

# Truth for Today

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## Lessons from the life of Jacob: Jacob at Peniel

Recently I watched a television documentary showing the work of confidence tricksters and how they were so successful in separating honest but gullible people from their money, in exchange for goods or services which were virtually rubbish. The subject of our meditation this morning is such a man. He was the second born of twins and it is recorded that at the birth he took hold of the heel of his brother, and was therefore named Jacob which literally means "heel catcher", in the sense of tripping up someone and hence supplanter. As he grew into manhood this characteristic became prominent, certainly so in the first half of his life. He hoodwinked his brother Esau into selling him the family birthright, an honour and position that would normally go to the eldest son; and then later he cheated both his brother and father (who was almost blind) in order that he might receive the final paternal blessing which Isaac, the father, certainly intended for Esau. Some years later when he was working for his uncle Laban he indulged in a highly dubious scheme to enrich himself by the increase of his own flock of sheep and goats at the expense of Laban's. But despite all this we have to note in the reading of Jacob's history that he was the man of God's choice. He was the grandson of Abraham, the man of faith; the son of Isaac, a type of the Lord Jesus Christ, as we find in Genesis 22, and God was pleased to be known as "The God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob", and more than once as "The mighty God of Jacob". Malachi 1:2 declares that God loved Jacob and hated Esau and moreover, He had declared before their birth that the elder should serve the younger. The promises God had made to his grandfather are confirmed to him when God spoke to him in a dream at Luz, and Hebrews 11:21 reveals that he was a man of faith although in his earlier years his faith was sadly mixed with self reliance.

Because of his behaviour towards Esau and the brother's consequent, but very understandable hostility towards him, which went even as far as intended murder, Jacob had to leave home in a hurry and because he was his mother's favourite son, she arranged that he should go and take refuge in the home of her brother Laban living at Paddan-aram. She advised "Flee thou to Laban my brother, to Haran and tarry with him a few days until thy brother's fury be turned away... and he forget that which thou hast done to him". In fact the few days became more than twenty years before Jacob eventually returned home.

So Jacob departs, alone, but nevertheless with the blessing of his father; Isaac says to him, "Arise, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel, thy mother's father; and take thee a wife of the daughters of Laban thy mother's brother. And God Almighty bless thee and make thee fruitful and multiply thee... and give thee the blessing of Abraham to thee and to thy seed". During those twenty years Jacob had two vital experiences with God, the first at the very beginning of his journey which happened at Luz and we have already referred to it, and the second was immediately before his reunion with Esau all those years later and it is this latter which we are chiefly considering today. Those who are regular listeners to Truth for Today will have heard about the former last week, but to get the continuity of things I must ask if you will bear with me if I give a brief précis of this event.

Under the canopy of heaven, Jacob, with a stone for his pillow lies down to sleep and during his sleep God speaks to him. Despite all his ingenuity and enterprise here we find Jacob, alone, no decent lodging, the hard earth for his couch and a stone for a pillow, the very epitome of weakness. Yet it was at such a time as that, that in a dream the Mighty God of Jacob addresses him, reminding him as we have already remarked of all that he had promised Abraham and that these promises would be fulfilled through Jacob. In the vision he sees a ladder set up from earth to heaven, and the angels of God, ministering spirits as they are, ascending and descending upon it. At that time Jacob was very much on the earth, but he was reminded that heaven is not far away, and access to it is always available. So right at the commencement of his journey God shows that He is dealing with Jacob, not according to His governmental ways which would have brought judgement upon him because of his sins, but according to His grace and mercy. The grace of God has often been defined as God giving us what we do not deserve whereas His mercy is not giving us what we do deserve. Jacob during coming years, whilst not being totally freed from God's discipline was constantly to experience the benefits of these two attributes. What Jacob should have learned here is that God is sovereign and His purposes will surely come to pass. If only he had grasped that at home in Beer-Sheba, how much sorrow would have been averted. We have pointed out that he was a man of faith and perhaps it was because of that, that he so desperately wanted the birthright, and he used his skills as a supplanter to obtain it. But God did not need Jacob's assistance to accomplish His own purposes. Awakened, one might have supposed that he would have been mightily encouraged by what he had seen and heard; God was on his side, the future was bright; surely he should have been shouting praises to God. But no! He is full of fear – this was a dreadful place – God was there and he did

not appreciate it. His imperfect faith now realises it and he sets up his pillow for a pillar and pours oil on it and he calls the name of the place Bethel meaning House of God. Yet still, despite all this, his old fleshly nature rears itself again. God had promised in 28:15, "I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places to which thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of". But, in the face of this, Jacob dares to make a bargain with God, virtually declaring that if God will keep His promises then he will give a tenth of all he receives to God. The lessons of Bethel are surely very clear for us all to learn.

