

## "CLIMBING JACOB'S LADDER"

### INTRODUCTION

This morning we're going to set to one side, at least temporarily, some of our own immediate problems and present day political concerns and once again move back across the centuries of time to the story of a man who, like Moses, lived in a different part of the world and under circumstances quite different from those that you and I live. The name of the man whose life we're going to be examining in some detail here in the next twenty minutes or so is Jacob. Right away we think of that beautiful negro spiritual that we use to sing as young people at summer church camps "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder". The inspiration for the title undoubtedly came from Jacob's dream at Bethel in which he saw a ladder ascending from earth to heaven. And I think a ladder is an appropriate symbol of Jacob's entire life story for truly in his biography, "Every round goes higher and higher"

### THE STORY OF HIS LIFE

Actually his life's story begins on a very low rung on this ladder. For if there was ever a spoiled, selfish and extremely self-centered youngster it was Jacob. And yet we ought not to place all of the blame on young Jacob. Usually behind every spoiled child there are unwise parents. In this case Issac and Rebekah. They were unwise in this sense that from the very beginning they proceeded to play favorites as far as their two sons were concerned. The Bible tells us: "AND ISSAC LOVED ESAU, AND REBEKAH LOVED JACOB". And her love for Jacob was unhealthy; it was a possessive, jealous, fierce sort of love. Whatever young Jacob wanted, she would get it for him. She would even resort to deceit and trickery at the expense of her husband and other son in order to please young Jacob. Probably a fine woman in other respects, but because of this weakness in her make-up we would not be able to include her on a list of the great mothers of the Bible.

And so young Jacob grew up - spoiled, selfish, self-centered and shrewd. I'm sure you remember fragments of the story. I'm sure you remember the time that Esau came in from hunting and he was greeted by the delicious odor of some stew that Jacob his younger brother had been preparing. Esau, who was rough, impetuous and something of an outdoor type, cried out to Jacob "Jacob, give me some of that stew. I'm famished." And Jacob, who had been doing some thinking on his own decided that the time for some rather under-handed action had come. And so he said to his older brother Esau "Sure I'll give you some stew. Only on one condition. Is it worth your birthright". And Esau who could never see beyond the next meal, who could never see beyond the next day (and how he reminds us of ourselves) would probably have signed the world away just in order to get that bowl of stew. "Anything you say. Just give me the bowl of stew".

Now you'll recall that the birthright meant certain advantage - both material and spiritual - for him who held it, and tradition made the eldest son, in this case, Esau, the holder of the birthright. To change the birthright required not only abdication by the eldest son but agreement by the father as well. And Jacob and Rebekah knew that they would never be able to obtain Issac's consent to this, and so this brings us then to the next step in the plot.

One day Issac, who was old and nearly blind, called for Esau and asked him to go hunting and then to prepare the game in a particular dish that was a favorite with Issac. Rebekah overheard the conversation

decided the time had come for her to act on behalf of Jacob. She sent Jacob out to kill two goats from their own flock and while he was doing this she was busy preparing the most tempting dish in her cookbook. And then with all of the skill of a make-up artist, she disguised Jacob as Esau and sent him in to Isaac bearing the dish of food. Isaac was old. He couldn't see too well; he couldn't reason too well and he fell right into the plot. Supposing that he was bestowing his final blessing upon Esau, he proceeded to administer the blessing upon Jacob.

Of course Esau wasn't too happy over this when he returned, and with bitterness in his heart and murder in his mind, he set out to get back at his younger brother. Jacob sensing that it would be no love-feast if he stayed on in his own home, took his mother's advice and went to visit his uncle Laban, his mother's brother, who lived in Haran.

