jacob's plan so that information did not get out to Laban and his sons before they got away. Since both Rachel and Leah wanted to be pleasing to Jacob and be favored by him in the family relationship, if one agreed, then both would agree.

Jacob justified his departure on two points. The first was that Laban's attitude had changed and he was continually doing things to cheat Jacob by repeatedly changing the deal they had made six years before that time. If the animals were speckled, then Laban wanted Jacob to have only the striped animals. Whatever Laban tried to do, it always worked for Jacob's advantage. God had shown Jacob in a dream that He was intervening on Jacob's behalf and that his success was because God had promised to bless him.

Let's look at the subtle implication of the statement at the end of verse twelve. Here we see "for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you." The obvious implication is that God sees and knows all which is not new information. The more subtle idea is that when we are cheated or abused that God intervenes on our behalf to bring us blessings to compensate for the unfair treatment. Is this a universal "truth" or is this idea specifically applicable to those whom God favors? Some Biblical accounts and verse may come to mind such as the life of Job, the compensation for the years of slavery of the Israelites in Egypt, the restoration of Israel after the exile period, and such statements as "the meek shall inherit the earth." The Eastern religion idea of "karma" would seem to apply this restitution or compensation universally. This universal application might be akin to claiming 1 John 5:14-15 regarding receiving whatever we ask for and forgetting that we must ask "according to God's will."

I saw a blog (by someone named Former Heathen) that addressed this question as follows:

When will God compensate you? When you quit complaining. When you quit focusing on the negative. When you quit dwelling on every bad thing in your life. When you quit making a religion out of your finances. God does not respond to complaints, negativity, and ingratitude. When you spend all day every day thanking God for His countless blessings to you, praising Him, and proclaiming your love and faith, then and only then will God start to compensate you for your sufferings.

The second point that was justification for Jacob leaving the area was that God (specifically identified as the God of his father) had commanded him to leave. We see this in the statement "Now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth." This is similar to the call that Abram had gotten from God many years ago. One difference for Jacob was that he knew where he was to go and Abram just knew that it was a place that God would show him.

Obedience Affirmed – 31:14-16

¹⁴ Rachel and Leah said to him, "Do we still have any portion or inheritance in our father's house? ¹⁵ "Are we not reckoned by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and has also entirely consumed our purchase price. ¹⁶ "Surely all the wealth which God has taken away from our father belongs to us and our children; now then, do whatever God has said to you." Genesis 31:14-16 (NASB95)

Several things are immediately evident in the answers given by Rachel and Leah. The role of women and the way they were treated in that culture caused considerable resentment and created a sense of being used and treated unfairly. Both women believed that their father Laban had little or no respect for them and essentially treated them as property rather than regarding them as his children.

The marriage arrangement apparently was seen by them to be simply another business

deal which enriched Laban and the proceeds of the deal was consumed by him rather than being provided as a dowry for the benefit of the daughters and their children. Since Laban apparently believed that his responsibility for Rachel and Leah had ended when they married, they saw no possibility of them being included in any share of or title to what Laban owned. In other words, they had no part in the birthright (portion) or blessing (inheritance).

Since there was no economic or material wealth incentive for their loyalty to Laban and there was also a sense that Laban had no natural affection for them (based on his essentially selling them), then their natural affection for Laban was eroded to such an extent that they were ready to leave and begin a new life that would not have the mistreatment they had experienced with their father. The abuse and unfair treatment had, essentially, prepared them to be willing to leave what was their home for a new home.

Another consideration that we see is that they realized that the increased wealth that Jacob had gotten during the past six years from Laban's flocks and herds was providentially provided by God. They viewed this as just payment to them and their children for all the injustices they had experienced from their father.

The final and very encouraging thing they said was they were willing to do and be part of whatever God had instructed Jacob to do. This statement and some other references to God (literally in the Hebrew, "elohyim") by Laban (as well as his daughters) might cause us to think that these relatives of Rebekah were believers in the God of Abraham. However, there is not a lot written about their overall concept of God. This was the same area in which Abram lived when Jehovah called him to leave his family and go to a place nearly 600 miles away.

We know from what Joshua said when the Israelites were moving into Canaan (Josh 24:2) that Abram's people worshiped other gods. This seems somewhat surprising since the descendants of Shem (one of Noah's three sons) who was given religious primacy over his two brothers in that his descendants (the Semitic people) were to be used to help people relate to their spiritual needs. In less than ten generations between Shem and Abram (which took about 350 years) there had been a corruption of the ideas regarding the "spiritual" and, apparently, people had adopted ideas regarding multiple gods which were at least venerated and maybe even worshiped (is there really a difference in veneration and worship?). It very well could be that the "God of Noah" was one of the recognized "gods" or spiritual entities by people in this area.

Evidence that people acknowledged the God of Creation and also venerated and even appealed to other "spiritual beings" is seen in the incident that was mentioned regarding the departure of Jacob and his family from the area where Laban lived. This incident was Rachel's theft of the household statues that belong to Laban. These were called teraphim which is typically translated as idols. These household gods may have been treated as good luck charms. The presence of these human-like figures was thought to bring blessings on the home. These teraphim were probably passed on from one generation to the next somewhat like the blessing that Isaac wanted to pass on to Esau but was stolen by Jacob. Rachel was, in effect, stealing the family blessing from her brothers who would be the natural or normal recipients of those images of the gods.

