

GENESIS

Lesson 30 - Chapters 31 and 32

In Genesis 31 we saw that things had turned sour between Jacob and his father-in-law Lavan. Even Lavan's 2 daughters.....Leah and Rachel.....who were Jacob's wives, felt their father had broken trust with them. They even accused him of not so much giving them in marriage to Jacob like a joyful father would, but selling them as though they were slaves. And, they assumed (undoubtedly correctly) that their father had no intentions of seeing to it that any part of the family estate would ever become theirs. As a result, Rachel stole the family gods from their father, and took them with her as Jacob and his family snuck away while Lavan was off tending some sheep. It was the custom of that day that the family member who physically possessed those little god-idols, was to be the inheritor of the family wealth and power. Jacob had no idea Rachel had done this thing.

Jacob and his family make their break for freedom. But, Lavan soon finds out they're gone and mounts a posse to go after him. During his search for them, God comes to Lavan in a dream and warns him not to speak either good or bad to Jacob. This simply means that Lavan is not to try to harm Jacob. But, it points out something kind of interesting: God speaks to the unbelieving. This isn't the first time we've seen Yehoveh speaking to pagans, and it won't be the last. Lavan was a spiritualist. He accepted many gods. So, it was no big deal for him to accept that Jacob's God was quite real; Jacob's god was just another of a seemingly limitless number of gods. Let us never think that Yehoveh only interacts with, or speaks to, Believers. He will communicate with, and use, whomever He wishes; after all, the Scriptures even tell of a time He spoke through a donkey. At the same time, let us also not think that because God has spoken to someone, that THAT is an indication that person is a Believer. Lavan loved to invoke Yehoveh's name when speaking to Jacob, but not because he revered God Almighty or bowed down to Him. He did it in hopes of influencing Jacob, or Yehoveh, for his own selfish purposes.

Lavan and his men catch up to Jacob in the northern part of Canaan, in an area called Gilead that will someday belong to Gad, one of Jacob's sons. Lavan, never at a loss for a good lie, scolds Jacob for leaving in secret, thus not permitting Lavan to throw him a farewell party and give his daughters and grandchildren the proper good-bye. Yeah, right. And, of course, immediately upon the insincere words of greeting, Lavan inquires about his missing gods, which is the REAL crux of the matter. Jacob says, hey, if you can find them, not only are you welcome to them, but the person who took them will be executed! Uh-oh. Rachel is now in grave danger, and she knows it.

But, Rachel hides them from her father by sitting on them, so that when he searches her tent, he doesn't find them. She tells her father that she isn't standing up because she's on her monthly cycle. And, her father doesn't demand she stand up so he can search NOT because he feels sensitive toward her because of her current condition; rather, it is because he would

become ritually impure by coming into contact with her or whatever she is sitting on. The concept of a woman being unclean and transmitting that ritual uncleanness while on her cycle is something that Moses will be instructed on 500 years into the future. But, it was also a law and tradition that was already in existence amongst almost all cultures long before Moses, even before Jacob. That Rachel would intentionally transmit her uncleanness to those gods she was sitting on was unthinkable to Lavan, so it apparently didn't even enter his mind that such was even a possibility.

Jacob, having no idea that Rachel actually HAS those idols, now is really angry at Lavan's accusation, especially after a thorough search fails to produce them. Jacob has had it. He now lays into Lavan, explaining that 20 years of servitude ought to be quite enough, thank you, for two wives and some sheep. And, he tells Lavan, he was well aware that Lavan had been cheating him, constantly changing the terms of the deal. Jacob is now in his 90's.

