

*"I will not let you go
unless you bless me"*



JACOB - a life transformed

INTRODUCTION

JACOB is one of the great forefathers (patriarchs) of the Jewish and of course, of the Christian faith. Throughout the Old Testament (O.T.) God's covenant dealings with His people are often couched in the words: "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, *and of Jacob.*" And it was Jacob's new name that was eventually to pass to into history and to a whole nation – *Israel.*

In the fifth chapter of the letter that bears his name, James tells us that "Elijah was a man just like us" (5v17). One of the easiest and most accessible ways into the O.T. (which was such a different world to ours), is through the people, people who although they may have lived in "far away places with strange sounding names," were in essence men and women "just like us."

Jacob's life is a journey, both physical, from his home in Beersheba to Mesopotamia (Iraq) and back but also an emotional and above all else a spiritual journey. And like the Prodigal Son, he discovered the truth that running away from things never solves anything and that God's faithfulness never ever fails. Hence the overall title of these studies:

JACOB – A LIFE TRANSFORMED.

It's possible also to trace a literary pattern to his journey, which will give us the themes for these studies. Because we shall actually be covering about nine chapters of Genesis it would be helpful to read those chapters through ahead of time, just to familiarise yourself with where we shall be going.

Genesis chapters: 25,27,28,29,30,31,32,33,35.

- a: Jacob is given his name (25v19-26)
- b: Family tensions (25v23-34; 27v1-41)
- c: Meeting with God at Bethel (28v10-22)
- d: The flight to his uncle Laban (27v42-28v5)
- e: His arrival at Laban's home (29v1-30v24)
- d: His flight from his uncle Laban (31v1-7,14-55)
- c: Meeting with God at Peniel and Bethel (32v22-31; 35v1-15)
- b: Family tensions resolved (32v1-21; 33v1-20)
- a: Jacob is given his new name (32v27-28; 35v1-15)

May God lead us in our journey with Him and to Him, and may our lives also know each day His transforming grace and power!

STUDY 1: JACOB IS GIVEN HIS NAME (Gen.25v19-26)

The story of Jacob is part of the great promise that God made to Abraham (12v2-3; 13v14-17; 15v5-6), to Isaac (26v2-5) and then to Jacob (28v14-15; 35v9-12). His life and the transformation of his life, is summarised in the words of Hosea 12v3-4, a kind of before and after. He “grasped his brother’s heel,” and “struggled with God,” only in the end to weep and beg for God’s favour.

After 20 years Isaac and Rebekah’s prayers are answered and she becomes pregnant with twins (v.21). However something is not right and she enquires of the Lord (v.22). The answer that she receives will set the tone for the rest of Jacob’s life, but it will take him much of his life to become this person through whom the blessings of God will flow to all people.

Esau, the eldest is known by two names, both connected with the idea of redness. The first is that as a new-born baby he is covered in reddish brown hair (medically, hypertrichosis), which gives rise to his birth name.

“Edom” will later be given to him and to his descendants as a reminder of how he sold his birth right for a “pottage of lentiles” as the Authorised Version calls it and so despised his birthright (25v29-34).

Jacob will also receive a second name but at the moment he is simply “Jacob” to us. This is a name attested in Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) documents and in its original form was a pious prayer addressed to God. Literally it means “May he be at the heels of,” i.e. “May God be your rearguard, your protector.” And significantly this is how God chooses to respond to the name: “I am with you and will watch over you,” He says to Jacob in their first meeting at Bethel (28v15).

However “Jacob” soon came to take on another meaning, that of a “Deceiver” or “Supplanter,” suggested by the manner of his entry into the world (25v26); confirmed by his brother (27v36); repeated by his father-in-law (31v26-27) and eventually becoming a by-word for treachery (Jer.9v4). And so thousands of years later Jesus will praise the integrity of Nathanael, one of His first disciples, by describing him as being “an Israelite in whom there is *no* Jacob” (Jn.1v47).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

- a. why did Rebekah ask God about the children she was carrying? (v.22)
- b. how did Esau come by his name? (v.25)
- c. what was Jacob’s first recorded action? (v.26)

1. Did you have a nickname at school or at work?
Was it good, bad or indifferent?
How did it make you feel about yourself and about those who gave you that name?
2. How do you think Jacob felt about himself and others and how much were his actions affected by being called “Deceiver” all the time?
3. The Bible tells us that what we say has the power of life and the power of death over others (Prov.18v21).
What do you think that means?
How might this affect what you say and how you say it?
4. What 3 words would you use to describe yourself?

