

Jacob: The Universal Man

Today we conclude our exposition of Jacob, the third of the great Hebrew patriarchs. Previously we observed that biblical accounts contain more about God and His message to man than about the people and events chronicled. The account of Jacob is no different. Whereas we have seen Abraham as a type for God, Isaac a type for Christ, Abraham's servant a type for the Holy Spirit, and Rebekah a type for Christ's church, we are naturally interested in what Jacob might be a type for. We will find that Jacob represents every man; and the primary task that lies before him is the same task that lies before each of us. Jacob is a type for the universal man.

When we looked at Jacob in the previous article, we found that largely through his own treachery Jacob had managed to supplant his brother as the next family patriarch; precipitated, as a result, his brother's hatred from which he had to flee; fell himself victim to his uncle's treachery; tended his uncle's flocks for fourteen years; married Leah and Rachel, both daughters of his unscrupulous uncle; and produced twelve sons along with a wearisome measure of domestic strife.

After those fourteen years of service to his uncle, Jacob announces his desire to take his family and possessions and return to his home country (Genesis 30:25). "We are not told why Jacob made this request at this time, but we recall that God promised Jacob at Bethel that He would be with him wherever he went and bring him back one day to his homeland (Genesis 28:15). Laban pleads with Jacob to stay and tend his flocks because he had seen that "the Lord has blessed me for your sake (Genesis 30:27)." Offering to Jacob to "name me your wages and I will give it," Jacob makes an offer to Laban that makes his eyes light up with greedy delight. Jacob proposes to take from the herds the speckled and spotted livestock and leave his uncle the balance. Laban expected to profit exceedingly once again. He failed to factor in, as he could not, that God would bless Jacob's livestock breeding practices to insure that Jacob would prosper... at Laban's expense. Not surprisingly, Laban's regard for Jacob fell in proportion to the size of his herds and flocks.

In chapter 31, verse 3, God calls Jacob to return to the land of his fathers. Fearing for the safety of himself and his family, Jacob departed without announcing the fact to his uncle. Laban pursues Jacob, but before he could overtake him God warned Laban in a dream to do Jacob no harm (Genesis 31:24). While Jacob was now secure from his uncle's wrath, he knew he could not return to Padan Aram. He was also aware that ahead was his brother Esau who had threatened to kill him. Jacob found himself caught, as it is sometimes said, between a rock and a hard place.

Jacob devised a plan to address his dilemma. He sent ahead a large gift as an appeasement to his brother; then divided his family, servants, and possessions into two camps so that one group might escape if his brother attacked him. More importantly, for the first time the text records that Jacob prayed. He prayed for deliverance, demonstrating that now Jacob was beginning to rely on God (Genesis 32:11-12).

What ensues is the most important event in Jacob's life, one that will change him forever. Jacob arose in the night, taking his wives and sons away from his camp. Jacob then returned alone. Here the text records that he encountered a Man (note the capital "M") with whom he wrestled until daybreak. At daybreak we are told that Jacob's hip was dislocated, but rather than suspend the struggle, Jacob clung to his adversary. He now no longer resisted, but pleaded for a blessing. The "Man" accedes to the request and says, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed (Gen. 32:28)." In verse 30 Jacob understands the significance of his all night struggle when he says, "I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved."

As we read Genesis 32:22-30 we see clearly that the "Man" was God. God had come to Jacob in the night and the struggle that ensued represents the same struggle that Jacob had been embroiled in all of his life. When Jacob finally recognized that it was no use to struggle against God, he changed his tactics. Instead of resisting God, Jacob clung to Him and would not let him go. What we learn from this section of Genesis is that Jacob, in his struggles with men and his neglect of God, represents the universal man. Like Jacob, we are all called upon to come to grips with Divine reality; to come, as it were, "face to face with God." Only then can we have hope of life. Only then can we then say, as Jacob, "I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved." [Read Genesis Chapters 37 and 39-42]