Lavan's answer is typical Lavan: everything you have is mine!! He had never been able to accept the idea that Jacob's wealth, which had grown primarily from the high birthrate of discolored animals Lavan didn't want in the first place, had actually equaled or exceeded his own. However, in a rather ingenuous display of graciousness, Lavan says, let's bury the hatchet since he certainly doesn't want to be an enemy of his own daughters. So, basically they make a treaty with one another not to war, put up a pile of stones as a both a testament to their agreement and a sort of boundary marker, and they have the typical covenant meal to seal the agreement. By the way, the setting up of "standing stones", or "stone piles or columns" as boundary markers is in use today. I can remember Uranium prospecting with my father when I was a small child, and we would occasionally run across a pile of stones, or now and then my father would erect his own, as claim markers. Though this passage doesn't go into full detail about the covenant procedure, it does mention a sacrifice, which of course would have been a clean animal, which has been cut up, and the pieces divided, into two piles, with Jacob and Lavan walking between the pieces as a sign of agreement. And, no covenant is complete with out a sworn oath, which is what we read in V53.

An interesting little aside to all this is that the scriptures tell us that they each named the pile of stones, the boundary markers, according to their native language: Jegarsahudutha is a form of Chaldean, and Galeed is Hebrew. They both mean, "pile of witnesses".

The primary terms of the treaty are that Jacob is to treat Lavan's daughters well, and that he is to take no other wives. Jacob adhered to this agreement.

Let's move on to Genesis chapter 32.

READ GEN 32 all

In order to place what occurs next in the proper context, allowing us to draw the more realistic mental picture as we explore Jacob's life, we need to understand that Jacob was now an elderly man. Depending on who's chronology you adhere to, Jacob was anywhere from a little less than 90 to close to 100 years old.

Now depending on your version, the first 3 verses can be labeled a little differently as to when one verse ends, and the next begins. It doesn't matter, because the text remains essentially the same.

This chapter begins with Laban saying goodbye to his two daughters, Rachel and Leah, and to all his grandchildren. Most bibles will say he kissed his SONS and daughters goodbye. It was common terminology to refer to male grandchildren as sons in those days and that is what is being referred to here.

Then we encounter a strange thing: it says, "The angels of God met him"...they met Jacob. Now, for sure, the "angels of God" are exactly that, because the original Hebrew is Malachim Elohim.....messengers (plural) of Elohim, God. But, we're not really given any more information than that. Perhaps this was an assurance that Jacob was back in the Promised Land, or the angels were a more visible presence confirming that God was indeed with him. It is interesting to note that upon Jacob's journey to LEAVE the land of Canaan, Jacob encountered angels (at Beit-el), so upon his journey to RETURN he also encounters angels. In any case, Jacob was impressed enough to name the place Mahanaim.....meaning.....two camps.

Now, V3 gives me an opportunity to kind of accent a point that I made a few weeks ago: and that concerns the word "Malach".....messenger. I told you that in strict Hebrew, when Malach is used by itself, it denotes a messenger of some sort.....usually a HUMAN messenger. But, when the word Yahweh, or Elohim, or some other title of God is attached to Malach, then it is speaking of **heavenly** messengers.....spirit beings.....angels. In verse 1, we have heavenly messengers. Here, in V3, we see that Jacob sent some Malachim (messengers) ahead, to find Jacob's brother Esau. And, we can be sure these are HUMAN messengers, because the word Malachim is used without attaching any Hebrew word for God to it.

For Jacob, he has just completed his unpleasant encounter with Lavan, but now he has to face his brother, Esau, who has sworn to kill him for swindling him out of his blessing.

Well, the messengers return to Jacob, but it's a good news, bad news report. The good news is that they indeed found Esau and presented him with Jacob's message. The bad news is that Esau didn't indicate anything more than he was coming to meet Jacob with 400 men. This scared Jacob right to the core. He had not long ago felt Laban's wrath and dealt with it.....but right was on his side in that case. How about his situation with Esau, though? Esau was the recipient of wrong doing by Jacob; deceit of the highest level that robbed Esau of what BOTH of them felt was Esau's birthright..... and Jacob had to wonder if time had soothed Esau's desire to kill him.....or not.

