

Genesis lesson 9: *Genesis 31-33, Jacob returns to Canaan*

November 11, 2010

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Jacob needed a name change. I need a name change, do any of you? In this week's lesson, we are going to take a look at the possibility of you and me needing a name change.

Slide: Genesis 31: Jacob and Laban reconcile and part ways

We recall from last week that after Jacob and Laban agreed that Jacob could begin raising his own flocks in preparation for their eventual separation, the Lord blessed Jacob's efforts and he grew exceedingly prosperous. We open this week's narrative in chapter 31 where we discussed today what three influences confirmed Jacob's decision to return to his homeland.

We saw first that Laban's sons grew envious of Jacob's success and they turned the heart of Laban against Jacob who began to make Jacob's circumstances uncomfortable. In that way, God prepared Jacob's heart to depart. So when God finally told him to go back Jacob was ready to make the move.

Life often follows a similar pattern for us when God wants to move us out of our comfort zone. We become increasingly dissatisfied with the work, family, social, or church situation, and sense that it is time for a change. Soon relationships that were once important begin to deteriorate and we become increasingly uncomfortable until a conflict arises which serves as the decisive factor. It's important to check trusted people to see if there is something that you have done to cause problems, or if it really is the circumstances that need to change. That is what is occurring in my life at this time; the work environment is becoming increasingly difficult for me and relationships are beginning to cause added stress. In checking with trusted people, I have come to realize that much of the difficulty lies within myself and the person who needs to change is me. But the change that may be necessary is compromise, and that for me would be even more difficult. So the answer may well be to move on, or do I need a name change in the same place. I'm praying diligently about the next step.

Jacob did not have to contemplate about whether to leave or not; in verse 3, the Lord spoke clearly to him to reassure him that he was to return home. When Jacob told his wives of his dream and his plan, they seemed eager to get out from under their father's thumb and immediately agreed to go. Their support was important to him because such a journey would be a difficult undertaking with his eleven children, hundreds of animals, many servants, workers and all their belongings. Leah's and Rachel's willingness to leave was further confirmation to Jacob that the timing was right.

When the entire entourage left without any farewells to Laban, it was an insult to the one who had been responsible for all of their livelihoods for many years. Jacob's fear of Laban, as he later declared, was a repudiation of God's revealed will, since God had promised to be with Jacob as he returned to the land of his fathers. **Map 1**

Although Jacob only took what belonged to him, Rachel managed to snag the family statues of the household gods. She was the daughter of an idol worshipper who knew about God, but did not know Him well enough to trust Him on a long journey away from home.

Rachel still believed in the idol's power to assist and protect the family. Since the statues were valuable, she also may have felt that she was entitled to them as part of her inheritance, which she was giving up by leaving her father.

When Laban realized that his entire family had left with the gods, he went in pursuit of them and caught up with them on the edge of the Promised Land. By then, thirteen days later, the

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caravan had arrived here **map 2-Mizpah**. God's speaking to Laban in a dream shows he had evil intentions towards Jacob as he pursued him, and this was one way that God protected Jacob and his family. The fact that Laban listened shows that he knew that Abraham's God was more powerful than his own idols. By the time they met up, Laban's attitude had softened and he played the role of victim as he tried to shame the family with hurt feelings and claims that he wanted to send them off with a great celebration. In reality, he had been stripped of his gods and wanted them back. How fortunate that they were not found or Rachel would have lost her life and surely Jacob would have returned to Canaan empty-handed.

After an almost thorough search of all his tents, Jacob was confident that everyone was innocent, so he then lit into Laban and expressed twenty years of pen-up frustration at how unfairly he had been treated. Then, of course Laban defended himself with his own point of view. I almost feel sorry for Laban who said, "The women are my daughters, the children and the flocks are mine.....yet what can I do about them? Laban then offered a truce; it was his recognition of Jacob's superiority and God's protection of his son-in-law. Jacob set up the pillar and gathered the witnesses for the event. They named the location, Heap of Witness, or Mizpah which means watchtower, and drew up the boundaries that would keep them divided forever. **(Slide of subducted hills)**

That same location was later used as a border station between Israel and the Aramean lands later called Syria. They sealed their agreement with a meal and a sacrifice and a meal and the next morning, they departed for their respective homes; Laban would never to see his daughters or grandchildren again.

It's ironic that once again, we have an example of the ungodly patriarch taking the lead in reaching out the very individual who should have done it first. We saw it with both Abimelechs and now we see the same with Laban and we'll see it again in a few minutes with Esau.