So he journeys on to Paddan-aram where he is employed by his uncle Laban as a shepherd. His twenty years in that country were not truly happy ones. The confidence trickster character seemed to be something of a trait in his mother's family, and Laban was no fool in exercising it. He hoodwinked Jacob into marrying the wrong wife, and during his years of employment changed his wages ten times. During his years in Paddan-aram he marries two of the daughters of Laban, Leah and Rachel, and both of them give him their maid servants as concubines in order that they might have children through them they both being infertile at the time. Their names are significant for they seem to describe the quality of Jacob's life through those years. Leah means 'wearied'; Bilhah, her maid servant means 'languishing' and Zilpah means 'dropping' as of tears. Jacob would have no difficulty in applying that name to the sort of existence that Laban imposed upon him. But Rachel, his second wife, means 'ewe or sheep', and portends that God has something better in store for him. She was last to bear, her son was Joseph who became a wonderful type of the Lord Jesus and would seem to point forward to his better days. But during all this time his God is watching over and caring for him, and he becomes a wealthy man with a large family. Finally God tells him to return to the land of his father and this is where we take up his story this morning.

He is nearing home and the day of meeting his brother Esau is imminent, but God, true to His word, had not forgotten him and in verse 1 of Genesis 32 we are told that the angels of God met him. The actual form in which they appeared we are not told, but Jacob saw them and recognised them as God's host. I wonder whether he remembered the ladder of his dream twenty years previously, with the angels upon it. Hebrews 1.14 tells us that they are ministering spirits and God no doubt sends them to watch over His elect. In this chapter we find Jacob as one ready to pray to God and ask for His help, whilst at the same time still relying upon his own planning and scheming. He sees the host of God and he sees his own host and he calls the place Mahanaim which means "two hosts".

Then he makes his plans. Firstly he sends ambassadors to Esau to ascertain his temperament - how very Jacob-like; he may have forgotten the ladder, but he had not forgotten Esau's anger and threats - he wants to be prepared. The messengers return with what appears to be a very unfavourable report; Esau's hostility has not abated. Scheming becomes the order of the day. He divides his company into two, reasoning that if Esau smites one then the other will have the chance of escape. Now he becomes two bands, but both his own bands. Seemingly God and His angels are forgotten, and his own cunning has to come to the rescue. Then he prays. But no sooner has he finished praying than he again begins planning. His next move is to prepare a most imposing present for Esau which he frankly acknowledges is but an appeasement. Then he divides them into two droves and gives the leader of the first drove specific instructions as to what he has to say to Esau when he meets him. What a hotchpotch! Planning, praying, then planning again - all to no avail. God does not require Jacob's assistance to achieve His purposes. He was dealing with Jacob in grace and it is His designs, not Jacob's management of things which will come to pass. If there is a lesson that we must learn from this experience of Jacob, it is that it is folly to rely on self-dependence, especially in spiritual matters. To make one's own arrangements and then ask God's approval of them is wrong. First seek His guidance and He will surely show the way. "In all thy ways acknowledge Him and He will direct thy paths", Proverbs 3:6. For the men of the world the message is the same. When Jacob was laying down his scheme he did not realise that before it could be put into practice He would have to meet God. But so it was, and so it is with everyone. All must appear before His judgement throne only then to understand that all our preparations; good works, a moral life, charitable deeds and every other act of self righteousness that may have been performed will count for nothing. For that solemn and awful day we need the salvation of God which comes only by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Then we read in verse 24, "And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him". This was Jacob's second vital encounter with God. It is difficult for us to imagine this scene. Who was this unknown stranger who suddenly appears and engages him in combat, and what was the nature of the struggle in which they engage? Hosea supplies the answer to the first question by revealing that it was an angel - could it have been one of the Theophanous of our Lord Himself? This is probably the case and indeed Hosea 12:13 may be translated "He took his brother by the heel in the womb, and in his strength he wrestled with God". As for the second, was it a literal wrestling or was it, as some have suggested, Jacob demonstrating his power in prayer? I do not think that it was the latter for it is specifically said that the man wrestled with Jacob, not Jacob with the man. What a strange mixture of a man he was. His very prayer shows that he knew better. "Deliver me" he cries to the God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac. When he had left Paddan-aram he had stolen away in secret; Laban knew nothing of it, but when he did learn of his flight he took a company and pursued Jacob. It took him seven days to catch up with his son-in-law with his wives children and cattle and when he did so he remonstrated with him and said "It is in the power of my hand to do you hurt". But God delivered him then and if he could deliver him from the wrath of his father-in-law could He not deliver him from the wrath of his brother. Of course He could and Jacob's simple but sincere prayer would have sufficed. Jacob was alone

