

To me, one of the most interesting people in the Old Testament is Jacob. Here was a cheating, deceiving, conniving, manipulating, supplanting man - an incredible character. Yet God loved this man dearly! In fact, his life is filled with marvelous lessons for us about God's dealings with human nature.

I'd like to pick up Jacob's story just as he's fleeing for his life from his older twin brother, Esau. Jacob had already outwitted Esau twice -- and now his brother was full of wrath!

First, Jacob had tricked Esau out of his birthright. When Esau came in from hunting totally famished, Jacob offered him a pot of stew in exchange for his birthright. In their culture, the birthright was the right of the firstborn male to be head of the clan. This included a "double blessing" -- that is, receiving a double portion of all their father's possessions.

More importantly, having the birthright also meant he was to be the progenitor of the patriarchal seed through which Christ would come: *"...and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed"* (GEN 28:14). The seed of Abraham was Christ!

Obviously, this particular birthright was of very great spiritual significance. And its importance exposes the awfulness of what Esau did in giving up the right of the firstborn, for a mere pot of stew!

Next, Jacob had stolen the patriarchal blessing from his father, Isaac -- a blessing that belonged to Esau. Isaac was old and bedridden, with failing eyesight.

The Perils and Sorrows of a Contrite Heart

And Jacob pretended to be Esau in order to get the blessing.

When Esau learned that Jacob had stolen his blessing, he was determined to kill his brother. He said, *"...he hath supplanted me these two times: he took away my birthright; and, behold, now he hath taken away my blessing....And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing wherewith his father blessed him: and Esau said in his heart...I will slay my brother Jacob"* (27:36, 41).

When Rebekah learned of Esau's plan, she persuaded Isaac to send Jacob away to Padanaram, where her brother Laban lived. Jacob could find a wife there and live peacefully until Esau's anger cooled off.

So Jacob set off -- and while he was on his way, God gave him an incredible vision. Jacob saw a ladder going up to heaven, with angels going to and from the throne of God, doing his bidding: *"And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending upon it"* (28:12).

This vision was not staged simply for Jacob's benefit. It wasn't some heavenly special effect the Lord whipped up just to impress him. No -- God was literally drawing back the curtain and showing Jacob the

divine activity going on all the time!

All those angels were on assignment -- going back and forth to the earth to guide and lead God's people, minister to them, camp around them, warn them, protect them, guard them, provide for their needs.

Beloved, that ladder is still there! And those same angels have not aged a single hour since Jacob saw them. In fact, they are still working and ministering on our behalf today.

Above this whole scene Jacob saw the Lord presiding: *"And, behold, the Lord stood above it, and said, I am the Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed"* (verse 13).

With this promise, the Lord brought Jacob into the covenant blessing of his grandfather, Abraham, and his father, Isaac. The Lord was saying, "I have accepted you into the seed! You are the firstborn now, and you have the birthright. And so I'm going to bestow on you the covenant blessings of your fathers!"

Then God added these wonderful promises: *"And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither 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" (verse 15).

God was giving Jacob an oath, saying, "I'll never leave you, Jacob -- I'll be with you every step of the way. You can never make a move I won't be involved in! And through it all I'm going to bring you into my eternal purpose for your life. My purpose will be accomplished in you, no matter what!"

Now, up to this time, I simply can't find any faith, goodness or grace in Jacob. How could he possibly be the covenant patriarch of God's eternal purpose? When the Bible says, *"...Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated"* (ROM 9:13), I want to ask, "Lord, what did You see in this man? I know You are holy and just, and You don't wink at the kinds of things he did. What made You not correct him? Why did You bless him, after he'd stolen and deceived?"

God Saw Something in Jacob's Heart That Brought Forth His Great Love and a Desire to Bless Him!

Scripture shows God's foreknowledge of Jacob -- that even from the womb this younger brother would have the birthright. When Esau came out of Rebekah's womb first, Jacob grabbed Esau's heel, as if to say, "No -- the birthright is mine!"

And God honored that. When Rebekah felt a struggle between the twins during her pregnancy, God explained to her, *"You have two nations inside you -- and the elder will serve the younger!"* Jacob's very name means "supplanter" -- that is, "one who trips up another by underhanded means, to take his place through scheming, to overthrow and replace him."

