

All of this does not bode well for the future. Jacob probably still felt the flush of success, having fulfilled the first part of his mother's request to find her brother and 'stay a few days' (27:44). He may also have felt that he had seen the woman he wished to marry; yes, the Bible does describe romance! Laban, however, would have remembered the last time someone came from Abraham's household to take a wife, and that man, because of his riches and smooth talk, had manoeuvred Laban out of getting as much from the marriage deal as he would have liked; at least from his point of view. Laban could see what was in Jacob's mind and saw the opportunity to play games with the young man before him, and exact a just revenge for what had been done to him before. That, indeed, is what happens next in Scripture!

Application

The story of Jacob is now opening out substantially as we see more of his character. From a human point of view, Jacob could prove to be a disaster; deceitful and arrogant, physically strong and yet untrusting and capable of being carried away by his emotions. It was a heady mix! The truth is that most of us are a seemingly strange mixture of characteristics. Hardly any of us is truly predictable, and we even catch out our nearest and dearest from time to time; God has not made us 'fixed in stone', and we should not allow ourselves to think this of ourselves or of anyone else. Just like Jacob, there are unexplored aspects of our characters that need the right circumstances in which to excel, and which may otherwise appear 'out of place' (like Jacob's passion in this story!).

The remarkable thing is that the more you discover about the lives of those who have committed themselves wholly to the Lord, the more you discover that God leads each of His people on a journey of self discovery that is exciting and adventuresome, demanding and fulfilling. He places us in new situations which we would not choose ourselves and then blesses us by giving us peace and fulfilment within them! Indeed, we learn more about ourselves and discover we are far more complex than we had ever imagined. God even gives us gifts which draws out of us things that we never thought were there; one person may discover a gift of healing, and thence a ministry of care for the dying and the sick, for example; or another may find that although quiet in other ways, they are able to write direct and effective letters to politicians and the media which create debate and change within the church or even society. God is present and active in these and many other ways.

It remains a mystery to me why we label people in the church according to roles, or even the 'Gifts of the Spirit' identified in us by others (as in some church 'gifting' programmes), or we label church leaders according to experience, role or qualifications. God and His people are so much more fluid than these labels, not because labels are not useful, but because they can only ever tell a fraction of the truth about people and they do more than they should. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is so much more. It promises a life which is a journey of immeasurable excitement and infinite possibility, and the story of Jacob shows us the way.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Write down a list of the good and bad characteristics of Jacob, and assess whether he was a good marriage prospect for one of Laban's daughters!
2. Have you heard of instances where people were able to do things that normally require the strength of more people? How do you explain this?
3. Discuss what you think God would have felt about the story in our text today.

Discipleship

Write down a list of your own characteristics. How many of them have been 'lifelong', and how many have been discovered along the path of life? Seriously consider what the Lord may be asking of you in the future, and whether this will require something more of you than what you currently think you can give or do. If you have no dreams for the future or for what the Lord may do in or through you, search your heart as to whether you are in the right place, spiritually.

Final Prayer

We thank You, Lord God, for the simple ways in which you guide us. Help us to take those small steps of faith that lead us on Your paths. May this be our life's journey, and may its end be in eternity with You: AMEN

Prayer

Bring joy to this world of ours, Lord God. May we, even in the midst of difficult situations or troubling events, have that peace which can come to us through knowing Your hand is upon our lives for good. May this be our testimony to the world; that nothing need be outside of Your gracious love and care, when we yield our hearts to You; AMEN

Further Suggestions for Prayer

Weekly Theme: The world of Advertising

Please pray today for the difficult and troubling features of the world of advertising; manipulation of people, the portrayal of women (and sometimes men) as objects of sex as a means of selling almost anything. There are many evils here against which we should pray with vigour.

Meditation

Rejoice to see the day's beginning;
See the providential power of God at work,
Gloriously driving on the Universal Law
Of goodness, faith, and hope and love.

Dispel the demons of today's despair;
The sinister, destructive power of Evil,
Driving everything back; even you and me,
Towards unhappiness, despair or gloom.

Let the power of God reign now; let Jesus say
No contest! As deep within our hearts
His Spirit stamps the image of our Maker
And we, by Faith, can taste the victory He's won!

Bible Study - Genesis 29:1-14

¹ Then Jacob continued on his journey, and reached the lands of the people of the East.

² There he spotted a well in the open countryside and three flocks of sheep lying nearby; for the flocks were watered from that well. There was a large stone across the well's entrance, ³ and when all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone away from the entrance, and water the sheep. They then placed the stone back across the entrance to the well.