How does it make you feel when someone who's not a Christian does something more characteristic of a Christian than you do? For me, it's embarrassing! It degrades the Body of Christ and disregards the Holy Spirit, reminds me of how sinful I am despite my undeniable desire to please the Lord. So I am disappointed for Jacob, chosen by God, when it is Laban instead of Jacob who initiates the offer to leave the conflict behind so that they can depart as friends rather than enemies. But then I am also relieved that God in His mercy and grace is willing to use the actions of the ungodly to remind us of our calling as Christians.

So Laban and Jacob parted on amicable terms the next morning, and Jacob with one less burden to deal with, faced west and prepared to move ahead.

What can we learn from this part of the narrative? I thought of three applications:

Slide: applications

1. Conflict and discomfort in relationships may be an indication that it is time for a change.
2. Resolve issues in relationships before moving on.
3. Pray that our Christian behavior sets a higher standard than those in the world.

Slide of Genesis 32: Jacob prepares to meet Esau and wrestles with God

Just as Jacob had encountered angels as he was leaving his homeland and named that place Bethyl, he encountered angels again as he returned to his homeland and he memorializes this

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location with the name, Mahanaim. (may huh NAY im) which meant two camps, a place where he and God camped together. **Slide of map**

The vision of angels assured Jacob each time that he was divinely protected and in the center of God's will. This return trip was important to the future of Israel as Jacob was bringing the very sons of the tribes of Israel and the ancestor of Jesus Christ Himself, his son Judah. The vision of angels was much needed as Jacob now prepared to re-enter Canaan, to face a brother whose threats to kill him had caused him to run from his homeland twenty years before. From this temporary stopping place, Jacob sent his messengers to Esau who was living in the land of Seir in Edom. In his first move toward Esau, Jacob made sure that the servants addressed Esau as master and himself as "your servant". Then he made sure that Esau knew that Jacob had his own wealth and wanted Esau's favor, not his possessions. Jacob had taken Esau's birthright and his blessing from Isaac when he had left and Jacob now wanted to discover Esau's strength and intentions before he planned their first meeting.

The messengers reported that Esau was coming to meet Jacob with 400 men and Jacob had every reason to believe the Esau's intentions were hostile. He divided his people and livestock into two companies in the hope that at least one group would survive the certain attack.

Then we read that Jacob for the first time, prayed to God for help. Despite many other predicaments in his life, Jacob had always managed to work his way out of them on his own. Now, against the face of what he believed to be great hostility, Jacob realized that his resources were limited.

His prayer shows his fear: he reminded the Lord of His command to return him to the Promised Land and His promise to prosper him. For the first 40 years of his life, Jacob had lived by shrewdness and strength of will, so his words in verse 10 reveal a new humility in his character; "I am unworthy of the all the kindness and faithfulness You have shown me", he said and then attributed his success thus far, to the Lord.

What had changed Jacob? Twenty years in Haran where he toiled in hardship for his uncle Laban who tried to out-manuever him the whole time. He also recognized that despite his unscrupulous methods of advancement that the Lord was faithful. Jacob asked for deliverance from Esau, and he reminded the Lord once again of his promises which would not come to pass if Esau annihilated his family. But dependence on prayer is new for Jacob and he is still accustomed to working out his difficulties his own way. Jacob had asked the Lord to deliver him; but then instead of trusting God to do that, Jacob instead made elaborate arrangements to appease his brother with a series of gifts. Did you notice the numbers? 220 goats, 220 ewes and rams, 30 camels plus their babies, 10 bulls, 30 donkeys! All arriving to meet Esau in three waves so that it would appear more impressive. Servants were specifically instructed to call Esau.... Jacob's "lord" and to refer to Jacob as Esau's "servant."

As it turned out, all his preparations proved unnecessary; God was working behind the scenes to change Esau's heart; perhaps God was at that very moment, speaking to Esau as he had spoken to Laban a short time before, telling him not to harm Jacob. Jacob could have trusted God and not spent his resources on gifts that Esau did not want or need. What Jacob feared would happen with his brother never came to pass.

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Jacob took his family across the Jabbok, a tributary of the Jordan River, and then separated himself so that he spent the rest of the night alone without any provisions or protection. Perhaps he was expecting to meet with God again as he had at Bethel twenty years before. This encounter, however, was completely different and it was no dream. A mysterious visitor, identified simply as “a man,” appeared on the bank of the Jabbok River in order to fight him. The contest was one long wrestling match lasting until daybreak.

Slide: word play The word, “wrestled” (*yabok*), in Hebrew sounds like the name Jacob (*yakob*). This wrestling match had something to do with Jacob’s name, so it had something to do with his identity and his character. The word “wrestled” is also a play on the name of the river, Jabbok (*yabbok*). On the bank of the river that sounds like his name, Jacob had an encounter that has something to do with his name.

