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JACOB – A Journey into Faith

Genesis 28:1-32:32

1. How God saved Jacob 28:1-22

It is easy for us to identify with Jacob since he is one of the most human and understandable people in the Old Testament. We will see God **saving** Jacob (28), **subduing** Jacob (29-32), **separating** Jacob and finally **sanctifying** Jacob.

The story of Jacob is spread over 20-30 years of Jacob's life. God never hurries and He never skimps his work in a human soul. He is working for eternity!

A. Jacob's departure (28:1-9)

Having deceived his blind old father and having defrauded his brother Esau, Jacob's situation had become untenable. In effect, Esau said, *"Jacob, we will bury our father and then I'll bury you!"*

- **Its immense importance** (1-9)

Jacob didn't sneak off into the night. He was sent off under circumstances sufficiently impressive to make a lasting impression on his mind. Isaac seems to have been frightened by his human weakness shown in the events that had just happened. With true patriarchal spirituality he summoned Jacob and gave him instructions regarding his future. He had two words for his son – one social and one spiritual. One dealt with the matter of a wife and the other dealt with the matter of worship. Decisions in both areas will affect a person's life for time and for eternity. One cannot be too careful in dealing with either one of them.

First, we have Isaac's instructions relating to the choice of a wife for Jacob, ***"So Isaac called for Jacob and blessed him and commanded him, 'Do not marry a Canaanite woman. Go at once to Paddan Aram, to the house of your mother's father Bethuel. Take a wife for yourself there from among the daughters of Laban your mother's brother'."*** On no account was Jacob to marry a local pagan. In the home of his maternal grandfather there lingered knowledge of the true God – a heritage of Abraham's testimony in days gone by. Jacob must go there and seek a wife.

The unspeakable horror of the Canaanite religion around them made it imperative that Jacob should be removed from any entanglement with Canaanite women. Esau had already disgraced himself by marrying idolatrous heathen women. Jacob must not do the same.

Bethuel, Rebekah's father, was Abraham's nephew. It is evident that he knew something of the Lord God from his response when Abraham's servant came there seeking a bride for Isaac years before. Having listened carefully to the servant's story, Bethuel said, ***"This is from the Lord; we can say nothing to you one way or another."*** (Gen. 24:50)

Next came the word of inspiration that related to Jacob's future and the patriarchal responsibilities that would be his. Isaac was not now speaking as a parent, but as a patriarch and the Holy Spirit was clearly guiding him and inspiring him as he gave Jacob the secrets of **<u>a productive life</u>** (28:3)

"May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. May He give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien – the land God gave to Abraham."

What Isaac wanted for his tough-minded, difficult and wilful boy was what every spiritually-minded father wants for his child. He wanted to see Jacob married to a believer and he wanted to see him walking in the ways of the Lord. So Jacob's departure from home was a matter of great importance.

- **Its immediate impact** (5-9)

"Then Isaac sent Jacob on his way and he went to Paddan Aram to the brother of Rebekah, who was the mother of Jacob and Esau. Now Esau learned that Isaac had blessed Jacob and had sent him to Paddan Aram to take a wife there and that when he blessed him he commanded him, 'Do

not marry a Canaanite woman' and Jacob had obeyed his father and mother and had gone to Paddan Aram. Esau then realised how displeasing the Canaanite women he had married were to his father Isaac. So he went to Ishmael and married Mahalath, the sister of Nebaioth and the daughter of Ishmael son of Abraham in addition to the wives that he already had."!

So Jacob packed his bags, said his goodbyes, got ready for the journey and left. The immediate impact was seen in an unexpected quarter. Esau took note of one fact. Isaac had sent Jacob away not because he was afraid of reprisals Esau might Institute, for with God's blessings resting on Jacob there was nothing Esau could do to harm him. He had been sent away because of his fear of the women of Canaan. Slowly the wheels began to turn in Esau's carnal mind. He thought, *"So that's why father refused to give me the blessing. He's put out because I did not marry a believer."* He decided to ingratiate himself with Isaac by marrying Mahalath.

B. Jacob's dream (28:10-17)

It seems that at this stage in his life Jacob was as yet and an unsaved man. He had been brought up in a believer's home. His father and his grandfather were both men who knew the Living God. Jacob himself knew the value of spiritual things and in his heart he craved the spiritual realities known by Abraham and Isaac. But so far he had had no personal encounter with God.

There were three stages in his conversion.

- **The far country** (10-11)

"Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep."

He had been on his way for two or three days and was tired, anxious, frustrated maybe and afraid. The threats of his brother were still ringing in his ears. There was no thought of God in Jacob's mind beyond the fact that he was going where Isaac had told him to go. There was no hint of repentance or remorse for what he had done. He found a suitable spot for the night, hunted for a suitable smooth stone for a pillow, looked up at the stars, yawned in the face of God and fell asleep.

He is the first 'prodigal' in the Old Testament paying the first instalment on 'accounts to be rendered' for his past behaviour.

- **The fresh covenant** (12-15)

"He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth with its top reaching to heaven and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord and He said, 'I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. <u>All peoples</u> on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' "

God is a God of infinite grace and doesn't easily allow prodigals to wander away. Jacob may pitch his tent and ignore God, but God slips quietly and unseen into Jacob's camp and invades Jacob's dreams. First we note what God proved to Jacob that night (12). ***"He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth with its top reaching to heaven and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it."***

A young man said to his girlfriend, *"I dreamt about you last night"*. She was intrigued and wanted to know all about it. He said, *"I dreamt I proposed to you. I wonder what that means!"* She replied, *"It's very simple. It means you have more sense when you're asleep than when you're awake!"*

That night Jacob had more sense when he was asleep than he had ever had when he was awake. That night he learned that the God of Abraham his grandfather and the God of Isaac his father could become the God of Jacob.

