**Lesson 13**

**13-14 December 2021**

**Genesis 29 – 33**

***Bible Study Fellowship’s Perspective:*** The following comments on Jacob’s first recorded prayer were taken from Lesson 21, page 2, of the BSF course on Genesis. As they point out, these seven components of Jacob’s prayer can help us today as we pray.

* **Praise God.** Jacob directly addressed God in prayer (Genesis 32:9a). Acknowledge your relationship with God and *say what is true about Him*.
* **Remember God’s Word.** Jacob intentionally prayed God’s command and promise back to Him (Genesis 32:9b with 31:3, 13). *Repeat the promises in God’s Word,* which are truer than your fear or doubts.
* **Confess your sin and unworthiness.** Jacob recognized he had no right to God’s blessing and acknowledged God’s blessing, despite his sinfulness (32:10a). God answers prayer because of His mercy, not our worthiness. *Confess your utter dependence on God and specific sin* in full confidence of God’s grace.
* **Thank God for past mercies.** Jacob recounted God’s undeserved kindness and faithfulness to him (32:10b). *A thankful heart always strengthens faith.* Recounting God’s record of faithfulness gives confidence in present and future struggles.
* **Present your specific requests to God.** Jacob clearly stated his request, “Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau” (32:11a). *Praying specifically allows you to identify specific needs, recognize God’s intervention and give Him the glory* when He answers prayer.
* **Honestly pour out your heart to God.** Jacob exposed his emotions to the Lord – “…for I am afraid he will come and attack me…” (32:11b). God understands you completely and is never shocked by what you feel. *You can express your reality to God*, trusting His compassion and knowing He is stronger than what you feel.
* **Believe God and personally apply His specific promises.** Jacob remembered that God’s promises secured his future (32:12). *Expect God to answer. With* ***bold faith*** *and* ***humble******submission,*** trust God in specific ways based on what He has declared is true in His Word.

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**Jen Wilkin, *God of Covenant* video #6: *Exile and Reconciliation***

**Review** – Many significant things happen in these four chapters of Genesis. We have talked about Genesis being the “book of beginnings” and how it answers some foundational questions for *anyone* who studies the Bible, but it particularly addresses some issues that would have been very significant for its original audience, i.e. the Israelites of Moses’ day. Chapters 12-50 specifically tells them how the nation of Israel came to live in Egypt. These chapters also reveal where the twelve tribes of Israel came from.

**Jacob’s Patterns of Behavior** – It is very helpful to read the story of Jacob and Rachel with fresh eyes, seeing this couple in light of what has come before. Some commentators have presented their story as a “great romance”, without noting what Jacob’s character is like at this point in his life. He is not a great moral person, but a great deceiver when he marries Rachel. He has demonstrated a pattern of self-reliance and of trying to gain the good gifts God had already promised him in the wrong way, not waiting for God to bring His promises to pass in His way and time. This pattern emerged in a home where favoritism was practiced, with one parent favoring the older son, and the other favoring Jacob.

As Jacob travels to Paddan Aram to find a wife, he thinks that he is following the example of how his father gained his mother as a bride. He would have heard their story many, many times over the years. But is gaining a wife the real reason Jacob is going to Paddan Aram? He is actually fleeing from the wrath of his brother Esau, and his mother had said, “Why don’t you go get a wife while your brother cools off.” He has a dream, and he makes a conditional pledge to God, that IF He does certain things for him, then Jacob will do certain things for God. He is still a very immature person. He is someone who *knows* God, but does not have relational depth with Him and does not trust Him the way he should. At this point in his life he is more interested in the *benefits* of having a relationship with God than he is with *God Himself*. We will see him mature more and more as he encounters very difficult circumstances in the chapters ahead.

**Jacob Meets Rachel** – When Jacob arrived at the well near Haran, he must have been pleased that he had safely arrived where he had wanted to come. And when the shepherds at the well said that they actually knew Laban, “and here comes his daughter Rachel now,” he must have thought immediately of how his father met his mother. He notices not only Rachel’s beauty, but also how much livestock she is leading. And his deeply emotional response—kissing Rachel and weeping aloud—suggest that he is giving more significance to all these events than would normally have been given.

**Leah and Rachel** – We quickly discover that Laban had two daughters, Leah and Rachel. Leah’s name means “wild cow” while Rachel’s means “ewe lamb”. We are also told that Leah had some sort of defect, which may have been a vision problem or it may have been some kind of physical defect that made her unattractive. So Laban has a problem. He has an older daughter who is basically unmarriageable because she doesn’t meet the cultural standard of being beautiful and desirable. But he does have pretty little Rachel, and he immediately begins scheming to see how he can work all this to his advantage.

