

# Genesis 29-33 Brothers in Conflict

## An Outline

- I. Jacob and Laban (29-31)
  - A. Jacob arrives in Paddan Aram (29:1-14).
  - B. Jacob marries Leah and Rachel (29:14-30).
  - C. Jacob's children (29:31-30:24).
  - D. Jacob's flocks increase (30:25-43).
  - E. Jacob flees from Laban (31:1-21).
  - F. Laban pursues Jacob (31:22-55).
- II. Jacob and Esau (32-33)
  - A. Jacob prepares to meet Esau (32:1-21).
  - B. Jacob wrestles with God (32:22-32).
  - C. Jacob meets Esau (33:1-20).

## Questions for Study

1. **My responsibility within God's Sovereignty:** "I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me; now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth" (Genesis 31:13).

There was a lot of drama and rivalry in Jacob's life. There was rivalry between Jacob and Esau over the birthright and blessing, between Rebekah and Isaac with respect to their favorite sons, between Jacob and Laban over tradition, labor, and wealth, and between Rachel and Leah over the number of sons and their husband's affection. Yet, as we read the biblical account, all these things seem simply incidental to the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham. Could it be that God gives such detailed and dramatic accounts to demonstrate this principle?

In their hearts humans plan their course,  
but the Lord establishes their steps (Proverbs 16:9).

In other words, how ever people plan, pursue, strategize, collude, and execute, God is the final determinant of the outcome. Jacob could do nothing and God would fulfill His promises through him. Jacob could do everything, but God would fulfill His promises through him.

Friends, we ought not to read these accounts and become fatalistic, thinking that nothing that we plan or do matters because God's will and not our own will be done. The latter is true but not the former. God's purposes will always be accomplished; however, this does not mean that our plans and actions do not matter. Will not God judge our motivations and our actions? Also, since we know that God's purposes for us and in us will never fail, shouldn't this give us greater confidence against anxiety and motivate us all the more to discern His will for us and in us, so that we might align ourselves the best that we can to that sovereign will? As for me, this reminds me again not to overcomplicate my life with elaborate desires and pursuits. It focuses my ambition to a singular ambition, namely, to exalt God and Christ in my life. Everything else is a detail. I will enjoy work, but life is not about work. I will enjoy time with my wife and

child and my relatives, but life is not about family. On the other hand, I will devote myself, using every resource, skill, platform, and opportunity that God gives me to exalt God and Christ in my life. I believe this is the primary mission and life purpose of every believer.

2. **Is our truth THE truth?** - "Then Laban replied to Jacob, "The daughters are my daughters, and the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day to these my daughters or to their children whom they have borne?" (Genesis 31:43)

This is Laban's response to his nephew Jacob's accusations. Jacob has accused his uncle of deception, greed and injustice, even while he himself has only been good to Laban. Without judging the merits of Jacob's claim to innocence, Laban's response is interesting. Laban does not acknowledge any of Jacob's accusations. Instead, he insists that Jacob's wives and Jacob's children are really his daughters and his children. He insists that Jacob's flocks are his flocks. His point seems to be that he can do whatever he pleases with what he claims to be his own. Laban seems to discount the fact that he had given his daughters to Jacob for fourteen years of work and that Jacob had birthed the children himself. He also seems to discount his agreement to give Jacob the particular selection of flocks Jacob had taken and for which Jacob had labored six years. In other words, Laban has taken the facts and filtered them through his own reality distortion field, so that he is innocent of any wrongdoing. The only reason he will not harm Jacob is because he fears God's warning in his dream (cf. Genesis 31:29), and he does not want to harm his own daughters and children (i.e. grandchildren).