#### GOD COMES INTO HIS LIFE

On the journey to Haran, Jacob had a dream. God was in the dream. This is the first time that God comes on to the stage in the drama of Jacob's life. Up to this time, it had been pretty much a one man show - Jacob, scheming, seeking and succeeding. And then all of a sudden, here was God coming into Jacob's life. Listen to what it says in the Bible: "Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.'" And Jacob was afraid. It reminds us of the way that God often comes in to our lives - when we least expect him to - when we're unprepared for him to come. Anyway the outcome of this religious experience was this that life was no longer the same self-seeking, self-centered, self-satisfying game that it had been up to that time. He came to realize that there was another at the center of it all, without whom a person is nothing, with whom a person must come to terms if he is going to accomplish anything that's lasting in life. Very well then, Jacob would recognize God. Indeed more than that, he would use God. Yes, they would form something of a corporation - Jacob and God, Incorporated. That's the way it would be. Jacob and God, Incorporated. Each would have certain duties and each would receive certain dividends. And Jacob, who had suddenly gotten religion drew up the charter. Listen to what it says in the Bible "If God will be with me and keep me, then the Lord shall be my God and of all that thou givest me, I will give thee back one-tenth." This was a new Jacob. He had gotten religion. And although we might not admire everything about his religion, at least we have to admire him for his latter decision, namely that of giving one-tenth back to the Lord!

#### RACHEL COMES INTO HIS LIFE

And so God came into his life. Jacob pushed on and finally arrived at the home of his uncle, Laban. At this point Rachel came into his life. Apparently she was a beautiful young lady. It was love at first sight. It's a wonderful story. I'm surprised that Hollywood hasn't made a picture of it yet. They could do a great job on this one especially if they stayed with the Biblical narrative. But on the other hand if they did this they might have trouble getting by the censor. It may have been love at first sight, but it wasn't a whirl-wind courtship. We can't blame Jacob for this however. Remember what happened. Rachel's father, Laban, insisted that Jacob work for him for seven years and then in return he would give Rachel to Jacob. There's a touch of poetry at this point for it says in Genesis: "And so Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her". Well, you know what happened next. At the end of the first seven years, Rachel's father maneuvered things in such a way so that he was able to get another

seven years work out of Jacob. This, I suppose, would have discouraged most men. But not Jacob. He was patient, persistent and he loved her dearly. And finally after 14 years, Rachel became his wife. On the one hand we admire Jacob for his persistence, but on the other hand, I wouldn't want to suggest that you follow his example, at least, not to the extent of a 14 year courtship.

And so at the end of fourteen years, Jacob decided that it was time for him to bring his visit with his uncle to a close. It was time for him to return home. During those years he had learned the meaning of honor, but he had hardly learned the meaning of humility. He proceeded to Lord it over his uncle saying "Laban, where would you have gotten without me. Why the Lord has blessed you wherever I have turned". It was still Jacob and God, Incorporated, with Jacob still serving as Chairman of the Board. And so Jacob started back to his home in Beersheba with his family and his servants and all of his possessions. There was only one thing that bothered him. It had to do with his brother Esau. Would Esau have forgotten what had happened fourteen years before. Would he still be out to get Jacob. Jacob wondered what to do, and then the idea came to him that he would appease his brother in advance by sending on ahead an impressive parade of cattle as a gift which would surely warm the cockles of Esau's heart.

It was at this point in the journey back to Beersheba that Jacob climbed another rung on the ladder. It was at night again, and the account of Jacob wrestling with his adversary is clothed in so much oriental imagery that it's difficult for us to know exactly what took place, except this that he went through some sort of spiritual experience which made him grow. It was dark and he was alone, and all of the former props of self-confidence and conceit and possessions didn't help him at all. In the darkest part of the night he vowed to the unnamed wrestler who confronted him "I will not let you go unless you bless me". The next morning all he could say was "I have seen the Lord face to face". The result of this experience was that it was no longer a question of what God would do for him, but rather a question of what he could do for God. No longer was Jacob chairman of the corporation. God took over! At this point he attained spiritual maturity.

Well, the rest of the story can be summed up in a few brief sentences. The fury of Esau had long since burned out and he went out to welcome his returning brother. And Jacob's remaining ways and days, while not always flawless, were nonetheless profoundly significant for Israel, not so much by virtue of what he was, but by the purpose of God which worked through him.

