

## **Genesis 29:1-14, No. 48**

### **“Step by Step”**

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With this paragraph we begin the next major section of the account of the life of Jacob. It extends from the beginning of chapter 29 to the end of chapter 31. Like some other sections of the patriarchal history, this next cycle of narratives is arranged in a way that betrays the narrator's art. It is organized in the form of a palistrophe or chiasmus, that is, an inverted parallelism. Each section is balanced with another in an ABCBA arrangement. Jacob's arrival in Haran and welcome in Laban's household is balanced, at the end, by the account of his departure from Laban with his wives and children. The second episode, telling how Laban outwitted Jacob in making him work for fourteen years for his two wives, is balanced or matched by the account of Jacob outwitting Laban to obtain the flocks and herds that Laban had hoped to keep for himself. In the center, as the pivot around which this cycle of accounts turns, is the narrative of the birth of Jacob's sons. Remember the toledot or the family history of Jacob is fundamentally and finally a story about Jacob's sons, these twelve men who will be the progenitors of the nation of Israel. Throughout this section the same themes that were prominent in the earlier patriarchal narratives appear again.

1. The *lex talionis* or law of reciprocity: God would be with Jacob, but that didn't mean he wouldn't have to answer for his sins to some degree. Jacob – who deceived his brother and his father – was to be deceived himself by his uncle Laban. Jacob reaped what he sowed.
2. God's grace overcomes his people's sins. Jacob's behavior would not be praiseworthy in some important respects, but by God's mercy and blessing, he arrived in Paddan Aram an empty-handed fugitive and left twenty years later a man of power, authority, and wealth.
3. In this world of sin, without the spirit of true faith in God and submission to him, one lives only half a life: Leah would have children but not the love of her husband; Rachel would have love but, for a long time, no children; and the happiness of both women was frustrated by the antagonism each had for the other.

### **Text Comment**

- v.3 The fact that Jacob had gone to Paddan Aram to look for a wife and came first to a well would immediately remind the hearer or reader of Genesis of the earlier occasion when Abraham's servant, who had come looking for a wife for Isaac, had arrived at probably the same well. We are encouraged in this way to notice similarities and differences.
- v. 3 That it required several men to move the stone over the mouth of the well not only kept the well clean but restricted its use; no passerby could take water from it. Outsiders would have to pay for water. The information about this stone provided here sets the stage for what happens later.
- v.4 Jacob didn't seem to know where he was. Clearly he was not, as Abraham's servant had been, well provided for with animals and the trappings of wealth. Isaac was wealthy and he had blessed his son, but he didn't send Jacob eastward with servants and a camel train

as Abraham had sent his servant years before. Isaac didn't have Abraham's commitment to his son's welfare.

- v.7 Rachel's arrival at an unusual time of day – remember Rebekah arrived as the sun was setting, the ordinary time for watering flocks – was a mark of God's providence.
- v. 8 Jacob seemed to want the shepherds to leave, perhaps so that when Rachel arrived he could speak to her alone. The reply of the shepherds seems to suggest that they were shirkers and were happy to laze the afternoon away. The stone was heavy and, in their minds, there were not enough of them to move the stone and uncover the well.
- v.10 That Jacob accomplished this feat alone is noteworthy since the shepherds hadn't undertaken to do it together. Rachel must have been dumbfounded to receive this preferential treatment from a stranger. [Sarna, 202]
- v.11 The strength of emotion seems to have resulted from the fact that Jacob knew that he had come to precisely the place he needed to be and at precisely the right time.
- v. 12 Rachel was beautiful (so we will learn in v. 17), but vv. 9-12 suggest that, at this point, Jacob was more interested in making a good impression on Laban -- notice how many references there are to Laban in just a few short verses.
- v.14 We today say "flesh and blood" if we want to say someone belongs to our family. The Hebrews said "bone and flesh."
- v. 14 Subsequent developments will lead us to conclude that Laban hurried out to meet Jacob not out of filial affection and family piety, but in hopes of another financial windfall such as he received when Abraham's servant had come years before and showered Laban with wealth as a means of persuading him to part with his sister Rebekah as a wife for Isaac.

But as he listened to Jacob's story (lit. "all these things" v. 13) Laban realized that Jacob was not another emissary bringing riches with him. But he did learn that Jacob had come east looking for a wife and so was pretty much at Laban's mercy.

Laban's character, as the following chapters will prove, was profoundly self-centered. He used people for his own ends. He was happy to deceive Jacob even though he was a relative. If, as usually in the Bible, wickedness is disadvantaging others to serve yourself and righteousness is disadvantaging yourself to serve others, Laban was a wicked man.

