

all he had worked for. In a quite unexpected way, Jacob's 'fortunes' were turned around by God's blessing on his hard work and labour at times that were difficult for his family and troubled by strife with his father-in-law. We also have a great deal of evidence of disharmony in Jacob's household from the previous stories of the birth of his children (29:31-30:24).

There are many places in the New Testament where we are encouraged to persist in order to travel a path of holy living; for example, from the letter of Paul to the Romans: 'we boast of our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope ...' (Romans 5:3,4,5) This text outlines a sequence which contains character building, endurance and the blessing of God which is remarkably similar to what happens in the story of Jacob. I am of the opinion that this great text which is one of the best descriptions of the life of holiness in the New Testament is indeed inspired by the life of Jacob. Paul was writing a letter to the Romans which was like a treatise setting out the ground rules of the spiritual life of a Christian, in the same way that the book of Genesis sets out God's ground rules for all his creation, and the story of Jacob is a pattern for the People of Israel. It is not unimportant that Paul was a renowned Hebrew scholar of his day, who knew the stories of the Old Testament with familiarity and accuracy.

Another similar passage comes in 1 Peter: 'for this reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love ...' (1 Peter 1:5-7). Yet again, at the heart of this ladder of spiritual qualities which build upon each other, is the quality of endurance; and the valuable insight of this passage is that true godliness and love are built upon the rock of endurance and self control. This again, reminds us of the story of Jacob.

Jacob was by no means a perfect person, and it would be wrong to say that he was even a 'good' person at some points in his reported life (Gen 27). He was however someone who was on a spiritual journey of profound depth and quality. It must surely be our aim, once we have responded to the call of Christ, to walk a sustained and purposeful journey of faith which is a proper expression of our salvation. Some of what happened to Jacob helps us to understand the steps we must take on our own journey; however different we are from Jacob, we have things in common!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What examples can you find of a sustained spiritual journey in Scripture? Do they all include 'endurance' or 'perseverance'?
2. Can you think of examples from your own life where the Lord has blessed things that have happened to you which may be insignificant on the surface, but which have a deeper spiritual meaning?
3. If sheep and goats were the key to Jacob's wealth, what are the keys to wealth today?

Discipleship

How would you describe your own journey of faith? Is it merely a walk from one exciting experience of worship or teaching to another? Spend some time looking at the life of Jacob, or the summary descriptions of Paul and Peter (as in the Bible study) and see whether you have been able to walk a path that is similar in any way to that defined by Scripture? To what extent have you persevered or endured?

Final Prayer

Thank You, Lord God Almighty, for the sheer joy of Your presence; for the intensity and wonder of the love of Jesus, for the breathtaking excitement of the wind of the Holy Spirit, and the amazing providence and care You have set in place for each of us who receive and accept Your love. Give us a heart that never fails to respond to Your awesome presence, Lord God Almighty; AMEN

Prayer

We know that You love us, Lord Jesus, but we are often hard pressed. When we are most tired, give us the strength to press on. When we are spiritually upset, give us a heart to stay close to You. When we feel let down, give us the strength of character to forgive and move on. Be alive in our faith, where it counts, we pray; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The food we eat

From ancient times, God has given us animals to kill and eat, and he gave instructions about how this may be done, humanely. Pray for the industry that raises birds and animals in sometimes dreadful conditions; pray for proper respect of the lives of animals reared for food.

Meditation

(a meditation on 2 Tim 3:16; Luke 10:29-36; Acts 5:1, John 17)

Your Word, Lord God, teaches uncomfortable truths;

Give us the courage to face them, and defeat the enemy!

When we take what we want from the Bible ignoring the rest;

Your Word is abused, but it all stands, prophetically, for ever!

When we love those who love us and not those around us in need;

Your concern for us is limited, but remains limitless for the poor.

When we give money for God's work, with conditions for its use;

Your work is held back, but more in us than God's Kingdom.

When we make a god of our church or any part of its life;

You weep as You did before Calvary, and the Cross

Your Love, Lord Jesus is greater than our blindness;

Change our hearts, forgive our sins. Then in Christ, set us free!

Bible Study - Genesis 30:37-43

³⁷ Then Jacob obtained fresh rods of poplar, almond and plane, and he exposed the white wood under the bark by stripping back the rods until they had strips of white visible. ³⁸ He set up the rods he had peeled at the watering places, and in front of the flocks of goats where they came to drink at the troughs. And since they bred when they came to drink, ³⁹ the flocks bred in amongst the rods and they produced young that were striped, speckled, and spotted.

