

"JACOB RETURNS TO CANAAN"

Genesis 31:1 – 33:20

Maggie Fitzpatrick

Do you know the meaning of your name? Mine, Margaret, means "pearl." I wish I could have been named "Bella" because that means *beautiful*, but my parents wanted all five of their children's names to start with the letter M, which often made my parents stutter trying to call us by the correct name! So, I am a "pearl"!

Did you ever want to change your name? I did! Growing up "Margaret" in the 60's and 70's was not cool. I had curly hair, glasses and was not, well, "svelte." Because my name is Margaret Ann, I wanted to be called Ann Margaret because she was gorgeous! In college someone called me Maggie, which I felt was less matronly, and it stuck.

This week's lesson is about Jacob who received a name change. We've learned that while still in the womb, he struggled with Esau, his twin brother. If it weren't for Rebekah, their mother, I think during their birth, if Jacob could have, he would have yanked Esau back inside, slid past him and shot out first, rightfully becoming the first-born son! Instead, Jacob came out of the womb holding Esau's heel. So, Jacob's name has been synonymous with "one who struggles" and "deceiver", among other unflattering characteristics.

As a young man, Jacob received the covenant promise from God. God's plan for Jacob was to become a patriarch of the Jews and Jacob's sons would be the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. Because God's plans always succeed, as we study Genesis we're learning that God will even use flawed people like Jacob to accomplish **His** plans. Changing Jacob's name brought Jacob a step closer to accomplishing those plans.

In this week's lesson, God was preparing Jacob's heart to leave his father-in-law's household. God told him, "Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you." (Genesis 31:3) The land of his fathers was the Promised Land, Canaan, the land God promised to Abraham and all his future generations.

Jacob had his wives, Rachel and Leah, meet him in a field to discuss in private his plan for all of them to return to his homeland. He told them that he sensed Laban and his brothers-in-law were not happy with him, probably because they saw their wealth decreasing as Jacob's increased. Jacob said he had worked hard for their father, but Laban, "has cheated me by changing my wages ten times" and "God has taken away your father's livestock and has given them to me." (Genesis 31:7,9) God also told Jacob, "I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you...Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land." (Genesis 31:13) The Lord used events in Jacob's life to get him to the land of his forefathers - the Promised Land.

Despite Leah and Rachel's intense rivalry they agreed to leave with Jacob. Basically, his wives said, "That's fine with us! We won't inherit any of our father's wealth anyway. All the wealth God has given you from our father legally belongs to **us** and our children so go ahead and do whatever God has told you."

Jacob had four wives, eleven sons, one daughter, hundreds and hundreds of animals, servants and possessions that needed to leave with him. Meanwhile, a three-day journey away, Laban was shearing his sheep, and Jacob chose that time to escape from Paddan Aram. Jacob didn't give a two weeks' notice or stay for a farewell party. Instead, he loaded up his large family, property, and livestock, and started towards the land of Canaan, departing in secret because Jacob suspected Laban would not let them go.

Yet, Jacob didn't know Rachel did some loading up of her own. She stole her father's household idols. What might that reveal about her character? Like father like daughter? Had she wanted to get back at her father? Did Rachel also have her family's pagan beliefs?

In the three-day head start, Jacob's huge caravan made it across the Euphrates River and headed toward Gilead. When Laban learned of Jacob's getaway, it took him a week to catch up to him.

God had warned Laban in a dream not to harm Jacob. Even so, when Laban eventually caught up with Jacob, he accused him of deceit (who's calling the kettle black **here**?). Paraphrasing Laban, he told Jacob, "Why did you run off secretly and deceive me? I would have hired a band and given you a going away party. I didn't even get to kiss my grandchildren and daughters goodbye." (Ok, that last part **was** sad). He also said, "I wanted to harm you but the God of your father told me to leave my hands off you. Oh, one other thing...why did you steal my gods?"

About the "gods." Archaeological discoveries suggest these gods or idols, called *teraphim*, were used in divination and were associated with inheritance and property rights. Those who owned them believed they gave good luck, prosperity, and fertility. Not knowing his wife Rachel was the thief, Jacob pronounced a death sentence upon her by telling Laban, "If you find anyone who has your gods, that person shall not live." (Genesis 31:32)

Continuing the legacy of deception, Rachel concealed them under a camel's saddle and sat upon it. When her father conducted his search, she told him she was on her period knowing he wouldn't make her stand. In the ancient world, menstruating woman were avoided at all costs because they were believed to be a habitat for demons.

When Laban failed to find the idols, Jacob lost his cool and recounted all the hardships he had undergone, including his financial losses, in caring for Laban's flocks. If not for God's protection and blessing upon Jacob, Laban would likely have cheated him out of everything. I think Jacob should have added that he also never got a vacation!

