

LEARNING THE HARD WAY

by Steve Zeisler

Jacob was the third patriarch of the nation of Israel. These studies in Genesis have brought us to a consideration of him. Last week we studied Isaac, Jacob's father. We discovered Isaac's problem was that he undervalued the great gifts he had been given. He undervalued the presence of God, the promise of God, and his place in the plan of God. Isaac took all of the resources that his father Abraham had given him--spiritual standing, wealth, and opportunity to influence his world--and did very little with them. But Jacob had a different problem. From the beginning he longed for what Isaac had. He wanted his father's blessing. He wanted what Isaac took for granted--standing before God. He desired to become a man of influence, a man of stature. He wanted to be respected. Jacob valued the things that Isaac did not value, but he also had a problem. He could not bring himself to believe that God would give all these valuable things to him for nothing. There had to be a catch to it, he reasoned, something he had to do in return. Jacob's problem was not undervaluing the gift, but undervaluing himself. He felt unworthy. As a result, he spent his life trying to earn for himself what God wanted to give him as a gift.

What do we know about Jacob that could help us understand his inner struggle? His twin brother Esau was an outdoorsman whom his father preferred over Jacob. Isaac chose Esau and rejected Jacob, even though before their birth God had indicated that Jacob was to be the son who would inherit the blessing. However, it did not matter to Isaac what God said. He liked Esau better. The smell of the fields was in Esau's clothes. He was a man of action, a hunter and an adventurer. Jacob, on the other hand, was better at cooking than he was at hunting.

Jacob was a mama's boy. His mother, who regarded him as her favorite son, pushed him around most of his life. Even when he was grown up she kept telling him what to do and how to do it. His uncle Laban, as we will see this morning, manipulated him and took advantage of him at every turn. In short, if we were to summarize Jacob's life experience growing up in his family, we could say that he was duped by his uncle, dominated by his mother, threatened by his brother, and rejected by his father.

By the time he reached adulthood Jacob did not trust anybody. His attitude toward life was, "Nobody is going to take care of me so I have to take care of myself." He was suspicious of every kindness. He had been burned too many times. Now he faced a death threat from his brother Esau, and he was off and running to Haran. How does God communicate the good news of his love and protection to such a man? Jacob resembles a hurt and beaten runaway teenager who seeks sanctuary in a big city. The runaway stumbles into a rescue mission, hears the good news of the love of Jesus, but cannot quite believe it. He is not sure he can trust anybody. Adults have told him this kind of thing before. It sounds wonderful and is very attractive, but there's got to be a catch.

This is Jacob's state of mind as he sets out for Haran. He must learn to choose between the many voices he is hearing. Those from the past have been mostly negative. Very soon he will hear the voice of God speaking love, approval and companionship. He must believe one or the other, the negative voices of his past or God's word, which offers him love and approval. It will take him twenty years to make his choice.

Then Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran. And 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. And 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. 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. Your descendants shall also be like the dust of the

earth, and you shall 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. And 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."

The Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." So 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. And he called the name of that place Bethel; however, previously the name of the city had been Luz. 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, and I return to my father's house in safety, then the Lord will be my God. And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God's house; and of all that Thou dost give me I will surely give a tenth to Thee."

Jacob is running away to Haran. He is alone, fearful, and uncertain about the future. He can still hear his brother's threats ringing in his ears. He lies down to rest, and has a vision in which he both sees and hears God. He sees the heavens open up and watches a stairway descending to the very spot where he is lying. Angels are descending and ascending the staircase, coming down from God to minister to him, and returning to God carrying his cares and questions. Jesus would use this very same imagery in the New Testament when he spoke to Nathaniel. He said, in effect, "Nathaniel, your faith at the moment is impressive, but someday you will understand even better the resources and the power of God, and his approval of his Messiah. Someday you will see the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man." Here we have a wonderful picture of God's supply for our needs, his concern for us, and his involvement with us. He knows us. He understands us. He gives us what we need to make our way in life.

In the vision, Jacob was told that the God of his father and grandfather, the God who had begun the salvation story in Abraham was now concerned for him. He was told of his own future descendants who would be so many they would be as uncountable "as the dust." Jacob would have his place in history. He would be given a land for his own, the promised land of Abraham. Finally, God said to him, "I will be with you. I am going everywhere you are going. You will never ever lack for a protector and a companion. You will never spend one day without my supply for your needs. Therefore you do not need to fear. Wherever you go I will bring you back. You cannot fail."

Now we can see more clearly Jacob's problem. What an extraordinary promise! What a magnificent announcement of God's love and approval of him! Jacob was chosen, known of God before he was born, and God would go everywhere with him. His place in history was ordained. Yet at the moment Jacob was all by himself, running in fear of his brother. He had been hurt and rejected. He had trouble believing in himself. Now he must wrestle with which message was true, the voices from the past or the voice of God which he just heard in the vision.

