

What's the Message – Lesson Eighteen

Our study of Genesis continues with the testing of Jacob.

. Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. We pray that our study today will help you see that the testing God permits in your life can be beneficial and strengthen you . . . not only for your eternal life . . . but for the life you are living now. Amen.

In our last lesson we saw how Jacob began to learn to trust God when his life took unexpected turns, and to bear trials with patience. That is a difficult lesson for any of us to learn, and sometimes it must be repeated in different settings to really “sink in.” It was certainly true with Jacob.

As we saw in chapter 31, Jacob realized the relationship with his father-in-law had become soured, and so he determined to depart secretly. But Laban, as soon as he realized what had happened took off in pursuit, because he realized that Jacob had brought him prosperity, too.

However, since Jacob was following God’s command to return home, Laban was foiled in his attempt to prevent Jacob from departing. However, now Jacob must face a new test as he returns to his homeland; the danger of the anger of Esau. How would his brother greet him? Would he carry out his threat to kill Jacob?

As we read chapter 32 of Genesis, the first thing we see is that God acts to give Jacob reassurance of His presence. Verse 1 and 2 tell us: Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him; and when Jacob saw them he said, “This is God’s army!” And so he was able to proceed, facing the wrath of Esau with calm and certainty.

His plan is to send some of his servants to Esau, with a message that was designed to be humble, and show Jacob’s submission to his brother. It was a message intended to conciliate Esau. But the messengers did not come back with a re-assuring word to comfort Jacob. Instead, all they could tell him was that Esau was headed toward Jacob with 400 men! Now his fear for his wives and children mounted, and we are told that he became “greatly distressed.”

He carefully devised a plan to divide his family so that if Esau would attack one, the other might escape. Now he might have been in a state of near-panic, but he had not lost his natural skill for cunning. Having taken this first step, he next

turned to God in prayer, asking for deliverance from the wrath of Esau, for he feared that his brother would try to kill them all.

Next, he prepared a series of gifts to Esau . . . gifts of goats, sheep, camels, cattle, and donkeys . . . that would be presented by his servants one after the other, with each one in succession being of more value than the preceding one. The servants were also instructed to give the same humble message to Esau, a message that addressed Esau as the superior, with Jacob the subservient.

It was a clever plan, timed so that each gift would have sufficient space between it and its predecessor that each group of animals would be seen as a new and valuable gift. And the words that accompanied the gift built a cumulative effect in the mind of Esau. At least, this was what Jacob was counting on.

Having set his plan in motion, Jacob now sends his wives and children across to the south side of the brook Jabbok, while he remains in the camp on the north side. Then we read in verse 24 of chapter 32 something strange and unforeseen.

And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. Out of nowhere suddenly there is this un-named man, and they begin a violent wrestling match that lasts the rest of the night. Not a brief affair, but a difficult, long-lasting struggle. Who was this man, and why was there a physical struggle with no buildup of a reason for such action?

But now it is day . . . Esau is coming . . . and 400 men are with him. So Jacob stepped out in front of his family, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. What would happen now? Slaughter, or forgiveness and acceptance?

We read in chapter 33, verse 4: But Esau ran to meet him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. The fear was gone. The nightmare was over. They were brothers again. To make a long story short, like Abraham and Lot, because of the size of their herds they remained living apart, and when their father Isaac died they joined together to bury him.

So now teacher, we have in brief some of the highlights of chapters 32 to 36 of Genesis. But what is the message for us and our lives today?

These excerpts from the life of Jacob may be over three-thousand years old, but they contain all the dramatic elements that a modern-day TV program might contain. So they do parallel our own experiences, and are relevant to us today.

First, Jacob and his family are fleeing from the abuse of Laban, but are headed right into the stated intent of brother Esau to kill him. Talk about jumping from the frying pan into the fire! Jacob is in the wrestling match of his life, struggling

emotionally. Before he knows it, he is also wrestling physically, with an unnamed man.

Jacob gradually became certain that this was the Lord himself, in human form, and he insisted that he be blessed. In chapter 32, verse 28, we read that the response is Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.

Dr. Paul Kretzmann has written about this episode as follows: “So it was not only a bodily struggle, but a spiritual wrestling as well which Jacob was obliged to endure. But he stood the test, he persevered until he had received the Lord’s blessing, until he saw the face of God turned to him in mercy, until his soul was healed of all its fear and terror.

“The sun rose upon him, and with its rising the courage which now possessed his heart, sent him forth cheerfully to meet his brother Esau.” Jacob was so changed that he needed a new name. Esau was a changed man, also. His attitude of hatred melted away as the two men met, and Esau became a different man. Yes, this story may be ancient, but the lesson for us is still new and pertinent. Trusting in ourselves, our own strength and ability, can in no way compare to trusting in God.

Our next lesson will deal with the selection of Joseph, and the purpose of selection.

