

# LEARNING TO LEAD

by Steve Zeisler

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When I was in college, I worked for a local Pepsi Cola bottler one summer. I performed various odd jobs; everything from cleaning up the plant to driving delivery trucks. One job I avoided, however, was operating the forklifts that were used to load pallets of Pepsi on to delivery trucks. Given the narrow passageways and my lack of skill, I had recurring visions of thousands of bottles of Pepsi cascading down in a shower of cola and glass all over the warehouse floor.

As Christians, God frequently calls upon us to perform tasks for which we do not have the necessary skills. We are faced with situations in which, depending on our background and skills, we may find ourselves wondering how in the world we are going to accomplish what God wants us to do. He does that, of course, because that is part of his training process to bring us to maturity as believers. He pushes us into waters that are very often way beyond our depth, thereby teaching us that self-reliance will not pull us through.

In our studies in the lives of the patriarchs in Genesis, we have recently been considering Jacob. As we continue looking at his life this morning, we will see that he too was called upon to perform tasks for which he did not have the required skills. Yet, over time, through Jacob's good and bad choices, God brought him to maturity; and in the process made him a powerful and effective servant. It is my hope that we will find a word of encouragement in the drama of Jacob's life. At times, the Christian life is presented as an immediate cure-all for every weakness and inadequacy. That is not in accordance with the Scriptures, nor is it the experience of anyone I know. When we come to Christ, we do not "proceed directly to Boardwalk." We will see this very clearly as we continue our study of the life of Jacob.

We have already noted that the critical moment in Jacob's life occurred on the night by the brook Jabbok when the patriarch wrestled with the pre-incarnate Christ. Although Jacob himself had received the promise of Abraham, and had been protected all of his life by God, he could not bring himself to believe that God had his good in mind. Jacob was a fearful man, a defensive man and a manipulator. He had difficulty believing the word spoken from the very heavens that God would protect and bless him. He went through life, therefore, relying upon himself.

We are familiar with the chart that is sometimes used to describe the Christian life. It comprises a circle enclosing a throne. The question is obvious: who sits upon the throne, you or God? Are you yourself in charge of life, and is God placed at the periphery of all that you do? Or is God sovereign in your life, and sitting upon the throne? During the twenty years he spent in Haran, Jacob was seated upon the throne of his life. He had relegated God to the periphery of all his plans and dreams. Then came the encounter with God at Peniel. Jacob's hip was dislocated. Crippled in body and spirit, the patriarch at last allowed God to ascend the throne of his life. From that point on, Jacob became a different man. He went from being the project upon whom God was working to being the agent through whom God worked. Up to then he had focused upon himself. He had been consumed by his fears and his own interests. Finally, at Peniel, he came to believe that God would indeed meet his needs. Jacob was given certain responsibilities, and was ready at last to be used by God to change the world around him.

But, as is true with all Christians, Jacob was quite ill suited for these tasks. At last he came to realize that he had certain responsibilities towards his family. He would henceforth be God's spokesman, thus he had to be a good example to those who looked to him for leadership. That had never occurred to him before; he was too busy looking after himself. Secondly, Jacob would be responsible to influence the world around him. He would have to be faithful, reliable and honest in his interaction with both believers and unbelievers. He would be called upon to

be a man whose lifestyle would bring honor to God. Thirdly, he would be responsible to guard a treasure. Paul wrote to Timothy, "Guard through the Holy Spirit who dwells in you, the treasure which has been entrusted to you." Jacob was called to reject compromise, to reject any alliance which would mix truth with error. He was charged to guard the treasure of the truth.

These were the responsibilities Jacob was burdened with on the night when God finally took his rightful place on the throne of his life. But, as we have already seen, Jacob was not good at doing any of these things. He was not a natural leader. He was an uninvolved father. In one of his addresses to his uncle Laban, he gave vent to all of his stored-up bitterness. We can imagine the negative effect that long period of unexpressed resentment had upon his children. When at last he faced the prospect of a meeting with his brother Esau, whom he had cheated, he placed his wives and children in front of him as a shield to protect himself. So much for his fatherly influence. His older children, as we will see, were accomplished in arrogance and high-handed sin. Surely this was caused in part by Jacob's lack of leadership and parental discipline.