Laban's response was, "All you see is mine; my daughters, the children, the flocks," yet he knew he couldn't do anything about it so he said, "Let's make a deal." (No, not the TV show!) Laban proposed a truce - a covenant - that neither would cross into one another's lands. A pillar of stones was heaped up to commemorate their agreement. In Laban's native tongue, he called the pillar *Jegar Sahadutha*. In Hebrew, Jacob called it *Galeed*. Both meant *witness heap*.

Laban's parting words gave their covenant its more famous name, *Mizpah*. Laban said, "May the Lord keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other." (Genesis 31:49) *Mizpah*

has been used as a blessing and a phrase in wedding ceremonies, engraved on jewelry like wedding rings, and probably even tattooed on skin.

But Laban's parting words weren't that pleasant and really didn't mean what romantics think it means. Laban didn't trust Jacob to keep their covenant. He wasn't asking the Lord to protect them while they were separated. Instead, Laban was asking the Lord to watch both of them in case one planned on harming the other. In other words, "May the Lord keep an eye on us."

I enjoyed Chuck Smith's interpretation of this exchange between the two men. He said that in the Hebrew, Laban's words meant, "You've ripped me off and now you're leaving with all of my goods, with my flocks and herds and taking my daughters too. And because I won't be able to keep my eyes on you, may **God** watch over you - you crook."

Furthermore, Laban included a warning to Jacob in their covenant, "If you mistreat my daughters or marry other women behind my back, remember that God stands as a witness between you and me." (Genesis 31:50) Perhaps Laban's threat was to protect his daughter's rights and status as wives by warning Jacob not to marry any others. Interesting, that because of Laban's deception, **he** caused Jacob to have two wives in the first place!

Each agreed they wouldn't cross the pillar of stones to harm the other, and Laban acknowledged Jacob's God, "May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us." (Genesis 31:53) Both families ate a covenant meal together and after kissing his daughters and grandchildren goodbye, Laban returned home and that's the last we hear of him.

After a 20-year self-imposed exile, Jacob obeyed God and left Paddan Aram to return to Canaan, the land of his forefathers. "He fled with all he had, crossed the Euphrates River, and headed for the hill country of Gilead." (Genesis 31:21)

As Jacob neared Canaan, the land of his inheritance, God prepared him to meet Esau by giving him a vision of angels to assure him once again of God's Divine protection. How timely are the Lord's interventions!

Jacob hadn't forgotten that twenty years prior, Esau vowed to kill him for stealing his birthright privileges, so he sent messengers to tell Esau where he had been all those years, basically asking for forgiveness: "I have been staying with Laban and have remained there till now. I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, male and female servants. I am sending this message to my lord, that I may find favor in your eyes." (Genesis 32:4,5) In addition to telling Esau of Jacob's success and desire to reconcile, the messengers were also to make a point of referring to Jacob as Esau's servant, hopefully to alleviate Esau's concerns that Jacob was returning to claim his inheritance. The gifts Jacob sent expressed his subservience and respect because those things were also taken when he deceived Esau.

The messengers returned to Jacob with alarming news. Esau was coming to see him - along with 400 men. Even though God told Jacob He would be with him, the news caused him "fear and distress" (Genesis 32:7) He knew it wasn't typical to bring 400 men to greet someone unless there was a possibility of combat.

So, Jacob strategized an escape plan to protect as many of his family, animals, and possessions as possible. He divided them into two groups thinking, "If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape." (Genesis 32:7,8)

Genesis 32:9 simply states, "Then Jacob prayed." Jacob's is the first recorded prayer in the Bible and it has been called a model prayer. Jacob prayed to:

- "O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, LORD..." (32:9)
- He reminded God of His command and promise to: "Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper." (32:9)
- He humbled himself acknowledging God's generosity was the reason for his prosperity: "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps." (32:10)
- He prayed to deliver him and his family: "Save me from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me and the mothers with their children." (32:11)
- He based his appeal on God's covenant promises: "But You have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'" (32:12)

After requesting God's protection, Jacob made plans to protect what God had given him. Prayer and trusting in God doesn't mean we're not to take action. The Apostle James taught we're to be doers of the Word and faith without works is dead. Daniel 11:32 says, "People who know their God shall stand firm and take action." Prayer shows our dependency on God; planning shows our responsibility.

Jacob prepared a gift of animals for Esau and told his servants, "Go ahead of me, and keep some space between the herds." Jacob strategically spaced his flocks of 550 animals into several groups and sent them to Esau. If Esau planned revenge, Jacob planned appeasement.