He learned there was such a place as heaven and it was not only a place, but it was an accessible place! Many centuries later the Lord Jesus told Nathaniel that He Himself was the ladder that Jacob saw. (Jn. 1:51) He is the link between earth and heaven for as both God and man He bridges the infinite distance between God and humanity, between heaven and earth. We can approach God and reach heaven only through Him. That night Jacob learned a great truth centred in the Lord Jesus Christ. It was and still is a saving truth.

We further note what God promised Jacob (15), ***"I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."***

In his vision, Jacob heard the voice of God speaking to him about **the Lord** and about **the land** and about **his life**. It was a reconfirmation of the original promise made to Abraham, reaffirmed to Isaac and now coming to rest on Jacob – the unconditional promise of God. Jacob was to awaken from this dream in the sure knowledge that his was the chosen line that would lead directly to the Lord Jesus, the Messiah.

- **The firm conviction** (16-17)

"When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, 'Surely the Lord is in this place and I was not aware of it!' He was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place this is none other than the House of God; this is the gate of heaven'!"

Compelled to leave his father's house, Jacob found that in His infinite grace God was offering him His (God's) house. Jacob was saved from that moment on.

C. Jacob's decision (28:18-22)

"Early the next morning Jacob took the stone placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it and called that place Bethel though the city used to be called Luz." (Luz means 'separation' and Bethel means 'the House of God'.) ***"Then Jacob made a vow, saying, 'If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's House and of all that You give me I will give You a tenth.' "***

- **He acted promptly** (18)

"Early the next morning Jacob rose up …." A new life pulsated in his mind. He jumped out of bed in the morning, his spirit light. Joy bells were ringing in his heart and mind. Perhaps the sky above was a deeper blue and the earth around a sweeter green. It wasn't just that it was a new morning. He was a new man!

- **He acted purposefully** (18-19)

He took the stone he had used for a pillow and set it up as a pillar. He poured oil on it and called it Bethel. This man Jacob who had been 'far off' – separated from God by sin – was now brought near to God. Jacob was setting up a public memorial to his conversion to be a true follower of the One and Only True God.

- **He acted practically** (20-22)

He acknowledged the Lord God's presence, His provision and His protection. He vowed a vow. It is the first time in the Bible that a vow is mentioned and Jacob made it! ***"If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I might safely return to my father's house, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house and of all that You give me I will give You a tenth."***

This was Jacob's verbal confession of his inner heart conversion. But he has not finished yet. ***"If God will be with me … the Lord shall be my God and this stone I have set up for a pillar shall be God's House."*** Then he adds speaking to God, ***"I will give You a tenth."*** This was the practical evidence of Jacob's conversion. The ruling passion in his heart had been greed. Now he wanted to give!

He was like Zacchaeus in the New Testament who had taken the Lord Jesus into his heart and his home and at once had begun to express his gratitude in terms of giving. (Lk. 19:1-10) The Lord Jesus commented on this, ***"Today salvation has come to this house."*** Zacchaeus wasn't saved because he gave. He gave because he was saved. The same was true of Jacob.

In this early period after his conversion Jacob promised the Lord that he would never forget two things. He would never forget **God's place in his life** and he would never forget **God's portion**.
It was a great start!

2. How God subdued Jacob 29:1-30:43

Jacob had been saved. It is one thing to be saved. It is another thing to be subdued. This subduing process took about the next 20 years of Jacob's life! We are all slow to learn even the basic elements of the life of faith. The story of God subduing Jacob tells of his arrival, of his arrangements and of his arrest in Paddan Aram.

We will look first at the events that have to do with the establishing of Jacob's family. At Paddan Aram Jacob took two matters into his own hands – the matter of marriage and the matter of money. [Paddan Aram is the area we now call Syria – inland from the coast and north of Damascus.]

A. Jacob's arrival at Paddan Aram (29:1-12)

The life transforming encounter with the God of Bethel was over and the memorial stone stood there as a tribute to Jacob's saving faith. Now Jacob had to work out his salvation with fear and trembling in a hostile world. (Phil. 2:12)

- **Coming to the well** (1-3)

"Then Jacob continued on his journey and came to the land of the eastern peoples. There he saw a well in the field with three flocks of sheep lying near it because the flocks were watered from that well. The stone over the mouth was large. When all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone away from the well's mouth and water the sheep. Then they would return the stone to its place over the mouth of the well."

Jacob appeared to have a new spring in his step and a new song in his heart. He walked along with his head held high perhaps whistling to himself. He went north and east following the arc of the Fertile Crescent to the Tigris/Euphrates – to the land that his grandfather Abraham had come from some 150 years before. Before him was a familiar sight – a well, several flocks of sheep and a group of shepherds lying in the shade. These men would be fierce-looking men with daggers in their belts and spears in their hands. Shepherds were used to roughing it in the wild in all sorts of weather and being able to deal with wolves, lions and thieves. They must have watched Jacob carefully as he came towards the well.

- **Confidence at the well** (4-8)

Jacob asked the shepherds, ***"My brothers, where are you from? 'We are from Haran', they replied."*** Haran is on a small tributary river called the Balikh River near what is the eastern Turkish border and northern Syria.