Now, this is the second time that a man from Abraham's family arrived at an eastern well looking to find a wife. The similarity of situation is so striking that it cannot be an accident, either in the providence of God or in the narrative of Genesis. For that reason we are clearly intended to compare the two incidents. After all, the two accounts are separated by only five chapters. And what a glaring contrast there is between the two accounts! [Sarna, 201]

Abraham's servant, as we read in chapter 24, wore his faith on his sleeve. He arrived at the well in a prayerful spirit, asked the Lord to bless him and his errand, and, when Rebekah arrived, paid attention at once to what he might learn of her character, whether she had the spiritual quality to make a wife for Isaac.

Not so Jacob. Fresh from his encounter with God at Bethel, he arrived at the well confident and sure of himself. We can understand that -- he had just had an encounter with God and heard God promise to bless him and keep him! But that confidence was not yet tempered with humility, with the spirit of love and gratitude, or with what is perhaps the most necessary trait of a true man of faith: a sense of dependence upon God. Jacob offered no prayer, nor did he speak of the Lord's having guided him to this very place, nor did he give thanks to God for his being met by a beautiful cousin. *In the life of faith, godliness does not come all at once, but in steps.*

And the fact is, early experiences of divine favor in a man or woman's life can actually pose an impediment to the growth of humility and the spirit of active dependence upon the Lord. In fact, this has been a chronic problem in the history of the Christian ministry which has often brought young men of great talent and of great zeal into its work. The favor of God enjoyed early in a man's life has often had the sad effect of stoking his pride rather than cultivating his humility. A man of whom some in this congregation are aware, a prominent figure in the history of conservative Presbyterianism in 20<sup>th</sup> century America, became influential while still a very young man, the pastor of a large church and a preacher with a large following. But it went to his head and for the rest of his life his ministry was compromised by his pride. A sad tale but an all too common one.

Look at Jacob at this well. He asserted himself proudly, it seems, before the shepherds, and then, as if both holding them in contempt and desiring to make a big entrance himself, he did by himself what they had just told him it took several of them to do. (We almost wish he had gone over to the stone, grunted and strained, and, unable to move it, had had to retire sheepishly while they all laughed at him. The embarrassment would have been good for him.) But, actually, God had something much more difficult for Jacob to face than some momentary embarrassment, as we will see as the narrative continues.

Jacob was now more oriented toward God than he had been before his vision at Bethel, no doubt, but he remained a man with a lot to learn! If you remember, Abraham's servant had asked Rebekah to water his animals. He wanted to test her character. Jacob sought to impress Rachel by watering her sheep for her. He thus learned nothing about her character. Abraham's servant had bathed his encounter with Rebekah at the well in prayer; a prayer before, a prayer after. Prayers the narrator enabled us to listen in on. Jacob, however, did not show himself prayerful or spiritually alert as had the older servant, a more mature believer who had learned over the long years of his life that he needed God's blessing more than he needed his own wit or insight or commanding presence. [Waltke, 402]

The brief dialogue between Jacob and the shepherds (four questions by Jacob; four rather brief, even curt replies by the shepherds) exposed Jacob as brash and cocky. We can understand why. He had just been granted a vision of God and had heard the Almighty speak to him. He knew very well that God had never revealed himself in such ways to these shepherds. *He was special!*

And so it was that his last question seems arrogant and impertinent. “Why are you wasting time waiting to water your flocks? Get along with it! – *As if it were any of his business!* As if anyone would thank him for such sage advice!

We might well have thought that Bethel would have put Jacob right in heart, spirit, and behavior. But actually Bethel, wonderful as it was, was just one very important step forward; it was hardly the whole journey. The next twenty years, in fact, will tell the tale of the transformation of Jacob from an ambitious, self-reliant, self-confident believing man – and there are a great many believing people of that type – to a man of humble faith in God. To be sure, a great deal of that transformation will come only at the end of the twenty years, the time in Paddan Aram being the sure and steady preparation of Jacob's heart for the crisis that will come at Peniel, of which we will read in chapter 32. The Jacob of those years in Paddan Aram is not yet the Jacob God wants or the covenant family needs. *And on all of that, brothers and sisters, hangs a most important lesson.*

True enough, this sense of development in his life, cannot be gained by the reading of a single paragraph. We must be aware of the larger narrative and its inner connections to appreciate the importance of any particular episode, as, for example, this one at the well upon Jacob's arrival in the eastern land.