His plan was that before he reached Jacob, Esau would have been met by several groups of animal gifts in hopes of pacifying him. If Esau asked who the animals belonged to, the servants were to say, "They belong to your servant Jacob sent as a gift to my lord Esau." (Genesis 32:18)

As Jacob's gifts were being delivered, the caravan of his family and all he owned reached Jabbok, a stream that flowed into the Jordan River.

But Jacob stayed behind. Scripture doesn't say why, but that he was all alone, **except** for an unexpected visitor, a "man", who, "wrestled with [Jacob] till daybreak." (Genesis 32:24) Jacob was not to enter the Promise Land until the Lord had a "moment" with Him!

Scholars offer many thoughts about who the "man" was. When God's angels appear, they can assume the form of a man. For example, the two angels in Jesus' tomb were called "men." Two "men", also angels, appeared at Jesus' ascension. Daniel said the angel Gabriel, appeared to him as a man. The angels who rescued Lot in Sodom and Gomorrah were referred to as men.

The “man” was a Divine being, which many scholars believe was the “Angel of the Lord.” That phrase sometimes means “the very presence of God”, the pre-incarnate Christ, a visible manifestation of God. Debating with **whom** Jacob wrestled is trivial. The powerful “man” was God’s representative. Bible teacher, Arthur Pink, referred to him as the “Divine Wrestler.”

All night long Jacob and the Divine Wrestler sparred. The NIV says the man “could not overpower” Jacob. Certainly, the Divine Wrestler was more powerful than Jacob, so I wondered, why Jacob could not be overpowered?

Bible scholars offer this explanation. In Scripture, there is similar wording about being “unable to....” In Exodus 40, Moses was “not able” to enter the Tabernacle. And in 1 Kings 5, David was “unable” to build the temple. Moses **could** have entered the Tabernacle and David **could** have built the temple, but the Lord prevented them. Likewise, the Divine Wrestler **could** have overpowered Jacob, but the Lord prevented him.

Why would God want the Divine Wrestler to “hold back” and cause the wrestling match to continue all night? That’s another good question and scholars provide these thoughts. Perhaps the Divine Wrestler allowed Jacob to fight all night to bring him to his “spiritual knees” - to show him he couldn’t win until the **Lord** decided it was time for the match to be over. Perhaps the Lord withheld His full might to let Jacob **think** he was winning until God delivered a decisive blow.

The Wrestler touched Jacob’s hip and crippled him. In Hebrew, that “touch” would have been a light one but it was also powerful. It “wretched” Jacob’s hip, leaving him with a permanent limp and a reminder that **Who** Jacob fought, was the victor.

“Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.” Although weak and in pain, Jacob told the Wrestler, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” (Genesis 32:26) Most scholars say the match had to end at sunrise because it was time for Jacob to meet Esau and his family.

The prophet Hosea conveys more about this interaction: “He [Jacob] struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favor.” (Hosea 12:4) Jacob’s desire for a blessing wasn’t a demand as much as a tearful plea. He was defeated, most certainly exhausted, and weeping. Jacob knew the Wrestler was from God or he would not have asked to be blessed. He didn’t “win” the wrestling match, but he “overcame”, meaning he *endured* through his struggle with God.

Even though crippled, Jacob would not “cry uncle.” I can relate. I’m the eldest of five siblings. My brother is 18 months younger than me and we used to fiercely wrestle **all** the time until one of us cried, “uncle – I give!” I was usually the victor, but I remember the day when my brother bested me – he overcame me - and **I** cried “uncle.” I never challenged him to another wrestling match after that!

“What is your name?”, the Divine Wrestler asked Jacob. I wonder if he remembered that when Isaac, his blind, elderly father, asked him, “Who are you, my son?” that Jacob bold-faced lied to his aged father, “I am Esau.”

The Divine Wrestler knew Jacob’s name, but wanted his reply, “I am Jacob.”

In making Jacob say his name, he acknowledged the **meaning** of his name - his character. "I am the 'heel grabber, the deceiver, the schemer.' I am the one who wanted what wasn't mine and deceived to get it."

The Hebrew expression for Jacob's name was "supplanter" - one who wrongfully seizes and holds the place of another. That aptly described Jacob. Before God blessed him, he had to be broken, to confess who he was.

After Jacob's confession, the Divine Wrestler removed the stigma of his old name and gave him a new name - a new identity. "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." (Genesis 32:28)

Jacob was no longer the "grabber." His new name would represent who he **would** be, Israel, which in Hebrew is, "to have power." Some scholars say it means, "struggled with God." Both meanings are correct, yet, more accurately it is, "God will prevail." Perhaps God renamed Jacob for the same reason Jesus gave Simon the name, Peter, to tell Peter who he **would** be. The **new** Jacob would become the patriarch of the nation Israel.