with God, a necessary experience for us all, and I would suggest that God is striving to gain some objective from Jacob, that being the realisation of what a poor weak worthless man he was – hence Jacob's stubborn resistance. I believe that this was crisis time in Jacob's life – he realises that it is God with whom he is contending and he resists to the end. Hosea again tells us that he had power with God and finally he is broken down only when the angel touches the hollow of his thigh and a sinew shrivels and shrinks. It is when the touch signifying death takes place that he realises that there is something above all else that he needs and now he is determined to obtain it, and so he says "I will not let thee go except thou bless me". Previously he had desperately sought for material blessings and had resorted to trickery to obtain them, but now he appreciates the surpassing advantages of spiritual blessings. Hence his anguished cry, a demonstration of true repentance, a total change of mind and direction. The two preliminaries for salvation are "Repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ". Acts 20:21.

What is the result of this encounter with God? Well first of all he receives the blessing for which he sofrantically wrestled. But first he has to declare his name – Jacob, Supplanter; and then he is told, "Thy name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel for as a prince hast thou power with God". From deceiver to a prince of God, what a change! True the transformation was not seen immediately – the name of God, despite his request, was not revealed to him then; he had to wait some little time before he learned that, as 35:11 shows. Neither was his own new name immediately appropriated; again it is not used until chapter 35 and then only sporadically. 35:4 shows that he still had idolatrous associations and these delays in his spiritual advancement would seem to indicate that spiritual blessings can only be fully realised in moral conditions that are suited to them. Ephesians 1:3 tells us that the believer is "blessed with all spiritual blessings in Christ". Are we enjoying them to the full, and if not, may not the lessons that we can learn from Jacob's life perhaps give us a clue as to why.

But I do believe that it is here where Jacob's life changed – the sun rose upon him – a new man albeit that for the remainder of his life he halted upon his thigh. Ever more would he remember the touch of death that showed him what he was in himself but also the bountiful grace of God. He calls the place Peniel meaning the face of God as he testifies in verse 30, "I have seen God face to face, and my life has been preserved".

I close with a reference to Jacob from the prophet Isaiah. It is found in Isaiah 40:27-31, and focuses on Jacob's principle failure, that of self-reliance and then it points to its means of correction. I read the passage: - "Why sayest thou O Jacob, and speakest O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the Lord, and the justice due to me is passed away from my God?' Hast thou not known? Hast thou not heard that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? There is no searching of His understanding. He giveth power to the faint; and to those who have who have no might He increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall, but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint".

Here Jacob is referred to by his two names, Jacob the supplanter and Israel the prince of God and in the context of the chapter he is looked at as a type of the earthly nation of Israel. He questions God's dealings with him, "My way is hidden from the Lord" revealing the Jacob side of his character. But God responds by reminding him of His greatness. In the earlier part of the chapter He is described as the Lord God who "will come with a strong arm"; who "will feed the flock like a shepherd"; who "hath measured the waters in the hollow of His hand and measured out the heavens with a span". Poor Jacob! Dost thou not realise that such a God is sufficient for thine every circumstance – Is not He, who guides the stars in their orbits so that they are never so much as a second late in traversing their courses, able to succour thee whatever thy problems may be. All such are insignificant to Him and His love will never fail when the way seems incomprehensible. Cast off thine own wisdom and leave all in His hands, for "He giveth power to the faint and to those who have no might He increaseth strength". The destiny of Jacob the man and Israel the nation is with Him. "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint.

And in the words of the hymn; "AND ISRAEL'S GOD IS OURS".

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