

## **Jacob**

God has a way of shaping the lives of His children even before they have entered into a relationship with him.

We do not see any evidence of Jacob's conversion before Genesis 28. Previously, Jacob referred to the God of Abraham and of Isaac as "your God." It is now that Jacob affirms, "The LORD will be my God". Jacob appears to be on the road to Haran much as Saul made his way to Damascus, religious but not related to God by a personal faith and commitment. Both Saul and Jacob were stopped short by a vision which was to change the course of their lives.

While the consequences for failure to pull off the deception of Isaac had been carefully considered, neither Rebekah nor Jacob had weighed the cost of success. Isaac had been deceived and mocked due to the frailties of his age. Esau was deeply resentful, looking forward to the time when he could kill his brother. Rebekah must have found the gap between herself and her husband (not to mention Esau) widened by her deception of her mate. More than this, Rebekah now perceived that Jacob would have to leave until emotions cooled, although she had no conception of how long this separation must last.

Rebekah began to expedite the plan which she had already formulated in her mind. She must see to it that Jacob escaped the passions of Esau. She would arrange for him to spend time with her brother Laban, far from Esau, and so she began to pave the way for Jacob's escape. First, she prepared Jacob for his departure by explaining the need for it. Just a few days, she reasoned, would be needed for things to settle down. Instead it was twenty years before Jacob would return, and that, it appears, was after she died.

The final verse of chapter 27 describes the skillful manipulation of Isaac by Rebekah, leading him to the inevitable conclusion that Jacob should be sent away to Haran, the city of her brother Laban: And Rebekah said to Isaac, "I am tired of living because of the daughters of Heth; if Jacob takes a wife from the daughters of Heth, like these, from the daughters of the land, what good will my life be to me?"

How different was Rebekah's approach from what Sarah could have been predicted to do. Sarah would have given Abraham an ultimatum: "Send my son to my brother Laban in Haran or else!" This she would have demanded, poking her bony finger in the face of Abraham all the while. Rebekah believed in the subtle but sure approach. She never told Isaac what to do; she just spelled things out in such a way that Isaac could reasonably do nothing else. She let it be known how distressed she was over the Canaanite women whom Esau had taken as wives. Then she insinuated that if Jacob did the same she would not be fit to live with.

So Isaac called Jacob and blessed him and charged him, and said to him, "You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan. Arise, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel your mother's father; and from there take to yourself a wife from the daughters of Laban your mother's brother".

Two things are striking about this word of instruction from the lips of Isaac. First, it is unprecedented. Nowhere previously has this instruction been given. We see this from Esau's response: thinking Canaanite wives displeased his parents, he married (besides the wives that he had) Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham's son, the sister of Nebaioth.

It is possible to conclude that neither Jacob nor Esau had ever previously been taught that marriage to a Canaanite woman would be inconsistent with the will of God and unsatisfactory to their parents.

Second, this charge to Jacob was untimely. Admittedly, the occasion of Jacob going to Paddan-aram to seek a wife is a good one for this instruction, but do not overlook how late in the life of these two sons this is. It is stated that Jacob was 77 years old when he went down to Haran. This would mean that Jacob did not marry until he was 84, since he had to work seven years for his wife.

Isaac was 40 when he married Rebekah, as was Esau when he took his two Hittite wives. For Esau this instruction came 37 years late. Imagine his frustration at finally learning the reason for his parents' grief about his marriage. Surely Isaac's words are too little and too late for Esau, and none too soon for Jacob.

Coupled with the fact that marriage was a secondary reason for Jacob's departure to Haran, while survival was primary, the casual attitude of Isaac toward the spiritual training of his sons is exposed. To him these matters must have been of minimal import to come as little and as late as they did.

The blessing of Jacob is somewhat more positive. While Isaac had blessed Jacob in the previous chapter, he had done so as though it were Esau. Only by allusion did Isaac convey the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant to Jacob in chapter 27. Here it is stated in very specific terms. Isaac has finally resigned himself to the fact that God is going to bless Jacob and not Esau. His words reflect this acceptance of things as they must be and as God said they would be.

Television and the movies have conditioned us to delight in the destruction of the villain. Likewise, when we come to these verses concerning the response of Esau to what has happened between Isaac and Jacob, we tend to think of Esau as the villain. We expect to see his downfall, and we plan to savor it when it comes.