Based on his record, therefore, it is fair to assume that Jacob was not a natural leader either of his family, or a potential natural leader whose life would have influence for good in his world. He was, rather, a deceiver and a manipulator—hardly the ideal candidate for Christian statesmanship. Before his encounter with God at Peniel, he had no sense of what it meant to guard the treasure that had been entrusted to him. Although he coveted the promise made to Abraham, he was without natural ability to pursue it and guard it. Beginning on that night when he wrestled with God, however, he would be called upon to grow into a man who would be able to do so. We pick up the account again in Genesis 33.

**Then Jacob lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. And he put the maids and their children in front, and Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last. But he himself passed on ahead of them and bowed down to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. Then Esau ran to meet him and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. And he lifted his eyes and saw the women and the children, and said, "Who are these with you?" So he said, "The children whom God has graciously given to your servant. "Then the maids came near with their children, and they bowed down. And Leah likewise came near with her children, and they bowed down; and afterward Joseph came near with Rachel, and they bowed down. And he said, "What do you mean by all this company which I have met?" And he said, "To find favor in the sight of my lord." But Esau said, ""I have plenty, my brother; let what you have be your own." And Jacob said, "No, please, if now I have found favor in your sight, then take my present from my hand, for I see your face as one sees the face of God, and you have received me favorably. Please take my gift which has been brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have plenty." Thus he urged him and he took it.**

**Then Esau said, "Let us take our journey and go, and I will go before you." But he said to him, "My lord knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds which are nursing are a care to me. And if they are driven hard one day, all the flocks will die. Please let my lord pass on before his servant; and I will proceed at my leisure, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my lord at Seir." And Esau said, "Please let me leave with you some of the people who are with me." But he said, "What need is there? Let me find favor in the sight of my lord." So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. And Jacob journeyed to Succoth; and built for himself a house, and made booths for his livestock, therefore the place is named Succoth. 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.**

Commentators differ in their interpretation of the interaction between the brothers Jacob and Esau. Some of them say that this is the same old Jacob, fawning and faking and manipulating. I don't agree with that interpretation. On

the contrary, I see great beauty in this account of their meeting.

Esau, I feel, demonstrates goodwill toward Jacob. God has done a work in his life, too, and he is sincerely happy to see his brother. Jacob too is at last beginning to repent for the way he had wronged his brother. His humility, I believe, is a genuine expression of his sorrow for how he treated Esau in the past. He owes Esau both a financial and an emotional debt, which he presses upon him, out of a feeling of genuine remorse for his past behavior.

There is a problem, though, in the fact that Esau appears for this rendezvous with four hundred men, while Jacob also is accompanied by a considerable entourage. Jacob knew that even before he and his twin brother were born, God had decreed that they would be separate from each other. He also knew that from each of them would spring separate nations, and Jacob's tribe was the one on which the favor of God would be manifest. Part of Jacob's problem, therefore, in addition to the obvious one-on-one concerns he had on meeting his brother, lay in the fact that Esau was also in the process of becoming a nation in his own right. He too had an entourage, one that rivaled Jacob's, as is obvious by the company of men who arrived with him for this meeting.

So while on the one hand, Jacob is delighted by the tone of his meeting with Esau, he cannot accept his brother's offer that the men of Edom travel with them. That was not God's plan for Jacob and his progeny. His protests, therefore, far from being manipulative, are evidence of his earnestness in light of his new responsibilities as leader of his family. He had driven them hard in the getaway from Haran; he had endangered their lives by placing them as a buffer between himself and Esau. His responsibilities with regard to them have finally come home to him. I believe he traveled on to Seir at some point to see his brother. At the burial of their father Isaac later, there is no record of animosity between them. I do not see, therefore, any evidence of manipulation and lying by Jacob in this interaction with Esau. Jacob means just what he says. He has become a man of his word. While he has not yet become a model father and leader, he has begun to make good choices. He is developing skills for which, as I also discovered in my summer job long ago, he had no natural bent.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, then come and present your offering." If we want to grow as Christians, we must first make things right with those whom we have wronged. If we have taken what was someone else's, or lied, or whatever, we need to make matters right. Here we see Jacob doing a good job of reestablishing and then cementing his relationship with Esau. He has righted an old wrong, and paid back what he gained earlier by lying and cheating. Christians should do no less in any day or age.