What 3 words would your house group / friends use to describe you?

What 3 words do you think God would use to describe you?

What conclusions and lessons do you draw?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father help me to accept only your words into my life.

Grant that I may only speak your words into the lives of others.

In Jesus’ Name I pray. Amen.

STUDY 2: FAMILY TENSIONS (Gen. 25v23-34; 27v1-41)

The Birthright:

This denoted headship of the family and certainly later on came also to mean receiving a double share of the inheritance (Deut.21v17).

Esau, the great hunter (25v27) doesn't do so well on this particular expedition and returns ravenously hungry (25v30). Knowing his brother well and quick to take advantage, Jacob bargains a meal (instant gratification) for the birthright (future benefit). Already the destructive nature of favouritism within a family is at work (v.28).

Significantly, although Esau is quick to blame Jacob and claims that he was deceived (27v36). Gen.25v34 and Heb.12v16 give the truer verdict.

The Blessing:

All four protagonists are at fault here. Isaac must know of God's intentions (25v23) but tries to thwart God's will. He calls Esau in secret, excluding Jacob but also the witnesses the law required to give legality to the blessing (27v1-4). Esau agrees to the plan, thus breaking his oath of yielding to Jacob the blessings due to the first born (25v31-33).

Rebekah spies on her husband and resorts to trickery to gain a blessing from God, even being willing to endure God's curse (27v5-13). Jacob's only scruples are that he might get caught, and twice lies to his father, even using God's Name (27v11-12,19,20,24).

In the end, Isaac is caught in his own trap, for having arranged to bless Esau in secret he has no-one to confirm that the son standing before him is indeed Esau. He is suspicious, because the meal comes so quickly (v.20) and the voice is not right (v.22) and so he keeps seeking reassurance by word and by touch (v.21-24). Finally he thinks he has been really clever in using the excuse of a kiss for one final check, but once again Rebekah has out thought him (v.26-27).

The blessing that he finally bestows upon Jacob is also sadly clouded by his blind (in every sense) love for Esau. How far away is his desire that others should be ruled by Esau from God's intention that others should be blessed (12v2-3).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

- a. what was Esau good at and what did Jacob prefer? (25v27)
 - b. how did Jacob manage to deceive Isaac? (27v15-17)
 - c. what finally convinced Isaac? (27v27)

1. What do you think are the effects of favouritism within a family (or anywhere else for that matter)?
 2. Does God have "favourites"? Does it sometimes seem that He does?
Why have you answered as you have?
 3. It is said that the quickest way to a man's heart is via his stomach! This was certainly true both of Esau (selling his birthright) and of Isaac (over the intended blessing).
Why is it, do you think, that we have a tendency to prefer instant gratification of our perceived need, to waiting for God's blessing and best?

How much do you think a church service should meet "my" need?
 4. People usually have a preferred style of handling conflict, often referred to as "Fight or Flight," (i.e. confrontation or avoidance). We can see these two traits demonstrated in Esau (*Fight* 27v41) and in Jacob (*Flight* 27v43).

How do you approach and resolve conflict within relationships?

What are the characteristics of a Christian handling conflict?

Prayer:

Lord, may I not be afraid of anyone, but love them as You love them

STUDY 3: MEETING WITH GOD AT BETHEL (Gen. 28v10-22)

After several days of travel Jacob finds himself near the city of Luz (v.19). Alone and friendless, he settles down to sleep under the stars with only a stone for a pillow (v.11). See where all his trickery has got him! What he had previously possessed (25v27): what he had anticipated possessing (27v28-29): what he now actually “owned” – the bare earth.

But God:

All unworthy and all undeserving, yet God is watching over him to fulfil His purposes in and through his life. And the promises that God make are just what he needs to hear at this time. He has left his father’s home but the God of his fathers is speaking to him: he is a stranger in a strange land but one day it will be home: he has no wife but will one day have many descendants (v.13-14). Above all else God is with him (v.15).

