

"JACOB - HUMAN NATURE DOES CHANGE"

INTRODUCTION

The inspiration for the hymn we just sang, undoubtedly, was the account of Jacob's dream at Bethel in which he saw a ladder ascending from earth to heaven. But there is something about a ladder which is an appropriate symbol for Jacob's entire life story, for truly in his biography "every round goes higher, higher".

DEVELOPMENT

It could hardly have started much lower than it did. If ever there was a spoiled, selfish youngster, it was Jacob. You can't blame him entirely. There were Jacob's parents, Isaac and Rebekah, who proceeded to play favorites when their sons were born. "Isaac loved Esau.... but Rebekah loved Jacob". However a noble woman Rebekah may have been in other respects, she never would be listed among the great mothers of the Bible. Her love for Jacob was fierce and jealous and possessive. What he wanted, she helped him get, even when it meant deceit and trickery toward her husband and toward her other son.

So Jacob grew up - scheming and self-indulgent and shrewd. One day Esau came in from hunting in the fields to be greeted with the tempting odor of some stew that Jacob was preparing. And Esau, who was rough and impetuous, cried out, "Give me some of that stew. I'm famished". Jacob, who had been doing some thinking decided this was the ripe moment for action. "Sure" he replied. "Sure. Just one thing. Is it worth, maybe, your birthright?" Esau, who could never see further than the next meal or the next day, would have signed the world away to get that bowl of stew. "Anything you say", he agreed. "Right now that food is more important than my birthright".

The birthright meant certain advantages - both spiritual and material - for him who held it, and tradition made the eldest son, in this instance 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. Jacob and Rebekah knew well enough that they could never obtain Isaac's consent to their plan, so they were ready with the next chapter in the plot.

When Isaac was old and nearly blind, he called Esau in and said he had one special request to make - that Esau go hunting and then prepare the game in a particular dish that Isaac loved. And Rebekah overheard and decided that this was her chance. She dispatched Jacob to kill two goats from their own flock and prepared the most tempting dish in her cookbook. And then with all the skill of a make-up artist, she disguised Jacob as Esau and sent him bearing the steaming dish to Isaac. Isaac could not see very well, and he could not reason very well - and he fell into the trap. Supposing that he was bestowing his final blessing upon Esau, he proceeded to administer the blessing to Jacob instead.

For Esau there was nothing left but bitterness when he returned, and there was murder in his heart toward the brother who had outsmarted him. Jacob sensed that his life was not going to be a love feast if he stayed on the family estate, and on his mother's advice he decided this might be a good time for a visit with his uncle Laban - his mother's brother, who lived in Haran. So Jacob left very quickly and very quietly on what was to have been a short visit, but what proved to be a fourteen years sojourn.

THE DREAM

On the journey Jacob had a dream, and God was in the dream. It is the first time that God comes on the stage in the drama of Jacob's life. Up to this point it had been a one-man show - Jacob scheming, Jacob

seeking, and Jacob succeeding. And all of a sudden, here was God. This is the way the Bible describes the end of the dream:

"Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it'. And he was afraid."

Strange...how suddenly he sensed that life wasn't quite the self-centered, self-seeking game that he had made of it up to this point - that there was Another at the center of it all, with whom a person had to come to terms if there was going to be any meaning in it. Very well, then, Jacob would recognize God - indeed, more than that, he would use God. They would form a corporation - Jacob and God, Incorporated - and each would have certain duties and each would have certain dividends. And Jacob, who had suddenly become very religious, drew up the charter,

"If God will be with me, and will keep me....then the Lord shall be my God...and of all that thou givest me I will give the tenth to thee."

THE STORY CONTINUES

Then Jacob pushed on until he came to his uncle's lands. There he met Rachel and fell in love with her. It was hardly a whirlwind courtship, though, for Laban, who was Rachel's father, insisted that Jacob should work for him for seven years in return for his daughter's hand. There's a kind of poetry in Genesis at this point,

"So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her".