Such practice of having these idols in homes in Israel was apparently fairly common even after the giving of the Law and the establishment of the nation. Michal (David's wife) used a teraphim covered up in a bed to trick the soldiers Saul sent to her home to find and kill David. When we read of this, we tend to think that such practice is such an obvious violation of the Second Commandment that we cannot comprehend anyone having such things in their homes that are given such special reverence, respect and veneration. However, we don't have to look

far to see statues and symbols that are thought by some to be necessary parts of worship among Christians today. When we hear this statement, our thoughts immediately go to Roman Catholicism and the statues of Mary, Joseph, and almost anyone who has been “canonized” and designated a saint. However, we would do well to examine our own practices in which we hold on to, cherish, adore, and venerate various symbols and rituals in which we trust or upon which we rely.

As it developed, Jacob made the proper move to move away from Laban in a secretive way since Laban’s first instinct was to chase after them presumably to bring them back. As the account unfolded, we read of evidence that God visited Laban in a dream and warned him to not interfere even to the point of not speaking either negatively or positively about what Jacob had done. Once again, we see evidence that God was intervening on behalf of Jacob so that the overall sovereign plan of which Jacob and his family were involved could be carrying out. It is not immediately evident that Jacob knew what God had done and was likely concerned about what might happen when Laban and his brothers caught up with them. This may be where we find ourselves many times in that we are faced with uncertainty and may be anxious about the outcome. However, as we know (and as Jacob knew or was learning) God is there for us when we are His and we can trust that He will work out what is for our ultimate good according to the purpose and plan God’s kingdom.

The situation in this extended family had gotten so bad that common courtesies were not even being observed. This is what happens when people are concerned with materialism and worldly success.

Throughout all this, Jacob was drawn by a goal or sense of destiny that God’s promise to Abraham was going to be fulfilled and that he was to be involved as it was unfolding. He saw that God had blessed him. Therefore, he was determined to return to the land and occupy it rather than just being content to live out his life in Haran.

Through all the things that happened to him, God was teaching him important lessons. However, he had not implemented these lessons in his life. He was learning that scheming breaks down relationships. He was learning that gaining earthly treasures by trickery robs you of your peace. He was learning that true satisfaction could not come to him apart from being in God’s will; that is, returning to the land of Canaan. Even though he was learning all these things, he still could not give up putting his trust in his own natural strength.

This is where so many of us are today: scheming, planning, manipulating to bring in the Kingdom of God in our own way. Do we think we know all the answers? Do we insist on doing things our way? Are we impatient and run ahead of God? Are we more like Jacob than being like Jesus? How do we get to the point of having Christ formed in us so that we can say with Him, “I do nothing of My own, but I do the will of Him Who sent Me?” We are about to see in the experience of Jacob how this change must happen.

FEAR

Genesis 32:1-12

Jacob went to the land of Aram for the stated purpose of finding a wife from the Semitic people living in that area rather than marrying a Canaanite woman. However, we know that the real reason for leaving Canaan was fear of being killed by his brother Esau because Jacob had stolen the blessing that Isaac wanted to give to Esau. Twenty years later, Jacob had successfully

completed the stated purpose in that he had a wife – in fact, he had two wives (or was it actually four wives?).

During this time (20 years) Jacob had also acquired a lot of material wealth, however, nothing had happened that would have alleviated his fear of retribution from his brother. In fact, he had gained new fears which were influential in his being open to God's instruction to him to return to the land of Canaan. He feared Laban and Laban's sons who thought that Jacob had cheated them. Because of this fear, Jacob and his entire company (wives, herds, flocks and servants) left Laban without even saying "good bye." His fear was justified in that Laban would have likely interfered and taken away Jacob's family and possessions if God had not intervened on Jacob's behalf. After a final interaction with Laban, Jacob moved closer to Canaan and the fear of Esau was a big concern.

God Responds Again – 32:1-2

¹ Now as Jacob went on his way, the angels of God met him. ² Jacob said when he saw them, "This is God's camp." So he named that place Mahanaim. Genesis 32:1-2 (NASB95)

Twenty years earlier, when Jacob was leaving Canaan he had a vision and now as he starts to return, he has another vision. Before, it was angel going up and down a ladder that reached from heaven to earth. This time, he can see two armies of angels surrounding and traveling with him and his family. Things appear to be going quite well for Jacob: He has God's command to return to Canaan, God's covenant promise, and God's protection in the angelic host. Now whom does Jacob trust? JACOB! *God's grace does not alter the flesh.* Jacob was still depending on Jacob.

Demonstrating Humility – 32:3-8

³ Then Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. ⁴ He also commanded them saying, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: 'Thus says your servant Jacob, "I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed until now; ⁵ I have oxen and donkeys and flocks and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight." ' ' ⁶ The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and furthermore he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him." ⁷ Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and the herds and the camels, into two companies; ⁸ for he said, "If Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the company which is left will escape." Genesis 32:3-8 (NASB95)

Jacob sent messengers ahead to let Esau know that he was now wealthy, and he was returning to Canaan and to ask that Esau would welcome him back. Jacob had the messengers refer to himself as "the servant of Esau" which was just the opposite position that was defined in the blessing given to Jacob by Isaac. The messengers return with news that Esau was on the way to meet them and had 400 men with him. Since Jacob did not know Esau's attitude and intent, this news produced more fear.

Jacob thought that this humble and flattering message would actually bring about a change in Esau. Jacob was still Jacob. He was still clever. Clever people have many worries. They buy the radar detectors so they won't get caught speeding – they worry and are jumpy and nervous every time it beeps at them. Those who scheme and contrive and do not simply trust and believe, find themselves as Jacob, "greatly afraid and distressed."

It is interesting that Jacob was obedient to God's command but *obedience does not equal trust.* He was trying to obey God and escape his brother at the same time. He decided he had better do something. He divided his entourage into two groups. He was substituting his two companies for the Mahanaim (two companies) God had already provided.