**Leah** – Think about what Leah’s life has been like. She has always been the unfavored one, the one that everyone fails to notice because they are so drawn to Rachel. In her culture, as in ours today, people favor the beautiful. Leah was the victim of a constant unfavorable comparison, everywhere she went. She was either “invisible” to other people or disdained by them. She dealt with the constant awareness that she “wasn’t enough.”

**The Great Deception** – At the end of the agreed upon seven years, Jacob is eager to consummate his marriage. Laban throws a big party, and gives Leah to Jacob instead of Rachel, although Jacob isn’t aware of the switch until the next morning. We read this and wonder how that was even possible. But remember that brides of that era were heavily veiled, and that Laban’s family lives in the middle of a very dark desert. Not only that, but Jacob probably drank enough at the party to dull his senses. Remember how Isaac’s senses deceived him when Jacob came to steal the blessing from Esau? It is deeply ironic that now Jacob’s senses will deceive him.

But what about Leah? Laban didn’t ask her what she thought about his great plan. She did not have “agency”; that is, she did not have permission or power to refuse to do what her father told her to do. She had to go along with the plan. Imagine how painful it must have been for her to hear Jacob’s angry protest when he confronted Laban and demanded, “Why have you deceived me?” And think how Laban’s words—“It is not the custom in this place to give the younger daughter in marriage before the *firstborn*”—must have stung Jacob, who had stolen the rights of the firstborn in his own family.

**Marriage and God’s Will** – Jacob agreed to Laban’s new plan of sleeping with Leah for the customary “bridal week” and then he takes Rachel as his wife also. But what did we learn about marriage in Genesis 2? *GOD’s* plan for marriage was that it be between ONE man and ONE woman who then become ONE flesh. In a perfect world, when Jacob woke up and discovered he had married Leah, he should have taken his wife and gone home. But he didn’t. We need to remember that **just because we see polygamy in scripture doesn’t mean that God smiles on it.** In fact, if we trace the stories out, we see that *every time* one of these men has taken a second wife or a concubine, it has resulted in a whole line of the enemies of Israel being born. What we see in the life of Jacob is NOT a beautiful story of how he got twelve offspring. It is rather the story of how God worked through a terrible circumstance to accomplish His will anyway.

**History Repeated** – Jacob grew up in a home where there were favorites. Now he becomes the master of a home where there are favorites. He doesn’t merely not love Leah: he hates her! (verse 31) Every time he looks at her, he is reminded of how he was made a fool in the eyes of everyone around him, and he despises her. God enables Leah to bear four sons in succession, and each time she thinks that *this time* she will gain the love of her husband, because she has fulfilled the expectations of her culture and produced sons to carry on the family line. But each time she is disappointed.

**Rachel’s Response: Envy** – Genesis 30:1 tells us that when Rachel realized that she was not bearing any children, she envied her sister. Think about it. This is probably the first time in her entire life that she has envied Leah. She has always been the beautiful, favored one in the family, both as a daughter and as a wife. But now Leah has something that she can’t have, children. She says a very ironic thing to Jacob when she demands, “give me children, or I will die!” In fact, God will eventually give her two sons, and she will die giving birth to the second one.

**Gaining Children Through Bilhah, Her Servant** – Rachel’s solution to her childless state of giving her servant to Jacob as a concubine was commonly done at that time. Legally, all children of such a union were considered to belong to the husband and wife who owned the slave, not to the concubine herself. Rachel says that she has *wrestled* with her sister and won. This is reminiscent of Jacob and Esau wrestling together in their mother’s womb.

**The “Baby Wars” Continue** – As Leah and Rachel continue to try to get the upper hand in their relationship with Jacob, the names they give to their babies reveal the unhappy nature of their strife. Leah names Zilpah’s second child “Asher” *(happy),* saying that she is happy—but she obviously is not. In fact, neither woman finds happiness or fulfillment in what is going on in their lives as they compete for Jacob’s favor. Leah will apparently go to her grave never having been chosen by Jacob. BUT God *did* choose her to be the human forebear of His beloved Son when it was time for Christ to become man and dwell among us. Leah’s son Judah is the ancestor of Jesus.