#### REFLECTIONS UPON THE STORY

Then, then is the story of Jacob - colorful, dramatic, primitive and stirring. The wonder of it is that across all of these years it still speaks to us today. And mind you it does. And in the few minutes that we have left I should like to reflect upon certain things this story has to say in terms of our own lives. You'll notice that there are three distinct rounds on Jacob's ladder.

On the first round the name of Jacob was synonymous with self-seeking. While he was still young, he was intent simply upon feathering his own nest, getting all that he could for himself by fair means and by foul. Everyone I suppose rests for a while on this rung of the ladder. In the early part of the story it was Jacob, first and foremost. Everything revolved around Jacob. Wrapped up in himself, and what a small pack he made. Well, I suppose we expect a certain amount of this

in children and young people. But the trouble is that so many people never get off this particular rung of the ladder. Some of them go through their entire lives standing on this rung. We see it in subtle forms - in men in high places who betray public trust for private gain, in ordinary citizens who grab privileges and dodge responsibilities, in parents who never let their children free to lead lives of their own, in young people who forfeit the deepest meanings of love and home life for sexual license.

Jacob managed to get beyond all this. After the dream at Bethel in which he saw the ladder ascending from earth to heaven, he moved up one step. And then for a time, his name was synonymous with self-righteousness. He was a much better man during this stretch of his life than he had been before. He prayed, he worshiped, he was decent and dependable. He strutted and smirked and was somewhat taken up with this own discovery. He had discovered God, and he was using God instead of letting God use him. He was good, to be sure, but not good enough. And how he reminds us of ourselves.

As some of you know, I do a bit of marriage counseling from time to time here in our church. Friday of this past week I talked to a woman who is interested in finding a mate. I don't think I'd be revealing any confidences if I were to tell you what she said to me. She's not from NYC, and I don't think she'd mind if I shared with you what she said. "Mr. Clarke" she said "I'm 44 years old, well fixed financially, and I'd like to get married. I'd like to meet a man about my own age who enjoys going to church. I belong to the First Methodist Church in my community. I also belong Blessed Angels Catholic Church and the Mount Zion Jewish Temple. I also attend the Christian Science Church regularly but do take aspirin occasionally. Can you help me to meet a man of good character who is interested in getting married and who belongs to any one of these churches or all four of them". Well I said to her "I'm glad you're interested in getting married. If you want something in life you've got to go after it. And it looks like you've got the bases all covered." My point in sharing this with you is to simply get this across to you that there are people like this who in one way or another use religion to cover all the bases. This is what Jacob was doing when he stood on the second rung of the ladder. Let me just say this: there's a great temptation in American church life today for people to simply stand on the same rung and never to move off of it. To use our religion to get what we want - success, security, health and heaven. To become Jehovah's pal - to use God for our purposes rather than letting God use us for his purposes. I do not mean to imply that religion has nothing to do with these values at their best. Only this - I do mean to imply that Christ's kind of religion is much stronger and much bigger than all of this.

Jacob climbed another rung on the ladder. After the second nocturnal experience, he was an infinitely a greater and bigger man than he had ever been before. From self-seeking to self-righteousness, to self-denial. There's a hymn that we don't sing very often here in our church because the music's unfamiliar to most of you. As a matter of fact, I don't believe the hymn is in our hymn book. It's a hymn that our parents use to sing, and a hymn that our grandparents use to sing. The last line of each verse suggest one stage in the development of a person's religion. Jacob would understand this hymn for this is the ladder that he climbed.

The first verse ends "ALL OF SELF, AND NONE OF THEE!" The second verse ends "SOME OF SELF, AND SOME OF THEE!" The third verse ends, "LESS OF SELF AND MORE OF THEE!" And the fourth verse ends, "NONE OF SELF AND ALL OF THEE!"

Where do you stand on Jacob's ladder?

LET US PRAY:

Once again our Father, in these moments of quietness that come at the end of another service of worship, we would ask thee to speak to each one of us in the ways that mean the most to us. We know that thou wouldst have us rededicate our lives to thee. Use us for thy great purposes. And give to us that measure of peace that comes to those whose minds are stayed on Thee. We ask ~~thée~~ in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour. Amen