Prayer Changes Us – 32:9-12

⁹ Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your relatives, and I will prosper you,’ ¹⁰ I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You have shown to Your servant; for with my staff only I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies. ¹¹ “Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, that he will come and attack me and the mothers with the children. ¹² “For You said, ‘I will surely prosper you and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which is too great to be numbered.’ ” Genesis 32:9–12 (NASB95)

As we read the background information, we see a glimmer of hope that Jacob prayed to God for deliverance from the actions of his brother Esau. This is the first real prayer we see from Jacob. Before this he had been all scheming and bargaining and now, he is scheming and praying. We need to learn that if we pray, we don’t need to scheme. If we scheme, then our prayers are probably without the requisite faith. After he prayed, he sent three waves of gifts to Esau by his servants in an attempt to pacify his brother as see in verses 13 through 23 of chapter 32.

Jacob was like so many of us who think that to trust God completely is too risky and even reckless. It is ironic that we in the modern day church see such behavior as Jacob took (praying and scheming) as praise worthy and to be copied. This is error.

The crisis time for Jacob came the night before his meeting with Esau. Jacob was alone and he recognized that the situation was a matter of life and death. Each of us must come to these “life and death” struggles. First is the question of whether we are going to hold on to the “old nature” or take on the “new life” in Christ. After that we wrestle with relying on our natural strength versus doing things God’s way in His strength.

TRANSFORMED

Genesis 32:24-32

As mention earlier in this study, in Abraham we see something of the nature of God the Father. Abraham is described as the father of all them who believe (Rom 4:11). Abraham is the beginning or the starting point for God’s plan of redemption that would deal (not just with individual sins) but with the sin problem of the human race. In referring to Abraham as the father, we see that the solution to the sin problem is a matter of birth and not of anything we can do to merit or earn it.

In Isaac we see a type of Christ. All Isaac had, he got by inheritance. Everything was bestowed upon him and he accepted. In the experience of Isaac, we see the old nature being taken care of. The bond woman and her son are cast out and the new life was given.

Having chosen us and having made provision to remove the old nature, God is still not through with us. We understand that the old nature is dealt with by death on the Cross of Christ. The Cross is God’s provision and means of taking away the old nature and imparting new life to us as exemplified in the Resurrection. The Cross is the starting point and not the end point of God’s salvation. There is more to be accomplished and this is what we see in the life and person of Jacob. In Jacob, we see that God deals not only with the old nature and its sinfulness but also with our natural strength and the strength of self.

Jacob was like so many of us who think that to trust God completely is too risky and even reckless. It is ironic that we in the modern-day church see such behavior as Jacob took (praying and scheming) as praise worthy and to be copied. This is error.

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The Match – 32:24-26

²⁴ Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵ When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob’s thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, “Let me go, for the dawn is breaking.” But he said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” Genesis 32:24–26 (NASB95)

Notice that it was God who brought this fight to Jacob. God was determined to bring about an utter surrender from Jacob. Jacob possessed tremendous natural strength and it appeared that God was not going to win the battle. God may overthrow our plans again and again, but we don’t admit defeat, we do not surrender. We think that we have not planned well enough and we tend to think that nothing is too hard for us to do.

This wrestling match was a condensed imagery of what had been going on throughout Jacob’s life. God had brought various trials and struggles to Jacob to give him opportunities to put his complete trust and confidence in God and these opportunities had not produced the surrender that God was going to accomplish in Jacob.

Jacob had never surrendered before. The discipline over the past 20 years had brought him to Peniel – to the place where God could touch him. *When we do not surrender under the discipline of God, then it may be necessary for God to touch our strength and put it out of commission.* Our natural strength may differ from Jacob’s – ambition, boasting, emotion, self love, etc. Once God had touched Jacob’s thigh, He could not leave him for now Jacob was dependent on God. We are the strongest with God when we are the weakest naturally. It is the small faith that accomplishes much. With our abundance of natural strength, we are of no use to God. On the other hand, with no strength at all, we can hold on to God. At this point, Jacob was a changed person and he was given a new name to signify that change. He would not be Jacob (the schemer) but be known as Israel – one who has power with God. Only now was Jacob ready to meet Esau. At this point, Jacob could not trust his natural strength for it was gone. As Jacob was holding on to God, we see a very revealing exchange unfold in the conversation between “the man” and Jacob.

God (the man) told Jacob to let Him go because daylight was approaching which would allow Jacob to “see” the One with Whom he had been wrestling. In his desperation and weakness Jacob would not let go unless “the man” agreed to bless him. We are not told what Jacob was expected in terms of the provisions of the requested “blessing.” It would seem that this exchange is teaching us that we should hold on to God until He blesses us. The caution that we must consider is that our idea of what is a blessing is many times much different from what God knows would be a real blessing. Seeking “the blessing” was what caused Jacob to deceive his father and, some twenty years later, Jacob was still seeking to be blessed. Apparently, being blessed in ways that appeal to worldly values does not provide lasting satisfaction but only a desire for more blessings.

Throughout the history of the children of Israel, they were guilty of “delighting themselves in the goodness (blessings) of God” but they did not “delight themselves in the Lord (Himself).” This misplaced motivation resulted in serious consequences for Israel and Judah (destruction of Israel by Assyria and seventy years of exile for Judah). The most important message for the church is that it is God who “holds on” to us and we should “hold on” (be

faithful) to God and delight ourselves in Him regardless of the outcome.

The Title – 32:27-29

²⁷ So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” ²⁸ He said, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.” ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him and said, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And he blessed him there. Genesis 32:27–29 (NASB95)

What is in a name? As we know, Old Testament names had meanings related to the character of persons. There are few examples of people who were given new names as the situations in their lives changed. Both Abram (exalted father) and Sarai (princess) had new names of Abraham (father of many nations) and Sarah (mother of many nations) which were similar sounding to their original names. Jacob’s birth name was chosen because he grabbed the heel of his twin brother as these two were being born. His name meant “heel holder” or “supplanter” which seemed to fit his character for his life. He was very ambitious, he was a planner or a schemer, and was not a person to easily give up in trying to accomplish his goals.