This is a supreme example of mercy and grace, such as Paul knew only too well (1 Tim.1v12-17). For Jacob (as for us) truly to live in the freedom of God’s love and the purposes of His grace, we have to move away from guilt and shame. Jacob cannot discover God’s new name if he is chained to believing he is only and can only ever be “The Deceiver.” So although the original blessing was obtained by deception, God will still bless, but not because of Jacob but because of Who God is – the God of Abraham (26v4-5).

At the moment this is all too much for Jacob. All he is aware of is that God is “in this place and I was not aware of it.” In erecting the stone and pouring on oil, Jacob begins to create a “Memory of Faith” – marking significant moments in his spiritual journey, and also creating a holy place and a holy space (Mt.6v6), to which in due course he will return.

Yet he has still a long way to go in truly understanding this God who promises to be with him. Through the negative experiences of being unloved or too much loved (25v28), Jacob knows only how to look out for Number One. He has not learned to trust because he has not experienced balanced, healthy love not learned to love in return. So this wonderful unconditional promise of God cannot be received unconditionally. “**IF** God will be with me...” and will demonstrate that He is trustworthy, then, and only then will I trust Him (v.20-22).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

- a. why did Jacob stop just where he did? (v.11)
- b. what did he see? (v.12-13)
- c. where did he believe that he was? (v.17)

1. Jacob was at Heaven’s Gate and did not know it.
In what ways are a church service or your house group, or your own prayer times the Gate of Heaven and the House of God? What do you expect to encounter and to experience at these times? Does there need to be an attitude change?
2. The Bible says that God sometimes speaks to us in dreams (Acts 2v17). Has that ever been your experience or has that ever happened to any one that you know of?
3. Jacob had no idea that his apparently random decision to stop where he did would be so significant for himself and for others (v.13-15). Have there been occasions in your life when during or afterwards you realised that God had been in that “chance” meeting, conversation, decision etc?
4. In v.15 God says, “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go..I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

What will those words mean for you this week and for our Church?
What *are* the promises of God for your life and for our Church?

Prayer:

God of Bethel, may I be always aware of Your presence, making holy every place and every encounter. I ask this in Jesus’ Name. Amen.

STUDY 4: THE FLIGHT TO HIS UNCLE LABAN (Gen. 27v42-28v5)

Sometimes one hears the exasperated cry of a wife concerning her husband, that “he never talks to me!” But on the other hand if you *do* talk then maybe you will have to face things that you would prefer to avoid.

Tragically the early love between Isaac and Rebekah (24v67) has been lost. Perhaps they seek to replace that love by demanding affection from particular sons and lavishing affection inappropriately upon the different boys.

Husband and wife both know what Jacob has done in gaining the birthright and are also aware of the shameful part that they themselves both played. But rather than use this as an occasion to face the truth and to seek to heal the family, they collude together in agreeing to focus on a different problem altogether. Jacob can clearly no longer stay at home (not least because Esau wants to kill him 27v41!) but the reason that Isaac and Rebekah choose to agree upon is the unsuitability of Esau’s wives and the necessity for Jacob to choose a wife from his mother’s family (27v46-28v2). And now the problem is safely “out there” and with “them,” and they have projected their inner tensions onto external causes.

But Isaac will also have his petty revenge. He sends Jacob away to find a wife with not a penny to his name – hardly the most eligible future son-in-law (32v10)! As we shall see, he has virtually to become an indentured servant to his uncle in order to win his future bride.

Yet at the same time Isaac also restates publicly and unambiguously the blessing of God that previously he had been fooled into giving (28v3-4).

The “community of people” (28v3), from the root word “to assemble” reminds us that God’s intention is to gather a people together, who will know Him, love Him and through whom the world might be blessed.

The Church. As a Christian once wrote, “The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.” We thank God for those who have walked with us and walk with us at this present time.

Jacob’s journey towards Laban is not however the end of his travels. And in Laban he will find someone who will make “Jacob the Deceiver,” look like a mere talented amateur.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

- a. what was Esau planning to do to Jacob? (27v41)
 - b. how long was it intended that Jacob should stay away? (27v45)
 - c. what specifically was Jacob to do? (28v2)
1. We are told that Esau “held a grudge” against his brother, even planning to kill him. What do the words of Jesus in Matthew 5v21-26, 38-48 have to say in connection with this particular situation and with regard to our own situations?
 2. Jacob was intended to walk into blessing surrounded by a “company,” a “community” (28v3). Who are and have been the people who have helped you in your walk of faith? How might you seek to be a similar guide and helper to others?
 3. Isaac blesses Jacob (28v1) but in fact he is simply pronouncing the blessing of God upon another’s life (28v3).
In what ways do we “bless” others and can we pass on spiritual blessing to our children and to their children? If so, how?
 4. Isaac and Rebekah obviously have difficulties with their daughters-in-law (26v34-35; 27v46; 28v8) but apparently nothing was said. Families can be a delight or a heartache, and sometimes both at the same time!