Jacob had learned what God was like. At Haran he was to learn what man is like. Up until now Jacob had always been the big man, the son of a wealthy and influential chief with many servants at his beck and call. But now he was an outsider among men who had no use for him at all. But Jacob didn't appear to be afraid. He asked the men, ***" 'Do you know Laban, Nahor's grandson?' 'Yes, we know him.' They answered."*** Almost everyone for miles around knew Laban and before long Jacob would know him too.

Uncle Laban was a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, clutching, covetous old sinner! He was sharp as flint and self-contained as an oyster. The cold within him froze his features. That was Laban! Everyone knew him!

Jacob's persistent friendliness brought a thaw. ***"Jacob asked them, 'Is he well?' 'Yes, he is' they said and here comes his daughter Rachel with the sheep.' "*** Probably Rachel was heavily veiled. Turning

to the shepherds, Jacob asked them why they were not watering their sheep. They replied, ***"Much of the day still remains."*** They really didn't give any logical reason why they didn't want to water the flocks until later.

- **Conquests at the well** (9-12)

Rachel arrived and with a courtesy unknown in those rough local times, Jacob moved the stone from the top of the well and lifted the water out of the well and poured it out to water Rachel's flocks.

Normally the shepherds would have shoved in first and made the women wait until they had finished. They must have looked with anger at Jacob. Were they tempted to intervene and put this presumptuous stranger in his place? Perhaps they noticed the big solid muscles in his arms and something of the look on his face that gave them pause. They left him alone. He conquered them.

He had also conquered Rachel! She had looked on in astonishment. Her wonder grew when he introduced himself to his cousin. "I am Rebecca's son" he said as he embraced her. With her heart and mind on fire, Rachel left the well and ran home to tell her father that a stranger had come and that he was at the well and that he said he was his nephew!

In such a way Jacob arrived in Paddan Aram. Throughout Genesis 29 and 30 we follow Jacob making his own arrangements. There is no indication that he asked God in prayer for His will in regard to financial matters or the issue of getting married. He was filled with self-confidence and felt that he was very capable of handling his own affairs.

B. Jacob's arrangements at Paddan Aram (29:13-30:43)

- **The matter of the wives** (29:13-30:24)

It is clear that Jacob had a pure love for Rachel from the moment he first saw her and this lasted until his dying day. When Laban heard from Rachel of Jacob's arrival, he hurried out to meet his nephew. Laban knew Jacob was from a wealthy family so he gave him the proverbial 'red carpet' treatment. He embraced him with the words, ***"Bone of my bone! Flesh of my flesh!"***

Jacob accepted his uncle's offer of hospitality. He made no mention of why he had had to leave Hebron in a hurry. He talked about his mother's continuing good health and beauty and his father's excessive business but said no word about Esau.

Jacob was too clever to hang about Laban's house for long so he began to make himself useful to Uncle Laban and soon was offered a full-time job. Laban said to him, ***"Just because you are relative of mine, should you work for me for nothing? Tell me what your wages should be."*** (29:15)

Within a month Laban began to wonder how he had ever managed his farms before Jacob came. Jacob demonstrated hard work, business acumen, cleverness at closing a deal and great skill in handling cattle and sheep. Jacob had also been doing some thinking. A month in Laban's home was alright and he had fallen more and more deeply in love with Rachel. No doubt Leah was okay, but there was something wrong with her eyes. They were very weak. Whatever it was, Jacob had nothing against Leah, but he only had eyes for Rachel. So when Laban opened up the question of wages, Jacob said, ***"I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel."*** We read in 29:20, ***"So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her."***

Jacob's first lesson (29:21-31)

The story has three parts.

a) ***"Then Jacob said to Laban, 'Give me my wife. My time is completed and I want to lie with her'."*** So true to his word, deceitful Laban gave orders for the wedding. Jacob had agreed to marry Rachel according to the customs of the land. Probably Laban had said something to Jacob like, *"My son, you understand that during the wedding you will not be able to see your bride for she will be heavily veiled. The wedding will take place at night and right after the wedding the bride will retire to your bedroom still heavily veiled. You will stay for a while to accept all the congratulations and good wishes of all the guests."*

b) Then came the discovery. ***"But when evening came he took his daughter Leah and gave her to Jacob and Jacob lay with her. … When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, 'What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel didn't I? Why have you deceived me?' "***

Jacob was clearly furious! He had been tricked! In reply Laban said, ***"It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one. Finish this daughter's bridal week; then we will give you the younger one also in return for another seven years of work."***

Clearly Laban cared little for Leah, Rachel or Jacob. Possibly Jacob remembered the time when he had stood before his old, blind father Isaac pretending to be Esau. Jacob had callously palmed himself off on Isaac who thought he was giving the blessing to Esau. Jacob hadn't seen that his methods were underhand and mean. Now in his present situation he was reaping what he had sown! Shocked and stunned, Jacob was forced to face the hard reality. Like it or not, he had married Leah and he had consummated the marriage.

Now there was another difficulty, ***"When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, He opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son."*** (31-32) God loved Leah as much as He loved Rachel no matter what Jacob might feel and He took action making it impossible for Rachel to bear children. In that Near East culture big, strapping, healthy sons, able to support their father and boost his business were essential to a man's standing in his community. So Jacob wanted sons, but he wasn't going to get any from Rachel!

c) It is a sad record that Jacob's home became a battlefield where two frustrated, angry women fought for Jacob's affections. Jacob was angry and frustrated – torn between his devotion to Rachel and his desire for sons. His first son was named Reuben meaning 'child of sore distress'. At his birth Leah said, ***"It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now."*** (32) It is perhaps surprising that Leah acknowledged the Lord God. Poor Leah in her bitterness and loneliness acknowledged the Lord God in the birth of her boy. She was the first one in Jacob's family to confess her faith in Him.

