

Jacob Returns Home

Key Verse:
**“I am with you
 and no-one is
 going to attack
 and harm
 you...”**

Acts 18:10

Extra: What are your thoughts about keeping the peace in family quarrels?

Level 5 lesson 21

Read: Genesis 31

After many years, Jacob’s employment with Laban came to an abrupt end. Although he had been a faithful worker, Laban had not really treated Jacob very fairly over the years. Laban’s sons also resented the fact that Jacob’s flocks and herds had greatly increased in number; they saw it as Jacob getting rich at their father’s expense. In fact, it was the clear blessing of God. However, this hostility from his brothers-in-law made life very awkward and difficult for Jacob. Finally, the Lord spoke to him in a dream and told him in no uncertain terms that the time had come to return home. “I am the God of Bethel,” He said, “now leave this land at once and go back to your native land.”

FLIGHT

Jacob acted immediately in obedience to God’s command. Without mentioning a word to Laban, he began the huge task of packing up all his belongings and family. Finally, the camels were loaded and the flocks and herds were gathered together. Then, while Laban was away shearing his sheep, the whole company crossed the Euphrates River and began the long journey back to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan. Three days later Laban heard of Jacob’s departure. Angrily, he called his sons together and they set off in hot pursuit! After seven days they caught up to him at a place called Mt. Gilead. At this stage God warned Laban in a dream, “Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.”

When the two men met, Laban remembered the warning. He reprimanded Jacob for sneaking away secretly, claiming that if he had known his plans to depart, he would have given him a good going-away party. “You have deceived me and taken my daughters away like captives,” he complained; “I didn’t even get to kiss them or my grandchildren goodbye!” He then acknowledged that in his hurt he would have harmed Jacob, except for God’s warning. Then claiming to understand Jacob’s longing to return to his father’s house, he asked, “But why did you steal my gods?”

FOLLY

Jacob of course, knew nothing about the theft! Unaware that his wife Rachel was the thief, he gave Laban permission to kill the one who had stolen them. Laban searched everywhere but couldn’t find his precious ‘gods,’ because Rachel cleverly hid them. The culture back then was steeped in pagan idol worship and the people considered their little idol figures to bring good fortune and protection. So Rachel no doubt stole them because she considered them valuable and part of her upbringing. Wisely, Jacob later commanded his entire family to get rid of all these ‘gods’ before settling in their new home at Bethel. Bethel was then dedicated to God, which showed Rachel and the others that God is more valuable and powerful than any idol! (35:1-3)

Now Jacob, angered by what he saw as another slanderous accusation, took the opportunity to rebuke Laban for his past conduct. He reminded Laban of the honest service he had given for twenty years; how night and day, in all kinds of weather, he had looked after the livestock. Any losses through the attacks of wild beasts he had borne himself. Ten times Laban had altered his wages, in an effort to reduce what Jacob earned. Jacob finished by stating that except for the overruling hand of God over the years, he would have left as poor as the day he arrived, with nothing!

FELLOWSHIP

Laban knew that what Jacob said was true. Somewhat guiltily, we can imagine, he asked Jacob to enter into a covenant with him and so ‘put the past behind them both.’ Jacob agreed. Directing his family to gather a number of large stones, they built a pillar, and piled up the other stones in a heap. They were to be a witness of the covenant between them and a reminder that the Lord was watching both Jacob’s treatment of Laban’s daughters, and Laban and Jacob’s collective loyalty to the covenant. It also marked the boundary line between their respective territories, which they agreed never to cross to harm each other. Both men then solemnly agreed to keep the covenant. So peace was declared between Laban and Jacob and celebrated by the offering of a communal sacrifice and a family feast that night. In the morning Laban rose, kissed his daughters and grandchildren goodbye and left them with his blessing.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. What two reasons led Jacob to return home?	.....
2. What effect did God’s words have on him?	.....
3. What sort of man do you think Laban was?	.....
4. What three things did the heap of stones signify?	.....
5. How was the declaration of peace between Laban and Jacob celebrated?	.....