**God Steps In Again** – God continues to bless Jacob with greatly increased flocks, just as He had promised—and despite Jacob’s superstitious efforts to gain wealth his own way, by using striped and speckled sticks. God tells Jacob that it is time for him to return home, and He refers to Himself as the “God of Bethel” (Genesis 31:13). This seems to be an indication that this is the place to which Jacob should return with his family.

**The So Called “Mizpah Benediction”** – When Jacob and Laban make the agreement at Mizpah, it was not actually a warm benediction at all. What they are actually doing is saying, “**May the Lord keep an eye on you,** because I don’t trust you.”

**Jacob’s Prayer** – Beginning in Genesis 32:9 we see Jacob doing something for the first time: he prays. He calls on the “God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac” but does not go on to say, “…and my God.” He isn’t there yet, although his faith and his knowledge of God are growing.

**Jacob Wrestles with God** – Genesis 32:24-32 records a very strange event in which God in the form of a man and Jacob wrestle together. Verse 25 says that “the man couldn’t defeat Jacob”. This doesn’t mean that Jacob was stronger than God, but rather that Jacob kept pushing and pushing against God and wouldn’t let up. So God faithfully wounds him so that he will have to give in to God. And then God asks Jacob to tell him his name so that Jacob will have opportunity to confess his sinful conduct. In effect, Jacob says, “I am a deceiver, that’s who I am. It colors every aspect of my being and affects everything that I do and every person in my life. I have deceived my brother and my father and Laban.” So Jacob’s very name is a confession of his character.

Then God does what He does so very well: He renames Jacob and gives him a new identity. The name *Israel* means either “he strives with God” or “God strives”. Scholars can’t decide which is the better interpretation, and that is good in a way, because God contends both *with* us and *for* us. But then Jacob asks God what *His* name is, and God does not give him an answer. In fact, He asks Jacob why he wants to know His name and thereby makes Jacob confront his motive for asking the question. In that day and time, it was believed that knowing someone’s name gave you a measure of power over him. God wants Jacob to know that He is the one in charge, and He is the one who names and renames a person.

**Pattern of God’s Dealing with Man** – Jacob will walk with a limp for the rest of his life after this encounter with God. This incident in Jacob’s life shows us a typical pattern of how God deals with man: He breaks, He blesses, and He renames. What He did with Jacob He has done with every one of us. We wrestle and contend with God, trying to get our own way. He allows us to come to the end of our own resources, and He breaks us. Then He gives us a new name and calls us the children of God. But we never walk with a swagger again.

These same three elements—broken, bless, and rename—occur in the Lord’s Supper. The bread is broken, the participants are blessed, and a new covenant (a new name) is pronounced. The sacrament pictures a Savior who was broken for us and who received the blessing of His Father, along with the Name that is above all names.

**What’s In a Name?** – To Jacob’s relief and amazement, Esau meets him in *friendship*. But Jacob continues to deceive. He tells Esau that he will meet him in Seir, but he has no intention of going there. Instead, he went to Shechem and built an altar there. But we would have expected him to return to Bethel, not Shechem. His decision to go to Shechem will play out to his harm and the harm of his family. This is unfortunate, but it is very significant to note the name that Jacob gives to this place. He names the altar he built “El-Elohim-Israel”, which means “God, the God of Israel”. At last Jacob is saying, “You are the God of *ME*.” (Note: we modern readers see the word “Israel” and think of the nation. But the nation hadn’t come into existence yet. Israel was Jacob’s new personal name, and at last he realizes that the God of Abraham and Isaac is also *his* God.)

**What’s Next for Jacob/Israel?** – We would expect that he would be referred to in scripture only as Israel from this point on (just as Abram was always referred to as Abraham once God gave him that new name). But instead his name sort of waffles between Jacob and Israel for the rest of his life . . . and so does his behavior. Being broken, blessed and renamed is an *initial way* of coming to God, but it is also something that we need to be reminded of repeatedly.

**Leah as a Type of Christ** – A type is someone or something that points you toward something else that will be more fully revealed later in scripture. So what all do we see in Leah that points us toward Christ?

* There was nothing in her appearance that would make her desirable.
* She was one who was rejected.
* Yet she is the one who was ultimately given the place of honor.

**Applications** – There was a lot of hope expressed in Leah’s story, but not a hope that she lived to see fulfilled. What about us? Is there hopelessness in the story of our lives? Leah did not see her “plot line” resolved neatly in her lifetime . . . but it was resolved beautifully in God’s timeline. Can you trust the Lord with your current circumstance? What if the rejection you are enduring is never resolved in your lifetime, but bears fruit in the lives of your children or your children’s children? Is that enough for you?