Next came Simeon, 'the child of disappointment' (33). Leah obviously hoped that the birth of a second son would win Jacob's love. It didn't! God heard all these words of bitterness in this very unhappy home.

Leah's third son was Levi. By now Leah must have been really discouraged. With her first two sons she acknowledged God, but not by the time Levi was born. This time she gave God no credit at all. Yet Levi became the leader of the priests and later Levitical Law forbade bigamy of jointly living sisters. (Lev. 18:18) Probably the hate-filled rivalry in Joseph's household provided a good reason for this prohibition. This disgraceful situation in childbearing extended to the 'giving' of maidservants as 'breeders' – doubtless with Jacob's compliance!

Next came Judah. By now Leah had begun to recover her optimism. She said, ***"This time I will praise the Lord."*** God honoured this for in the future Israel's kings sprang from Judah and this included the Lord Jesus. The Son of God Himself was a descendant of Judah.

By now Leah was no longer worried that her sister Rachel monopolised Jacob's heart. Leah didn't need people to make her happy. Her joy and praise was in the Lord. At this point Leah stopped having sons. I think she must have felt that the Lord was better to her than a hundred sons.

By now Rachel had become very frustrated. She said to Jacob, ***"Give me children or I'll die."*** Jacob was angry with her and responded. ***"Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?"***(30:1-2)

Now come some sordid tricks that will lead to further unhappiness. Rachel comes up with a plan to use a technical legality to give her slave girl to have a child by Jacob. In this case the child would be legally Rachel's. As a result a son, Dan, was born. This was really very sad. But Rachel was so pleased with her scheme that she employed it yet again and Naphtali was born. At Dan's birth Rachel had acknowledged God as 'Elohim'. But at Naphthali's birth she didn't acknowledge God at all. She just rejoiced that she had triumphed over Leah. Sadly, she was deluded since spiritual victories can't be won in the flesh.

Leah had been watching all this and decided that she too could sink to a low spiritual level in this fight with Rachel. She sent her maid to Jacob and as a result Gad was born (30:9-11). Leah gave no acknowledgement to God at the birth of Gad. It is sad to see Leah sink to a low spiritual ebb simply to get even with her sister. Next came Asher when Zilpah bore a second son. Leah was happy but there was no acknowledgement of God. Happiness is something quite different to praise. Happiness depends on what happens.

The family quarrel between the two sisters now reaches an all-time low. Rachel still has complete sway over Jacob's heart. Reuben was about 4 years old when he came home with some mandrakes. It was harvest time and the fields were full of reapers. There was festivity in the air. Little Reuben had been out to pick a bunch of wildflowers for his mother. He arrived home with some mandrakes – a plant that still grows in Israel. It has dark leaves and a carrot-like root. It has a sweet smell something like an apple. People thought this plant could excite sexual passion. Rachel was tired of waiting for God to make her fruitful. She struck a bargain with Leah that in return for the mandrakes Jacob would be with Leah that night. But the plan did not work at all. Leah began to have more sons! A sixth son, Zebulun was born. It was as if Leah was shouting her victory over Rachel. She never persuaded Jacob to come and live permanently with her, yet God honoured the longings of her heart. When the Lord Jesus came into the world he came to stay in Nazareth in Zebulun.

Finally Leah had a daughter who she named Dinah meaning 'vindicator'. She was Leah's seventh child.

At long last along came Joseph! ***"Then God remembered Rachel. He listened to her and opened her womb. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, 'God has taken away my disgrace'. She named him Joseph and said, 'May the Lord add to me another son'."*** And He did!

- **The matter of the wages** (30:25-43)

"After Rachel gave birth to Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, 'Send me on my way so I can go back to my own homeland. Give me my wives and children for whom I have served you and I will be on my way. You know how much work I have done for you."

When Joseph was born something happened to Jacob. He realised that Mesopotamia was not his real home. His home was far away in the Land of Promise. So he made the great decision to go back to the land where God had put His name.

Laban wasn't happy to lose Jacob or his daughters. So Laban promised to pay Jacob more. To Laban, Jacob was a tool he had used to serve his own ambitions. Laban was a trickster. He changed Jacob's wages 10 times and always in his own favour. He probably smiled to himself at his ability to take advantage of a man who was, for a while, in his power.

Jacob probably recalled how he had treated Esau some 14 years earlier when he had come in weak from a hunt and wanted some of Jacob's stew. Jacob hadn't cared a bit that Esau was his brother. He had simply taken advantage of a weaker man who was temporarily in his power. Jacob saw Esau as a tool to increase his ambitions. But ***"Be not deceived; God cannot be mocked: a man reaps what he sows."*** (Gal. 6:7)

"But Laban said to Jacob, 'If I have found favour in your eyes, please stay. I have learned by divination (strictly forbidden to Israel – Lev. 19:26; Deut. 18:10, 14) ***that the Lord has blessed me because of you.' Then he added, 'Name your wages and I will pay them'. Jacob said to him, 'You know how I have worked for you and how your livestock has fared under my care. The little you had before I came has increased greatly and the Lord has blessed you wherever I have been. But now, when may I do something for my own household?' "***

Laban asked, ***"What shall I give you?"*** Note what is said about Jacob's wages (31-36). Jacob agreed to oversee Laban's affairs, but he must be allowed to lay the foundations for his own financial future. He would go through Laban's flocks removing every speckled or spotted sheep, every dark-coloured lamb and every spotted or speckled goat. These would be separated and would be Jacob's wages. The white sheep and black goats would be Laban's. Jacob would not breed from the existing brown sheep and the spotted goats. But all future brown sheep born of white sheep and all the spotted and

speckled goats born of the black goats would be Jacob's along with their offspring of similar markings. This was the deal.