⁴ Jacob said to them, 'Friends, where are you from?' 'We are from Haran,' they replied, ⁵ He then asked, 'Do you know Laban son of Nahor?' And they said, 'We do.' ⁶ He enquired of them, 'Is he well?' 'Yes he is,' they replied, 'and here comes his daughter Rachel with the flock.' ⁷ 'Look,' he said, it is still the middle of the day and it is not the right time to gather the animals together. Water the sheep, and let them continue to graze.' ⁸ But they said, 'We can't do this until all the flocks are gathered, and then the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well. That is when we water the sheep.'

⁹ While he was still speaking with them, Rachel arrived with her father's sheep; for she tended them. ¹⁰ As soon as Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his uncle Laban, together with Laban's sheep, Jacob went over and rolled the stone from the well's entrance, and watered the flock belonging to his uncle Laban. ¹¹ Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and burst into tears. ¹² He told Rachel that he was related to her father, and that he was Rebekah's son; so she ran to tell her father. ¹³ When Laban heard the news about Jacob, his sister's son, he ran to meet him. He embraced him and kissed him, and brought him to his house. Jacob then told Laban everything that had happened. ¹⁴ Laban said to him, 'You are indeed my own bone and my flesh!' After this, Jacob stayed with him for a month.

Review

Jacob now began his quest in earnest. He had been sent by his parents to find Rebekah's brother Laban and his family, and from them find a wife. As he set out on his journey, the Lord met him and offered His blessing (28:10-22). This story of Jacob's arrival in the region of Haran is, in general, a happy one in which he is overjoyed at the initial success of his journey. He managed to find the right region without any difficulty, and then, although the local shepherds were not exactly helpful, he met Rachel, the daughter of Laban. For him, it was proof that the Lord was indeed watching over him, as he had asked (28:20).

It is obvious straight away that there are similarities between this story, and the one in which Abraham's servant took the same journey to find Rebekah as a wife for Isaac (ch24); in both, the well was a place of meeting; in both, the young woman destined as a bride came immediately to the scene; and in both, Laban rushed out to meet the stranger who had come. Other similarities include the significance of watering animals, and joy at the successful turn of events. However, we learn a great deal about this whole episode as much from the differences as the similarities. Abraham's servant came with ten camels and great riches which placed him in a position of power over Laban, who sought to get all he could from the deal and failed (see ch24). Here, Jacob came alone, an outcast in search of some meaning in his life from the God who had promised him so much (28:13f.). In the earlier story of Rebekah, she was the energetic, youthful girl who performed heroic feats to water ten thirsty camels (24:19f.); now it was Jacob who had to prove himself by removing the stone from the watering hole to feed Laban's flocks and favouring Rachel's in front of the hardened shepherds (we will examine what they were doing and why, later on in the study). Finally, there is an emotional outburst as Jacob kissed Rachel before explaining that he was related (again, this interesting sequence of events will be looked at this later). Finally, in the first story, a young Laban had hurried out to discover riches adorning Rebekah and the prospect of wealth from a good marriage deal; and in this story, an older Laban again hurried out (29:13) only to discover a penniless relative embracing his daughter. It is not clear in translation, but Laban was distinctly unimpressed by Jacob's story and his offer of a stay for a month (29:14) was merely the proper thing to do.

We are at the beginning of a long tale in which Jacob would have to learn many lessons, but the Lord granted him sufficient blessings in these events to keep him on track with God's plans for the future. Without some success like this, Jacob would have soon lost heart and lost faith in his journey. We can all understand that on a long journey, we need initial encouragement, but if we are truly following the Lord's way, then he will indeed look after us and protect us, even though there may be troubles around the corner. Jacob would soon discover trouble enough, and needed to be sustained by the recollection of the successful start of his mission.

Going Deeper

Today, we will explore Jacob's character in more depth, for this story tells us so much more about this complex man. This, of course, is just the beginning of an extensive story of self discovery by the man who would one day be named 'Israel'!

The focus of our text today is almost entirely upon Jacob, and it is only towards the end that we are drawn to notice the rather threatening figure of Laban. Before Jacob left home, he was a scheming brother and an unremarkable son. Behind his parents back, he had stolen his brother's birthright (25:29-34); and was later manoeuvred by his mother into deceiving his father over his father's blessing and incurred the wrath of his brother Esau (ch27). These two stories tell us of a character who was somewhat unpredictable, and for one whose name meant 'grabber', the only significant things he had done in his life were to fulfil that name! In addition to this, he appears to have stood at a distance from faith in the God of his father Isaac (27:20).