Certainly God took all of this into account before blessing Jacob. He saw the carnality in this man's actions. And Jacob was old enough to know better. He was at least forty years old when he pulled off his deceits (some scholars believe he was over seventy). And by that age, some things in his character should have been changed.

So, **why did the Lord make a covenant with this man? Why did he look so favorably on Jacob?** Scripture must always answer scripture. And we read in Isaiah: *"...I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones"* (ISA 57:15).

This passage describes a man who, like Jacob, is dejected, on the run -- and God is reviving him, blessing him, honoring him. Isaiah adds: *"...but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word"* (66:2).

We know that humans consider the outward appearance, but **God always looks at the heart.** We can see only Jacob's covetousness, greed and manipulation. But God saw beyond his flesh and into something within his heart -- a contrite, broken spirit. God knew that something in Jacob's heart was willing to be changed.

And that is exactly what God is looking for in us! He looks for a broken, contrite heart he can work on. He can't do anything with an Esau type, who takes the things of God for granted, and who weeps phony tears of repentance. Esau was sensual, and his heart was hard. He was like many Christians today -- floating through life with no purpose, wanting only to enjoy sensual pleasures along the way.

Yet Jacob revered God's word. How do I know this? Think about it: Jacob must have heard his father, Isaac, tell over and over the story of how God had made a covenant with Jacob's grandfather, Abraham. He heard of the time Isaac was laid on the altar to be slain -- but when Abraham lifted the knife, God stopped him and showed him a lamb to be used for the sacrifice instead. Finally, Jacob also heard of the holy seed that was to come from the patriarchal lineage.

In addition to all this, Jacob's mother probably reminded him of the dream God had given her -- that Jacob would be the holy seed. Jacob must have thrilled at the thought that one day he would be

the head of the clan -- carrying the torch of the lineage through which the Messiah would come!

Jacob was aware that the birthright held great spiritual significance and meaning. Yet, when he looked at his older brother, Esau, all he saw was sensuality and worldliness. Esau was a profane man, calloused to such truth. He had married two Canaanite wives. Jacob simply would not allow the birthright to fall into such ungodly hands and be lightly disregarded. So he determined to take Esau's position. He declared, "I want the birthright!"

There is no evidence Jacob wanted this privilege for selfish reasons. After all, he wouldn't be the head of the clan, because he would be gone for some twenty years. And he never tried to raise up an army, return and take his double portion. No, it is clear in my mind that, **deep in his heart, Jacob had a yearning and longing for God.** And the Lord must have seen the spiritual meaning behind Jacob's actions. I see no other reason why he would endure Jacob's deceptive plan to take over the birthright.

Today, the Lord has given us wonderful, new covenant promises as well. And they're just like the promises he made to Jacob -- to be with us always, to keep us from falling, to provide us with every heavenly blessing, to fulfill his eternal purposes in our lives.

Yet, **God does not covenant with everyone who claims to be a believer. He doesn't promise to keep or deliver those like Esau, who have little regard for holy things. God loves and blesses the Jacob type -- the one who knows he has inconsistencies and weaknesses. This one has a willingness to be changed and molded by the hand of God. Something in him is always breaking and yielding.**

The word "contrite" means "broken in spirit by a sense of guilt; a condition of being sincerely repentant; having a hatred for sin and a willingness to change." Even Webster's definition for "contrite" is "grieving and penitent for sin or shortcoming." Contrition is a detesting of sin and a desire to change.

Jacob Set Off for Padanaram to Find a Wife -- With a Great Sense That God Loved Him!

As Jacob entered into the new land, it soon became clear God was with him at every step, just as promised -- because his first stop was one of divine order. He met some shepherds who told him they knew his uncle, Laban -- and they pointed out to him a beautiful woman who was leading some sheep to water. "That's Laban's daughter, Rachel," they said.

When Jacob saw Rachel, he thought, "Lord, you truly are with me. You've led me to the most beautiful woman I've ever seen -- and she's going to be my wife!"