Laban must have thought Jacob was crazy! Jacob was willing to base his hoped-for fortune on highly improbable results. It was a bargain Laban couldn't resist. Laban then sent out his workmen to remove all the marked sheep and goats. Jacob had said to him, ***"My honesty will testify for me in the future whenever you check on the wages you have paid me. Any goat in my possession that is not speckled or spotted or any lamb that is not dark-coloured will be considered stolen."*** (33)

Jacob seems to have discovered Mendel's law of genetics thousands of years before Mendel! He was an experienced and observant cattle breeder. He learned that animals have both dominant and recessive traits. The dominant trait in Laban's flock produced mainly white sheep. But starting with a pure white flock, Jacob knew he could produce brown sheep. The same held true for goats. Starting with black goats he knew that eventually he would get spotted and speckled goats. In this way he would be able to increase his own flocks.

Jacob trusted that God would be gracious and give him a better percentage than he might ordinarily expect. But Jacob was Jacob and he was a cunning man. He went into the hills with his two large flocks – his speckled and striped flock and Laban's white sheep and black goats. It was in the interests of both Jacob and Laban to make sure the flocks multiplied rapidly. The more offspring that could be produced the higher his chances of getting a good start with his coloured sheep and spotted goats.

The first thing he did seems very strange, ***"He took fresh cut branches from poplar, almond and plane trees and made white stripes on them by peeling the bark and exposing the white inner wood of the branches. Then he placed the peeled branches in all the water troughs so they would be directly in front of the flocks when they came to drink."*** (37-38)

Why did Jacob do this? We don't know, but Jacob wasn't a fool! Many have written scholarly papers about Jacob's peeled rods. Some have suggested it has something to do with chemicals from the rods. In any case Jacob believed it would work and it did work!

It wasn't long before the flocks and herds began to multiply and the kind of sheep and goats Jacob wanted began to show up in unusually large numbers. Jacob wanted both quantity and quality. When the cattle were mating he placed his rods that he hoped were aphrodisiac. He constantly separated stronger animals from the weaker ones. So in time he began to develop a fine strain of healthy sheep and goats. This may have been the first example of selective breeding! As he later told Laban (32:10), God had chosen to bless him.

So we read of Jacob that, ***"He grew exceedingly prosperous and came to own large flocks and maidservants and manservants and camels and donkeys."*** (30:43) This was over a period of six years. His natural shrewdness helped as did his hard work and sound investment. He was simply the best man in his field. But more than anything else, God helped Jacob and because God chose to bless him he soon became a wealthy man and a power in the land.

3. How God stopped Jacob 31:1-32:32

At Paddan Aram Jacob established his family and his fortune becoming rich both in children and in material things. But his true home was not on the Euphrates but in Canaan – the Promised Land.

A. How old goals were challenged (31:1-16)

God couldn't let him settle in the very land from which, many years before he had called Abraham. So God allowed things to go badly wrong with Jacob. God wanted him to go back to Canaan.

- **Jacob's fundamental concern** (1-3)

He was challenged about the things that had crept into his life. They must be dealt with or put away or put right. So far Jacob had been motivated by two goals – to marry Rachel and to get rich. He had achieved both, but neither was adequate, neither money nor marriage can fulfil the deepest needs of a person's life.

It all happened rather suddenly. Jacob's world suddenly became menacing. (31:1-2) ***"Jacob heard that Laban's sons were saying, 'Jacob has taken everything our father owned and has gained all***

this wealth from what belonged to our father.' And Jacob noticed that Laban's attitude towards him was not what it had been."

Jacob had kept strictly to the agreement he had with Laban and his growing prosperity was entirely legitimate, but jealousy is never reasonable. For Jacob and his family the world had suddenly become a menacing place.

"Then the Lord said to Jacob 'Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives and I will be with you'." It had been a very long time since Jacob had heard the clear voice of God. Now in his threatening circumstances he heard that voice and everything came into focus. He had been "arrested" by God Himself. He must go back to the Promised Land.

It is a great blessing for us when the world in which we are living, that looked so attractive to us, suddenly turns sour on us. It is usually only then that we are willing to listen to what God has to say to us.

- **Jacob's family conference** (4-9)

Jacob's problem was how to get away from Laban. If he simply told him that he and all his family were leaving, Laban would summon his associates to stop him or he would send him back to Canaan without his family, his fortune and everything else.

So Jacob decided to leave Paddan Aram secretly. He called a family conference out in the open fields where they would not be overheard. So Jacob, Leah and Rachel met secretly. He shared with his wives two things about their father that had troubled him. He said to them, ***"I see that your father's attitude towards me is not what it was before, but the God of my father has been with me. You know that I've worked for your father with all my strength, yet your father has cheated me by changing my wages 10 times. However God has not allowed him to harm me. If he said, 'The speckled ones will be your wages', then all the flocks gave birth to speckled young; and if he said, 'The streaked ones will be your wages', then all the flocks bore streaked young. So God has taken away your father's livestock and has given them to me."***

Jacob hadn't seen himself in the mirror! He hadn't seen that he was just like Laban! We speak loudly when others wrong us, but we are blind to the wrong we have done to other people. Jacob had forgotten all the dirty tricks had pulled in his earlier life. Jacob hadn't yet seen himself, but that was coming. Right now all he could think of was Laban's persistent dishonesty.