Let us look at Jacob's response following the vision. He demonstrates that he has faith, but notice also his lack of faith. He is afraid. He has a holy fear of God. He realizes he has spoken with God and that he must respond to what he has heard. He does not just ignore it, decamp the next morning and head on. As much as it was in his power to believe God at this point in his life he did so. And, as we will see at the end of the story, God brought him back to the vow he made here. The Lord took his vow seriously.

But there is a great lack of faith that is discernible in both what Jacob did and said. First of all, he is most impressed, not with the Lord, or even the statements of the Lord, but with the place where he witnessed the vision. He is saying, in effect, "This must be a holy place. And this must be an especially holy pillow. What a remarkable dream I had!" The pillow and the land get the most attention. Jacob is saying, in effect, "If anybody else had slept here, he would probably have had the same experience. I lucked onto the gate of heaven, just when God was about to be kind to someone."

Furthermore, he bargains with God. "If God will be with me...I will surely give a tenth to thee." Compare that with Abraham's response when God tested him by asking for Isaac's life on Mount Moriah. Abraham withheld nothing though obedience seemed to demand a terrible sacrifice. Suspicious Jacob not only questions God's character but offers him less (one-tenth) in return. He offered all of himself without hesitating, without question. He is trying to believe but is having a hard time believing. He is trying to respond but does not know how to respond. He is all alone and embarked on a hard journey. He falls short of being a man of faith at this point in his life.

Time does not permit our reading the next two chapters; thus I will trace a mere outline of Jacob's twenty years in Haran. He meets Rachel at a well and falls in love with her. He moves into his uncle Laban's home and negotiates for Rachel's hand in marriage. Laban, whose greedy and manipulative style were first encountered in chapter 24, agrees to the match provided Jacob works for him for seven years. Laban would one day regret his shrewdness as a marriage broker, however, because it caused him to lose his family. His daughters saw how much it cost Jacob to marry them. Eventually they would resent their father for growing rich by his selling them as brides.

So the bargain was struck. The days passed so quickly Jacob hardly even noticed seven years going by. He was so much in love with Rachel that no effort seemed too great. Things were going swimmingly until the wedding night. In the middle of the festivities Jacob is waiting in his boudoir and at last his bride arrives. In the morning, however, Jacob discovers that his bride is not Rachel at all but her older sister Leah. Laban explains to Jacob, "I thought you knew our customs. The older sister always marries before the younger." Instead of spending his wedding night with the woman of his dreams, in the morning Jacob discovered that the woman in his tent was her sister Leah.

James Boice says this about the wedding night:

Poor Jacob. Apparently Leah and Rachel were somewhat alike; their differences being largely in the area of their beauty or lack of it, which would not be noticed in the dark night of the desert. Leah would be dressed in Rachel's clothing and perfumes. The conversation would be in whispered words of love, if indeed Leah said anything. Jacob was unsuspecting. He thought he was making love to Rachel. His consternation the next morning must have been enormous.

Laban tricked the unsuspecting Jacob on his wedding night, substituting Leah for Rachel. Obviously upset, Jacob comes to Laban with his complaint, only to be told, "Well, the older sister has to be married first. That is the custom in our region. But if you will serve another seven years, you can have Rachel, the woman you love." Laban allows the marriage to Rachel to go ahead, but now Jacob owes him another seven years' labor.

The story continues in chapters 29 and 30 with an account of the rivalry between Rachel and Leah. Leah knew that Rachel was Jacob's favorite wife. That ate away at her and made her bitter toward her rival. But Leah could lord it over Rachel in one area, at least. She could have children, while Rachel was barren. So even if she was, in a sense, second wife, she at least could say she was first mother.

For her part, Rachel found herself hating her sister. While she herself may have been first wife, only in a secondary sense was she a mother. Both women made use of other women to bear Jacob's children. At various points Jacob finds himself being bounced from one tent to another. Sons are being born to different mothers; the rivalry grows more intense. On one occasion Rachel bargained with Leah for mandrakes which had been discovered growing in a field and were considered an aphrodisiac in those days. Leah received Jacob's affections for one night as her part of the deal and conceived another child. It almost seems that Jacob had to draw a number before he went to bed each evening!

There is a third account in these chapters that describes Jacob's twenty years in Haran. The first story concerned his marrying two wives. The second deals with wifely rivalry and the birth of children. Finally, we have the account of Jacob's gaining wealth and standing. In this section he makes his final deal with Laban. He has completed the fourteen years of service demanded by Laban to pay for his two wives. He has become a

father, but he does not have the wherewithal to be head of his own family yet. So he offers Laban the following proposition: "Because of my faithful service and careful shepherding of your flocks, you are now a very wealthy man. Here is what I want in return from you. Allow me to have for myself all the spotted, striped and mottled sheep and goats. You retain all the black goats and white sheep for yourself. I will do my best to make do with what I can find. Furthermore, I will take care of your flock in the meantime. Just grant me some means by which I can establish financial independence."