Esau's response to the messengers must have convinced Jacob that his worst fears would be realized, because Jacob ordered that his family be divided into two groups, and that he would stay with one hoping that if Esau extracted his revenge on Jacob, perhaps the 2nd group (presumably located elsewhere) would survive. It was the dividing of his group into two camps from which the name of this place came: Mahanaim, two camps. And, of course, now that all the deceit and guilt of his life was suddenly manifesting itself in a situation from which there appeared no escape, Jacob falls on his knees before God and prays. How often we have

found ourselves running ahead of God or lagging behind, or just plain rebelling or doing wrong, and then asking God to rescue us from the natural consequences of those sins. Jacob was now doing the same.

At the same time, we see how time and his experience of walking with God have changed Jacob. He acknowledges that he deserves nothing of the wondrous bounty and protection that the Lord God has provided for him.

The area that Jacob encamped is well known, today. It is called the “Jabbok”, and it lies east of the Jordan River, at about a midpoint between the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee; the Jordan was clearly visible in the distance from the bank of the Jabbok where Jacob was standing. It is a beautiful place: green, lush, and fertile. The Bible tells us that Jacob sent several flocks ahead of him accompanied by his messengers, his emissaries that were to offer these flocks as a gift of repentance to Esau. The amount of the gift was enormous, as it consisted of 550 animals. It was truly a gift fit for paying tribute to a king. Then, Jacob took his immediate family, crossed the Jabbok, and then parted company with them, apparently planning to face Esau alone.

It is here that we encounter one of the stranger episodes in the entire Bible: suddenly, Jacob finds himself wrestling with some “man”. The Hebrew for this word “man” is “ish”, which can mean man, or husband, or even a mighty or great man. But, the thing to get here is that this man SEEMED, to Jacob, to be flesh and blood. We are told this wrestling match went on all night long, and when “the Man” concluded Jacob was not going to give up, he dislocated Jacob’s hip with but a touch.

So, here in verse 25, it says Jacob wrestled with an “ish”, a man. But, in verses 29 and 31, it is made clear that this being is divine, because Jacob says, “I have seen Elohim face to face”. Hosea 12:4 speaks of this encounter, and clearly states that this was a heavenly being that Jacob fought with. So, why this reference first saying Jacob’s opponent was a man, and then saying it was Elohim?

Let’s talk about angels for just a moment. There has been so much confusion in Christianity as to just what an angel is, what the appearance of one portends, and so on. The first thing to understand is that in its most foundational meaning, an angel is first and foremost a bearer of the divine word. An angel **brings** a divine message from God, OR, he **carries out** a divine command from God. Today, we have the expression “don’t kill the messenger”; meaning, look, the person who is telling me something of importance isn’t presenting me with his own words, or even his own view; he’s just been hired to bring to me the instruction from someone higher than himself. He’s not responsible for the content of the message, other than his duty to carefully and accurately deliver it. That’s an angel.

Yet, the Bible will use the word in a number of contexts, and I think, often, metaphorically. For instance, in the Bible prophets and priests were at times called “angels of the Lord”or more aptly, MESSENGERS of the divine word. In fact Haggai and Malachi are referred to in the Scriptures as what is usually translated as “angels of the Lord”. Now, were Haggai and Malachi divine, spiritual beings? No. But, as men who were simply passing on to others God’s

instructions to mankind, they certainly qualify as being messengers of God.

We'll also see, in Holy Scripture, the distinctions between the bearer of the divine message (an angel of the Lord), and Yehoveh Himself, being blurred. We see that in the Burning Bush episode, and with Hagar who was spoken to by an angel, but she responded directly to God, and in a number of other scenes as well.

But, that shouldn't surprise us, or seem strange. Because we followers of Yeshua find ourselves faced with a similar blurred distinction in trying to comprehend just who Yeshua is. He is a man, but he is also God. We find that exact scenario here with Jacob as the being he wrestles with is alternately called a man, an "ish", and God, Elohim. Think of this as well: is not Jesus also called "the Word"; or, in it's most complete Biblical sense, "the divine Word of God". Jesus was the **bearer** of the divine word (as an angel), he WAS the divine word (God), and he was also a flesh and blood human (a man). Now if you can fully comprehend that, see me after class so I can meet the first person that could. So all these blurred distinctions of where God leaves off and angels begin, we find in Yeshua, the man/god/angel.