The match was even. Apparently, Jacob was a man of great strength since the mysterious man could not overpower Jacob. He therefore dislocated the socket of Jacob’s thigh, with a mere touch. And then in verse 26, the man said to Jacob, release me, for it is daybreak. Why did God ask Jacob to release Him? Jacob had not chosen to yield, to let God do what He wanted with Jacob’s life. And yet, Jacob hung on and demanded a blessing from the One who had the power to destroy him. But before giving the blessing, the Lord asked Jacob, “What is your name?”

To know someone’s name was necessary to give a blessing. The person’s name was usually included in the blessing. When he sought a blessing twenty years ago from Isaac, Jacob answered that he was Esau, and he was given the blessing intended for Esau. He never did get his own blessing. This time, Jacob confessed the true nature of his character with only one word: “Jacob.”

By answering with his real name, Jacob acknowledged who he really was, a “Heel Grabber,” “Supplanter” and “Deceiver” and he had lived up to his name with Esau, with Isaac, and with Laban. “I am Jacob, yes! I am the Heel Grabber! I am the Supplanter! I am the Deceiver! And I want a blessing!”

The blessing Jacob was given was a new name: Israel. The name is related to the Hebrew word for “strive.” And it matches with Jacob’s contentious nature. Jacob had “striven with God and with men.” And Jacob had “prevailed.” How had Jacob prevailed, since he was now injured? The wound showed him that he had lived up to his former name; Jacob had been wrestling with God his whole life.

To answer, “Jacob” was to admit his failure in his own quest for the blessing. With Jacob’s new name, he was handed a new destiny: the father of a nation of people who would forever struggle with God. When Jacob then demanded the name of his struggling mate, God kept His identity a secret, but Jacob knew the **slide of Peniel** truth so he named the place of blessing Peniel, (Pen Nigh el) which means “face of God” because, ‘here I struggled with God face to face and yet my life was spared.’ His hip, however, is forever injured and he limped into his new life, every step reminding him that he was weak and dependent on the mercy of God and now dependent on the mercy of his brother. The people of Israel would commemorate Jacob’s encounter with God by setting aside the meat of the hip of the animals they ate. Although not part of the Mosaic Law, it became a custom for many of the Orthodox Jews. By

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this, they would always identify with him as a wounded nation, dependent on their God. And so they are even until today.

What can we take away from this wrestling match between God and Jacob?

Each of us has our own wrestling match with God which has something to do with our identity and our character. Some of us spend our entire lives wrestling with God before yielding to him. When we stop wrestling with God, we may find that instead of fighting, He has been trying to embrace us with his love, but we have not wanted to give in, so God often allows us to be wounded by life's circumstances or people, especially those whom we love. **Slide wounded**

Where have you been wounded?

- Has a relationship on which you counted been removed?
- on-going health problems?
- Loss or retirement from a career with status?
- Prodigal children or grandchildren?
- Loss of your home, all your "stuff"?
- Loss of youth?

Our wounds are a step on the road to self-discovery. When we eventually give up on trying to be self-sufficient, without the relationships on which we once depended, or the health we once took for granted, or the youth we once enjoyed, or the intellect or the skills we developed, God finally wrestles us to the ground and asks, "What is your name?" in other words, "Who are you....really? What is your identity without a title, after you've lost your job or retired from a career? Who are you without a spouse, without your kids, without a home or all your "stuff"? If all I know about how to do life is how to operate within my strengths, I don't really know who I am. You and I are not complete in our strengths and our self-sufficiency any more than Jacob was. Self-sufficiency and strength only showcases ourselves and has nothing to do with showcasing the glory of God in our lives. Jacob could not have entered his homeland in his own strength, and neither can we enter our homeland in heaven in our strengths. And so God allows us to be wounded. And in that woundedness, we hold on like Jacob did for the blessing. Jacob wanted a real face-to-face blessing, and he wanted it from God. However, God first asked a question: "What is your name?"

The answer was, "Jacob."—a heel grabber, a supplanter, a deceiver. Up to then, Jacob would not have admitted it, but now that he was wounded, he wanted the blessing from God that he had tried to get by deceiving his father. Perhaps in our mysterious conflicts in life, God fights against us—until we give up—only to bless us and then He fights for us. He blesses the heel grabbers, supplanters and deceivers who come out of hiding and admit who they are. What is your name? Are you the do-gooder, Are you the compulsive organizer? Are you the gossip? I am the super-parent, the super-grandparent, I am the white-washed tomb, I am the Pharisee, I am the deceiver! I am the sarcastic one, I am the critical one! I am the one lacking in compassion....."My whole life has been like this." I will not let go until You bless me!!!