At the point in his life that God touched him, Jacob was a changed person (the real blessing that God had been working to accomplish) and he was given a new name to signify that change. He would not be Jacob (the schemer) but be known as Israel. The meaning of the name Israel has been said to be “one who has power with God” and/or “God prevails.” While these two meanings may not seem to be related, we might argue that only those who fully surrender to God (God prevails) are those who can be described as those whose “effective, fervent prayer avails much.” (See James 5:16)

The idea that Jacob “prevailed” as stated in verse 28 could be related to the fact that Jacob was told early in his life that he was a person through whom God would work to bring about the promises made to Abraham and he did not lose sight of that outcome being accomplished in his life. He did not let circumstances and difficulties or abusive treatment discourage him and cause him to abandon the objective of being used by God. He was an “overcomer.” We see the importance of “overcoming” mentioned in Christ’s letters to the churches in the early chapters of the Revelation. In these letters we see the words “to him who overcomes, he who overcomes, etc.” six times to these churches.

The blessing that God chose for Jacob involved a change of “the essence of his being or his character” which is what the word “name” represents. A somewhat subtle thing that we see in the interchange between God and Jacob was that God asked Jacob to speak his name. Obviously, God already knew Jacob’s name, so the request was not for God’s benefit but was done to get Jacob to confess his flawed character so that a real change (repentance) could be brought about as the next step in God using Israel in the fulfillment of His promise to Abraham.

Since Jacob now had the new name Israel, he was curious to know the name of “the man” with Whom he had wrestled. Some have speculated that Jacob wanted to know the name so he could properly credit God with the transformation in his life. Others think that Jacob was of the opinion that knowing a person’s name would allow someone to invoke the name to access the power of God in dealing with issues in life. (This idea also appears to be implied in the statement from John 14:13, “Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do.”) A simpler explanation might be that Jacob (at the end of the struggle and the blessing had been given) had a thirst for a deeper and more satisfying knowledge of God. This seems quite natural for someone who has come into a personal relationship with God. We may recall the fervor and intensity of people who have experienced salvation to search the Scriptures, to spend much time in prayer and meditation so they can know more of the nature and character of God.

God's response to Jacob was designed not only to have Jacob examine his motives for wanting to know God's name, but also to realize that he had already received sufficient light. The next step that Jacob needed to take was to gain insight into the revelation he already had. Such insight would be gained by applying what he knew to life situations and to approach all of life in a manner consistent with faith in God rather than relying on his natural strength. The important thing for Jacob was that he was now Israel and all his future behavior and actions were to be impacted, motivated by, and a result of his new character that came about by his surrender to God's will. It was to be characterized by his need to hold on to God because of his weakness rather than trying to hold on to God to manipulate Him and influence the outcome of what God was working out in his life using his natural strength.

The Venue – 32:30-32

³⁰ So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved." ³¹ Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Penuel, and he was limping on his thigh. ³² Therefore, to this day the sons of Israel do not eat the sinew of the hip which is on the socket of the thigh, because he touched the socket of Jacob's thigh in the sinew of the hip. Genesis 32:30-32 (NASB95)

As the account continues, we see more evidence of the importance of "names." This time it is the name chosen for a place to commemorate an event. The literal meaning of the name Peniel is "facing God" and the event was the encounter Jacob had with God during the night after Jacob had taken precautions to protect his family by dividing them into two camps.

While Jacob said that he had "seen God face to face" we learn from the account that the encounter was prior to sunrise, so it could be that this was not a reference to physical sight. This expression may be idiomatic in that the verb "to see" could mean "to encounter." This experience was certainly a "close encounter" in that God had wrestled with Jacob. These expressions related to things such as "meeting with God face to face" or "seeing God" are evidence that there are "shades of meaning" used in the word pictures we are given in the Scripture texts. When we read in John 1:18 "No one has seen God at any time, but the only begotten has explained Him" we can certainly appreciate that this is not a reference to physical sight of a "spirit" but is a reference to the inner essence or nature of God.

Apparently, it was generally believed (as stated in Exodus 33:20 – No man can see Me and live) that close encounters with the Supreme Being would result in death and so Jacob was thankful that his life was spared as evidenced that he did not die. We clearly do not understand the subtleties of meaning in these various passages that reference such encounters.

One thing is clear though and that is that Jacob was a changed person in that he had surrendered to God and would always have a physical reminder of that change in the limp he had with every step he took from that point on in his life. Some associate this physical reminder with the "thorn in the flesh" that Paul had as a reminder that God's grace is sufficient and that our natural strength is inadequate for what God has for us to accomplish in the lives of His saints.

RECONCILED

Genesis 33:1-15

The word "reconcile" is found five times in the "Authorized Version" of the Bible. It is used in place of such words as atone (cover over) and accept (be pleased with) in the Old Testament and to "bring into agreement" with an objective to "restore harmony" in the New Testament. We might conclude from these ideas that the need to be reconciled would be a result of wrong actions (sins) that would need to be resolved or atonement made. Such wrong actions

would likely result in rejection and disagreements that would make a relationship anything but harmonious.

When Jacob left the home of Isaac and Rebekah in Canaan to go to Aram to find a wife, the relationship between Esau and him could certainly be characterized as “lacking agreement and out of harmony” and that would be an understatement. Jacob’s attitude toward Esau was one of “indifference” as if he thought that Esau and his feelings did not matter to him. Esau’s responses to being treated that way by Jacob were bitterness and hatred for being disrespected and cheated.

