

Defilement that Delays

Series: Jacob Have I Loved

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In our last study we looked in chapter 32 at the account of Jacob's midnight struggle with the God/man, the fateful event in his life when he came face-to-face with himself, and came to the end of himself as a result. Though he emerged from this encounter a broken man, he discovered a new source of strength--a wisdom and power from above that he could count on. His name was changed from Jacob, "the deceitful one," to Israel, "one who prevails with God," "a prince with God." As we saw, both won--the God/man won, in that he prevailed against Jacob, and Jacob won, because he submitted to the God/man. The course of his life was dramatically different as a result. His combativeness gave way to a dogged dependence upon God. His life was not easy from this point on, but he had a resource, a source of strength and wisdom, upon which he could rely.

In chapter 33 we come to the event he feared most: his meeting with Esau. Jacob had spent a sleepless night, had reactivated his ulcers, in preparation for this meeting with his brother whom he had not seen for twenty years, the brother he had wronged deeply, whose rights he had usurped. He dreaded this meeting, and made extensive plans to appear in the best possible light. It was through this anxiety that God met him and showed him his tendency to trust in his own schemes and plans, rather than relying upon the God of Israel, the God who had appeared to him at Bethel.

But how different than he dreaded his meeting with Esau actually turns out to be! Though he proceeds much as he had planned, Esau is no longer a threat. And Jacob is at the head of the column, instead of hiding behind as originally planned. He goes out to meet Esau, trusting not in his plans but in the Lord, and aware that God is going to prepare the way for him. This chapter reveals the results of his trust. Esau meets him with an embrace instead of the expected spear thrust. He throws his arms about his neck and weeps, and assures him of his love and continuing protection, and his desire to be again a brother to Jacob. This the Lord has brought about.

Then Esau goes back to Mount Seir, and Jacob promises to visit him. There is no record in the Scriptures of a visit, but there are clues throughout the rest of Jacob's history which indicate that he and Esau had continuing contact during the years Jacob lived in the Promised Land. So these two brothers were reunited, and the family which had been fractured by Jacob's scheming was knit together again. Then we read in verse 17,

And Jacob journeyed to Succoth; and built for himself a house, and made booths for his livestock, therefore the place is named Succoth.

He travels about five miles downstream toward the Jordan River from Peniel, the place where he had wrestled with the God/man, and there he builds a house, and booths for his cattle. The Hebrew word "succoth" means "booths". Is it not strange that Jacob would establish himself, put down roots, on the wrong side of the Jordan River? He was not in Canaan. God had told him to leave Haran, where he had spent the previous twenty years, and travel down to the Promised Land, back to Canaan, back to Bethel, where God had appeared to him at first. There at Bethel he was to reestablish his relationship to God. Yet Jacob seems incapable of following the Lord's directions.

He remains in Succoth for several years, and seems to have no desire to enter the Promised Land. We wonder what inhibited Jacob, what delayed him.

Verses 18 through 20 record a further delay:

Now Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Paddan-aram, and camped before the city. And he bought the piece of land where he had pitched, his tent, from the hand of the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, for one hundred pieces of money. Then he erected there an altar, and called it El-Elohe-Israel [God, the God of Israel].

It appears that Jacob understands the nature of his relationship with God. He builds an altar there in the land of Canaan to the Lord who had revealed himself uniquely as the God of Israel, the God of Jacob. But again, he seems unable to move on to Bethel, the place God had told him to go. Instead, he puts down roots in Shechem. As best as I can determine, he lived there for seven years. So for ten years after his encounter with the angel at Peniel, he seems to be resisting the Lord's will. Something is retarding progress in his life, keeping him from fulfilling totally God's plan in his life.

In Jacob's time, Shechem evidently was a beautiful place. Canaan was much more fertile in those days, and there were vineyards which covered the mountains surrounding the city. Shechem was located in a high pass between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim. This was where Abraham had pitched his tent when he first came into the land of Canaan, and he had erected an altar there. I mentioned earlier in this series that there is an account of a young Egyptian named Sinuhe who traveled through this area just about the same time that Jacob dwelt there. He described the region around Shechem in much the same terms as did Moses' spies upon their return from their mission into the land. They reported that it was a land flowing with milk and honey. Sinuhe described it as a land where there was more wine than water—a beautiful, verdant, fertile territory. It must have appeared very attractive to Jacob.