And then, God blessed Jacob, not with words of prosperity, but by changing his name to Israel.... One who struggles with God and men, and has overcome. His new identity would be a

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mixed blessing.....a source of intimacy and one of continued conflict for the nation that God was birthing, and out of that conflict would come the victory, eventually through the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Slide Genesis 33: Esau and Jacob reconcile and Jacob settles his family in Shechem

The new Jacob looked up and saw Esau's company moving toward him and reverted to his old habits. He feared the worst. The day before, he had divided his entourage into two companies so that half of his family and animals would survive an attack. Now he placed his family in order and moved to the front of the line, limping and exposing his weakness to his brother. He bowed seven times, in complete submission, treating his brother as royalty. It was as if he was attempting to restore the blessing he had stolen. But Jacob had completely underestimated what God had done in the heart of his brother. **Slide: reunion** Imagine the joy and relief when Esau, instead of approaching with hostility, instead ran and greeted Jacob with an embrace and a kiss. Both men wept as they held each other. How gracious of God to have been working behind the scenes to soften the heart of Esau who had every right to hold a grudge. In introducing his family, Jacob acknowledged God's grace, by saying that God had "given" him children and then clarified that the gifts sent ahead were intended to pave the way for "my master to welcome me".

In referring to Esau as his master, Jacob had essentially given the birthright back to his brother. In addition, over the last twenty years, God had blessed Esau with plenty. In the end, Jacob's treachery didn't set Esau back. Perhaps that realization had softened Esau's heart toward his brother. More likely, Jacob's prayer that God would deliver him from Esau was answered more abundantly than Jacob would have expected or deserved. Jacob had indeed seen the face of God smiling on him with the joyful reunion. When Esau finally relented and agreed to accept Jacob's gifts, the reconciliation between the brothers was complete. Esau then suggested that the brothers travel together, but Jacob was now a family man and a shepherd and as such needed to care for their needs as they continued their journey. He exercised caution where Esau was concerned; although he was glad to be reconciled with Esau, Jacob now had a different agenda to establish his family in the land of his fathers. The brothers part ways, each to build their own lives. They would come together again later to bury their father in a final act of unity. **Slide: Genesis 32 application**

The Jacob-Esau story teaches us that reconciliation is the work of God. The greatest preparation for it is prayer. In chapter 32, before Jacob met Esau, he prayed for deliverance. In Genesis 33, God answered his prayer. In offering to return the blessing to Esau, Jacob demonstrated the importance of making reparations. If we have stolen from someone or damaged something, we must seek a way to make things right. To ask for forgiveness without offering to make restitution is insincere at best. If you have had loan reconfigured, or a bankruptcy in the past, or a family problem with money, and someone else has lost money because of you, it's important that as a Christian you honor the name of Christ and make every attempt to compensate for the loss that someone else has suffered.

This story tells us that though we should seek to reconcile with those we have injured, complete restoration of a relationship may not be possible or even desirable. In the case of Esau and Jacob, the brothers remained apart, as each had a different role to play in history.

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Jacob had a sense of God's calling in his life whereas Esau did not. If we have met with God to the point where we see our sin, we may have a better sense of his calling on our lives. Such a calling may be incompatible with the person with whom we are seeking reconciliation. We may not be able to journey together as we once did, because we are now heading in different directions at different paces. Still, in seeking reconciliation, we can at least hope to part on good terms in the manner of Jacob and Esau.

Slide: wrap up

- The Lord had closed the door to Jacob's life in Haran with Laban
- The Lord had brought Jacob back to the land, as promised,
- and Jacob had reconciled with Esau.

Jacob then moved from Succoth, a temporary stopover, to Shechem. Shechem is described as being in the land of Canaan, Jacob set up camp before the city and bought property for his family. Purchasing property in the Promised Land was seen as an expression of faith in God's promises. Having purchased land, as Abraham did, he now erected an altar in Shechem, and called it "El-Elohe-Israel," which means "Mighty is the God of Israel."

Slide of Jacob's prayer

The identification of the name was significant: Prior to this, God was to Jacob, the God of my father Abraham, and the God of my father Isaac. Now, God had changed Jacob's name and now finally Jacob called Him, mighty is my God....the God of Israel! From now on, the God of Israel will be a personal God not only to the entire nation, but to everyone who acknowledges their complete dependence on the Lord and embraces their own name change.

Slide He shall change your name

What is your name? Are you wounded, outcast, lonely or afraid?
He shall change your name, you shall no longer be called, wounded, outcast, lonely or afraid.
He shall change your name, your new name shall be, confidence, joyfulness, overcoming one, faithfulness, friend of God, one who seeks His face.