It might be helpful to try to gain some insight into what was motivating Jacob and Esau. Starting with Jacob, he was likely aware that he was “the chosen one” of Isaac’s twin sons. Knowing this could result in either humility or pride. Humility would come if there was a realization that being “chosen” or favored carried with it a great responsibility and he would need a lot of help to do a good job of carrying on the family identity. Pride would come from thinking that it was a “great honor” to be chosen and that he was more than adequate to handle the job. It seems fairly obvious that Jacob thought he was the right choice and that whatever he needed to do was “no problem.”

A second consideration that would follow from the first conclusion would be that the mission was all important and his decisions should be influenced primarily by what it would take to do the job of becoming the proper legacy of his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac. This resulted in Jacob buying the birthright from Esau and stealing the blessing without any concern for the impact these actions would have on Esau. The danger for us as Christians today is that we can become so “goal or task oriented” that we will push ahead with our agendas and disregard or even run over people in the process. In a military framework, this is called “collateral damage.”

Esau’s motivation seemed to be less complicated. It may be overstating it to say that he “lived for the moment” and wanted to just “enjoy life” and maybe “grab all the gusto” he could. Along with this, he probably had a keen awareness of fairness and ascribed to the idea of “live and let live.” The other side of that “laid back attitude” was an idea that if you “do me wrong” you will pay for it and I have a long memory regarding being slighted or treated unfairly.

It is easy to see how such motivational attitudes could result in disagreements and disharmony with a need for reconciliation in the relationship. Of course, we realize that people can avoid trying to resolve such problems by creating a separation between the two parties involved. How many of us know people who avoid family members and will literally not even speak to each other because of being hurt or cheated. It happens in many types of relationships and it can even happen in churches.

When separation cannot be maintained, then the problem or situation needs to be addressed. If peace is to be restored then reconciliation has to happen. In the account of Jacob and Esau being reconciled, we can perhaps learn some of the basic actions and attitudes that can help the process of reconciliation.

Put Aside Your Pride – 33:1-4

¹ Then Jacob lifted 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 maids. ² He put the maids and their children in front, and Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last. ³ But he himself passed on ahead of them and bowed down to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. ⁴ Then Esau ran to meet him and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. Genesis 33:1–4 (NASB95)

We would be fairly safe in assuming that many (maybe most) interpersonal relationship failures find their causal roots in one or all of the following: pride, greed, and disrespect or disregard for others. The fruit of such failures is distrust, resentment, bitter hatred and vengeance experienced by the “victim.” For the perpetrator or initiator of the issue, the fruit that results is fearfulness. All these elements appear to be present in the relationship failure that had gone on for twenty years between Jacob and Esau.

If there is to be any healing of such rifts in relationships, then there needs to be a reversal or undoing of the bad behavior. We will look for actions in the behavior of both these brothers as the reconciliation process unfolded.

Even though Jacob had encountered God and had experienced his natural strength being broken, he was still attempting to protect himself and his family. It has been suggested that lining up the family the way he did was to put the most expendable (least valued) in front and the most valued in the rear. The lesson for us would be that even if we have been born again of the Spirit of God, we still tend to rely on what we think will work best based on a value system that may be imperfect. We have to learn to trust God as we experience His faithfulness and His power in our lives, then the trust to do things God’s way comes naturally.

Jacob may have lined up his family in order of increasing importance, but he walked on out ahead of them all indicating that if there were trouble, he was willing to experience it first. This is an example of the sacrificial love that pleases God since it is the kind of love that He showed to us in dying for our sins. In the context of respect or regard for others we would certainly give Jacob (Israel) positive points for putting himself in front.

As Jacob walked to meet Esau, he bowed seven times as an indication that he was not only showing respect for Esau but also seeking Esau’s forgiveness. Esau could see that Jacob was different. Such an act of humility to ask for forgiveness was not like the Jacob he knew twenty years ago. Esau could also see that Jacob walked with a limp. Although Esau did not realize the significance of the limp, it was evident that Jacob had changed. We know that the change was because of an encounter with God.

As Jacob approached Esau, he was not aware that God had changed Esau. However, Esau could see that Jacob had changed. He was walking with a limp, he was doing things that were not typical of Jacob (offering gifts, bowing down, thinking of others, exposing himself to danger). The change in Esau may have happened as soon as he saw the change in Jacob. Many times, we have conflicts with others and we pray for God to change the other persons. However, it may be that for such a change to take place, we must first change. We who are called of God hold the key to what happens to, in, and through the rest of the world. *If God has made a change in our lives, it should be evident to those who know us.*

Finally, the meeting took place and God had been preparing the heart of Esau so that he was willing to no longer hold a grudge against Jacob. Esau had prospered and the double portion of the inheritance he had not gotten because he sold his birthright did not make any difference. The double portion had not benefitted Jacob either. Jacob tried to give Esau part of his wealth to appease him but by now both had discovered that material possessions are not as important as relationships.

Esau, glad to see his brother, ran to meet him and embraced him which resulted in a release of healthy emotions by both men. For twenty years both Jacob and Esau had each been living with stressful tensions of thoughts and feelings that were not compatible within themselves. This kind of stress comes from the strain of knowing how things should be and being unable to get there because of unresolved issues of fearfulness or bitterness resulting from

being abused, disrespected, and cheated. The remedy to such a situation is to see evidence of repentance and contrition which can then open the way for forgiveness.