The people who lived in Shechem were Hivites, descendants of Ham through his son, Canaan. They are called Horites or Hurians in other places in Scripture and in secular literature—a very populous tribe. Evidently they extended every hospitality to Jacob and he felt comfortable with them. We know, however, that the Canaanites were grossly immoral. They had a very twisted, distorted mythology which they acted out in religious rituals built around the worship of sex. We will see the effect this has on Jacob's household. They are touched by the immorality of the Canaanites around them. It seems so strange that Jacob would want to stay there. There was really nothing there for him, and God kept calling him back to Bethel. Yet for ten years Jacob resisted. What was wrong?

In chapter 34 there is an account of a terrible disaster which overcame Jacob and his family. Jacob had a young daughter, Dinah, the eldest daughter of Leah, who at this time must have been from fifteen to seventeen years old (she was seven when they left Haran). Leah had six sons before Dinah, the first daughter born to the household, and evidently she was highly loved, the favorite of her brothers. She went out one day to visit the daughters of the land. It was very dangerous and foolish in those days for a young woman to go unattended. Shechem, the son of Hamor the Hivite, assaulted her, violated her.

As the story unfolds through the rest of the chapter, Shechem loves this girl. The Hebrew says he "spoke to her heart." And he takes her into his house. Hamor, his father, goes to Jacob to appeal for her hand in marriage.

Jacob's sons, her brothers, contrive a plot. They apparently agree and they pretend to establish a relationship with the Hivites, agree to intermarry with them and share their flocks and lands. But underlying this is a scheme to annihilate them. They say, "In order for us to intermarry with you, all males must be circumcised." The Hivites comply and to a man they are circumcised. The passage tells us that on the third day, when the men are especially incapacitated, Simeon and Levi, two of Dinah's brothers, assault the city and murder all the men. Picking up the account at verse 27,

Jacob's sons [the other brothers] came upon the slain and looted the city, because they had defiled their sister. They took their flocks and their herds and their donkeys, and that which was in the city and that which was in the field; and they captured and looted all their wealth and all

their little ones and their wives, even all that was in the houses. Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, "You have brought trouble on me ["trouble" is from a Hebrew root which means to muddy waters-"See how you have muddied the waters and confused my relationship with the Hivites!"], by making me odious among the inhabitants of the land, among the Canaanites and the Perizzites; and my men being few in number, they will gather together against me and attack me and I shall be destroyed, I and my household." But they [the brothers] said, "Should he treat our sister as a harlot?"

Represented in this passage are two normal reactions to evil. In Jacob's case, there seems to be a desire to appease the Hivites, not to create conflict, not to upset the status quo. On the other hand, his sons' response was one of vengeance. Both reactions perennially are equally sterile. Now, how can you explain this? This is Jacob, who at Bethel has received a vision of the God who answers in the time of distress, Jacob, who wrestled with the angel, who seems to understand all that God intends to be to him. And yet he seems totally unable to act. He is completely restrained. For ten years he delays. What is wrong?

It is interesting, in looking at this passage, to see that Scripture does not pass judgment either on Jacob's actions or the actions of his sons. But the history recorded in Scripture reveals the final outcome of the actions of Simeon and Levi. In Genesis 49 there is what amounts to Jacob's last will and testament. It is a prediction of the things which will come to pass in the lives of the descendants of his sons. Beginning in verse 5, he says,

**Simeon and Levi are brothers;
Their swords are implements of violence.
[That is, instead of being tools for justice, they are to become tools for anarchy, violence.]
Let my soul not enter into their council;
Let not my glory be united with their assembly;
Because in their anger they slew men,
And in their self-will they lamed oxen.**

[It appears that they were so outraged they not only slew the male inhabitants of Shechem but also needlessly maimed animals.]

**Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce;
And their wrath, for it is cruel.
I will disperse them in Jacob,
And scatter them in Israel.**

That occurred in history. Simeon was a tribe which settled in the southern part of Canaan and early was conquered by the Moabites. Those who were left were assimilated into Judah, thus ceasing to exist as a tribe. The Levites were priests scattered throughout the entire nation, who never possessed any land of their own. So history demonstrates they were wrong in their actions. They were wrong, and Jacob was wrong, although there is no indictment of them here in the passage in chapter 34. What was wrong? Why did they delay? Why did Jacob allow them to remain in a situation where they could be so compromised? We are given the answer in chapter 35:

Then God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel, and live there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau." So Jacob said to his household, and to all who were with him, "Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your garments; and let us arise and go up to Bethel; and I will make an altar there to God, who answered [answers] me in the days of my distress, and has been with me wherever I have gone." So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods which they had, and the rings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak which was near Shechem.