- **Jacob's faithful confession** (10-13)

"In the breeding season I once had a dream in which I looked up and saw that the male goats mating with the flock were streaked, speckled or spotted. The angel of the Lord said to me in the dream, 'Jacob'. I answered, 'Here I am'. Then he said, 'Look up and see that all the male goats mating with the flock are streaked, speckled or spotted, for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you. I am the God of Bethel where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land'." (10-13)

So Jacob had to confess that his prosperity was not due to his own cleverness but to <u>God's grace</u>. God had shown him what to do. Jacob didn't know anything about recessive traits in animals, but God knew! He had helped Jacob by showing him in dreams which animal to mate with which.

His second confession had to do with his prospects which were not the result of his own conniving but were due to <u>God's guidance</u>. (31:31) ***"Jacob answered Laban, 'I was afraid because I thought you would take your daughters away from me by force'."***

Then Jacob spoke to his wives. He explained to them what God had been saying to him, "***I am the God of Bethel …. Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land'."*** Jacob told them that there was no future for him in Paddan Aram. His future was in the land where God had placed His name.

This is a great lesson for all believers! True prosperity is spiritual, not material. It does not reside 'here', but rather where God is. So Jacob, suddenly faced with the loss of everything, came home to God.

- **Jacob's final commitment** (14-16)

"Then Rachel and Leah replied, 'Do we still have any share in the inheritance of our father's estate? Does he not regard us as foreigners? Not only has he sold us, but he has used up what was paid for us. Surely all the wealth that God took away from our father belongs to us and our children. So do whatever God has told you'."

Jacob must have been thrilled with this reply. A husband can't ask anything better than to have his wife and loved ones wholeheartedly endorse his desire to do God's will without any reservations.

B. How old gods were challenged (31:17-35)

"You shall have no other gods before Me." This is the first of the Ten Commandments. It was well understood by Jacob. His grandfather Abraham had abandoned idolatry and the worship of false gods many years before in Mesopotamia.

Jacob knew no true believer could worship a false God nor could a believer tolerate the presence of idols in his home. Jacob's wives were the daughters of Laban and Laban was a pagan at heart. Probably both Leah and Rachel – especially Rachel – had kept hold of Laban's idle worship. Rachel had kept some of Laban's teraphim (household gods) in her home. So now Jacob took on the difficult task of getting rid of all the old gods. Perhaps this was not so difficult if the idols were shown to be a block of wood or a stone.

- **What Laban taught** (17-21)

We are given two interesting glimpses into Laban's character. Laban had forced two principles into the minds of his children and he is now about to see these two principles put into practice against him!

The first was **ruthless expediency**. (17-18)

"Then Jacob put his children and his wives on camels and he drove all his livestock ahead of him, along with all the goods he had accumulated in Paddan Aram …."

"Moreover, Jacob deceived Laban by not telling him he was running away. So he fled with all he had and, crossing the river, he headed for the hill country of Gilead." (Now in Jordan)

So, with the full support of his wives, Jacob and his family slipped away while his father-in-law was busy.

The second was **false religious truth**. (19)

This was why Rachel stole her father's idols. She had seen them in her father's home and she had seen him worshipping them so it is not surprising that Rachel carried them off. Rachel was 'hedging her bets'. She knew Jacob's God, but she also felt that may be it was wise to take her father's idols so she put them in the bag that was hanging from her camel.

- **What Laban thought** (22-30)

Laban was not at all pleased with the loss of his gods or with Jacob, Rachel and Leah leaving together with his grandchildren. All of Jacob's vast holdings which Laban had probably planned to seize were gone. So he gathered a sufficient force of armed men to attack and stop Jacob.

He went across the Euphrates, up around the Fertile Crescent and on down into Canaan as far as Mount Gilead. That is about 300 miles. Jacob covered this in 10 days. He must have pushed his camels and herds hard. But Laban apparently covered the distance in a week. He caught up with Jacob and planned to attack him the next day.

But that night Jacob's God, the Living God, met Laban in a dream and said to him, ***"Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad."*** (24) Laban had met the Lord God.

Next we are told how Laban met Jacob. ***"Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country of Gilead when Laban overtook him and Laban and his relatives camped there too. Then Laban said to Jacob, 'What have you done? You've deceived me and carried off my daughters like captives in war. Why did you run off secretly and deceive me? Why didn't you tell me so I could send you away with joy***

and singing to the music of tambourine and harps? You didn't even let me kiss my daughters goodbye. You have done a foolish thing. I have the power to harm you, but last night the God of your father said to me. 'Be careful not to say anything to Jacob either good or bad.' Now you have gone off because you longed to return to your father's house. But why did you steal my gods?' "

- **What Laban sought** (31-35)

Clearly Laban was **biased** (25-28), **bitter** (29) and **blind** (30). But the crucial issue was the stolen gods. The night before Laban had met the True and Living God, yet now he still referred to his little clay idols as his gods. Behind the image lurked the demons. Worshipping an idol gives the demon a hold on the worshipper. But these were gods that could be stolen, stuffed in a bag and bounced about on the back of a camel for about 300 miles without a murmur!