Be Genuine – 33:5-11

⁵ He lifted his eyes and saw the women and the children, and said, “Who are these with you?” So he said, “The children whom God has graciously given your servant.” ⁶ Then the maids came near with their children, and they bowed down. ⁷ Leah likewise came near with her children, and they bowed down; and afterward Joseph came near with Rachel, and they bowed down. ⁸ And he said, “What do you mean by all this company which I have met?” And he said, “To find favor in the sight of my lord.” ⁹ But Esau said, “I have plenty, my brother; let what you have be your own.” ¹⁰ Jacob said, “No, please, if now I have found favor in your sight, then take my present from my hand, for I see your face as one sees the face of God, and you have received me favorably. ¹¹ “Please take my gift which has been brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me and because I have plenty.” Thus he urged him and he took it. Genesis 33:5–11 (NASB95)

Esau, in a spirit of genuine care for his brother, wanted to meet the rest of Jacob’s family. As each came up to be introduced, he or she also bowed before Esau. In doing this, they were saying that they respected him. Showing respect for other people is the best possible action to gain acceptance. It would be reasonable to think that since the oldest child was barely a teenager, the children had been coached regarding how to behave when they were presented to their uncle.

In verse eight, it is likely that Esau’s question about “all this company I have met” was with regard to the series of gifts presentations of more than 500 animals that he had encountered as he approached the area where he and Jacob finally met. Each of Jacob’s servants who delivered the gifts had the same message that the animals were gifts from the “servant Jacob to his lord Esau.” This language was specifically chosen by Jacob to make amends for stealing the blessing in which Isaac declared that the brother of the one being blessed would be a servant to him. There was no provision to “undo” or take back the blessing; however, the choice of words of Jacob to Esau was an attempt to make the servant role a mutual one. In other words, they would serve one another which is the kind of relationship we should be cultivating in the church and in our families.

At the point when these brothers came together, Esau had not formally accepted Jacob’s gifts and his initial response was to decline the gifts. Esau certainly realized that the series of gifts that came to him as he approached Jacob was an attempt to gain his favor and he apparently was cautiously patient in not committing to accept the offers until he had a chance to see Jacob face to face.

The interplay in offering gifts and the reception of the gifts was full of unspoken messages about the relationship between the giver and the receiver. An outright rejection of the gifts would have been interpreted as an equally outright rejection of the giver of the gifts. This would have been a very negative outcome for Jacob regarding being reconciled. Esau’s refusal that essentially said that “gifts were not needed” was likely part of the accepted courtesy practices of that culture in that he did not want to appear to be greedy or even be thought of as expecting gifts. Jacob knew the routine that he had to practically beg Esau to take the gift as a sign of acceptance which Esau then did. This symbolic exchange was reassuring to both Jacob and Esau that both the offer and the acceptance were genuine.

When forgiveness takes place and acceptance is granted, then the giving of gifts to put us in a favorable light is no longer necessary. Esau had no need for the presents sent by Jacob. However, apparently, Jacob had a need to give the gifts and to see them accepted as evidence of Esau accepting him. It is a strange thing about giving and receiving gifts. If I totally reject you,

then I would not receive a gift from you. I believe that this is why many people never receive the gift of salvation from God – they have totally rejected God in their lives.

Agree on Limits – 33:12-15

¹² Then Esau said, “Let us take our journey and go, and I will go before you.” ¹³ But he said to him, “My lord knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds which are nursing are a care to me. And if they are driven hard one day, all the flocks will die. ¹⁴ “Please let my lord pass on before his servant, and I will proceed at my leisure, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my lord at Seir.” ¹⁵ Esau said, “Please let me leave with you some of the people who are with me.” But he said, “What need is there? Let me find favor in the sight of my lord.” Genesis 33:12–15 (NASB95)

The 400 men that Esau brought with him that Jacob feared at first were available to help him move his family and livestock to his new home. Sometimes this is the way it is when we trust in God: the things that we fear the most are the things that can help us move in the direction of being more and more in the will of God.

As we see at the end of verse fourteen, Esau was expecting Jacob to travel to where Esau and his family now lived. Esau had moved from the family compound in Canaan near Hebron where Isaac lived to a mountainous area south of the Dead Sea. This area eventually became known as Edom which literally means “red” and was a nickname for Esau. The name used in verse fourteen for the area is Seir which literally means hairy or shaggy (some resources say it means rough or rugged) which is also the literal meaning of the name Esau. However, it is thought that the name actually came from a Horite chief who had previously lived in that area.

Jacob politely declined the continued help of Esau or his men in completing his journey back to Canaan. Sometimes when people try to help us, it takes us out of a natural timing that is needed for a particular task. Sometimes we just need time to let things work out and let our ideas have a chance to develop rather than being pressured to make a decision in a shorter time frame. Jacob’s argument was that just knowing that all was well between him and his brother was sufficient help and he simply needed some extra time before making major decisions.

As we learn from later verses in the account of Jacob moving back to the area that he eventually settled at Shechem for an extended time period. In the mean time he built a compound (house?) complete with shelters for the animals (booths) and that area became known as Succoth. Succoth was a little south of Peniel and on the east side of the Jordan River. Mount Seir was south of where Jacob and Esau met and Shechem was several miles west and north of that place. Scholars debate whether or not Jacob and his caravan went to Seir or if he intended to go but changed his mind or if he was simply being polite to Esau in implying that he was going to follow him to his home in the south. Some commentaries suggest that Jacob and the company of people and animals with him did go to Seir and then traveled on north and west from there to Shechem. Apparently, several years (perhaps seven or more years) had passed by the time Jacob and his family arrived in Shechem.

As we will learn in later chapters, this was a temporary residence and eventually Jacob and his family moved from there to Bethel and then on to Hebron to be near Isaac who was still living. This peaceful return to the land of Canaan would not have been possible without the reconciliation of the difference between Jacob and Esau which would not have been possible without the life changing events that happened when God blessed Jacob and he became Israel.

