

## ***Tempered By Trials***

### **Sermon # 2**

#### **Jacob: Learning Dependence the Hard Way!!!**

How does one grow into spiritual maturity? Several avenues are possible; prayer is one of the most obvious. Unfortunately, Jacob was not much of a man of prayer. So he had to grow into spiritual maturity in another school – one that many of us are familiar with – “the school of hard knocks.”

Jacob was a man who fervently believed in God and earnestly wanted to be a good husband and father – yet he ran into frustration after frustration, disappointment after disappointment. If anyone in the Bible can be said to have learned the hard way, it was certainly true of Jacob. His was a life of tremendous spiritual highs and distressing valleys of seeking things his own way.

Tonight we are going to look at Jacob’s life and three things he had to learn the hard way!

FIRST, There Are No Short Cuts To God’s Blessings (Gen. 25-28)

Jacob and his brother Esau are twins but Esau was born first, and as first-born he was entitled to receive the birthright from his father, Isaac. Jacob wanted the birthright for himself and was willing to employ any strategy, including defrauding his brother and deceiving his father, to obtain it for himself.

It must be observed that Esau obviously despised his birthright as much as Jacob desired to possess it. So Jacob’s desire, if you will, was a good desire. But *it is possible to go after the right thing in the wrong way*, and that is what Jacob did.

The lesson here is plainly, “*There are no short cuts to God’s blessings!*”

Having pulled a fast one on his brother, his position became untenable. Esau tells him in no uncertain terms he intended to even the score by killing him. Jacob suddenly felt led to go on an extended visit to his uncle, his mother’s brother, in the land of Haran.

God Intervening – *An Experience At Bethel*

(Genesis 28:11-17)

As Jacob fled from home he no doubt felt guilt, fear, sadness and loneliness. He was right where his sin had placed him. Yet it was there where he felt the most alone that God came to him.

I want you to see this evening that God is also with you. You may be right in the middle of the biggest mess of your life and although you may not be able to sense it, God is with you. Wherever you are right now in your life, God is there and this can be a gateway to a new experience with God.

In Genesis 28:11 we read, "And he took one of the stones of that place and put it at his head, and he lay down in that place to sleep. (12) Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. (13) And behold, the LORD stood above it and said: "I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. (14) Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall 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 spoken to you." (16) Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." (17) 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!*"

What should have been a life changing experience for Jacob was not. Jacob failed to allow it to make a permanent impact on how he lived his life, how he made his decisions and how he faced crisis in his life.

Bruce Wilkerson in his book "Talk Thru the Bible Personalities" says, "The awesome experience with God at Bethel has become simply that – an awesome experience. Instead of plugging into God's availability and power for everyday living, Jacob has Bethel neatly shelved under the label; 'Exciting Spiritual Experiences of the Past.' [Bruce Wilkerson & Larry Libby. Talk Thru Bible Personalities. (Walk Thru Bible Ministries, 1983) p. 14]

*There Are No Short Cuts To God's Blessings And...*

Second, God Cannot Bless Us If We Do Not Trust Him. (Gen. 29-31)

Nothing is more ironic than when a cheater is cheated or a thief is robbed but that is exactly what happens to Jacob. Jacob the schemer finds himself temporarily out maneuvered. Jacob leaves home fearing that his brother is going to kill him. He flees to his Uncle Laban's home in Haran. Jacob falls in love with Laban's youngest daughter, Rachel and agrees with Laban to work for seven years to get Rachel as his wife. But then Laban, pulls a "Jacob" and on the wedding night substitutes, Leah, her older sister. In order for Jacob to actually get Rachel, Laban requires another seven years of work. Jacob is furious, but he is so helplessly in love with Rachel he agrees to the added years of work for his uncle (29:15-30).

A few more years go by and Jacob decides that it is time to go home. When he informs his uncle of his plan he begs him to stay, by offering to increase his pay. What ensues is another attempt by Jacob and Laban to outwit each other.

Uncle Laban attempts to rig the outcome by a little trickery. Jacob reacts by likewise outmaneuvering his Uncle. Isn't Jacob's scheming natural under the circumstances? Perhaps... *but not in light of Bethel*. Jacob had heard the voice of God – he been made aware of his access to deal with earthly issues in a heavenly way.

Looking back at Jacob's failures in this down time of his life –we might wonder *"What did Jacob do that was so wrong?"* Had he not reacted as any ambitious young man might do who wanted to get ahead? According to the standards of the world Jacob is only guilty of watching out for #1. The problem was that Jacob had a higher standard – the standard of his God. And so do we!!

God Intervenes –(Gen 31:10-13)

"And it happened, at the time when the flocks conceived, that I lifted my eyes and saw in a dream, and behold, the rams which leaped upon the flocks were streaked, speckled, and gray-spotted. (11) Then the Angel of God spoke to me in a dream, saying, 'Jacob.' And I said, 'Here I am.' (12) And He said, 'Lift your eyes now and see, all the rams which leap on the flocks are streaked, speckled, and gray-spotted; for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. (13) I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed the pillar and where you made a vow to Me. Now arise, get out of this land, and return to the land of your family.'"

God tells Jacob, *"I did not need all your scheming. In fact Jacob, the huge increase in your flocks was not because of your scheming. I did it. I saw what Laban was trying to do and I overruled."*

All that Jacob's scheming did was get in His way and create even more hard feelings.

*God Cannot Bless Us If We Do Not Trust Him And...*

Third, *Sometimes God Has To Break Us To Bless Us!* (Gen. 32)

Jacob is headed back home. But there is one problem - that is where his brother Esau is. Esau's last words to him were far from comforting, Jacob's mother Rebecca had told him, "Behold your brother Esau is consoling himself concerning you, by planning to kill you." (Gen 27:42)

So Jacob starts scheming, *"How can he make his brother Esau accept him."* So he tried to appease his brother with gifts. Yet messengers return to Jacob with the message, *"Esau is coming!"* Esau is coming alright, he is coming and he has 400 men with him. Jacob's life explodes into flames of panic. But instead of turning to God, he throws his mental computer into overdrive.