My Name is Age

Jacob and Esau Reconciled

Key Verse:
“...For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

2 Corinthians 12:10b

Extra: What can you find out about the Covenant that God made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?

Level 5 lesson 22

Read Genesis 32 & 33

FEARFUL MEETING

Having parted amicably with Laban, Jacob continued his journey back to the land of his birth. Verse 1 of our reading tells us of an interesting incident where “angels of God met him.” This was no doubt, a great encouragement to Jacob, since he was sure going to need it! Straight ahead lay the land of Seir where Esau, his brother, lived; the brother whom Jacob had cheated out of his firstborn inheritance and who had vowed to kill him in revenge!

Twenty years had passed since then of course, but we can imagine the trepidation with which Jacob approached the land of his estranged brother. Would Esau still harbour thoughts of deadly revenge against him? Would he harm his family? Many thoughts swirled around Jacob’s mind. As he drew nearer, Jacob decided on a course of action; he sent messengers to Esau to show his humble readiness to be reconciled to him. They were to speak of Jacob as Esau’s servant and Esau as Jacob’s lord. They were to tell him of all the property that Jacob had accumulated during his years with Laban. But they were to make it clear to Esau that Jacob was not coming in pride or glory, but instead seeking to “find favour in Esau’s eyes.”

Esau’s reply was to collect four hundred men and go to meet Jacob. News of this struck terrible fear into the heart of Jacob. He felt sure that Esau was coming with such a group, not to honour him - but to exact his revenge! Jacob realised that with his family and little children he was largely defenceless against Esau’s fighting men. So he divided his company into two bands, thinking that if Esau attacked one group then at least the other could escape.

DESPERATE PRAYER

Then, Jacob prayed earnestly to God. He admitted his unworthiness to receive even the least of God’s mercies and God’s goodness in blessing him with so many material possessions and a large family (after he’d left home with only a staff). Then he pleaded for deliverance from Esau for himself and his family. Finally he reminded God of His promise “to do him good and make his family increase.”

There is much in this prayer, which we should note, especially the attitudes with which Jacob prayed: humility, thankfulness, and total dependence on God. These should characterise our prayers at all times. We too, are not worthy of God’s goodness (miserable sinners that we all are), yet God in His mercy has given His Son to die in our place. Now through faith in Him, God bestows upon all true believers many wonderful spiritual and temporal blessings and we look forward to eternity in His glorious presence.

Jacob then decided to win Esau’s favour, if at all possible, by sending him generous gifts. These gifts consisted of numbers of various animals: sheep, goats, camels, and donkeys. Each of these very valuable gifts was to be delivered by some of Jacob’s servants at intervals. As each group met Esau, they were to tell him that the flocks were a gift from his brother Jacob and that he was coming behind. So the flocks were gathered together as Jacob had ordered, and after the last of them had left, Jacob also took his wives and family and the remainder of all their flocks and possessions across the Jabbok Stream. Jacob though, spent the night alone on the east side of the river.

SURRENDER

During the night, an amazing thing took place. A man appeared and began wrestling with Jacob. All night Jacob resisted until finally the Man touched the socket of Jacob’s thigh and put it out of joint. Jacob quickly realised that this Man was no ordinary human being, and so clinging to Him helplessly, he said, “I will not let You go unless You bless me!”

The man, who was really the Lord (see v30) in the appearance of a man, asked Jacob his name. Then He announced that Jacob would have a new name, Israel, which means “a prince of God.” So God blessed him and Jacob was left alone again, pondering the marvellous fact that he had seen “God face to face and yet my life was spared!” How good to see that Jacob’s crooked ways did not cause God to withdraw His blessing! What a gracious God He is.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

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| 1. Why was Jacob afraid of Esau? | |
| 2. How did he try to gain favour with Esau? | |
| 3. What should we especially note from Jacob’s prayer? | |
| 4. What can we learn from Jacob’s experience at Jabbok? | ..... |
| 5. What value do you see in forgiving others? | ..... |

Loved and Hated

Read Genesis 37:1-20

Further Reading: Acts 7:9-10

Key Verse:
“The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in His hands.”

John 3:35

Extra: How could Jacob have acted more wisely in his family situation?