We are reminded, however, that Jacob was not chosen because he was the hero, nor was Esau rejected because he was the villain. Genesis 25, especially in the light of Paul's explanation in Romans 9, forces the conclusion that God chose Jacob and rejected Esau without regard to the deeds of either. Esau is not any different from any unbeliever whose heart has not been enlivened and whose mind has not been enlightened to respond to divine realities. Esau in his unbelief is no more depraved nor any less sensitive to spiritual things than any other son or daughter of Adam who suffers from inherent sin:

Let us therefore put aside all sense of smugness and superiority when we come to consider this tragic figure, for whom we should all feel a deep sense of pity. Let us all acknowledge that, but for the grace of God, there go we. Here is a man who cannot comprehend the love of God and is unconvinced about the love of his father. Here is one who fails to grasp spiritual realities but who also has not been taught them by his parents. Thirty-seven years too late Esau has learned at least one of the reasons why he felt unloved: his wives displeased his parents (although Esau seems only to care—desperately—about his father’s opinion).

If having a non-Canaanite wife was all that it took to please his father, that was a small price to pay for the approval he craved. Failing to see any problem in his actions, Esau took Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael. This woman was no Canaanite; she was of the family of Abraham. What could be more pleasing to Isaac than this? But Esau did not understand the matter of purity. Ishmael had been rejected to carry out the line of Abraham because he was a child of self effort. He was a product of fleshly striving, not spiritual dependence. Marriage to a descendant of Ishmael failed to achieve Esau’s intended goal. Without realizing it, he typified in this act the very thing which God most condemned, fleshly striving. Just as Abraham acted on his own to achieve a son, so Esau acted in a fleshly way to win the approval of his father. How appropriate this marriage was, and how ineffectual.

On his journey to Paddan-aram, Jacob was accompanied only by his staff and his thoughts. Surely he must have considered the wisdom of his actions in deceiving his father. He must have compared his expectations in this plot with the outcome of it. He should have felt guilt at the thought of his treatment of his brother and father. He undoubtedly grieved at having to leave his mother. He must have wondered what kind of reception he would have from Laban, and would not have overlooked that he had nothing to offer as a dowry for a wife.

Whatever his thoughts must have been, Jacob came to realize that he would never prosper on the basis of his schemes and struggles. His self-assurance was probably at an all-time low. This was the ideal time for God to break into his life, for now Jacob knew how much he needed God in order to be blessed as his father had been.

Night overtook Jacob before he arrived at the city of Luz, whose gates were closed for the night, so Jacob, as shepherds customarily did, slept under the stars. In his sleep he had an awe-inspiring vision of a ladder reaching from heaven to earth, with angels ascending and descending upon it. Above this ladder was God, who spoke to him.

The words spoken by God are very similar to previous declarations to Abraham and to Isaac. Isaac’s pronouncement that passed on the blessing of Abraham to Jacob was now confirmed by God Himself. While there are various aspects to these covenant blessings, foremost seems to be the references to the land. Jacob perceived the significance of the place, too, for he immediately narrowed his thinking to the awesomeness of the place where he lay. Later on in his life Jacob looked back upon this vision, still realizing the manner in which God signified the special nature of that place.

As Jacob approached the land of promise, he received a report that Esau was coming to meet him with four hundred men. Jacob prayed for protection as he went forward, based upon the promise of God in the vision at Bethel.

These statements of God and Jacob fit together nicely, especially in the light of the context of the vision. Jacob was about to leave the land of promise for a twenty year sojourn in Paddan-aram. He might be tempted never to return to this land again. By means of this dramatic vision God impressed Jacob with the significance of this land. It was the place where heaven and earth met. It was the place where God would come down to man and where men would find access to God. It was, as Jacob asserted, “the gate of heaven.” Throughout those twenty years Jacob would never forget this dream. He would realize that ultimately, to be in the will of God, he must be in the place of God’s choosing, the land of promise. It was in the land that God’s blessings would be poured out upon God’s people. While Jacob must leave, he must surely return.

Jacob’s response to this dramatic disclosure of the divine purposes and promises of God can be summarized by three statements.

#### Jacob Set Up a Pillar

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 the place Bethel; however, previously the name of the city had been Luz. The pillar was to serve as a memorial. It marked a place to which he would return to build an altar and worship God.

#### Jacob Made a Profession of Faith

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”. (Some are inclined to view the “ifs” of these words as evidence of Jacob’s bargaining nature. It is as though Jacob is striking a deal with God.)

#### Jacob Made a Promise

Jacob planned to return, consistent with the thrust of the vision he had seen. At that time he would build an altar and give a tithe to God. While the Scriptures record the building of the altar, no reference can be found to the giving of the tithe.