Friends, I realize that even today we risk the danger of applying a reality distortion field to our circumstances, so that we see ourselves as completely innocent and the offending party as completely guilty. We marshal our selective "facts" and Bible verses to "prove" our case. Certain facts in our perspective appear irrefutable, yet we may fail to realize that these very facts are being distorted by our fanatical interpretation of them. We pretend to want counsel, but we show ourselves in an "attack-dog" stance toward any counsel that differs from our own. I do not doubt Laban's sincerity. Yet, he is sincerely blind to the error of his thinking. Yet, in his mind he is completely justified in feeling the way he does and doing what he did. Likewise, people today, even Christians, I believe, can be sincere in the error of their thinking. Pride, bitterness, and self-righteousness are all elements of a kind of narcissism that can blind us to the truth. Even if we seek truth, if we do not address this narcissistic demon within, we will not be able to recognize the truth as truth. Daily I praise God for His mercy and grace. I pray for His wisdom and discernment. I acknowledge my inadequacy and trust in His providence to exalt Christ through both my right steps and missteps. I pray that I may always love, that I may have longsuffering patience, that I may pursue mercy and reconciliation more than judgment and justice, and that I may never seek vengeance or gain through another's hurt but humbly accept my lot, whether good or bad, knowing my eternal hope in Christ makes everything else pale in comparison. To God be all the glory!

3. **Judging Sinful Man Correctly:** I've always considered the whole affair between Jacob, Leah and Rachel very humorous. Through it all Jacob seems very accommodating to his wives, who are playing a game of making babies and "winning" Jacob's affection. While this is going on, there is apparently another game being played between Jacob and Laban, with each trying to gain an upper hand with respect to their flocks. Yet, over all of this, the One really in control is God, who has already determined the future of Jacob, the sons he would have, as well as which of his sons

would become great. He had made this determination even before Jacob was born (Romans 9:10-13). Now, this may not mean that God controls every detail of every event of Jacob's life; however, every event will lend itself to the fulfillment of God's plan for Jacob's life. What is also interesting is that there is deception, polygamy, incest, jealousy, fornication (Jacob's sexual relations with his wives' maids), greed, divination and even idolatry (worship of "household gods") in the mix. Yet, there is not a single word of judgment at this point for any of it. It is not that there was no moral code. For God says of Abraham, that he kept God's commandments, statutes and laws (Genesis 26:5). But this moral code did not encompass everything encompassed in the Law of Moses, nor later the greater Law of Christ. Therefore, we must be careful in making moral judgments on the actions of these early patriarchs, for we may be guilty of applying standards to them that God did not have for them at the time. We must allow for the giving, changing and expansion of the laws of God over time. Yes, God does not change; however, His laws for people do change. For example, Adam only had one commandment that he was expected to follow: not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Now, after Adam's sin, there was no one else that committed that sin, nor could they, because God kicked them out of the Garden and blocked the way into it. But the punishment of Adam's sin extended not only to Adam but to every generation that proceeded from him because, in a sense, all sinned in Adam. This is the meaning of Romans 5:12-19:

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned— for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come... So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.

Thus, we speak of original sin and original guilt. This is why David would write in Psalm 51:5,

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,  
And in sin my mother conceived me.

In other words, we are not born innocent and become sinners. We are born sinners and every day of life would only confirm that reality. And the universality of death proves this. But with respect to the commands of God, since they are different for different eras of history, let us understand what is applicable for each era and what is not, so that we might not make misjudgments or misapplications.

4. **Trusting Own Works/Cunning to Trusting God's Grace/Promises:** I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant (Genesis 32:10).