Do you see what was wrong? Idolatry had crept into Jacob's house, and it was literally eating the heart out of his household. Though Jacob the patriarch was not idolatrous--he was true to his Lord--the rest of his household had become idolatrous. And Jacob could only go as far as his household would allow him to go. Whenever sin enters a family, it affects every member of the family--even those who want to go on.

The idols they worshipped were the household gods Rachel brought out of Haran. The story is in chapter 31. When they had left Haran, Rachel had stolen her father's teraphim, the household gods. She hid them in a camel's saddle. And when Laban pursued them it was obvious that his concern was not for his daughters nor his property, but rather for his household gods. When he finally overtook Jacob, his question was, "Why did you steal my household gods?" He was so concerned because possession of the teraphim guaranteed the right of double inheritance for the firstborn. It appears that Jacob had been adopted by Laban's family. Laban initially had no sons of his own, so he adopted Jacob and gave the teraphim to him. But later Laban had sons, which explains the way he began to treat Jacob--tricking him and trying to cheat him out of what was rightfully his, in order to give the inheritance to his own sons.

And Rachel, because she wanted to get what was right for Jacob, stole the teraphim. That is what frightened Laban. He thought Jacob might some day cross the border with the teraphim in his hand and claim his rightful inheritance. Those gods had been carried in Jacob's family for ten years. And what started out on the part of Rachel as merely an attempt to secure her own husband's rights, became something which subverted the entire family. They began to worship them. These gods are called "tarpe," and were found all over Canaan. They represent goat-headed demons. This was Satan worship, occultism, and it had crept into Jacob's family and was literally destroying it from the inside. This inhibited and frustrated Jacob so that he could not move.

There is a principle here which is found throughout Scripture. We can move only as far as the family of God will allow us to move. We go together, or we do not go at all. The presence of sin in the family will always inhibit and frustrate and thwart other members. Paul says in Ephesians that it is with all the saints that we know all the dimensions of the love of God. We need one another. And when another brother or sister is sinning, rebelling against God, they do not sin in isolation-we all feel the effects of it.

This is why Jacob dug a hole under the oak there at Shechem, buried the teraphim, and said "We are never going back to them again." He told them to purify themselves and change their garments-perhaps they were wearing garments somehow associated with demon worship. These were put away and life was changed. They went on to Bethel, verse 5,

As they journeyed, there was a great terror upon the cities which were around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob.

Jacob had feared that the Canaanites would overtake and destroy his family.

But God protected him, now that he was acting according to truth.

So Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him. And he built an altar there, and called the place El-bethel [the Strong One of Bethel], because there God had revealed Himself to him, when he fled from his brother.

You see, for Jacob, God was the only One. He was the God who answers in a time of distress. You remember from a previous study that the word translated "distress" in verse 3 means "to tie into knots." The God of Bethel is the only God who answers in a time of distress. No other gods answer. Throughout Scripture the idols are always dumb. They do not respond in times of need. This was true throughout the ancient world. When they seemed to respond, as in the case of the well-known oracles, it was the demons who spoke, but always in a convoluted, mystical way that no one could ever understand (although some thought they did). The result was confusion rather than wisdom. The gods do not answer in times of distress.

It is always interesting to see how the prophets viewed idols. In Isaiah there are a number of references to idol worship. In one place Isaiah says, "You make an idol, and carve it out of a piece of wood, and nail it on a base so it won't fall over, and that is the god you worship. Or you plant a seed and water it, and a pine tree grows. Then you cut it down and burn half of it to cook your food over and warm yourself with, and you make a god out of the other half and worship it. In both cases, you are worshiping ashes. It is nothing; it cannot answer in a time of

distress. It can do nothing for you."

Earl Palmer, a masterful storyteller, tells about a man who sailed on a ship. He had his idol with him-the goddess Diana-carrying it everywhere he went, because that was what his trust was in. Unfortunately, he fell overboard; but fortunately, he held onto his idol. There he was in the middle of the ocean, rubbing her head and trying to remember the incantations to invoke over the goddess Diana, but he had forgotten the whole ritual. He was treading water furiously, trying to keep himself afloat. Of course, his idol was made of metal and weighed forty-five pounds, so it was dragging him down. His idol had literally become a drag! He had one of two options: he could jettison the idol and look for some other source of help, or he could hang onto his idol and let it take him to the bottom.