God Intervenes - (Gen.31:1-2)

“So Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. (2) When Jacob saw them, he said, "This is God's camp...."

Jacob is awed by his encounter with God but again he fails to understand what God is trying to tell him. Instead he throws himself into another desperate planning session. Perhaps flattery will appease his brother. Jacob sends servants who lay it on thick

Now having turned away from God's strength to use his own feeble devices, he further weakens his position by splitting his company.

Jacob had done everything he knew to do. So now he did as the popular but ironic saying goes, *“When all else fails pray!”* Jacob finally did what he should have done first. Jacob's prayer is recorded beginning in verse nine, “Then Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, the LORD who said to me, "Return to your country and to your family, and I will deal well with you': (10) I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, 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, lest he come and attack me and the mother with the children. (12) For You said, "I will surely treat you well, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.”"

Jacob finally resorts to prayer. Notice that Jacob began by claiming a promise (v. 9) He said, *“Lord you said.”* Not only does God not mind you reminding him of his promises, He relishes in our trust that he is a promise keeping God.

Jacob finally gets serious (vv. 22-24a)

“And he arose that night and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed over the ford of Jabbok. (23) He took them, sent them over the brook, and sent over what he had. (24) Then Jacob was left alone....”

The fact of the matter is that God has been trying throughout his life to get Jacob to trust Him. He met him at Bethel with visions and promises, and yet his response was not lasting. He met him again during his years of service in Haran, using disappointment (Ch 29), trouble (Ch 30) and opposition (Ch 31) to lead him to trust, but with little or no effect. And then finally he is completely alone and without any further schemes to fall back on.

We see Jacob Wrestling (vv. 24b-25)

“... and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. (25) Now when He saw that He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him.”

Jacob began wrestling in his own strength and for his own way. Later when Jacob's strength is broken, he simply resorts to clinging to Christ for his blessing.

We see Jacob Clinging (vv. 26-30)

"And He said, "Let Me go, for the day breaks." But he said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me!" (27) So He said to him, "What is your name?" He said, "Jacob." (28) And He said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed." (29) Then Jacob asked, saying, "Tell me Your name, I pray." And He said, "Why is it that you ask about My name?" And He blessed him there. (30) So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: "For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved."

God had waited two decades for Jacob to obtain from Him, and not from his brother or his father, the blessing and inheritance that He had intended for him all along. Instead of scheming for a blessing or bargaining for a blessing; he simply asked and received.

There is a story, from many decades ago, about a construction worker that I want to share with you. This construction worker was employed on a high-rise building project, which required him and others to work after dark. He was busy on the edge of one of the walls which was many stories high, when he suddenly lost his balance and fell. As he fell over the edge, he managed to grab the edge of the wall with his fingertips. Desperately he hung on hoping that somebody would discover his perilous situation. He was in total darkness, barely hanging on to the wall, and crying for help, but no one could hear him due to the noise and machinery at the construction site. Very soon his arms begin to grow weak and his fingers began to relax. He tried very hard to force them to hold on but eventually and slowly his grip began to slip. He tried praying, but no miracle occurred. At last his fingers slipped from the wall and with a cry of horror he fell! He fell exactly 3 in. to a scaffold that had been there all the time, but he had not seen it because of the darkness.

This story illustrates the situations we sometimes find ourselves in when we face various crises in life. Sometimes we feel that we are all alone, desperately doing all we can to save ourselves, crying out for help but feeling unheard, until finally we lose all our own strength and let go.

The Lord had been pursuing Jacob for years. Now, wounded, alone and scared to death – at the most critical moment of his life – Jacob clings to God with all his strength.

Also of importance in this prayer is for the first time we see Jacob owning up to and what he is. When in verse twenty-seven he is asked what his name is, he is forced to deal with what his name implied. He was Jacob the cheat but now he is given a new name, Israel.

We see Jacob Changed (v. 31)

“Just as he crossed over Penuel the sun rose on him, and he limped on his hip.”

Some modern readers want to completely spiritualize the experience of Jacob as only happening in a dream. But men do not become lame as a result of an imaginary conflict in a dream. This was a very real experience after which Jacob was forever changed. The abiding principle seem to be, *“Sometimes God has to break us to bless us!”* By this experience Jacob was;

- He was forever changed
- Others could see the change
- He was sensitive to the touch of God from that day on. Jacob literally learned his lesson through the crucible of pain.

In Hosea 12:3-4, (The Message) we read, “In the womb, that heel, Jacob, got the best of his brother. When he grew up, he tried to get the best of GOD. (4) But GOD would not be bested. GOD bested him. Brought to his knees, Jacob wept and prayed. GOD found him at Bethel. That's where he spoke with him.”

#### Conclusion

I think Bruce Wilkerson sums it up best when he said, “Jacob didn't have to lie and cheat and steal to get the birthright from his older brother. It had been promised to him before he was born. God could easily have accomplished that ...if Jacob would have given him the opportunity. Jacob didn't have to resort to deceiving his old, blind father in order to obtain a blessing. God was capable of overcoming Isaac's favoritism... if Jacob would have given the Lord a chance. Jacob didn't have to wear out his brain trying to outwit Laban, he didn't have to conjure up a plan to appease his brother – he didn't have to do any of these things. God had told Jacob very clearly that He would be with him, protect him and bless him.

*But Jacob refused God's way; refused God's timing. In so doing, he refused God's best!”*  
[Wilkerson & Libby. p. 18]