ASSURANCE

Genesis 35:1-15

Most of us have found ourselves in situations where we thought things were going fairly well and life was somewhat routine with predictable outcomes and results and then everything started falling apart with terrible things happening. In such situations we could use some reassurance that things will get back to “normal” and maybe some assurance that we are doing what we ought to be doing. We might even raise questions regarding the need to “move on” or “back up” and do something that should have been done before.

Jacob had already had such times of questioning. One such occasion was when his uncle Laban and his sons let it be known that they weren’t very pleased with how things were working out after he had been living in their area for the past twenty years. It was at such a time that God gave him assurance that it was time for him to leave that area and return to Canaan.

Jacob eventually settled in an area of Canaan that was north of where he grew up and where Isaac still lived. This area was called Shechem and it seemed that Jacob was going to be there for an extended period of time since he bought some land from the Canaanites who lived in that region.

We don’t know how long Jacob lived in Succoth after he met with Esau, we don’t know if he visited the area where Esau lived, we don’t know if he traveled to Beersheba to visit with Isaac before he came to Shechem. It was apparently seven to ten years later that we pick up the account of what happened to Jacob’s daughter Dinah. It is thought that Dinah was around age thirteen to sixteen when she had occasion to visit with some of the young women who lived in that area. Some commentaries speculate that the occasion was something like a festival (maybe a debutante party) where young (marriageable age) women could make some social contacts and interact with their neighbors. Obviously, there were some young men at the same event and one of them (named Shechem the son of Hamor, the leader of that area) took advantage of Dinah and then wanted to marry her.

What he did was not right; however, he was willing to try to do “the right thing” by the marriage proposal. In that culture, the fathers of the people getting married worked out the details and his father (Hamor) visited Jacob and offered a large dowry for the hand of Jacob’s daughter in marriage to his son. Jacob made no commitment at that time. He was likely shocked and angry and uncertain of what to do. He told Dinah’s brothers (Levi and Simeon) what had happened and they eventually took action to avenge the defilement of their sister.

Their actions in killing all the men of the village associated with Hamor, taking all their livestock, and enslaving the women and children were certainly shockingly drastic actions. Jacob was certainly shocked by it and realized that the consequences of what Levi and Simeon did could be that other Canaanites in the area would come together and do the same thing to his family. Things had been going fairly well and now fear had returned and the peaceful life Jacob and his family had been enjoying for several years was now gone. We would conclude that Jacob needed some assurance at this time. As had happened before, Jacob found that assurance in God.

Purify Yourself – 35:1-4

¹ Then God said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel and live there, and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.” ² So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments; ³ and let us arise and go up to Bethel, and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with

me wherever I have gone.”⁴ So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods which they had and the rings which were in their ears, and Jacob hid them under the oak which was near Shechem. Genesis 35:1-4 (NASB95)

This is not the first time when Jacob was in a distressed situation that God spoke and/or appeared to him. We are familiar with the “ladder” event when Jacob was fearfully concerned about Esau’s anger. The next time was when Jacob was anxious about the anger of Laban and his sons. This was followed by Jacob seeing two companies of angels when he was concerned about an upcoming encounter with Esau. This concern prompted Jacob to initiate prayer to God. The next time was very soon after this prayer when God wrestled with Jacob and blessed him with a new “name.” This encounter changed Jacob (the deceiver) to Israel (God prevails) which was to prepare him for the actual meeting with Esau.

While Jacob was uncertain about what he should do in the dangerous situation in Shechem, God again spoke to him and that had to be assuring to Jacob in that it confirmed one of the promises God had made early that “He would be with Jacob.” God’s instructions were to leave Shechem and relocate to Bethel where Jacob had his first encounter with God. Bethel was about twenty miles south of Shechem and it brought Jacob closer to where Isaac lived in Beersheba.

When Jacob first moved to Shechem, he built an altar to God and when God instructed him to move to Bethel he was specifically instructed to build an altar there. The presence of an altar would strongly suggest that sacrifices of animals were made on the altar. While we don’t read about much “religious” activity in the everyday life of Jacob, there were likely occasional observances where sacrifices were placed on an altar as an expression of gratitude to God.

We see that Jacob realized that this move to Bethel was a very significant move since he was now going to be in a place that was special (read that as holy). The last time Jacob was there he was convinced it was where the presence of God was especially evident. This sense of it being a special holy place can be contrasted to the sense (belief) that Jacob had that God was with him wherever he went. Because of the significance of Bethel being the house of God, Jacob honored that by making sure that when he and his family relocated to that area they would not defile it.

The preparation that Jacob made was to put away all foreign gods and to thoroughly wash themselves and their clothes. Commentators are divided as to whether the foreign gods included the household statues that were more or less a culturally accepted practice or if it was specifically directed to the gods of the Canaanites who had become servants and slaves in Jacob’s family compound. We could hope that the directive was aimed at all such expressions of other gods. The two aspects of Jacob’s instructions to the people addressed the doctrinal issue of the unique sovereignty of the God Who appeared to him at Bethel and the issue of personal purity as represented in the need to bathe and put on clean garments. The recorded account does not indicate that this preparation was told to Jacob by God. Somehow, Jacob realized that trying to serve multiple deities was not possible to do and when people know they are going to where they would interact with a holy God that purity is important.

The importance of having well-respected leadership is seen in that the people not only brought their “foreign gods” but also included things such as earrings that were “good-luck charms” likely related to worship of other gods. In other words, everyone cooperated with Jacob and held nothing back. These items were then buried as an acknowledgment that such things were dead to the people and there was no place for them in “the house of God.”