But in Genesis 34, we find that Jacob again fails miserably as God's man. The commentators who hold that Jacob was merely hustling Esau at their meeting, recorded in chapter 33, say that his failures in Gen.34 are the result of his rejection of God, and his decision to handle things himself. Again, I disagree. What happens Jacob in Gen.34 would have been my fate if I had taken the controls of the forklift that summer. Jacob had not yet learned the necessary skills. He did not run away again; he did not slip back into his old patterns of lying and subterfuge. But he had to face a new circumstance, and he botched it.

These chapters are quite explicit about Jacob's behavior. When he is deceiving someone, as he had deceived his father and later his uncle Laban, we are given that information (e.g. Gen.27:35 and Gen.31:20). Jacob was a deceiver, Scripture says. Even his name, which means "deceiver," declares that. Thus, in the section where we now find ourselves, where Scripture concludes that Jacob was a moral failure, what he actually was was what many of us are on occasion, and that is, struggling believers who don't know how to handle what we have gotten into. At times we are not particularly skilled to deal with what life throws at us. Then, God does not judge us for that failure so much as he takes us through the consequences of our failure and, through it, teaches us what he wants us to learn.

Having said that, however, Jacob's behavior, as revealed in Gen.34, is very bad indeed. What a very sad story we have here! Dinah, Jacob's teenage daughter, was in need of friendship. She traveled to a local village and befriended the young women of that town. In the course of that trip, she was either raped or seduced (the Hebrew

is not clear) by a young man. He wanted to marry her, and his father went to negotiate with Jacob. This man, Hamor the Hittite, seems forthright and above board about the matter, but Jacob appears to not have a clue as to how he should respond. He did not take any action, but rather, as the text says, "kept silent," until his sons came in from the field. He seems to have been unable to respond to this situation, uncertain as to what to do.

When the girl's brothers come home, they are filled with the kind of moral outrage we expect from young people who come to learn of such an indignity. They determine to "do what is right" by Dinah. Never mind that they themselves are caught in sexual sin later; at this point they are outraged at what has befallen their sister. In a fashion that is typically deceptive for this family, Dinah's brothers respond by making an offer of their own. Hamor's son may have Dinah for his wife, they suggest, but only if all of the men in his family submit to circumcision. The unstated part of the brothers' scheme is that they plan on killing all of them while they are immobilized following their circumcision. When all of this has been accomplished, we find Jacob, once more, fearful of his own destruction, and humiliated by his own sons.

What happened to Jacob is the fate of many fathers in every generation: he is forced to observe the behavior of his young adult offspring when they are unsure of what to do in a crisis situation. Jacob was feeling guilty for his failure during his children's formative years. He found it hard to act because he knew he bore some responsibility for their inability to make wise and informed choices in the face of crises. He had not provided for his daughter's emotional need for friends, and that too made him feel guilty for what had befallen her. His sons had dreamed up an elaborate, deceptive trap to assuage their moral outrage by wreaking havoc on the Hittites. But Jacob well knew that he would have to go on living in Canaan long after his sons had avenged their sister's misfortune, and that he would have to deal with the relatives and friends of the slain. He knew that part of his responsibility was to remain separate from the tribes which surrounded them; that he had responsibilities towards his daughter and sons; and, of course, to God himself. Yet he stood there silent in the face of the news that his daughter had fallen prey to a Hittite. He was unable to act because he had never before been confronted with such a dilemma.

There are other fathers in the Bible—Manoah, Eli, David, to name a few—who also had to face the fact that they did not have control over their children once they became adults; that children are capable of taking independent action, and that they insist on doing so. Keenly aware of his own responsibility for what had happened to Dinah, Jacob stood, silent and helpless—frozen, almost—by the news of his daughter's fate.

I confess I used to be much more critical of the parents of teenagers than I am now that one of my children is a teenager. I used to wonder why mature Christian parents tolerated the behavior of their teenagers. I don't have that problem anymore! As a parent of a teenager, I have discovered that it isn't always obvious how to respond to any given situation. A parent must be both loving and honest. You must know when to put your foot down and when not to, realizing that you are not in charge anymore; that all you have is influence, not command. All of these factors can produce the kind of dilemma which Jacob found himself in. As a father, he didn't know what to do.

As terrible as this account is, however, I appreciate the fact that God does not condemn Jacob for his failure. On the contrary, he protects him by preventing the people of the land from doing him harm following his sons' violent solution. God reiterates (in Gen.35) his promise to Jacob, telling him that he loves him. He even takes him back to Bethel.