But then Laban maneuvered it so that he could get another seven years' work out of Jacob, and you know by now that Jacob is much more of a man than he was back when he was forever figuring short cuts to defraud Isaac, for Jacob went the second mile in his service.

After fourteen years Jacob decided that it was about time that he went home again. But while he had learned the meaning of honor in those years, he had hardly learned the meaning of humility. Now he proceeded to lord it over Laban, "Where would you have gotten without me? The Lord has blessed you wherever I turned" - and it was still Jacob and God, Incorporated, with Jacob as Chairman of the Board. There followed a bargain between Jacob and Laban about the division of the flocks - a bargain which Laban promptly broke, and while Jacob meticulously kept the letter of the agreement, he revealed that the goals of his corporation were still success and prestige and vengeance.

Then he started back to Beersheba with his family and his servants and his cattle and his possessions. There was only one thing that threatened to interfere with his homecoming day, and that was Esau. Strange, how yesterday's sins decline to recognize any statute of limitations. What if Esau was still breathing fire against him? He knew what he would do - he would appease his brother in advance. He would send his servants on ahead with an impressive parade of cattle as a gift which would surely melt any hardness in Esau's hearts.

And right there it was - at that juncture in the journey - that Jacob climbed up another round on his ladder. It was at night again, and the account

of Jacob wrestling with his adversary is clothed in so much Oriental imagery that it is hardly possible for us to know exactly what did happen - except this, that here was some experience through which Jacob was disciplined and chastened. It was dark and he was alone, and all the former props of self-confidence and conceit and possessions didn't help at all. And all his breezy religiosity didn't help much either - except that he did know that it should make some difference, and in the darkest part of the night he vowed to the unnamed wrestler,

"I will not let you go, unless you bless me".

Until when the sun come up, all the strutting and arrogance had gone out of him and all he could say was, "I have seen God face to face". It was no longer what he would have God do, but what God would have him do.

Do you remember the rest of the story, how Jacob went on to meet Esau, whose fury had long since burned out and whose welcome to his returning brother is in sharp contrast to the attitude of the elder brother in the New Testament who could not forgive the returning prodigal? And Jacob's remaining ways and days - while not always flawless - were nonetheless profoundly significant for Israel, not by any virtue of what he was, but by the purpose of God which would work through him.

SELF-SEEKING Notice, if you will, that there are three distinct rounds on Jacob's ladder, and inquire whether or not you are really climbing Jacob's ladder. On the first round the name of Jacob was synonymous with self-seeking. While he was a youth at home, Jacob was intent simply upon feathering his own nest, getting all that he could out of life by foul means or fair. He was the kind of person that we have in mind when we say, "He would cheat his own grandmother". He would and did cheat his own father and his own brother in acts which he thought would be for his own self-interest.

Everyone, I suppose, rests for a time on this round of self-seeking. When we are very young, we see ourselves as the world's capital, with all roads leading to our wants and our whims. There's no higher good, then, than to get what we want when we want it. Unfortunately, there is no chapter in Dr. Gesell's books on understanding children and adolescents in which we are told that at such and such an age we can expect a child or a young person to move on beyond that kind of selfish isolationism. This is not Dr. Gesell's fault. This is the fault of the individual, of the family, of society.

Some people spend their entire youth on the round of self-seeking. They forfeit competence in any subject or any field in school by compromises that will get them passing grades while they have a good time. Or they forfeit a thorough education for a quick job and a quick car. Or, they forfeit the deepest meanings of a home for sexual license. Pick up the paper any day and you will recognize Jacob at his lowest level in the accounts of the deeds and the misdeeds of young people who haven't begun to understand that there's some reason to their existence here beyond their immediate, selfish satisfactions.

It's even worse when some adults spend all of their lives on the round of self-seeking. You see it in its more subtle form in men in high places who betray public trust for private gain, in ordinary citizens who grab privileges and dodge responsibilities, in parents who will never let their children go to lead lives of their own.

SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

But fortunately, Jacob got beyond all that. After that dream at Bethel, when God became a fact in Jacob's life, he moved up one rung on the ladder. Then for a time the name of Jacob was synonymous with self-righteousness. There isn't any doubt but that Jacob was a better man in this stretch of his life. He prayed and he worshiped and he was decent and dependable. But he strutted and he smirked. He had discovered God, and he proposed to use God to enlarge his holdings and guarantee his security.

There was an almost incredible letter to a counselor in the Post one evening last Winter.

"Dear Abby,

I am 44 years old, well fixed financially, and would like to get married. I would like to meet a man about my age who enjoys going to Church. I belong to the First Methodist Church, Blessed Angels Roman Catholic Church and the Mount Zion Jewish Temple. I also attend the Christian Science Church regularly, but do take aspirin occasionally. Please help me find a man of good character who is interested in marriage and belongs to any one or all of the above mentioned churches."

And the counselor started her reply by commenting, "It looks like you've got the bases all covered." I do not know whether the letter was written by a wag or a thoroughly mixed-up person. But there are people like that - who in one way or another use religion to cover all the bases. Jacob did it, really. At the end of Act I in his life he was becoming completely fed up with his self-centeredness, and in trying to escape the consequences of his selfishness, he bumped into God. God always makes the difference and in Act II Jacob was scrubbed up and wearing clean clothes, but actually he is only a dry-cleaned version of the old Jacob. His goal was success, as the world spelled it, and he was sure that God would help him make it.

With all the emphasis on religion there is a temptation to stay on this second rung of Jacob's ladder. We know that complete self-centeredness isn't the answer because soon there are ashes in the mouth and wrinkles in the soul and like Jacob we simply can't get away from the fact of God. So we turn to religion, to see what it can do for us. We are tempted to see how we can use our religion to get what we want - success and security and health and heaven. I do not mean to imply that religion has nothing to do with these values at their best - but I do mean to imply that Christ's kind of religion is so much bigger than any of these.

SELF-DENIAL

So Jacob had another rung to climb on his ladder. After that nocturnal experience at the fords of Jabbok, the name of Jacob was synonymous with self-denial. From self-seeking to self-righteousness to self-denial. The record says that in struggling with his adversary, Jacob's thigh was thrown out of joint, and henceforth he was lame. But the lame Jacob was to be an infinitely better man than the Jacob who had not been lame. For in the process of that experience he had learned that being religious was not so much a question of how he could use God, but a question of how God could use him. The Lord said,

"Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel,"

and he promised that a nation and a company of nations should come from him.

RELATING IT TO JESUS

What is implicit in the life of Jacob is explicit in the life of Jesus. He made it abundantly clear that real religion did not result in riches, for at the cross the only estate that he left was a robe for which the soldiers gambled. He made it clear that real religion did not result in popularity, because at the cross his closest friends deserted Him. He made it abundantly clear that real religion did not necessarily result in long life, for at the cross He was 33 years old. Yet He did make it abundantly clear that real religion meant a surrender of the self and an opening of the door to a power and a will and a love that would never let go. He said there would be crosses and self-denial. He said there would be mysteries. He said there would be struggles of the soul. But He promised and He proved that through it all there would be God - leading and loving us on.

There's a hymn that we don't very often sing because the music isn't that familiar, but the last line of each verse suggests one stage in the development of a man's religion. Jacob would understand the hymn, for this is the ladder that he climbed. The first verses ends, "All of self, and none of Thee!" The second verse ends, "Some of self, some of Thee". The third verse ends, "Less of self, and more of Thee". The fourth verses ends, "None of self, and all of Thee!"

Where do we stand on that ladder? The question I leave with you is:

PRAYER

Help us, O God, to climb Jacob's ladder, rung by rung, until we too move from a life of selfish and self-centeredness, to a life of self-denial, putting You at the center. In the spirit of Jesus we pray. Amen