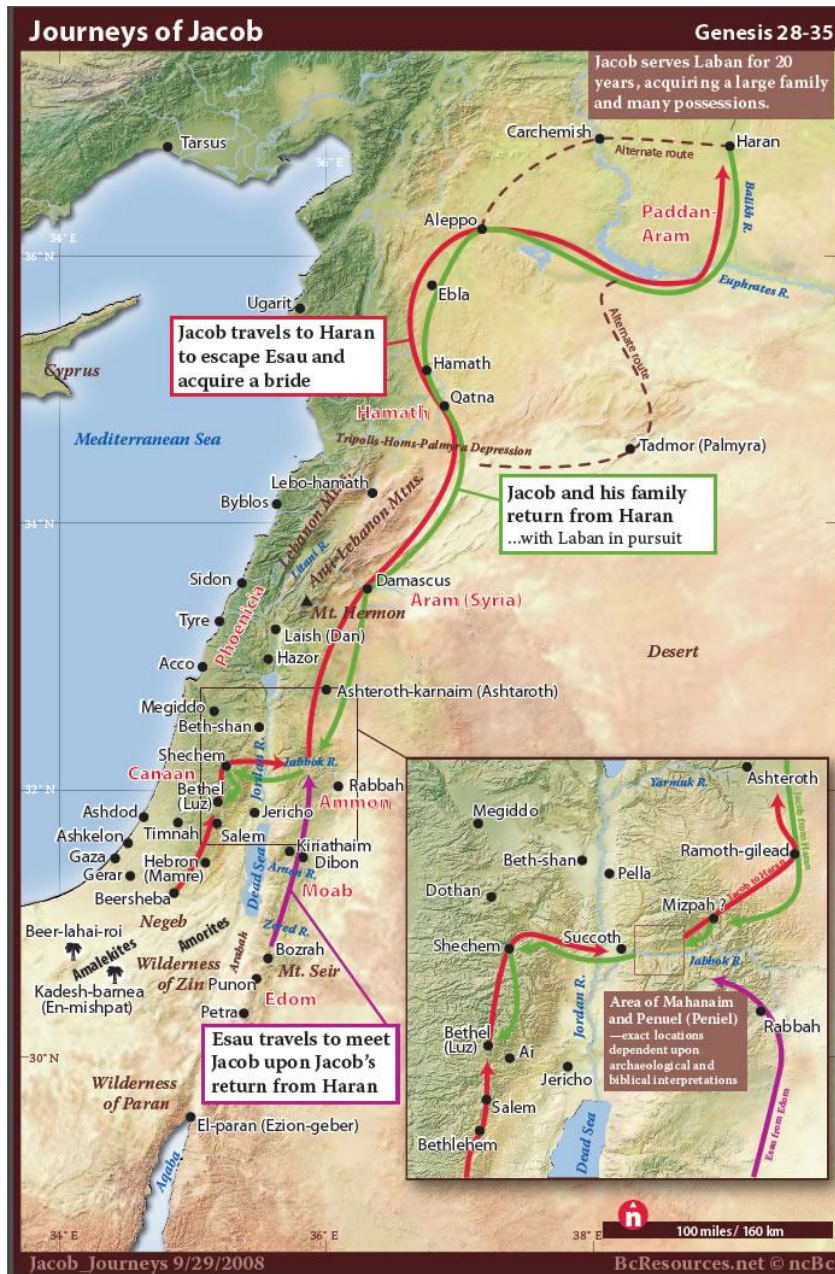
When Jacob first encountered the Lord on his way to Haran, he made a deal with the Lord, telling God that if he simply returned home safely, he would make the LORD his God, build an altar to God there, and give him a tithe (tenth) of whatever bounty he brought back (Genesis 28:20-22). Now it has been twenty years later, and God has enriched him with a large family and

great wealth. Yet, he is at risk of losing it all to his brother, who comes to him with four hundred men. So, he prays to the LORD. But his prayer has changed. He is not trying to make a deal with the LORD. Instead, he declares himself unworthy of all the favor God has given him. He prays for deliverance, not on the basis of a deal, but on the basis of God's covenant promise to Abraham that was reiterated to him (Genesis 32:12; cf. Genesis 28:14). I observe that Jacob matured spiritually over his twenty years in Haran. What did he learn? He learned that he prospered not because of his hard work but because of God's favor. He learned that even though Laban's cunning was greater than his own, God protected him from being cheated by his uncle. He learned that even after everything God gave him, all of it could be taken away in one instant. He almost lost it all after secretly running away from Laban, but God helped him. Now, he risked losing it all again to his brother, who may still have had a lingering grudge against him. His original works-based faith was transformed into a grace-based faith. When he first encountered God, he made a deal with God. When he encounters God now, he acknowledges God's grace and appeals to His promise. Later, when Jacob wrestles with the incarnate God (Genesis 32:22-30), even being injured and risking death, he still clings to God and prevails. Is this not similar to God's testing Abraham's faith with the command to sacrifice Isaac? Jacob's faith was tested. Would he hope in God against all hope, even though he was crippled and might be killed? If so, then Jacob could trust God with respect to his brother Esau and the four hundred men he was bringing against him.