That is the viewpoint Scripture takes of idol worship. You do not have to worship a literal idol to be an idolater, as you well know. Anything we put at the center of our lives is an idol. We can worship another person, or a relationship, or a thing, and it becomes an idol to us. But it cannot answer us in the time of distress; it cannot meet our needs. It cannot encourage, it cannot supply support; it can only become something that we must support-it is a drag!

And that is why Jacob said, "We're going to put those idols in the ground, and we're going to serve the God who answers in a time of distress." And when he moved out on the basis of that concept of God, God protected him from the hostile tribes around him, and he traveled on to Bethel. Verses 9 and 10:

**Then God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram,
and He blessed him. And God said to him,**

**"Your name is Jacob;
You shall no longer be called Jacob,
But Israel shall be your name."
Thus He called him Israel.**

As far as we know, God had not said anything to Jacob during the ten years he delayed. But now that he is at the place of obedience, and has gone back to Bethel, God speaks to him and again confirms the promise, bestows upon him the name he gave him ten years earlier at Peniel, when Jacob wrestled with the God/man. "You are Israel. You are no longer Jacob the schemer; you are a prince with God, one who prevails with God." Then God tells him his own name. When Jacob wrestled with the God/man he said, "What is your name?" But the God/man refused to give Jacob his name. He never answered. But here he gives Jacob his name, or at least one of the names by which he is called in Scripture, verse 11:

**God also said to him,
"I am God Almighty [The Hebrew is "El Shaddai"].**

No one knows precisely what El Shaddai means. The term does not appear anywhere else in the Old Testament except in the name of God. Some have felt that it comes from a root which means "the violent one," so they translate it, "Almighty". But there is growing evidence that the term comes from the Hebrew word "shad" which is the word for a mother's breast. He is saying that he is the One who satisfies. He is the God who is sufficient, the God who is enough. He is the One who gathers us in times of need, as a mother would gather her infant child, and nourishes us and satisfies us. This is the God who answers in a time of distress. Jacob went back to Bethel, and God revealed himself there as that kind of God. And Jacob rebuilt the shrine he had first built thirty years earlier, verses 14 and 15.

And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He had spoken with him, a pillar of stone, and he poured out a libation on it; he also poured oil on it. So Jacob named the place where God had spoken with him, Bethel.

That is the name he had conferred upon this spot thirty years before, when he discovered that it was the "house of God." He said, "The Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." Now, thirty years later, that private and personal act became public in the life of his family. In effect, Jacob said, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." This is Bethel for all of us.

There are many applications we can make from this story, but the most obvious is that sin in the family of God always affects the rest of the family. We cannot sin in isolation from one another. When one sins, we all feel the effects of it; we all hurt.

In a moment I would like to have you look at a New Testament passage in Hebrews 12, which is a counterpart to this story. But first, do you remember the story of the conquest of Ai in the book of Joshua? It came right after the victory at Jericho. The nation of Israel crossed the Jordan River under the leadership of Joshua, took the city of Jericho, but were told to take nothing from the city, for it was all placed under a ban. Only Rahab and her family were spared; everything else was to be destroyed. They all obeyed except one man, Achan, who took a bar of gold, a shawl, and some silver coins, and hid them under his tent.

The following week they set out to conquer Ai, a little town just north of Jericho, but in no way comparable to Jericho. They decided that since it was so small they would send only a small contingent of men against it, for surely it was not necessary to send the entire army against one tiny town. They suffered a disastrous defeat, turned on their heels and ran. It is the only instance throughout the seven-year history of the conquest of Canaan that they lost any lives, as far as we know. Joshua asked the Lord what was wrong, and the Lord said that someone in the camp had sinned. So they had the tribes brought in by lot, and the Lord caused them to narrow it down to families, then households, and eventually the lot fell upon Achan. Achan admitted what he had done, and he was taken to the valley of Achor (i.e., "trouble"), the place where Achan troubled Israel, and he was stoned there with all his household and belongings.

That was very harsh treatment. God does not call upon the church today to stone people who resist him; there is another way of handling the situation. But God's attitude toward the sin is the same. It has to be eradicated, has to be put away. If it is not put away, it will affect the entire body of believers. It resulted in defeat for the nation of Israel; it will result in defeat for us as a family, if sin is not judged and put away, as Jacob did with the teraphim.