Obey God’s Directives – 35:5-7

⁵ As they journeyed, there was a great terror upon the cities which were around them, and they did not pursue the

sons of Jacob. ⁶ So Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him. ⁷ He built an altar there, and called the place El-bethel, because there God had revealed Himself to him when he fled from his brother. Genesis 35:5-7 (NASB95)

Jacob's concern about being attacked by the neighboring tribes around Shechem was a shared concern that the neighboring tribes had of being attacked by Jacob and his sons. They were probably glad to see them leave the area after what had happened to Horam and his clan.

Jacob carried out God's directive to build an altar in the area where Jacob and his family could show devotion to God. The place was then named by Jacob as "God of the house of God."

Historical Information – 35:8

⁸ Now Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the oak; it was named Allon-bacuth. Genesis 35:8 (NASB95)

Starting in verse eight, we first find a bit of historical information that does not appear to fit within the context of the narrative of Jacob's travels that would eventually bring him back to Isaac. Regarding the death and burial of Deborah, some have associated this with something that happened at the time Jacob and his sons went to Bethel from Shechem. If this timing is correct, then the implication that is drawn is that Deborah was living with Jacob's family and speculation is made that Jacob may have visited Isaac on various occasions since he had returned to Canaan nearly a decade before. It is thought that Rebekah had died years earlier and Jacob then took on the responsibility of caring for Deborah and she went to live with Jacob's family. This is, of course, speculation. The account could be coincidental to the fact that Deborah had perhaps died earlier, had been buried in the Bethel area at that earlier time, and this fact was simply noted in the narrative associated with being in that area.

Remembering God's Promises – 35:9-13

⁹ Then God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him. ¹⁰ God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; You shall no longer be called Jacob, But Israel shall be your name." Thus He called him Israel. ¹¹ God also 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 forth from you. ¹² "The land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I will give it to you, And I will give the land to your descendants after you." ¹³ Then God went up from him in the place where He had spoken with him. Genesis 35:9-13 (NASB95)

It had been around twenty-six to thirty years since Jacob had an encounter with God at a place that he named Bethel. God had promised (covenanted) several things to Jacob and he had made a vow to God. That vow was that since God was protecting and providing for him that when he returned to where Isaac lived in peace that he would regard and respect the place where he had just encountered God as sacred and that he would return to God a tenth of all that God would give him.

Most commentaries see this account as a second visitation of God with Jacob at Bethel. It could also be simply a recounting of what had happened years in the past and the act of recalling God's promises and his blessings along with Jacob's vows would be very reassuring to Jacob at this point in his life.

The incidents mentioned in verses nine and ten are identical to what had happened when Jacob wrestled with God at the Brook Jabbok prior to Jacob meeting with Esau as he was returning to Canaan.

Verse eleven has different wording than the account that we have previously read in Genesis 28:13-15. In chapter 28 God refers to Himself as the "God of Abraham and Isaac" and in chapter 35 verse 11 the words are "God Almighty." As it turns out, Abraham and Isaac knew God as El Shaddai which is literally translated as God Almighty. The proof-text for this is found

in Exodus 6:3 where we read “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by My name LORD I was not known to them.”

There was not any recorded mention of “kings” in the chapter 28 account, but there is a reference to many descendants in both accounts. The promise of giving the “land” to Jacob and his descendants appears in both passages. Not mentioned in the chapter 35 account is the promise that “in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

The mention that God went up from Jacob in the second account seems to be similar to what Jacob had seen in the first account with God being above the ladder or stairs.

Treasuring God’s Promises – 35:14-15

¹⁴ Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He had spoken with him, a pillar of stone, and he poured out a drink offering on it; he also poured oil on it. ¹⁵ So Jacob named the place where God had spoken with him, Bethel. Genesis 35:14–15 (NASB95)

The account of Jacob’s response in setting up a rock as a pillar in this passage differs slightly from the account given in chapter 28. The addition we see here is that a drink offering was also poured on the rock before oil was poured on it.

Whether this was a second appearance of God and a second setting up of a stone pillar or just a recounting of the first instance, the impact on Jacob was positive and reassuring as he again found himself moving to a new place. We don’t know how long Jacob remained in Bethel before he moved on toward Bethlehem or Ephrath and eventually came to Beersheba where Isaac lived.

It was on the way to Ephrath that Rachel died in childbirth of Benjamin. We could argue that the assurance that Jacob received at Bethel was helpful in preparing him to deal the loss of the wife he really loved.

Some Observations – Promises and Vows

As we look over the life of Jacob from Bethel and back to Bethel we see that God’s promises to Jacob to be with him, keep him, and bring him back to the land were graciously fulfilled. There were some items that God promised that were yet to happen and would find their fulfillment in his descendants. Even though he had twelve sons, Jacob did not see the full scope of the many descendants. He owned a small parcel of the land of Canaan but it would fall to his descendants to inherit the land and occupy it. Finally, it would be many generations before the promise of all the families of the earth being blessed in the coming of the Messiah would be fulfilled. When Christ came and died for our sins, He said it is completed (done) and that could be a reference to the words God spoke to Jacob “I will not leave you until I have done what I said.”

Jacob’s vow during the first meeting with God at Bethel was essentially an affirmation of what God had promised him as he said, “Since God is going to do all this for me (be with me, protect me, and bring me back) as well as give me the land, then I will return back to Him a tenth of all that God gives me.” There is no mention that Jacob ever gave a tithe in his lifetime. Was this a broken vow or was this vow directly related to the land that God had promised Jacob and his descendants? Obviously, the tithe could not be given before the land had been received and that was finally accomplished when the Children of Israel entered the Promised Land hundreds of years later. The tithe was for the support of the Tribe of Levi and the upkeep of the Tabernacle and the altar used in worshiping God. It would appear that Jacobs descendants received the land and made good on the vow he had made to God to return a tenth to God of all that God gave him.