Jacob quickly sprang into action. There was a huge stone covering the water where the sheep were to drink. Yet, before Rachel could get there, Jacob moved the stone and watered the sheep. When Rachel arrived, Jacob told her, "I'm Rebekah's son" -- and he kissed her immediately! It had to be love at first sight.

I can imagine the excitement Jacob felt in that moment. He probably couldn't wait to get to Laban's house. When he did meet his uncle, he was hired immediately as a shepherd. Yet Laban told him, "Even though you're my nephew, I'm not going to make you work free of charge. What do you want for your wages?"

Jacob pointed to Rachel and blurted, "I want her as my wife! And I'll work seven years for her." Sure enough, Jacob worked a total of 2,555 days to marry Rachel. Night after night he endured the cold and heat of shepherding work. Yet scripture says he was so in love with her, those seven years seemed like only a few days to him.

Finally, the wedding day came. After the vows had been made and the celebration ended, Jacob retired to his tent to anxiously await his veiled bride, Rachel. But Laban had other plans! He worked out a scheme in which his oldest daughter, Leah -- who apparently was plain and unattractive -- would veil herself and go into Jacob's tent instead of her younger sister.

Once Leah was inside with Jacob, she must have whispered instead of talking, for fear her voice would give her away. Jacob probably attributed it to a new bride's shyness. In the darkness of the tent, he had no idea it was "weak-eyed" Leah who lay in his arms.

What a time that must have been! I wonder how many sweet things Jacob spoke into Leah's ear, thinking she was Rachel. He probably shared countless dreams with her, talking the night away: "I want ten children -- no, twelve!" His new wife only whispered back and nodded her approval.

Yet, when Jacob awoke the next morning, he saw Leah lying next to him and cried out, "You're not Rachel!" Angered, he ran to Laban and shouted, "You deceived me!" (a strange accusation, coming from the "supplanter"!).

Laban offered Jacob a new deal. He said, "In our society, it isn't right to marry off the younger daughter before the older. I'll tell you what -- just fulfill your week of the honeymoon with Leah, and then you can have Rachel also. But in return, you'll have to give me another seven years of work."

"And he [Jacob] went in also unto Rachel, and he loved also Rachel more than Leah, and served with (Laban) yet seven other years" (GEN 29:30). Scripture says not only that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, but that he hated the less attractive woman: *"And when the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb: but Rachel was barren"* (verse 29).

These sisters now despised one another. As time went by, they did nothing but argue. Imagine how Jacob felt about it all. Now he was tied down to seven more years of slave labor, during which his wages would change ten times. He was in no position to provide for his family or to move forward with his own plans.

One night he sat in an open field and had it out with the Lord: "God, how did I end up in this mess? You made such great promises to me. You told me You would guide me, keep me, fulfill Your plans in me. Why didn't You stop this deception? How could any of this be Your leading?"

"Now my whole future is in question. I can't make any plans, because I'm tied down to this evil man for the next seven years. And he's robbing his daughters of all their inheritance. There won't be anything left, Lord. I simply have no future. What kind of covenant walk is this?"

Now, you may reason to yourself, "Maybe Jacob didn't seek God about who he was supposed to marry. Maybe he had the wrong motives and chose Rachel by his flesh. Maybe he was supposed to marry Leah." All that is beside the point. God could have intervened on Jacob's behalf at any time -- but He didn't.

The fact is, we can have a contrite spirit and still have marital problems. Perhaps this describes you. You and your spouse may be going through a terrible trial. You've prayed, "Lord, I don't understand! I know my heart is right, and I'm walking in covenant with You. I seek You faithfully. I worship You. So, why are You allowing this awful trial?"

Like Jacob, most of us think that contrite, praying Christians shouldn't have to endure great sorrows. We shouldn't have to face awful times or fearful conditions in which our very future is threatened. Yet, in reality, we can be humble, repentant, praying Christians -- surrendered wholly to God's will, obedient in all things, walking in covenant with Him -- and still suffer great peril and sorrows!