⁴⁰ Jacob then separated out the ewes, and made them look towards Laban's flocks of striped and the black animals; and he thereby built up his own flocks and separated them from Laban's flock. ⁴¹ And whenever the stronger animals of the flocks were breeding, Jacob placed the rods in the watering troughs where they could be seen by the flock, so that they bred among the rods. ⁴² But he did not place them there when the weaker of Laban's flock came; so the weak ones belonged to Laban, and the stronger ones belonged to Jacob.

⁴³ In this way, the man grew extremely rich, and had large flocks, male and female slaves, and camels and donkeys.

Review

Psalms 7 describes the consequences of evil deeds with these words 'they make a pit, digging it out, and fall into the hole that they have made!' In our passage today, this is exactly what happens to Laban; he had played tricks on Jacob, deceiving him over his first marriage and then binding him into his service because of his love for Rachel. Then when Jacob wished to leave, as we discovered yesterday (30:25-36), he flatly refused and forced Jacob into a deal which tied him into his service as a shepherd. But Laban had gone too far. The Lord's hand © Paul H Ashby Derby 2007 www.prayerandbiblestudy.org 24/02/2010 page 1

was on Jacob within both his marriage and his work, and the evidence of this was there for Laban to see. Jacob was clearly blessed by God as the father of eleven sons and a daughter (29:31-30:24), all in little more than seven years (after his marriage to Leah and Rachel – 29:21-29). Secondly, and as Laban openly confessed, Laban had been personally blessed by Jacob's success as a shepherd; something he attributed to divine help (30:27).

Today's passage describes how everything changed and the tables were turned on the scoundrel Laban; and we can chuckle as we read it, for Laban should have known better. What happened was neither magic nor a form of ancient genetic engineering, but the results of God's blessing upon Jacob. The text for today's reading is difficult to translate and difficult to explain, and you may have been confused when reading about the stripped rods of poplar (etc) at watering holes and what they meant! The details of this are set out later in the Bible study, but the simple version of what happened is this. Laban had agreed that Jacob's pay should be any sheep or goats born in the coming years that were piebald (30:32); that is, multicoloured instead of being a single colour. Laban immediately made it next to impossible for Jacob to obtain these by sending them as far away as possible (30:35,36). Jacob was left with healthy flocks of white sheep and black goats that were pure bred, so his chances of breeding piebald ones were virtually non-existent!

Most of our text today describes Jacob's attempt to make the flocks do the impossible and bear the multicoloured sheep and goats that he could claim as his own. His methods were typical of the day but questionable, yet whatever we make of this (see below), he was successful! God blessed Jacob so much that at the end of our passage, his wealth as measured in healthy piebald sheep and goats was so extensive, that it was described (30:43) in words similar to those describing Abraham when he was given great wealth by Pharaoh as he left Egypt (12:16f.).

Against all human odds, Jacob was blessed by God, and like his grandfather Abraham, he prospered in flocks and servants whilst living away from the Promised Land. This is an important Old Testament theme, for the thriving of God's people outside of the Promised Land was regarded by the later prophets (e.g. Jeremiah & Ezekiel) as vital evidence that God never abandoned those he loved. He was always faithful and blessed his people at those very points in their lives when they thought they were most lost. This remains true today!

Going Deeper

Clearly, we will have to look carefully at exactly what was going on in this story, though we will have to accept that some of it is virtually unfathomable! Yet this fact alone enables us to see how God's Covenant plan was being fulfilled in a way that was prophetic. The Lord has always been able to rise above popular belief and culture (as practised by Jacob) to do His will; He was then, and He is now.

Breeding method 1 – what the flocks saw when they were mating

Several things must be clear in our minds as we begin to try and explain this rather obscure text. Firstly, you will find that it is translated quite differently in most common translations of the Bible. The very fact that the translations are so different should cause us to think twice about what was going on. It is most likely that the practices described are ones that would have made perfect sense to people of ancient times, but are completely confusing to us today because our understanding of sheep rearing is now completely different.

