

Watchman Nee:

When we begin to look at Jacob the man, we discover how strikingly his history is like our own. Before God has begun to deal with us we are inclined to take a rather superior attitude to Jacob, and judge him as self-willed and irresponsible. But when we begin to recognize the flesh in ourselves and our own weakness and sinfulness and self-will, then it is that we see Jacob in ourselves. And when we come to the last seventeen years of his life, and watch his words and his whole demeanour, we must praise God's grace in the man. It is hard to find any in the Old Testament with an end like his. It can move us to tears to see how wondrously God has worked in him and how grace has led him to a place of usefulness. A seemingly hopeless man has been made into a most useful vessel for God's purpose.

Yet the whole of this fruitfulness in Jacob was the result of God's discipline of him. God touched his natural strength, and as a result he became in due course a vessel unto honour. It is as the Spirit disciplines us that He works Christ into us; they are not two separate works. The life of Christ is wrought into the character of the disciple, and fruit is born naturally, spontaneously. So we have much to learn from Jacob.

We can recognize four stages in Jacob's life. First, the man Jacob as he was (Genesis 25-27). Secondly, his testing and discipline through circumstances (28-31). Thirdly, the dislocation of his natural life (32-36). Fourthly, the 'peaceable fruit' (37-50).

We begin by looking at the character of Jacob the man. By natural instinct Jacob was a fighter from birth (Genesis 25.22-26). How different he was from Isaac! Isaac did nothing; he accepted and received everything. Jacob from beginning to end is a schemer, clever, wily, confident that he can do anything. How is God going to bring such a man to the place of being a vessel for His purpose?

It was not just that what he did was wrong; he himself, from before his birth, was a man unsuitable to God by nature. Oh yes, He desired the will of God. He wanted Esau to hold back and allow him, Jacob, to be the eldest; and when that did not happen he would use every device, every stratagem to make good the disadvantage. That was Jacob! Of what use to God was such a man?

We cannot give a rational answer to that question. Only the grace of God can account for His choice of this one. 'For the children being not yet born, neither having done anything good or bad, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth, it was said unto (Rebekah), The elder shall serve the younger. Even as it is written, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated' (Romans 9. 11 -13). The election of God is the only explanation; there is no other. God wanted to choose a man. We must believe in the choice of God. If He has begun a good work in us He will not leave it half done. He is the First and the Last. The work He has started to do in us He will finish. If we trust to the election of God, we can rest in Him.

If you are inclined to say, 'I am so difficult for God to deal with,' then put your trust in Jacob's God. Jacob did not choose God first; God chose Jacob. Before his birth He chose him, and the same is true of us. Recognize God's elective grace, and we shall be freed from anxiety.

It was the will of God that Jacob should rule. Jacob had discovered that. He learned of God's plan and recognized its true importance, and that it involved him and not his brother. He saw God's election and God's purpose, but he wanted to make sure of it for himself. So in their youth, when Esau returned one day from hunting, Jacob bargained with him for his birthright. 'Let me be the elder, and you shall be the younger,' he declared (Genesis 25. 29-34). His motive was right, but he used his own wits to get what God fully intended to give him.

Then in chapter 27 Jacob cheated his father in order to secure his father's blessing. We can, of course, see Jacob's problem. Isaac had sent Esau to hunt, with a view to giving him his blessing. If that happened, and Esau received the blessing of the first-born, then what about God's promise? Jacob had seen the design behind that promise, and so he saw the danger too. He must somehow contrive that God's will should be done. From his point of view he was quite right, but his was the reasoning of the natural man. Each thing Jacob did, we find, was designed to accomplish God's will. He showed, however, that he could not wait for God's time and look to God to do it but must himself devise measures to bring about what it appeared as though God could not do.

Our natural man uses human strength and ingenuity to compass the will of God. If God's throne seems in danger of falling, out goes our hand to steady it. 'Something must be done!' we exclaim. That is Jacob, the able, scheming, clever, natural man. But the result of his efforts was only that Esau felt himself cheated and

determined to kill him, and Jacob had to leave home.

Not only does man's uncleanness render him unfit, and therefore powerless, to do God's will; man's very best is equally powerless. No matter how perfect the heart's intentions may be, if it is man using his natural strength to do it, the result is failure. Jacob had not learned to know and quietly to wait for the God who says, 'I will work, and who shall hinder it? (Isaiah 43. 13). He was God's choice, God wanted him, but he knew neither God nor himself. The blessing he attained by cheating, he failed truly to realize. All he received was God's discipline. Clever people get a lot of that!

Through discipline God gave him the blessing he had cheated to obtain. Already at Bethel, before he had even left the land, his life of discipline began (Genesis 28. 10-22). God spoke to him in a dream. He could not speak to Jacob directly while he was trusting to his own plans.

But now look what God says to Jacob! 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; and thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed' (28. 13-14). It would not surprise us if God had said these words at the end of Jacob's life, but here they are at the very outset! The whole blessing is presented to him, even while he is still his natural, contriving, crafty self. How is this possible? Surely only because God knew Himself. He had great confidence in what He Himself would do. He knew that this Jacob, so committed to Him, could not escape His hands, and sooner or later would become His vessel unto honour. 'I will give it,' God said. There was nothing for Jacob to do. How wonderful that God is a God of such confidence! He knows He can carry out His own plans.

We might well think such a downright statement of intention rather risky when dealing with a man like Jacob. But the end was already certain; God's plans always are. For God's expectation is in Himself, never in us. Oh that we might learn the undefeatedness of God!