The journey that Jacob was on was one from scepticism to faith, and it was a journey in which his character would have to be changed if he was to come to a place of submission and faith in the God of his fathers. People have a tendency today to place a great emphasis upon the idea that 'God accepts us as we are'; which is true. However, it does not mean that God can continue to accept us if we are unwilling to change. He needs us to follow the path he sets before us so that we eventually arrive, like Jacob, at a place of genuine faith.

The character of Jacob

Jacob appears to be a man who was totally focussed upon himself and his own needs in the story we have read today. The narrative glosses over the hundred miles or more of journey between Bethel and the regions to the north east of Canaan which are described here as 'lands

of the people of the East' (29:1). The sight of a well with some flocks gathered nearby would have been intriguing (29:2) and caught Jacob's eye as he travelled through the countryside. It was an indication of some contention or dispute, for flocks would usually be left to graze during the daylight hours, and then gathered together and taken to a watering place at the end of the day, before being gathered into a fold for the night. Gathered flocks during the day meant that there was competition for the water, either because of scarcity, or strife over land and water rights (remember the trouble Isaac had with this issue – 26:17f.), and the shepherds had gathered their flocks early in order to gain an advantage when the water became available at the end of the day. This well was guarded by a large stone (29:3,8) which was removed, presumably by several men, at due time. Scripture explains this all to us (29:2,3) before the story unfolds, so that we understand the ensuing conversation!

Jacob made some general enquiries with the shepherds who gave him brief, curt responses. This was enough to excite Jacob, who learned that Laban's family lived nearby. Jacob seems not to have been bothered by the replies, even challenging them about what they were doing. It was hardly a tactful thing to do to local shepherds who knew far more about what was going on than he did! Jacob was only interested in his own plans and their fruition.

Nevertheless, Jacob found out what he needed to know; the Lord was blessing him yet again, for not only had he found the well near where Laban lived, but his daughter Rachel was coming out with her father's sheep! (29:6). Jacob's response to this was extraordinary, and we are tempted to believe that he was filled with supernatural strength, rolling back the stone from the entrance to the well so that Rachel could water her father's flock in advance of those who were queuing nearby! It is doubtful that Jacob won many friends for this rash action amongst people who, though he did not yet know it, he would have to live and work for many years.

Jacob's focus was on Rachel. We are not told immediately that Rachel was beautiful, for that comes later (29:17,18); but what follows is almost unprecedented in scripture, being virtually the only occasion in Scripture where a man is recorded as 'kissing' a woman in what could possibly be the closest Scripture comes to a romantic situation (outside the Song of Solomon!). It could be argued that Jacob's 'kiss' of Rachel (29:11) was a formal means of greeting; as indeed it was later on when Jacob first 'embraced' Laban and then 'kissed' him (29:13). However, verse 11 of Genesis 29 is a most remarkable verse, for the kiss was not preceded or described in Hebrew by any words of normal formal greeting; Jacob appeared to be highly charged emotionally, having removed a stone that normally required the efforts of more than one man, he then kissed Rachel and further, he burst unto tears! Only after this extraordinary outburst did Jacob tell Rachel anything about himself and his mission to find Laban (and a wife).

Is this the same deceitful and sceptical Jacob we have met so far in Scripture? It is, and the Old Testament has chosen to show us that we should not presume to know a man from a couple of stories, even though they were key to his destiny. Underneath the somewhat dry character we have met so far is a passionate man, perhaps capable of falling in love at a glance, just like his father (24:67). This deep passion within Jacob was something that the Lord could build upon to guide him on his journey in coming days, as we shall see.

Laban – the man, and the future!

Laban has figured strongly in this story even before the verse in which he comes running to meet Jacob (29:13), his name appearing four times, mostly in reference to the ownership of the sheep driven and kept by his daughter Rachel. As soon as he heard that a relative had come, Laban, just as he had done many years ago for the emissary of Abraham (24:29), ran to find out what was going on. However, the man the Laban met this time was no prospect for marriage. He had been rejected from his family home, and the unthinking Jacob is reported to have told 'everything' (29:13), which implies that he told Laban all we know of his life's story, at least, which could have been interpreted in a number of ways, good or bad. It was a hasty and foolish act, and quite the opposite approach to that of the experienced servant who had manipulated Laban when Rebekah was taken as a bride for Isaac.

We can imagine that Laban would not reject Jacob from his house as unworthy, however, as he was a member of his extended family. That is about the sum total of Laban's concern, for his expression 'you are indeed my own bone and flesh' is not necessarily complimentary. One commentary on Genesis (Wenham; Word series 1993) reports Laban's approach in this way 'you have convinced me you are my nephew so you may as well stay!'