C. How old grudges were challenged (31:36-55)

Jacob knew nothing of Rachel's theft of her father's idols. ***"Jacob was angry and took Laban to task. 'What is my crime?' He asked Laban.' What sin have I committed that you hunt me down? Now that you have searched all my goods, what have you found that belongs to your household? Put it here in front of your relatives and mine and let them judge between the two of us'."***

Filled with anger, Jacob speaks his mind. He is angry at being furiously chased and falsely charged as well as being foully cheated. This led to an oath and an offering.

D. How old guilt was challenged (32:1-32)

But now back in Abraham's land Jacob had to deal with Esau. (32:1-21) Jacob had to learn one of the most basic, far-reaching lessons that we can ever learn as believers. God doesn't condemn sin in a sinner and condone it in a saint! Jacob had cheated Esau. He might try to suppress the memory, but God had not forgotten and neither had Esau! It is always that way. God cannot continue to bless us with spiritual blessings until we face our sin and put it right with God and with the people we have sinned against.

- **Jacob's confirmation from God** (1-2)

"Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him. When Jacob saw them he said, 'This is the camp of God.' So he named the place Mahanaim."

Today it is located in Gilead to the east of the Jordan and just north of the little river of Jabbok.

What happened at Bethel took care of his **beliefs**. But what happens at Jabbok is going to take care of his **behaviour**, his **salvation** and his **sanctification**. Jacob became aware of angels escorting him. They were unseen before.

John Wesley spent 52 years in the saddle preaching up and down the country of England. The highways were always very dangerous. There were many highway men (footpads). Wealthy people travelled by coach with armed guards.

Wesley was riding alone along a lonely road and he noticed that further ahead there was a large group of highwaymen. He realised that he faced death and he could have turned back. So Wesley prayed. At once he heard hoof beats. Another traveller rode up beside him on a great horse. Wesley gave the newcomer a cheery greeting and together they hurried down the road and on past the robbers who withdrew and let them pass. John Wesley then turned to thank his companion only to find that he had suddenly disappeared. John Wesley and Jacob and many others have had a glimpse of our angelic escort.

Jacob's response to this meeting with the angels of God was to name the place Mahanaim meaning two hosts – the visible host Jacob and whoever may have been with him and the great angelic army of God unseen and silent, but mighty in their ability to guard and protect us. What an affirmation and confirmation that God was with him!

- **Jacob's confusion about God** (3-23)

So Jacob was wonderfully affirmed by God. Now he has to plan how he's going to pacify his brother Esau. Here is his plan:

i) **Try negotiation** (32:3-8)

Jacob sent a flattering message. We can imagine him bowing and scraping and parading his wealth. He was answered by Esau that he was coming to meet Jacob together with 400 men! Now Jacob forgot about the angels! Jacob's attitude was, 'It all depends on me'! But it didn't!

ii) **Try intercession** (32:9-12)

"Then Jacob prayed, 'O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac …'." It is a prayer of beauty and boldness. It has four parts:

- ✓ He pleaded **the purposes of God** (9). God had directed him to the place where he was. In effect he said to God, *"Lord God, I am in the centre of your will. I am in a mess. Please take responsibility for me."*
- ✓ He pleaded **the providence of God**. (10) He remembered God's past goodness to him.
- ✓ He pleaded **the protection of God** (11)
- ✓ He pleaded **the promises of God** (12)

George Muller of Bristol had a number of goals he wanted his orphanages in Bristol to accomplish. One of these was to have clear visible proof that God answered prayer and that He was completely trustworthy as well as a rewarder of those who diligently seek after Him.

So Muller built, staffed and maintained the orphanages for several decades. He used to pile up arguments to himself as to why God should answer his prayers:

- ✦ the orphanages belonged to God
- ✦ the orphans and all their needs were God's responsibility for God had promised to be the father of the fatherless

Personally I don't think God needs to be convinced! But we do need to convince ourselves by forceful arguments.

iii) **Try conciliation** (12-23)

He prepared 200 female goats and 20 male goats, 200 ewes, 20 rams, 30 camels with their colts, 40 cows and 10 bulls, 20 asses and 10 foals. This was his conciliatory present for Esau. The principle behind this was the Old Testament "trespass offering". If a man is to get right with God, he must make restitution and more.

4. The second great spiritual crisis in Jacob's life

Jacob's first spiritual crisis was at Bethel. It was a great experience of heaven and angels. It was thrilling and sensational. Jacob was still the controller. He connived and manipulated to get what he wanted. Let's compare Jacob's experience at Bethel with his experience at Jabbok.

Bethel	Jabbok
He saw the ladder.	He saw the Lord.
He became a believing man.	He became a broken man.
He became a saint set apart for God.	He longed for God's presence and blessing.
He returned from the experience with a new spring in his step.	He returned from the experience walking with a lasting limp.
He died to his sin.	He died to self – a very painful experience.

5. The third and final crisis in Jacob's life (35)

Jacob wrestles with God (32:24-32)

"So Jacob was left alone." (24)

His wealth had already gone before – his family and fortune and all his servants had been sent ahead. Jacob was alone and although he had faith in God, he knew very little of fellowship with God. By and large he sought to obtain by carnal manipulation his inheritance which only God could bestow.

Most of us hate to be alone for long. We tend to structure our time to be full because we dare not be left alone with absolutely nothing to do but face God. But in reality there is nothing more needful than to be left alone with God.