Then we should notice also, at Bethel, that in spite of Jacob's spiritual condition, God has not one word of rebuke for him. We should certainly have had! Yet God made no mention of what had happened. He knew all about Jacob and his deceit and his subtle contriving. Here was this man, determined to reach his goal, no matter what means he used to get there, and God knew he was like that. But for that very reason, God did not rebuke him. It would have been no use; he was like that, he could not change, and God did not tell him to. God knew that Jacob was in His hands; and what Jacob could not do, God Himself could.

Twenty-one years later when Jacob came back to Bethel, he was a different man, and God knew this would be so. What is not accomplished in ten years, will be in twenty. At the end of that time God is still holy. He has not forgotten, and He never approved of Jacob's action. Jacob was foolish, but God had His plans. Time would work them out.

This promise to Jacob was greater and went further than that given to either Abraham or Isaac. 'Behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee whithersoever thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of (28. 15). Praise God for this extra promise given to Jacob! It was unconditional. There was no 'if you . . . then I . . .'. Whatever Jacob was like by nature, God had a plan; He would have His way. He has a way to His goal for even the most hopeless of us. He cannot be defeated. There is no means of bringing God to a halt half-way there.

From Bethel onward Jacob was in God's hand, and twenty years of discipline wrought the change in him. But here, at the outset of his journey, he as yet did not know the meaning of the promise. This revelation to Jacob in a dream had not changed him one bit. To look at him only draws from us the exclamation: 'Lord, your work is indeed so perfect, but how poor the material you have to work upon!'

From verses 16 and 17 it seems that, on waking, Jacob had forgotten what God had said, and was only afraid because he had slept at the Gate of Heaven. The promise was secondary. He was afraid of God. And the house of God is indeed a terrifying place to those in whom the flesh has not been dealt with. The house of God has the power of God, God's order, holiness, righteousness, revealed in it. It is justly to be feared if the flesh is still proud and active.

Then Jacob spoke to God. 'And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, if God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then shall the Lord be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house'

(20-21). What a contrast this is to God's unqualified words to him. Jacob says, 'If . . . if . . . if . . . then.' We see here what Jacob's desires were, namely, food and clothing. He had lost sight of God's purpose. But surely here we can already detect God's discipline. For he was young, the beloved of his mother; and now he was alone, knowing nothing of his future. Even in this situation his chastening had begun. He wanted food and clothing, and to return to his home! 'And of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee' (28. 22). That is Jacob! If you give me all this, then I will give you a tenth! He wanted to do business, even with God. Everything for him was on a commercial basis.

Yet this was also Bethel. Although Jacob could not rise to God's promise, yet from that time, to Jacob He was the God of Bethel. A great impression was made on Jacob there.

Now Jacob comes to Haran, and in Genesis 29. 9 - 11 we read how Rachel was the first one of his relations to meet him. Again we see God's discipline at work, for the first thing he did was to weep. She awoke in him memories of his past, and of the way he had come. Before he left home he had been hard; there had been plenty of ways of keeping himself from tears. It is those who have no way out of their situation who weep. Jacob's course had led him from riches to poverty. Again God had touched and chastened him.

For one whole month Jacob was a guest in his relatives' home (29. 14). After that Laban said to him, 'Because thou art my brother, shouldest thou therefore serve me for nought? Tell me, what shall thy wages be? (verse 15). Yet verse 14 contains no suggestion that Jacob had been serving Laban! His host was announcing a change of status.

The fact is, both Laban and Jacob had commercial minds. The natural man and the worldly man are one in this. On Jacob there were a lot of sharp corners to be rubbed off, and whereas Esau could not rub him, Laban certainly could. There is plenty of friction when two of the same kind meet and live together! First it had been, 'my bone and my flesh'. Now it is, 'You work and I will pay you.' It was a polite way of saying, 'You can't live here for nothing!'

In his own home Jacob had been the son; all was his. Now Jacob was a servant, a cattle-man, and his uncle was a harsh task master. Once more God's chastening hand was at work.

But there was still more to come. Jacob served Laban seven years for the hand of his daughter Rachel, his first love, and then Laban cheated him! He gave him Leah instead. It is always very bitter to have to take your own medicine! So Jacob served another seven years-fourteen years in all for Laban's two daughters. He went out to keep the sheep, and Laban changed his wages ten times. Thus Jacob was put through the fires of discipline, tested and tried, but with the hand of God always upon him. For God had promised to bring Jacob back home.

Laban could scheme and plan as well as Jacob; indeed, even Jacob had difficulty in getting the better of him. Yet somehow he managed it. He schemed long and carefully to increase his own flock and to enhance his wealth at the expense of his uncle, and in his scheming he makes it quite clear that he has not changed one bit!

Yet Jacob acknowledged the hand of God. Though through all the years he had not mentioned God's name, yet at last, with the birth of Joseph, he bethought himself of home and sought to return (30. 25). But now he could not get away! He was in fact compelled to stay on with such a man as Laban for twenty long years.

What God's hand does is right. Circumstances are His appointment for our good. They are calculated to undermine and weaken the specially strong points of our nature. It may not take Him as much as twenty years to do this, or it may take longer. Yet God knows what He is doing. We see this clearly at the end of Jacob's life. Earlier he had inspired little affection in anyone, for everyone had to serve his ends; yet at the last he became gentle and lovable.

'Now for a little while, if need be, ye have been put to grief in manifold temptations, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold that perishes though it is proved by fire, might be found unto praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ' (1 Peter 1. 6-7). There is nothing accidental in the life of the believer. It is all measured out to us. We may not welcome the discipline, but it is designed in the end to make us partakers of His holiness.