Nowhere in the Bible does God promise to keep us from marital or family problems. Never does He promise us a smooth ride in our job or career. Nor does He promise us any exemption from affliction. In fact, he says: *"Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the Lord delivereth him out of them all"* (PSA 34:19). **This verse doesn't say God delivers us from afflictions, but out of them.**

Paul speaks of knowing the heights and depths of God's love for him. Yet **the Lord didn't keep Paul's ship from sinking. In fact, He allowed the apostle to be stoned, beaten, disgraced. Paul says he was exposed to perils on land and on sea, from**

robbers and from his own countrymen.

At times we may weep, wondering, "God, where are You? Why haven't You taken me out of this?" But even though the Lord allows us to go through things that try our souls, in one way or another He delivers us out of them all -- just as He did with Jacob, Joseph and Paul.

I believe few Christians have faced the tragic, sorrowful family problems Jacob had. For example, he didn't know that his special love, Rachel, was a secret idolater -- and that God had shut her womb as a result. Indeed, Rachel didn't have a child for years, because she had stolen her father's family idols: *"Now Rachel had taken the images, and put them in the camel's furniture, and sat upon them. And Laban searched all the tent, but found them not"* (GEN 31:34).

Jacob was totally unaware of this. But when Laban found out the idols were missing, he went after Jacob and demanded that he return the images. Jacob was incensed at the accusation. Little did he know, his beautiful wife was so attached to idols that she lied to keep them hidden!

Talk about a troubled family. Here was Leah, stuck in a loveless marriage, with no future. She gave birth to son after son, thinking, "Maybe now my husband will love me." But nothing ever changed. And now her sister was enraged at her for having stolen Jacob's affections.

Here was Rachel, an idolater who berated Jacob constantly to give her a child -- and yet her womb was closed by God, because he hated her idolatry.

Please understand -- all this time, Jacob was walking in obedience to God. Finally, after serving the additional seven years, God came to Jacob in a dream and said, "Go back to Bethel, the place where I first met you. Build an altar there, as you promised you would do."

And Jacob obeyed. He rounded up his family and herds and started out for Bethel, toward his own father's home.

Jacob Was Heading Into the Greatest Peril of His Life

-- Even Though He Was on the Path of Obedience!

Jacob had heard a clear word from God, and he acted in full obedience to that word. He knew he was under covenant -- that God would keep him, be with him and fulfill His plan for him. Yet Jacob faced a peril that brought him to the very brink of destruction!

He was going back to face his brother, Esau, and his father, Isaac, whom he had deceived. And, at one point, a messenger came to Jacob, warning him, "Esau is coming this way with an army of four hundred men. He's out to get you!"

Scripture says, *"Then Jacob was greatly afraid..."* (GEN 32:7). I can imagine the panic that hit Jacob. He quickly divided his clan into two groups, thinking, "If Esau kills one group, at least the other can escape." Yet, even in this most fearful experience of his life, we see proof of Jacob's broken, contrite heart:

"Jacob said, O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, the Lord which saidst unto me, Return unto thy country, and to thy kindred, and I will deal well with thee: I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands.

"Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau: for I fear him, lest he will come and smite me, and the mother with the children. And thou saidst, I will surely do thee good, and make thy seed as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude" (verses 9-12).

Jacob was holding to the covenant God had made with him. He was saying, in essence, "Lord, You made me a promise! I know I'm not worthy of it. I know my name means 'Supplanter.' But now, in this path of obedience, You've brought me to the brink of total despair.

"You told me You would go with me, Lord. But now I'm about to lose my family, everything. I'm not claiming any goodness on my part. But I know I love You and am

obeying You. So, where is Your covenant, God?"

The next time we see Jacob, he is in awful travail. Throughout the entire night, he wrestled with an angel (which was the Lord Himself). And the Bible tells us he "prevailed" with the angel. He emerged from that night of travail a changed man: *"And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed"* (verse 28).

Some Christians may think, "The reason Jacob suffered up to that point was because he didn't have faith. But now he had prevailing faith and power -- and he didn't have to be tested with any more troubles or sorrows. He could just rebuke the devil and go his way rejoicing!"

No! Jesus said His father causes the rain to fall both *"...on the just and on the unjust..."* (MATT 5:45). And until we go to glory, we will continue to face many afflictions. There is no place to run -- no place out of the reach of the perils and sorrows of a contrite heart!