Jacob was surrounded by all the promises of God in the Bible, yet he had none of the enjoyment of any of them. The old Jacob was very much alive. He was afraid to meet Esau. Suddenly a man jumps on him! He thought to himself, "It's probably Esau! If not him, then some sort of enemy." He wrestled with the 'man' until dawn and the 'man' didn't beat him! That unknown assailant couldn't pin Jacob down. The old carnal, stubborn, fighting, self-sufficient controlling Jacob was very much alive.

The battle went on in the dark. God's intention was to bless Jacob. Jacob's reaction was to get rid of Him. I wonder how long it was before Jacob began to realise that he was wrestling with God. How soon did he realise that God was challenging him with his desperate need to make a full and unconditional surrender to God?

Jacob was very much changed, ***"When the 'man' saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the 'man'. Then the 'man' said, 'Let me go, for it is daybreak'. But Jacob replied, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' The 'man' asked him, 'What is your name?' 'Jacob' he answered. Then the 'man' said, 'Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.' Jacob said, 'Please tell me your name'. But he replied, 'Why do you ask my name?' Then He blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'It is because I saw God face-to-face and yet my life was spared.' The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel and he was limping because of his hip."***

That night was the climax of 20 years of God's patient dealings with Jacob. We are often impatient, but God is never impatient! We have lots of things that are instant today – instant meals, instant communication, instant entertainment etc., but never instant spiritual maturity!

We long for "quick fixes" for heart problems, pressures and stresses. We are told to take regular exercise, proper meals, get adequate sleep and if none of these work we take a pill. Why can't I have a huge meal so I never need another one? Such an idea is stupid! But in the spiritual realm people often make claims like that.

God takes time to bring us to spiritual maturity. He never crowds us. He always waits and woos us. God wrestles with us because he wants us to be so much more than we are. Probably our greatest battles are with God – in the dark and alone.

6. The Result

- **A man broken by God** (25-27)

Jacob was no longer a man fighting, but a man clinging. His hip joint was broken and you can't wrestle in that condition. All Jacob could do was cling. Jacob said to God, ***"I will not let you go unless you bless me."*** This is the basic difference between Esau and Jacob. With all his many faults, deep down in Jacob's heart the ultimate issue in his life had been decided. Jacob wanted the blessing of God. Esau never wanted it.

So we see Jacob clinging and we also see him confessing. God asked him, ***"What is your name?"*** At first it seems a strange question to ask. Didn't God know who Jacob was? Of course He did!

Once before Jacob had been asked this question, (27:18-19) ***"Jacob went to his father and said 'My father' 'Yes, my son' he answered. 'Who is it?' Jacob said to his father, 'I am Esau your firstborn'."*** But now this broken man cried, ***"I am Jacob"*** he was saying, *"You know me. I am Jacob. All I really am is just a cheat and a liar."*

That is what God wanted! He wanted Jacob to see himself as he really was – confessing all he was. Now God could work. A new heart is born in us in the same way – often accompanied by great pain.

- **A man blessed by God** (28-30)

God only breaks us so that He can make us anew. God said to Jacob, ***"Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel."*** Israel can mean 'he strives with God' or some translations have 'a prince with God'. The Hebrew root implies 'chief'.

When God gives a person a new name it implies that he is a new person. The man Jacob who entered the Land of Promise was not the man who had left it 20 years before. That man had cheated his brother, deceived his blind father and outwitted an unscrupulous uncle!

Now he was a man who had learned that God will bless us if the means employed to gain that blessing are both surrender to God's will and supplication in the form of a prayer to God with a humble heart.

With great boldness Jacob asks God, ***"Please will you tell me your name?"*** In the Old Testament God usually revealed Himself to people by His name. So it wasn't presumption on the part of Jacob, but it was by faith that he asked God. God didn't tell him because He knew that Jacob already knew who had broken and blessed him. But this great "midnight wrestler" added a further tremendous blessing. Jacob saw God!

"So Jacob called the place Peniel saying, 'It is because I saw God face-to-face and yet my life was spared." A staggering sense of awe and amazement swept over Jacob. He had seen God! He was thrilled!

- **A man branded by God** (31-32)

Jacob bore the marks of his encounter with God. God had touched his hip. The hip joint is perhaps the strongest joint in the body and it is a symbol of what it took to break Jacob's strong will. Jacob forded the Jabbok River leaning heavily on his staff.

He met his wives and all his children. They would have seen him limping and probably asked him, *"What happened to you?"* He probably replied something like, *"I met God last night and I will never be the same again!"*

So we first met Jacob **lying**. Then at Bethel we saw him **listening**. Next we see him **learning** but he was a slow learner. Now we meet Jacob **limping** and **leaning** on God. As believers, we are "tried by fire", but God is no arsonist! He is a refiner. He burns not to destroy but to remove the dross.

Once we have faced God, we can face our "Esaus". Jacob thought that his relationship with Esau and Laban was his problem, but in reality his problem was his relationship with God!

We all have Esaus/Labans – points of failure – things we dread but we have to do. We cry out to God something like, *"O God, please get me through this meeting with ….. tomorrow."* But usually the problem is not the person we are going to meet. If we let God take the "Jacob" out of us and replace it with "Israel", then we can face our Esaus/Labans.

Our nature is to control and manipulate. It often takes a crisis to 'dislocate our hip'. But God didn't reject Jacob. He blessed him because He saw something in Jacob that pleased Him. He saw the potential for a humble and contrite heart beneath a manipulative exterior. God blessed him by bringing about a crisis that led, in the end, to total consecration.

What will God have to do in your life to bring about complete consecration to His will and His purposes in your life? Beware of the Christian leader who does not walk with a limp!!