Now disabled by this divine messenger, Jacob STILL wouldn't quit, saying, "I will not let you go till you bless me". Obviously, Jacob came to know that this was no ordinary man he was grappling with.

Over the years, I have heard many teachings on this event. I have also heard that this never actually happened, that it was just a fairy tale. I've heard that this was added to the Holy Scriptures many centuries later. I've heard that this is just allegory.

But, I am quite convinced that this is none of the above; that it was quite real. What we have here is a scene that is at once literal and symbolic; symbolic because all Believers must go through a time when we must wrestle with God over control of our lives. And, if we are to truly apprehend that life which God has for us, a time must come when, by our own choice, through absolute surrender, we must leave our tattered history behind and start a new history with God as Lord of our lives. Yet, invariably, the scars of the past will come with us, and we'll have to deal with it. Even more, sometimes we will pay a price to leave behind our rebellious ways, and go forward into new life. Thus was the case with Jacob, as he now inherited a permanent disability as he crossed over from a foreign place into the Promised Land.

How I wish it was so, that when we first recognize our salvation, or when after years of having been saved we finally decide to live it out, that our earthly past could be as dead as our old natures. Too often well-meaning Pastors tell converts that their slates have been cleaned; what they forget to tell them is that though spiritually we are forgiven, that does not end the natural consequences of what our sin natures have caused. In some way or another, we will live out the rest of our lives regretting our foolishness. Jacob will walk with a limp for his remaining days; an inescapable testament to his having fought with God for almost a hundred years, until he finally submitted instead of attempting to achieve a balance of power.

Jacob had always won against men, before, with his own skills and cunning, often mixed with deceit. But, when he recognized that what he was wrestling was far more than flesh and blood,

he knew he could not win as he always had.....and so, instead, gave up and asked to be BLESSED. And, like most of us, we cannot seem to arrive at this point until we are broken and disabled. If we take the most literal possible sum of Jacob's name it means "the cunning self-helpful supplanter", and how well it characterized Jacob's life up till now. But, because Jacob yielded to God, he was to have a new destiny and it would be reflected in his new name: "Israel".....a prince with God. From here on in the Biblical narrative, we see a new Jacob. No more does he rely on himself, his fleshly ways, he rests in God's strength. And, he will be called Israel.

I cannot help but recall my Ishmaelite brother in Christ Tass's story about his coming to Lord. About how as a Palestinian, fighting against Israel, they could never seem to defeat the Jews. That, like the average Muslim Arab living today, there was the deepest frustration and anger that leads to irrational hatred over Israel because it was incomprehensible that 200 million Arabs could not defeat 6 million Jews. That the combined Arab armies that dwarfed Israel's were defeated time after time, and brought nothing but humiliation to the Arab world. After coming to Christ, Tass suddenly realized why they had never been able to defeat Israel: he finally understood that the Arabs and Muslims who thought that their enemy was the Jews..... had actually been fighting God. And, when we fight God, there is absolutely no chance of victory on our terms. In the most ironic way, our victory in God must occur by the defeat of ourselves.

This is exactly what was happening in this scene with Jacob, and it has happened, or WILL happen, to every Believer who finally surrenders his will to Yehoveh's.

Let me end this chapter by pointing out something that is in some ways obvious, but in others we slide right over it. Verse 33 starts by saying: "that is why the children of Israel **to this day**....." and then goes on to explain why the sciatic nerve (called sinew in our Bibles) is removed from animals and not eaten as meat. The observation is that redaction has taken place. The writer of these passages.....traditionally said to be Moses....is looking BACK. At least part of this was written from the perspective of a time future to when the events of Jacob and the wrestling with this angel took place. And, from the viewpoint of a time when a Tradition had been developed to remove the sciatic nerve from animals to be eaten and or sacrificed, in honor of this day when Jacob had his hip dislocated, as he was given a new name that described his new NATURE.....Israel.

Further, from a historic viewpoint, it is at this moment.....in Genesis 32 verse 29, that the nation of Israel is established.