God saved Jacob from Esau's wrath on that occasion. But then, instead of going all the way to Bethel as he was commanded, Jacob stopped halfway. Even though he was walking in covenant with God and in new power, he camped near the Hivites in Shalem, which was in Canaan, and settled there.

One day, while walking through the fields, Jacob's daughter Dinah was raped by a young man named Shechem. Afterward, Shechem confessed to Jacob and said he wanted to marry Dinah. But Dinah's brothers were enraged at Shechem -- and they had a scheme.

It was against the law to intermarry. But Jacob's sons agreed to marry Hivite women, and to allow Hivite men to marry their sisters, as long as the Hivite men were circumcised. Yet, while the Hivites were sore and healing from their circumcisions, Jacob's sons attacked and slew them all, kidnaping their children and plundering their possessions.

When Jacob found out about it, he was grieved beyond words. This man of prayer looked at his

murderous sons and said, "You've shamed me before the whole world. What kind of men are you?"

Beloved, all of this sorrow came after Jacob had prevailed in prayer! But that wasn't the end of Jacob's troubles. In his old age, Jacob sired a son, Joseph, who became the joy of his life. Jacob played with the boy, taught him, and gave him a coat of many colors. Then one day, the coat was brought back to Jacob in tatters. He was told a wild animal had killed Joseph in the fields.

I can picture the bitter tears Jacob wept over his son. That had to be the worst sorrow of his life, the greatest test of his faith. Even his prevailing power in prayer couldn't bring back his son.

Then, on top of his grief, Jacob had to face a terrible famine -- one of the worst perils of his life. He saw nature drying up before his eyes -- and again, prevailing power in prayer couldn't bring down rain. He faced the possibility of having to watch his family members starve to death, one by one.

Yet then things grew even worse. When Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy food, they returned with the news that his youngest son, Benjamin, was being held hostage there. That was simply too much for the old man. Jacob almost collapsed under the strain.

I have to wonder at this point in Jacob's story: When does the flood of trials ever stop? Is this what happens when you walk in covenant with God -- when you have a humble heart before him? Doesn't God keep his covenants? Or does it even pay to live faithfully before him?

Now Let Me Take You to Another Scene in Jacob's Life!

Turn your attention now to Pharaoh's court. Here stands Jacob as an old man -- 130 years of age -- and his lost son, Joseph, suddenly rushes to embrace him. As it turns out, Joseph is second in command over all of Egypt. And everywhere Jacob goes with his son -- in the palace, through the streets, in his chariot -- people bow to Joseph in respect and awe.

When Pharaoh asks Jacob how old he is, he answers, "*...The days of the years of my pilgrimage are an hundred and thirty years: few and evil have the days of the years of my life been...*" (GEN 47:9). The Hebrew reads, "Few and sorrowful have my days been." In short: **"I've seen a lot of suffering."**

Yet, was it worth it? Yes -- absolutely! Jacob and his family had been delivered from the famine. All seventy members of his clan were now safe from harm,

planted in the richest farmland in Egypt. They had all the food they could eat. And Jacob's son was on the throne!

Now Jacob -- a man with a contrite heart -- could look back and say, "When my brother Esau threatened me, it looked like my life was over. But God brought me out! My Lord was there the whole time. When Laban tried to destroy me, God blessed and delivered me. And the Lord delivered my wife, Rachel, and my family from the perils of idolatry.

"I was victorious over all my enemies. None of them ever rose up to challenge me. And I lived to see my seed multiply and prosper - - the beginnings of a great nation. I lived to walk in the midst of my grandchildren -- even great, great, great grandchildren. And now my sons will be the patriarchs of Israel, leaders over their own tribes.

"Not a word God told me in the beginning has ever failed. My Lord has kept His every word to me!"

And, beloved, so will He with us today!

by David Wilkerson
May 19, 1997

Copyright © 1999, World Challenge, Inc., P.O. Box 260, Lindale, Texas 75771.

CHRISTIAN ASSEMBLIES INTERNATIONAL, P.O. BOX 888, COFFS HARBOUR NSW 2450, AUSTRALIA