Level 5 lesson 23

Today we begin studying the life of Joseph - surely one of the most interesting characters in the Bible. Joseph was one of Jacob’s twelve sons (listed in Genesis 35:22-26), but he was not the firstborn son, nor directly in the line which led to the birth of Jesus Christ. That line, or genealogy, is spelled out in Matthew’s Gospel: beginning with Adam, it progresses on down through Seth, Noah, Abraham and Isaac to Jacob. However, the line continues onwards to Jesus Christ through Judah, not Joseph. Nonetheless, it is Joseph’s life that God has chosen to record for our benefit in Scripture, not Judah’s, and there are many parallels in his life-story which make him a wonderful type (or picture) of our Saviour.

LOVE AND HATE

One of the first things we should notice, as we begin, is that even though Jacob was chosen and blessed of God, his family was certainly not perfect! His wives fought and argued constantly (Genesis 30:1-22) and there was a lot of friction between Joseph and his brothers. We can take heart from this; God can use all of us, no matter what our family is like, if we (like Joseph) will seek to obey Him, and live a life pleasing to Him in every respect.

The opening paragraph of our story reveals something of these problems within Joseph’s family; we read that Joseph is loved by his father but hated by his brothers. So something is very wrong with this picture! Verse 4 gives us the reason: “when his brothers saw that their father loved him (Joseph) more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.” Jacob had unwisely contributed to this problem by making it clear he loved Joseph more than all the other brothers. One day, he gave him a very special gift, a “coat of many colours,” which made the situation even worse! How careful and wise we as parents need to be, in this important area of family life.

LIES AND TRUTH

Then one day Joseph went to his father Jacob with a bad report about some of his brothers. We must not think Joseph was being a mere ‘tell-tale’ here; the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, Jacob’s wives, were not doing right, and Joseph felt that in loyalty to his father he should tell him of their bad words and conduct.

Then Joseph angered them more by telling all his brothers about a dream he’d had. He dreamt they were all together binding sheaves of wheat in the field. At one point, his sheaf stood up, while their sheaves gathered around and bowed down to his. Of course, they understood this to mean that one day Joseph would rule over them and “they hated him more for his dream and his words.”

REBUKE AND HONOUR

In all this, we see a vivid picture of our Lord Jesus. When He was here on earth, He was beloved of His Father God, and so He told His fellow Jews this truth. He also told them of His kingdom and His coming reign over them. The four Gospel books in the New Testament, particularly John’s, show clearly how His faithful words of rebuke cut them to the heart, and how Jesus came to be hated by the Jews. They were determined to bring His claims to nothing - just as Joseph’s brothers had been.

Joseph later told a second dream, not only to his brothers, but also to his parents, in which the whole family bowed before him. Jacob was initially sceptical at first, and rebuked Joseph. Later, he wisely recognised that this was more than a boyhood fantasy and that perhaps it was God’s purpose to use and honour Joseph in this way (v 10-11). Remember, God has declared that all shall bow before Jesus, and so we should do this now (Philippians 2:9-11).

One day, Jacob called Joseph and told him to go and find his brothers down near Shechem, where they were minding their flocks. “See if they are alright and bring me word of them again” he instructed him. Joseph willingly obeyed, even though he was aware of his brothers’ murderous hatred toward him. How similar it was with Jesus! He was willing to be the ‘Sent-One’ of God - knowing this meant death for Him at the hands of wicked men.

So Joseph set off for Shechem about 70 miles to the north. Not finding his brothers there, he made some enquiries and finally located them at a place called Dothan, about 10 miles further on. Verse 18 records the chilling words of his brothers as they saw him coming: “before he reached them, they plotted to kill him!” We read a striking parallel to this, in relation to Jesus, in Matthew 26:4.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. How can we take heart from Joseph’s family situation?	.....
2. Why did Joseph’s brothers hate him?	.....
3. What did Joseph’s dream foretell?	.....
4. Mention two ways in which Joseph’s life was like the Lord Jesus.	.....
5. What did Joseph’s brothers do when they saw him coming?	.....

