

JANUARY 14

Genesis 31, 32, 33

Congratulations! You have made it through two weeks of readings and are 60% of the way through the book on beginnings! Today you read Genesis 31-32, but before we look at it together, I want you to look back over the last two weeks and ask yourself what benefits you can now see from the discipline that is by now being established as a regular habit in your life. I'd like to encourage you to take a piece of paper and actually write down what you are thinking and feeling about your participation in Project 4:4 and then talk with God about it. If when you have done this you really think that this has been a very valuable exercise, I'd like for you to commit yourself to share the things you've written with someone else and to encourage them to also begin Project 4:4.

As we meet Jacob at the conclusion of his time with Laban, there are a couple of important things for us to notice. First, it is evident that Jacob has learned some of what God has been trying to teach him. He is now able to clearly recognize the providence of God in his life, that is, the hand of God directing his life, protecting his life, and caring for his interests. Laban's attitude toward Jacob, though, is hardening, because he can't seem to get the better of Jacob no matter what he does, and Jacob says to his wives, "*It's because the God of my fathers* (Jacob still can't say 'my' God) *has been with me* - God hasn't let Laban cheat me. Jacob no longer credits his superior breeding and animal husbandry skills, he just says - "God took your father's flocks away from him and has given them to me! God did it!" Jacob still isn't ready to completely trust God; when he leaves, he sneaks away because he's afraid. God is still 'my Father's God' to Jacob - but he is ready to take the next step toward God. He's learned that all that he has achieved thus far is because God has been gracious, not because Jacob has been smart! He's ready now for the next step. God's infinite patience with us is so astounding. If you plateau in your Christian growth, and stay at the same level for twenty years, God doesn't go away. He's always there. He keeps working - bringing in bigger and bigger hammers and chisels. But when you learn what's needed at that level, He'll show you the next step. So after a couple of decades at Level I, Jacob has learned some things, and God speaks to him again. "It's time to leave here and go back to the Promised Land."

Even though going home will mean meeting Esau, Jacob is ready to obey. He's still Jacob - the deceiver - so he doesn't tell Laban he's going - he "deceives" Laban and flees, running away with all that he had.

Rachel stole her father's household 'gods.' The word used in the Hebrew text here is 'teraphim.' They were apparently some kind of household idols. The term appears also in several other Old Testament passages (Judges 17 and 18, I Samuel 15, II Kings 23, Ezekiel 21, Hosea 3, Zechariah 10). The references in Ezekiel and in Zechariah suggest that 'teraphim' were used in connection with fortune telling. That may explain Laban's remark in chapter 30:27 when he told Jacob that he had learned through 'divination' that the Lord had blessed him because of Jacob. The passage in I Samuel 19 suggests that these 'teraphim' were used to create false illusions. Some

scholars think that they were idols portraying human forms; others think that they were some sort of masks. In any case they were small and easily hidden. One thing this passage shows is that Rachel and the relatives of Abraham still living in Paddan Aram were not very strong in the worship of the Lord and had definite leanings toward idolatry. Through Rachel's deception (she too was a master at it, and why wouldn't she be with a father like Laban and a husband like Jacob) the stolen gods are not discovered, and they travel all the way back to Canaan with Jacob's family...more of that later.

Throughout the whole account of Jacob's life - even in the rather considerable period of time in which he was paying only vague attention to the Lord, it is clear that the Lord was protecting Jacob. Now that he is acknowledging the Lord openly, though haltingly, it is still the same. God - keeping His promise to protect Jacob - appears to be pursuing Laban and warns him not to harm Jacob in any way. Jacob had an angry man behind him in Laban and an angry man in front of him in Esau and no real way to defend himself and his family, but he was in the safest place he could possibly be simply because he was in the center of the will of God.

How about you? Are you between two hard people these days? Are you trying to make a no-win decision? Are you feeling threatened by your surroundings? Stay in the center of God's will. It is the safest place to be.

Now the encounter that Jacob had the night before he met Esau was just plain freaky. Esau, alerted to Jacob's imminent appearing, was riding out to meet him with 400 men. That was probably not a good sign. That fact alone would have filled Jacob with fear. Still not willing or able to trust God alone, Jacob had devised a careful plan for meeting Esau and buttering him up with the present of a huge number of flocks and herds so he would treat Jacob with gentleness. He sent an enormous gift of cattle and livestock ahead of him, he divided his household into two groups for additional safety, and just to be sure, he prayed and asked God for protection. Late that night alone by the Brook Jabbok, Jacob met the angel who wrestled with him in an apparent attempt to prevent him from crossing back into the Land of Promise.

When Jacob realized the nature of his adversary we are not told, but at some point in the night, he began to see that his struggle was spiritual rather than physical, and that a strange role reversal takes place. At the beginning of the struggle, it was Jacob who was struggling to get free, believing that the mysterious opponent was keeping him from entering the Land of Promise. But by the end of the night, it was the angel trying to disengage from Jacob and Jacob is hanging on tenaciously - not willing, in spite of an injury, to let go until he secures from the angel the divine blessing. It was here before the "face of God," (that's what Peniel, the name Jacob gave to that place, means,) that Jacob finally learned that he could not possess the promises of God until he stopped trusting his own schemes and wit, and learned to rest entirely on the person of the Lord. That night the God of Abraham became the God of Jacob. That night Jacob "the deceiver" became Israel, "the prince of God." The Scripture tells us that Jacob spent the rest of his life walking with a limp - marked by his encounter with God and unable, because of that limp, to ever forget it. Perhaps it was very much the

same kind of affliction that God left with the Apostle Paul, telling Paul that He would not remove the affliction because He wanted Paul to remember the great lesson that his "*strength was made perfect in weakness.*" The limp he walked with would be a constant reminder that God is in control and he works despite our plans, our manipulations and our scheming.

This is Mark Ashton reminding you that man does not live by bread alone but by EVERY WORD...remember that...EVERY WORD that comes from the mouth of God.