Every head of a family will run into circumstances at one time or another when he does not know what to do, when he feels paralyzed. That does not offend God. He will use such circumstances to teach us, and then he will show us what to do so that we will be wiser for what happened. And the more we learn in this way, the more we mature in our responses as to how to proceed when the next situation arises. God will use our very lack of certain skills to mature us.

In Genesis 35, we discover that Jacob has turned a spiritual corner.

**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 me in the day 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. As they journeyed, there was a great terror upon the cities which were around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. 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, because there God had revealed Himself to him, when he fled from his brother. Now Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the oak; it was named Allon-bacuth.

Then God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddar-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. God also said to him, "I am God Almighty; be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come forth from you. And the land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I will give it to you, and I will give the land to your descendants after you." Then God went up from him in the place where He had spoken with him. And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He had spoken with him, a pillar of stone, and poured out a libation on it; he also poured oil on it. So Jacob named the place where God had spoken with him, Bethel.

Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and she suffered severe labor. And it came about that when she was in severe labor that the midwife said to her, "Do not fear, for now you have another son." And it came about as her soul was departing (for she died), that she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). And Jacob set up a pillar over her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day. Then Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder. And it came about while Israel was dwelling in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard of it. Now there were twelve sons of Jacob—the sons of Leah: Reuben, Jacob's first-born, then Simeon and Levi and Judah and Issachar and Zebulun; the sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin; and the sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maid: Dan and Naphtali; and the sons of Zilpah, Leah's maid: Gad and Asher. These are the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram. And Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre of Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned. Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. And Isaac breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people, an old man of ripe age; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

Here we can plainly see that Jacob, who for so long seemed ill suited to spiritual responsibility, has grown up. That is evident both in the good choices he made in confronting Esau, and the bad choices he made when he was camped by the city of Shechem. All of these conspired to make him a man of much greater spiritual stature, a man with a sense of purpose in life.

For instance, at the outset of this chapter we read that he took steps to rid his family of the idols that they had brought with them when they left Paddan-aram. Jacob himself did not take any idols on his departure from his uncle's home (it was his wife who did so), but I doubt if it ever occurred to him that that was a problem during all those years. However, he finally began to realize that as leader of his family it was up to him to take the steps to rid his family of the remnants of idol worship. Furthermore, at Bethel this time around he worships the God of Bethel, unlike the last time when he seemed to pay more attention to the place itself. Now he has a much more profound sense of who God is.

Look at the kind of things Jacob is called upon to face on this chapter. He suffers the loss through death of Rachel's beloved nurse, and the death in childbirth of his own beloved, the woman he had loved from the first moment he saw her. He buries both of these well-loved women with great honor. He renames the son who was

born to him, whom his mother had named "the son of sorrow," and calls him "the son of my right hand." This son would not have to face the prospect of knowing that he had brought sorrow, but rather would bear an exalted name, given him by his father. (By the way, it is revealing to see how much better Jacob was as a father to these younger sons, Joseph and Benjamin, than he was to his older sons.) Then, in the death of Isaac, we see how the two brothers, Jacob and Esau, come together to provide an honorable burial for their father. Jacob has at last learned how to handle emotionally turbulent times. He has learned how to confront tragedy. He has become a leader, manifesting skills which he never had before. He has become God's man, a man of character, depth and wisdom.

The most important choice Jacob made was his decision at Peniel to allow God to take his place as King of his life. We need to do the same. Let us quit running, lying, manipulating, and living in our own strength. Jacob made that critical first choice at Peniel. From that point on he was given responsibility to serve God in his generation, notwithstanding the fact that he did not know how to carry out that responsibility. The master Sculptor went to work on his life, sculpting a new man out of the mistakes of the past. Through Jacob's choices, good and bad, through his mistakes and failures in the years to follow, God was hewing something beautiful and worthwhile.

Each one of us who puts Jesus Christ first in our life has been charged by God to become an influence for good in our generation. Each one of us is an unfinished, rough-hewn block upon whom God is working. And, thankfully, he will not quit working on us until he finishes the job. He is a patient teacher. He will not reject us, but he will correct us and teach us when we do not know how to proceed in the Christian life. He will even use our failures to teach us. No matter how discouraging things appear to you now, no matter how rough are the edges, God is committed to finishing what he began in your life.

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Catalog No. 4042  
Genesis 33:1-36:43

Fourth Message

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May 24, 1987

Updated December 16, 2000

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