Years ago Pastor DeMass and I took the boys of the junior and senior classes to Vancouver Island for a retreat. We had a great time with six of our young men, but what we all remember from that trip is a baseball game we played on an all-dirt field that was already soaking wet when we played our game in the gentle rain. What we remember these years later is how hard we laughed. I'm not sure I've laughed that hard since. I laughed until my sides hurt. The field was so slick, when anyone tried to do anything on the field he fell down. If the ball was hit to the outfield the outfielder fell down trying to catch it. If he then threw the ball to a teammate, he fell down again. But, as it happened, that didn't make any difference because the fellow who hit the ball fell down rounding first and then he fell down rounding second as well. We were the Keystone Cops and the Three Stooges rolled into one. We wished we'd had a video recording of the whole thing, but no one had cell phone cameras in those days.

Of course the reason it was all so funny was because the game didn't matter and nobody cared about outcome. No one had a stake in whether the game was won or lost. Change that single fact and the fact that fellows were falling down all over the place would no longer be funny. You're taking food off of somebody's table. You're making millions of fans angry at you. The whereabouts of Steve Bartman, a Cubs fan who innocently interfered – or was thought to have interfered – with a catch in the Wrigley Field outfield during a play-off game years ago, a game the Cubs then lost, I say the whereabouts of this man is one of the best kept secrets in the United States. Would that our government could protect its secrets as well as Steve Bartman has protected his whereabouts since that October night in 2003. Nobody knows where he is. It is not because so many years have passed; it is because the Cubs finally won the World Series that there is now talk of inviting Steve Bartman back to Wrigley Field.

But you see, those two stories together are the Christian life. There is *a lot at stake and we're falling down all the time!* Our failures are legion, our errors never seem to stop, and our growth

proceeds at a snail's pace. *You and I almost never come to terms with how difficult the life of faith and godliness really is*, how far it will require us to travel from where we are now, how many errors we are always making, how much God will have to do in us and to us to carry us all the way we ought to go, how much remains to be done even after, even right after he has drawn near to us, blessed us in some way, proved himself to us, and even changed us for the better. We have had our Bethels, but we still far too often act like asses when we arrive at the well. *There is so much that needs to change!*

I somehow find myself on the email list of a prominent minister whose influence and reputation was national news not so long ago. His ministry ended in disgrace and now he is beginning again. How many times has that happened and, on a smaller scale, how many times does it happen in your life and mine. We gain a reputation and then we lose it in a moment with some ill-considered remark or foolish decision. And forget about the opinions that others have of you and me (always considerably lower than the opinions we have of ourselves). We know ourselves well enough to know how far we have advanced in the Christian life, or, better, how far short we still fall every day of what are after all only the ABCs of the Christian life. By now we should be heroes of prayer, heroes of witness, heroes of good works, heroes of devotion, and heroes of humility. But we still have the same flaws, the same serious failures we were struggling with years ago. We have flaws, serious failures and any honest Christian knows it. But it is also true that God is not content simply to endure our flaws. He intends to change us, there is too much at stake, and if we really love God and have his interests in our lives at heart, we will intend to change too.

But, as Charles Hodge once memorably put it, "Even omnipotence works gradually." All through the ages Christians have wondered why God doesn't do his work in us faster. Would it not bring him greater glory? Would it not be a much more powerful recommendation of the gospel to the world? Wouldn't it be an immense blessing to the church and the world if Christians lived much better lives, were holier people, more given to love, sacrifice and self-denial, more devout, obedient, and faithful? *Why should it have taken Jacob twenty years just to get ready for Peniel?* Well, that is some indication, isn't it, how entrenched our sinful attitudes and habits are and how resistant to change. *To learn humility takes a lot of time and many, many experiences!*

Consider Jacob, one of the figures in the biblical history whose life story, the account of whose sanctification is told in the greatest detail. He was blessed in the most dramatic and wonderful way at Bethel but was still showing mostly his warts a few days later. In fact, there have been many through the ages who have argued that Jacob *was converted* at Bethel – that he only began his believing life a few days or weeks before he reached the well –; others have argued that he *wasn't converted until Peniel*, that he was still an unconverted man at the well. Do you see what's happening? They are excusing Jacob's behavior here by viewing him either as a rookie, a spiritual neophyte or as still an unsaved man. But, I think it is clear that for all his terrible behavior, even much earlier Jacob was a believing man. Even as he was demanding Esau's birthright before he would share his stew with his brother and even as he was lying to his father's face he was a believing man. For all his moral failures Jacob *cared about the covenant* as Esau did not. And that is the Old Testament's definition of faith: he cared about the covenant; he took it seriously; he was committed to it. We have no reason to think that Jacob was not a believing

man from the beginning of his story. But that story is, without question, the story of one serious lapse after another and of ponderously slow growth in the graces of a faithful life.

And so it will continue to be as Jacob, after the twenty years in Paddan Aram and after his second encounter with God at Peniel, in imitation of his own father showed himself a catastrophically foolish father of his twelve sons. All along the way it is as if Jacob were intending to provide an illustration of the divided Christian self that Paul so famously described in Romans 7:18: "...for I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. ... So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand." Astonishing things for the great apostle to say! Astonishing, but so obviously, true.