Joseph Sold

Read Genesis 37:18-36

Further Reading: Psalm 105:16-22

Key Verse:

“And [Judas] asked, ‘What are you willing to give me if I hand him [Jesus] over to you?’ So they counted out for him thirty silver coins.”

Matthew 26:15

Extra: What comparisons do you see between Judas and Joseph’s brothers?

Level 5 lesson 24

THE PLOT

Joseph’s brothers were determined to bring his dreams to an end. Little did they know that God in His sovereign, overruling power, would use their wicked actions to fulfil those very dreams! As Joseph drew closer, his brothers said to one another, “Come on! Let’s kill him and cast him into some pit; we can say some evil beast has devoured him. Then we’ll see what becomes of his dreams” (v20)! But Reuben, the eldest son, intervened at this point to thwart their evil plan. “Let us not kill him, but throw him into this pit,” he suggested, pointing to an empty pit nearby. It seems Reuben wanted to save Joseph’s life and deliver him safely back to his father; he deserved credit for this. So Joseph was stripped of his much-envied coat of many colours and thrown into the empty pit.

THE PAYMENT

This accomplished, the brothers then calmly sat down to eat their lunch. Some time later, a group of Ishmaelite traders appeared on their camels. They were bound for prosperous Egypt, to sell their goods in the markets. Suddenly, Judah had a brainwave! “Hey!” he said to the others, “Why don’t we sell Joseph to these Ishmaelites instead? Let’s not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother!” If only he and Reuben had spoken up strongly for what was right from the beginning - the whole situation could have been avoided. Of course, we can see God’s hand in it all, behind the scenes, working out His purposes.

The others agreed with Judah’s plan and so Joseph was sold for twenty pieces of silver, the going price for a slave at the time. This transaction reminds us too, of our Saviour, who was also sold for thirty pieces of silver, the going price for a slave in Jesus’ day. So Joseph was lifted up out of the pit and callously given over to the Ishmaelites, who no doubt tied him securely to a camel and resumed their journey towards the lucrative slave market in Egypt.

Reuben was away when this cruel piece of trading took place, and was terribly dismayed to return and find the pit empty.

He tore his clothes and cried in distress, “The boy isn’t there! Where can I turn now?” Obviously, Reuben felt genuine concern for Joseph and as the eldest son, a measure of responsibility for what had happened. How would he explain this to their father Jacob?

THE FRAUD

The brothers soon thought of a plan to explain Joseph’s disappearance. They would kill a young goat from their flock, dip Joseph’s coat in its blood, and then take it home to their father, and lie to him that they had found it along the way. Of course, there were plenty of wild beasts in the wilderness and Jacob would immediately think Joseph had been devoured by a wild animal. It is quite obvious that Joseph’s brothers never expected to see him again. If they had thought there was any chance he might one day turn up again, I think they would have thought of a different story!

So the brothers went home to their father and lied as they produced the blood-stained coat, asking Jacob if he could identify it. As expected, Jacob recognised it instantly, “It is my son’s coat!” he cried, grief-stricken, “An evil beast has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.” So Jacob was utterly deceived by the heartless fraud.

As callous as this was, we can’t help but think of Jacob’s similar deception of his own father, Isaac, years before. Back then, you’ll remember, he had put the skin of a goat on his hands and neck professing to be Esau. Now, he himself had been deceived by his own sons in a similar way. “I will go down to the grave, to my son, mourning,” cried Jacob pathetically as he wept inconsolably over the supposed death of his beloved Joseph.

Eventually, Joseph arrived in far-off Egypt. There the Ishmaelites put him up for auction in the slave market, where he was bought by Potiphar, a high-ranking officer in the guard of Pharaoh, the King of Egypt. And so began the next chapter in the life of this great Old Testament character. We can only surmise at what Joseph was thinking at this point, but we know that he continued to trust in God to protect and guide him - whatever lay ahead.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. What did Joseph’s brothers intend to do with him and who prevented them?	.....
2. Who does the sale of Joseph remind us of?	.....
3. How did the brothers deceive their father?	.....
4. What did Jacob say about the matter?	.....
5. What happened to Joseph on arrival in Egypt?	.....