What prayers would you value on behalf of your families at this time?

Prayer:

Lord and Father, may I be a blessing to others and receive Your blessing from others, this week. In Jesus’ Name I pray. Amen.

STUDY 5: ARRIVING AT LABAN'S HOME (Gen.29v1-30v24)

"Though he had stood at heaven's gate, Jacob could not stay there" (Baldwin: The Message of Genesis. BST). He travels on to Paddan Aram and at once has a golden opportunity to impress his uncle and the girl that he has fallen in love with. What better way to gain their esteem than to lift the heavy stone from off the well and water his uncle's flock (29v9-10)?

After a first significant meeting with God at Bethel, now a significant meeting with Rachel, and the crucial first encounter with her father Laban. It is not a promising beginning. Far from being a rich and eligible bachelor, reaping some of the benefits of his father Isaac's wealth (26v13-14), Laban finds a penniless ne'er-do-well (32v10) with no apparent desire to move on now that he has arrived (29v14). The fact that Laban speaks to his nephew of paying him "wages" (29v15) sets the tone for their future relationship, even though Laban will eventually become Jacob's father-in-law. To all intents and purposes Jacob will be an exploited servant not an esteemed son. Laban "owns" people like he owns property (31v43), a truth not lost on his own daughters (31v15).

Jacob offers to work for 7 years in exchange for Rachel's hand. In fact 20 years will pass before Jacob will finally go home (31v41), but at the moment that is hidden in the future and Jacob is so in love with Rachel that the 7 years "seemed only a few days to him.." In no hurry to honour his part of the bargain, Laban is nagged into action (29v21), only for Jacob to be tricked. In the dark of the tent on the wedding night, one sister pretends to be the other and cheats her sibling out of what she had been hoping for, even as in a different sort of darkness (27v1) a brother pretended to be the other and cheated his sibling out of what he had been expecting (Ch.27). Jacob the Deceiver is himself deceived!

In fact Jacob finds himself in the middle of a family as broken as the one from which he had come. The two sisters see themselves as rivals for his affection and in competition with each other (e.g. 30v1,8), whilst not a birthright but a birth is bought and sold for a meal (30v14-17).

Later on the marriage of two sisters whilst both were alive was expressly forbidden in the Law, with the telling words, "Do not take your wife's sister as a *rival* wife.." (Lev.18v18).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

- a. what did Jacob do for Rachel? (29v10)
- b. how long did his wait for Rachel seem? (29v20)
- c. what was the name of Rachel's son? (30v24)

1. Jacob enters a family as dysfunctional as the one he had come from! What an environment into which to bring children and in which they would grow up. And sadly Jacob was to repeat the destructive pattern of favouring one son against another (37v3). How do we create and foster a healthy environment in which new Christians can flourish?
2. Rachel became jealous of her sister Leah, seeing her basically as a rival for Jacob's love. What causes jealousy amongst Christians and how can such jealousies be resolved and avoided? Have you ever been jealous of another Christian?
3. In an ancient Near Eastern context, Rachel and Leah's actions in giving their maids to Jacob might (just might) have been acceptable (30v3,9). But ultimately this is about using other people for one's own ends. When are the times that we might be tempted to "use" people (in the nicest possible way!) to get what we want? What does it mean to love someone unconditionally?
4. The names that the sisters gave to their children all had meaning and promised something for their future lives. Spend a while praying for your children and grandchildren and for new Christians that they might grow into the people God has called them to be.

Prayer:

Loving Father, make whole families and Your Church family. Amen.

STUDY 6: THE FLIGHT FROM LABAN'S HOME (Gen.31v1-7, 14-55)

The relationship with his uncle/father-in-law had never been an easy one and Jacob was conscious that he had always been the poor relation in the other's eyes. No longer the petted, pampered favourite that he had been back in Beersheba. Eventually the situation deteriorates to such an extent that not only does Jacob sense God's prompting to return home but begins to fear (not without reason) for his safety (31v1-2,23-24,29).