Laban agrees to Jacob's terms. Then instructs his sons to remove all the striped and spotted animals from the herds and hide them. This man did not miss a trick. For six years Jacob works for his uncle and is allowed to keep the off-colored sheep and goats. He even runs a genetic experiment of his own. While the animals are mating, he places striped rods before them, and arranges for the strongest of the rams to be involved all of this in an effort to increase his own flocks, and to see Laban's decrease. Jacob wins this duel of deceivers, not, as he would later learn, because of his skills as a geneticist, but because of God's gracious intervention.

The Lord said from the beginning that he would be with Jacob, and that he would supply his needs. He showed him in a vision that the very angels were caring for him. Yet Jacob remained uncertain. He did his best to make deals with his uncle, but most of the time his best was not good enough. So he grew angry at the tricks his uncle played on him. He listened to the clamor of his wives. He tried genetic experiments to increase his flock. He spent most of the time in Haran unaware of God, trying his best to make life work.

Remember the trick Jacob played on his father? Isaac in his old age could not tell one son from another, so Jacob played an elaborate charade and stole Esau's blessing. I wonder if he thought about that on his wedding night when Laban tricked him as he has fooled his father? I wonder if, when he heard the story of one wife selling plants from the field in order to gain his services for the night, he thought back to the time when he tried to buy a birthright from Esau by selling him a lentil soup? Did he wonder at how cheaply, for the mere price of vegetables and beans, great decisions were made and sold? I wonder if he remembered the pain of his own rejection as he watched Leah suffer rejection, preference being given to her beautiful younger sister? Did he ever hear God's voice saying to him, "You do not have to do this, Jacob. You do not have to be tricky and play all the angles. You do not have to try and create for yourself what I want to give you."

In Genesis 31, Jacob demonstrates that the lessons of God had finally gotten through to him.

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.' And Jacob saw the attitude of Laban, and behold, it was not friendly toward him as formerly. Then the Lord said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you." So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah to his flock in the field, 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. And you know that I have served your father with all my strength. Yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times; however, God did not allow him to hurt me. 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. Thus God has taken away your father's livestock and given them to me."

"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. Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob,' and I said, 'Here I am.' And 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. 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.'" And Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, "Do we still have any portion or inheritance in our father's house? Are we not reckoned by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and has also entirely consumed our purchase price. 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."

Jacob has become a wealthy man in his own right, and he calls his wives to him out in the field. There they all assemble, together with all the goats and sheep. No longer are the women rivals. No longer is it a question of first wife or second mother, second wife or first mother. God had given both of them a sense of approval and they had finally seen his hand in their experience.

Jacob begins to reflect on his life. Ever since the moment of his birth, when he grabbed his brother's heel as he came out of the womb, Jacob wanted to be a man of stature. He wanted respect and authority, to be the head of a home, to be able to hold his head up high. He wanted the blessings of God. And he fought and connived to get what he wanted. In a duel of deceivers, he had fought and won over his uncle. Seeing his wives, one of whom he loves, the other whom he respects, his children and his wealth, it finally dawns on him that God had given him everything he sought. And it was not because the striped rods produced mottled goats but because the Lord God said, "I saw what Laban did to you, and I have given you wealth." God had told him he would be with him to provide for him. He told him he loved him and would protect him, and he had kept his promise. The power, the resources, the approval of God had been his from the beginning, but Jacob had fought and scratched to achieve what was already his by God's gracious hand.

For various reasons many among us struggle to believe that God cares for us. Many of us fight to win what God wants to give us in the first place. We believe that the Lord is with us, that he will never leave us, that his power is sufficient for us, but we live in a world that contradicts all that. We are tempted time and time again to try and establish well-being, self worth, personal authority, and victory over failure. That day when they all met in the field was a turning point in the lives of Jacob, Rachel and Leah. Hear the words of his wives. They reflect on what kind of man their father was and they conclude, "Now, then, Jacob, do whatever God has said to you." Jacob had seen God in his dream and had heard the words of God, "I have given you everything you have. Come back now to the place where you ought to be." You can see Jacob finally beginning to say, "Yes, I trust you." He is not home yet--there is one more great issue that remains between him and God--but he has finally stopped running away. The meeting in the field could be compared with the time when the prodigal son stood in the field eating the pigs' food. That is when he came to his senses and said to himself, "In my father's home servants do better than this." On this day in the field Jacob, Rachel and Leah finally came to their senses. The steps they took home from the field that day were the first steps back on the road toward their real home, where God intended them to be all along.

I hope if you are the kind of person who has battled to believe that God could possibly love you--if you are like Jacob--that you will come to the place this morning where Jacob found himself in the field that day. We begin the process of becoming what God intends us to be when we cease trusting ourselves; when we are grateful for his loving care; and when we begin to trust him by obeying what he has said.

Jacob made a vow out under the stars twenty years earlier that was sort of a halfway vow, yet God accepted it. Here is what God said in response to his words on that occasion:

I am the God of Bethel, Jacob, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me. [I am taking seriously the vow that you made, Jacob.] Now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth.

He is still the God of Bethel. His word to us is no different.

Arise.

Leave behind your spiritual self-dependence.

Begin the journey home.

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