The passage in Hebrews tells us the procedure. It is one of many passages which tell us what our approach should be. As you know, this chapter deals with discipline. Every son experiences discipline. No one is absolved. If we do not experience discipline, this passage tells us, then we are not sons of God. Therefore, since all of us at times will experience difficult periods, what should our attitude be toward one another? We will begin at verse 12.

Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

This is a word to us individually. "Do not give up, do not stop running. Take another grip on the Lord and keep on moving when things get tough."

That is the first command. The second is found in verse 14:

Pursue after peace with all men, and after the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.

The second command is to pursue peace with all men, and sanctification—and the point is, the sanctification of all those who call upon the name of the Lord. This is more than a personal injunction; it has to do with our relationship with brothers and sisters in the family. We are to pursue the things which make for peace and sanctification. Sanctification means to be put to God's intended purpose. And so we should pursue the things which result in God's accomplishing his purpose in every life.

In verse 15 he tells us how we are to do that. It would appear, at least in the New American Standard Version, that verse 15 is another command. But it is not; it is a participle. It ought to be translated like this:

Pursue after peace with all men, and after the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord seeing to it [or, "by seeing to it"] that no one comes short [or gets left behind] of the grace of God...

How do you pursue peace with all men, and how do you see to it that every one is moving in the direction God wants him to move? This is how: First, see to it that no one gets left behind. We are not running in a race by ourselves. It is a corporate race. We run together. There may be times when you are out in front. Everything is going well, there are no grave problems in your life, and you look around and see someone else who is being left behind. What should be your response when someone flags in zeal, when they stumble and begin to fall? You go back and help them. You put your arm under theirs, lift them up, and you run with them. Do not run away from everyone-you cannot. Go back and get them and urge them on. Do not scorn them, or turn your back on them; go back and encourage them, bring them up alongside. The second thing is found in the latter part of verse 15:

...seeing to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by it many be defiled.

This passage is often misapplied. It is made to refer to bitterness within ourselves, deep seated bitterness which defiles others. The principle that this should not be allowed is certainly true, and it can be found in other places in Scripture. But notice, in most translations, the cross-reference to Deuteronomy 29:18. This is an almost word-for-word quotation from that verse. Turn back to that passage and see the context. These are some of Moses' last words to Israel before they pass into the Land. He is warning them about some of the abominable things they will see when they get there.

They are not to become involved with the gods of the Canaanites. Beginning at verse 17,

(Moreover, you have seen their abominations and their idols of wood, stone, silver, and gold, which they had with them); lest there shall be among you a man or a woman, or family or tribe, whose heart turns away from the Lord our God, to go and serve the gods of those nations; lest there shall be among you a root bearing poisonous [or "bitter"] fruit and wormwood. [Wormwood is an extremely bitter substance.]

The author of Hebrews is quoting from this passage. "Take heed lest there be among you a root which poisons others, which causes others to become distasteful to God, to become bitter. What is this? It is idolatry. This is the root which defiles. Now do you see what Hebrews is saying? We run in a race; we all run. And either we run together, or we do not run at all. So when you see a brother or a sister who is weakening and falling away, do not run off and leave them. Do not turn your back on them, do not ridicule them. Do not run to the leaders of the church and tattle. Go back and help them. This is the function of the entire body of believers. Lift them up.

And if they have gone even further and are rebelling against the Lord, take heed lest that root of bitterness spread, because it will defile many. Go back and correct them; urge them to bury their idol. Urge them to put again at the center of their life the God who answers in the time of distress. This is the privilege we have as members of the body. We can encourage, strengthen, lift others. We need to recognize that defilement, within any of us will delay the progress of the entire body. But that delay is unnecessary. It can be corrected -- if we are willing to go back and encourage those who are falling behind, and lift up those who have fallen into idolatry.

Father, what an encouragement this passage is to us, because we realize that there are many times when we fall behind, and we need the encouragement of the rest of the body. We do not want to be left behind. There are times when we fall into idolatry, and need to be rebuked and loved back into a place of submission. We ask that we may have eyes to see-not our own problems and our own

needs-but to see the needs of those around us, and when a brother or a sister is failing, to restore such a one in a spirit of meekness. Strengthen us, Father, for this task, we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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