Secondly, the normal colour of the flocks was that the sheep were white and the goats were a dark brown, almost black colour. This means that according to Laban's scheme, Jacob could claim only those of the pure bred flocks which were born with any colour blemish, and this would be highly unlikely! Laban, of course was counting on this fact to preserve his own flocks and wealth. Incidentally, we should note that Laban's name means 'white', so a considerable amount of the narrative in Hebrew is a play on Laban's name, in effect mocking the man who had tried to cheat Jacob, but who was now on the receiving end of God's trickery!

Thirdly, it was believed in those days (and there is evidence of this belief from non-biblical sources which come from those ancient times) that the objects seen by female animals when they mated had a bearing on the offspring they bore. Before we dismiss this as nonsense, we should consider that opinion today is that a variety of circumstances and stimuli at conception

do indeed affect the young that are born, though admittedly, not things as such as the skin colour of animals. Nevertheless, we should not be disparaging of these ancient attempts at understanding the breeding processes just because four millennia have passed since the times we are discussing.

Armed with this knowledge, we can now see what Jacob was doing. He needed to outplay Laban by breeding piebald animals from pure white sheep and black goats. He attempted to do this by placing a naturally 'striped' image in front of the female goats when they were 'on heat' and came to the water troughs for mating (30:38); and did this by tearing strips of bark off young shoots of wood (30:37). The fact that this method worked may appear to us to be the peculiar consequence of superstition, but that would be ungenerous to Scripture, for it is likely that verse 39 reports the success of the venture as miraculous. Scripture mostly records things that happen and leaves us to decide the value of what happened (for example, nowhere in the story of Jonah does Scripture say that his survival in the belly of a fish for three days and nights was a 'miracle' – that is our obvious judgement after reading the story!).

After success with the goats, Jacob used a similar method with the sheep. He placed the flock of ewes, when they were 'on heat' and near a water trough (30:40), to face the black and striped animals in Laban's flocks in order to achieve the same effect, even though Laban attempted to keep his flocks at a distance from those that belonged to Jacob. The result was that he 'built up his own flocks and separated them from Laban's flock' (30:40); in other words, once Jacob had healthy piebald sheep and goats of his own, he continued to look after Laban's pure white sheep and black goats, but made sure that his own piebald flocks were favoured. They were his just inheritance!

Breeding method 2 – favouring the stronger

From verse 41 onwards, Jacob employed a second breeding method which is much more obvious to us. He made sure that his own flocks grew stronger by encouraging the mating of the stronger animals within his own flocks. This was important because in our modern language of genetics, the 'piebald' types are naturally weaker (the result of a 'recessive' gene), and they needed the kind of aggressive breeding tactics Jacob employed in order for them to grow strong. It must be said that verse 41 appears to contain a mixture of these two methods of breeding and the Hebrew of the text is extremely unclear. If your own translation appears to say something different, that is the unfortunate consequence of a very awkward passage.

As before, we must accept that Jacob had no more knowledge of the genetics of breeding the stronger animals than he did of the appropriateness of what animals saw when they mated, so whereas we see the successful outcome of this second method (30:42b) as logical, it was as much a mystery to Jacob as the outcome of the first method, and both of them were from his point of view, down to the miraculous intervention of God. By the end of the passage, and certainly in the next chapter, the wealth of Jacob obtained in this way was described as the work of God alone (31:7f.); and although we do not naturally read the passage in this way, there is no mistaking this conclusion in Scripture!

God's blessing was now evident in Jacob's life in three essential ways. He had an extensive family that fulfilled the Covenant promise of God that he would 'make nations (12:2,3) out of Abraham and his descendants. Secondly, his work was evidently blessed, and it was even a blessing to others (see 12:2,3 also), though Laban would have only accepted this grudgingly (30:27), and now Jacob had found wealth that measured up to that of his grandfather Abraham (see above); for with the growth of his flocks, he was able to procure the services of servants and the other trappings of wealth as a consequence of his managing and trading of the animals the Laban could no longer dispute were his. For Laban, the worst outcome had occurred. Jacob's God had blessed him and enabled him to prosper, and for one such as Laban whose life was lived in the worship of other gods and whose morality was based on his own survival rather than any kind of compassion or idea of the common good, it was galling to see his despised son-in-law escape the clutches of the trap he had set.

Application

The story of Jacob in this part of Scripture describes the unexpected blessing of a man who was willing to place his trust in the Lord and wait patiently for many years to see the fulfilment of