Jacob asked the Divine Wrestler his name but his question was ignored. God had come as close as possible to Jacob. He was in the hands of the One against whom it was useless to struggle. Jacob named the wrestling place, Peniel meaning, *Face of God*, because after God wounded Jacob, he knew with Whom he had wrestled.

While the emphasis of the Scripture was on the wrestling, its purpose was the changing of Jacob into *Israel*. Israel came to mean a person, a people, and a nation - all of which have, and will continue, to "struggle" with God, but **He** will prevail.

"God brought Jacob to where he needed to be in order that He might work in him His blessings." (Chuck Smith) Jacob needed to be broken of his self-dependency. So, God met him alone, wrestled with him one-on-one, then blessed him.

When necessary to mature our faith, God may cause us to limp, although probably not physically as He did with Jacob. Jacob went from wrestling **with** God to clinging **to** God. There are those of us who go through a lifetime wrestling match with God, yet, when we cling to Him, He blesses us in our brokenness.

The sun rose and Jacob limped to rejoin his family and face his brother. He didn't know if Esau still wanted revenge and there was a mini army of 400 men with Esau, which he didn't think was a welcome party.

Jacob had the promise of the Lord's protection but he did what he did best – he made plans to protect himself and his family. He divided them into two groups. His plan was that if Esau wiped out the first group, the second might escape. The family group in front included Leah and her children. Behind Leah, the second group included Rachel and her son, Joseph. Yes, Jacob showed preference to Rachel and Joseph by placing them the furthest away from Esau.

Jacob limped to the front of his first family group and faced his brother. He bowed seven times – a sign of submission and respect. Esau neither reciprocated nor called for his men to attack. Instead, “Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept.” (Genesis 33:4) This image reminded me of Jesus’ parable of the father running to embrace his prodigal son.

Seeing Jacob’s two maidservants and their children bowing before him, Esau asked who they were. Jacob replied, “They are the children God has graciously given your servant.” Next Leah and her children bowed, followed by Rachel and Joseph.

Seeing Jacob’s gifts of so many animals, Esau asked, “Why are you giving them to me?” Jacob replied, “To find favor in your eyes, my lord.” But Esau said, “I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself. To see your face [Jacob] is like seeing the face of God...for God has been gracious to me and I have all I need.” (Genesis 33:8-11) Twenty years prior, Jacob traded a bowl of stew to get his brother’s birthright, but here, Jacob insisted Esau accept his gifts.

With the reunion and reconciliation concluded, Esau told Jacob, “Let’s go back to Seir. I’ll go with you and some of my men can accompany your family.” Ironically, the 400 men who accompanied Esau were not there to slay Jacob but to safeguard the journey of his family.

Jacob turned down Esau’s offer for protection and cleverly avoided traveling with him. He cited that to preserve the lives of his family and animals he would be traveling too slowly to be chaperoned. Jacob also refused Esau’s offer to leave some of his men with his caravan and told Esau he would meet him in Seir.

However, instead of following Esau south, Jacob traveled in the **opposite** direction – north – and settled for a time in Sukkoth. We’re not told Jacob’s reason for apparently lying to Esau but I think Jacob doubted the sincerity of his brother’s forgiving attitude.

Eventually, Jacob moved west near the city of Shechem, the place where Abraham camped when he first arrived in Canaan. Jacob had finally returned to his homeland. He bought land, settled down, erected an altar, and called it *Elohe Israel* meaning *God is the God of Israel*. Scholars believe Jacob named it that to acknowledge his name change and his acceptance of the role he was to have in the Abrahamic covenant.

The Lord came to Jacob, broke him, transformed him, and renewed His covenant promise to him. Through the years, God had used Jacob’s actions to accomplish **God’s** plans. Yet, Jacob had to experience fear, anxiety, deception, humility, and physical struggle with a Divine Wrestler who overpowered him.

What can we learn from this lesson?

Despite Jacob’s faults, in God’s sovereignty, He chose him to be the leader of Israel, the nation that still bears his name today. He uses imperfect people to accomplish His purposes because, “God’s power is made perfect in our weakness.” (2 Corinthians 12:9)

And, as it was for Jacob, clinging to God is crucial for stronger faith, even though it may require our wounding. And we need to see "the face of God", Jesus the Christ, never forgetting His powerful grace that transforms sinners.

Oh yes, about my name change, although it won't be "pearl", one day I'll get a new name!

Jesus said, "To everyone who is victorious I will give a white stone, and on the stone will be engraved a new name that no one understands except the one who receives it." (Revelation 2:17)

If you know Jesus as your Savior, in heaven, you too will receive a white stone and a glorious new name!