So it has always been for every believer and so it is with you and me. *This is truth that can either be galvanizing for a Christian or demoralizing*: galvanizing to think that there is work to be done that needs to be done and ought to be done and can be done, but demoralizing to think that when all is said and done, when I've run my race, I will still be miles short of the finish line.

But clearly the point of the Genesis narrative is to show us that *Jacob did grow in grace* and the knowledge of the Lord. From Canaan to Bethel, from Bethel to Peniel, and from Peniel to Egypt we are given to watch a man become more and more the man he ought to be, the man he was not when he was young, but the man he became as the years passed and as his experience of the Lord's faithfulness did its work upon his heart and his life.

We may ask, as in our frustration with ourselves we are sometimes tempted to ask, "What's the point if at the end of the day we will still fall so far short of the godliness we long for? We know what a Christian ought to be and ought to do; we know that only too well how much more of a Christian you and I ought to be now than we are. And yet here we are, still struggling to do even the simple things faithfully and well. Why bother?" There are many important answers to that question. But the one that concerns us here is simply this: God cares about your growing in grace and goodness, in Christlikeness and a holy heart and life. *And he will see to it that you care also* – however much it takes. It took Jacob twenty years and a lot of trouble simply to get ready for the next great step forward, which he was to take at Peniel. But God was at work in him and he saw to it that Jacob changed for the better.

Robert Murray McCheyne says somewhere that it is evident what God cares most about. If God cared most that his children be happy, then they would be happy, much happier much more of the time than they are. But he cares most that they be holy and that is why their lives are so full of those troubles, pains, and sorrows that soften the heart, that open the mind; so full of those consequences of our behavior that force us to face our sins, humble ourselves before God and man, renew our dependence upon the Lord and his grace and help, and break our attachments to this world so that we might set our hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. If you are truly a Christian, God will not let you remain indifferent to what displeases him in your life! And *that*, brothers and sisters, is the explanation for a great deal that has happened in your life and that will happen in the future.

*That* is the over-arching lesson of Jacob's twenty-year-long sojourn in Paddan Aram! And that is why life is as difficult as it is for real Christians -- there remains so much to cut away, so much to

change and so much to become -- all made so much more difficult by the fact that it must be done by stupid, dull, selfish sinners like you and me and among conniving, evil people like Laban who make the transformation more difficult at every turn.

So, we have a lot to do, you and I; and God will be at work in forcing this work upon us. Changing us is his project in the world! And is that bad news or good news? It is good news, absolutely! Wonderful news!

The world may not understand why. But then it has no conception of how unholy it is, how far removed from the will of God and the heart of Jesus Christ, or how much judgment it is storing up for itself. It thinks it is a small thing to be saved. Worldly people do not imagine that the forgiveness of their sins would require anything as earthshaking as the incarnation, the humiliation, the suffering, the death, and the resurrection of the Son of God. And similarly, they would never imagine that making an important step toward genuine holiness and goodness would take twenty years of suffering, pain and effort on Jacob's part in Paddan Aram. But it did for him and it will for us.

This is the proof of how great a thing holiness, true goodness really is! Getting it, advancing it, keeping it is the true drama of human life, finally the only eternally significant thing, at least eternally happy thing that ever happens in this world. Therefore Christians must not resent the trouble and the pain and the effort that it takes, when it is so important to God that he makes the whole world turn around this one issue, making his people good.

Every true Christian's life, like Jacob's, *is an epic of sanctification*. *Your life* is an epic of sanctification! This is the great story of our lives. It is the drama and adventure of our lives. It is what God cares most about, what determines how our lives go; and so, *that* is what we should care about and think about above all things. Let us renew our conviction that because we are God's people our lives must be and we must see them to be primarily about our growing in grace, faith, and love. Samuel Rutherford thought that, this being so, this is what we will remember and talk about in heaven.

"The vessel would be prepared with the frequent sense of grace, before Christ pour in it the habit of glory. It is fit that we see and feel the shaping and sewing of every piece of the wedding garment, and the framing, moulding, and fitting of the crown of glory, for the head of the citizen of heaven; ...as travelers at night talk of their [difficult] way, and of the praises of their guide; and battle being ended, soldiers number their wounds, extol the valour, skill, and courage of their leader and captain; – so the glorified soldiers may take loads of experiences ... to heaven with them, and speak there of their way and their country, and of the praises of Him who [led] them .... [*Trial and Triumph*, 204].

Jacob had a story to tell when he got to heaven! And that story was mostly about how God changed him from one man into another. And if you are a Christian, you must and you will have a similar story to tell!