Friends, these examples in Scripture are given to us to confirm and strengthen our trust in the Lord. They are not cute stories for kids' coloring books. They are historical affirmations of God's faithfulness to keep His covenant promises. So Paul writes, "If God is for us, who can be against us?!" (Romans 8:31).

5. **Spiritual Maturity Does Not One Encounter Make** – "Please let my lord pass on before his servant, and I will proceed at my leisure, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my lord at Seir... Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built for himself a house and made booths for his livestock; therefore the place is named Succoth... Now Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Paddan-aram, and camped before the city" (Genesis 33:14, 17, 18).

Some people have tried to argue that Jacob's encounter with God at Peniel totally transformed him, so that he became a completely new man, no longer fearful of his brother, no longer a deceiver, but a servant of God. However, the above passage suggests otherwise. Jacob tells his brother that he will slowly make his way to him in Seir (i.e. Edom, in the South), but he instead goes the opposite way to Succoth, and then to Shechem.



Now, even though this is where God wanted him to go, and ultimately to Bethel (cf. Genesis 35:1), this does not take away from the fact that he again deceived his brother. In Israel's ongoing history, Edom would be a perpetual thorn in its side. Perhaps one reason for this is the series of deceptions upon which the two brothers forged their strained relationship. And the reason for Israel's continual progress through biblical history is not because of the righteousness of the patriarchs, nor of the generations of people that would come by them, but simply and completely because of the sovereign choice, grace and power of God. Some have suggested that God had Jacob wrestle with him all night because He may have been trying to build into him perseverance and character. I would add to this that God would continue to build Jacob's

character even beyond this encounter. One encounter with God, even a dramatic one, did not a new man make. Perhaps this is a lesson for us as well. Certain people seem so eager for the next great experience. They think that by it they will grow closer to God. So they go to IHOP, they go to a Lakeland Revival, or they seek a Toronto-like blessing. It's almost like a drug addict seeking their next fix. But is this how we are called to mature in the Lord? In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil (Hebrews 5:12-14).

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

We mature by learning and applying God's Word, not by seeking out "spiritual" experiences. If God supernaturally visits us, that is one thing, but we are never encouraged to seek out retreats, revivals, or similar type experiences. Even in Jacob's case, there is no indication that Jacob sought this "man" out. The visitation was spontaneous. Instead, we are constantly encouraged to seek Him in His Word:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God (Colossians 3:16).

6. **God's Sovereignty and Our Infinite Worth** - Is there anyone else that felt a bit uncomfortable while reading today's passage? In these chapters it appears that the event of Jacob's wrestling with God has completely eclipsed the matter of the rape, deception and mass murder that also occurred. This is kind of like how the news is sometimes received by viewers today. News of the latest Kardashian escapade could completely eclipse the sufferings of tens of thousands in Haiti, the hundreds, approaching thousands, being murdered in Syria, not to mention significant crises occurring just within the United States. Perhaps it is not the same. Why?

While the contemporary example is truly frivolous and reflects the popular addiction to the latest tidbit of gossip press, in the example of our reading, it is not simply a bizarre wrestling match but rather one orchestrated by God to prepare Jacob to lead his family into the next phase of God's grand plan to bless the whole world. That means that as horrible as the rape, deception and especially the mass murder were, we are reminded that Jacob is God's chosen, and Jacob's twelve sons are also God's elect. Jacob would become Israel and the twelve sons would become the twelve tribes of Israel. Even at the very end, God's elect will not be forgotten, for their names will be recorded on the gates leading into the heavenly Jerusalem at the end of ages (Revelation 21:12). We are only in the book of Genesis, and I wonder if there are still people who doubt the profundity of God's election? In considering it we must remember that God's election does not so much speak of the goodness of the elect - quite the contrary - it speaks of the power of God's grace and inviolability of His purposes in spite of the depravity and sometimes harrowing deeds of His elect. If there is any goodness in the elect, it is by virtue of

their relationship to God. Jacob's strange wrestling event would be a trivial non-event except that God was at the center of it. Our lives would be a trivial non-event except that God has saved us. And because of this relationship to God, we are of greater worth than the greatest king, genius, tycoon, or famous person this world has ever known or will ever know. Recently, some antiquated components and manuals went on sale for \$150,000:



Why in the world would anyone pay \$150,000 for old "junk"? Simply put, it is related to the most influential company in the world today: Apple. In an infinitely greater way, we are "junk," or "dust" or "worms" or "as wind," but because we are related to God, we have infinite worth. Therefore, the Scripture says, "Let those who boast, boast in the Lord!" (1 Corinthians 1:31).

7. Who is the Man who wrestles with Jacob? – Jacob says it was "God" that he faced. Hosea 12:4 says Jacob struggled with "The angel." Was this a spiritual fight or physical fight?

Both the immediate context and the reference in Hosea 12:3-4 point to this being God incarnate, even the pre-incarnate Lord Jesus Christ. Remember, God appeared to Abraham as a man along with two angels earlier in Genesis. And there are numerous texts in the OT that describe God as the Angel of the LORD. There are a lot of good discussions that persuasively make the case that every reference to this Angel of the LORD, even physical appearances of God on earth, is a reference to the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ. In Hosea 12:3-4, note two parallel verses. We read, "(3) And in his strength he struggled with God. (4) Yes, he struggled with the Angel and prevailed." Jacob's experience with God is said to be an experience with "the Angel." This is synonymous parallelism, where the second verse restates the meaning of the first in different words. Furthermore, Hosea 12:4-5 reinforces our understanding that the One Jacob wrestled with was indeed God:

<sup>4</sup> Yes, he struggled with the Angel and prevailed;

He wept, and sought favor from Him.

He found Him *in* Bethel,

And there He spoke to us—

<sup>5</sup> That is, the LORD God of hosts.

The LORD *is* His memorable name.

The Angel is God, who is the Man in Genesis 32:24. When God tells Jacob that he has wrestled with God and man, the immediate reference points to the one Man with whom he wrestled, which I understand to be the God-man Jesus Christ. Jacob also recognizes that he has wrestled

with God. Furthermore, Jacob's name change signifies that it was God he wrestled with because "Israel" means "one who struggles with God." There is, therefore, plenty of evidence to suggest that the One Jacob wrestled with was indeed God. Perhaps the more telling question is what was the significance of this struggle? Why was this event important in the life of Jacob? Why did Moses include this account in his history of Israel for the generation entering the Promised Land?

- 8. God allows struggle for our good** - It seems that throughout Jacob's life he is wrestling with someone. It begins in the womb as he fights with Esau and even grabs onto Esau's ankle during childbirth, his battle with Esau regarding birthright and blessing, his struggles with Laban for his wives and against unfair wages. Now he wrestles with a unnamed man in the middle of the night, as dawn approaches neither is willing to give up on the struggle, so the man touches Jacob's hip to cause him to become cripple. Experiencing this supernatural touch, Jacob comes to realize that he is not wrestling with no ordinary man but God himself, Jacob declares "I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." This is remarkable event. Jacob says it was God that he was wrestling with. Was this a spiritual fight in his dreams or a physical fight? Jacob walks away with a limp showing this indeed was physical in nature. In any case, whether spiritual or physical, Jacob's wrestling with God doesn't end here. Throughout the history of the nation of Israel, their struggle with God continues. What I find interesting is that the struggle could have ended at anytime in the night with a simple touch, however, God allowed it to continue throughout the night...Why? Many times we ourselves struggle with God as we ask for answers to tough questions (the Why questions), when God doesn't seem to be listening or answering our prayers...Is God allowing us to continue in this struggle as a means of building perseverance and character in us? Whether our life is easy or a continuous struggle from beginning to end,

...we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup>perseverance, character; and character, hope (Romans 5:3).

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything (James 1:2-4).

*Blessed be the name of the Lord who knows what is good for us and helps us to persevere in our struggles.*