Laban is a hard and dangerous man, who has often cheated Jacob and exploited him, yet one who is reluctant to let him go because he senses that his prosperity is tied up with Jacob (31v38-42; 30v25-27). Even to the end he holds what he considers to be his in an unrelenting iron hand – "All you see is mine" (31v43). But he is also capable of presenting himself as an injured party, the abused one and not the abuser (31v26-28), even as Esau had done over his birthright all those years before.

In fleeing secretly from Laban, Jacob is obeying God's prompting but still using his limited and sinful human intellect to work out how to do this (31v3,19-21). He has still not learnt to trust God in and for all things, the God who had promised to "watch over" him and who had said that He would "bring him back to this land" (28v15). In fact it is a hopeless flight, encumbered as he is with all his possessions, but by placing his family on swift camels, they at least may escape (31v34).

Rachel steals her father's household gods at the same time. There is some evidence to suggest that possession of family deities strengthened later inheritance claims, but it may be simply that she believes her father will in some way be weakened and she strengthened by possession of these gods. Perhaps Laban won't be able to divine where they have fled (30v27). In fact her cleverness nearly brings them to disaster (31v32).

In the end there is some sort of reconciliation although between Laban and Jacob in reality no more than a truce (31v44-55).

God is invoked as witness and protector of the agreement between them (31v49), but once again Jacob's experience of family life has ended in conflict and in someone seeking to harm him. And once again he is running away, only this time his steps are leading him homewards and to a life changing encounter with God.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

- a. what were the two reasons why Jacob decided to return home? (v.2-3)
 - b. what did Rachel do? (v.19)
 - c. what did they call the pile of stones that they built? (v.49)
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1. Rachel told a lie when her father was searching for his gods. Is it ever right for a Christian to tell a lie?
 2. Jacob was clearly exploited as a worker by his father-in-law Laban. How does a Christian turn the other cheek, without becoming a doormat to be walked all over? How good are you at saying "No" to strong personalities or to inappropriate pressure?
 3. In what sense do you think that God "watches" over us, both protectively but also in the sense of watching our attitudes and actions? Do you find the sense of God seeing everything you are and do as comforting or disturbing – or both!?
 4. Contrast Laban's claim, "All you see is mine," (v.43), with the promise made to Abraham, where God says, "All the land that you see I will give to you," (Gen.13v15). The self-made man contrasted with the God-made man. How much are we able to hold what we have with a light hand and how much do we truly believe that all that we are and all that we possess actually comes from God and belongs to Him? What are the differences between a Laban attitude and an Abraham attitude to life?

Prayer:

Father Almighty, grant that I may receive each day as a gift from you and grant that I may acknowledge You as true Lord of my life. I ask this in the Name of the great Servant of God, Jesus my Lord.

**STUDY 7: MEETING WITH GOD AT PENIEL
AND AT BETHEL**
(Gen. (32v22-32; 35v1-15))

Peniel: (Gen.32)

With the prospect of meeting Esau, hurrying towards him with 400 men – this is a war party, not a welcoming party! (32v6) – Jacob is in a panic He separates his company into two groups, hoping that one group at least may survive (v7-8), and then, for the first recorded time since his first meeting with God at Bethel, *he prays* (v.9).

And he is not on his own. The God who promised to be with him (28v15) has sent his angels to protect him (32v1-2) and by the time he eventually meets Esau, the change in his brother is even more remarkable than Laban's when he caught up with his fugitive son-in-law!

And God Himself comes to meet with Jacob (32v28-30 ;Hos.12v3-4), that "face to face" encounter that Jacob had been avoiding all his life. Jacob and the Angel of God wrestle (in prayer) together through the long night, and through the struggle Jacob prevails. But he prevails not because he has won the wrestling match but precisely because he is defeated and so for the very first time in his life has (in every sense of the word) to lean and to depend upon God. The last time he had been blessed by anyone it had been by trickery and then by right (ch.27 & 28v3-4). Now it is all of grace. Prior to this moment, Jacob had been mistrustful of God's promise to bless all peoples of the world through him (28v14,20). Now, in a surge of faith, he believes, realising that unless God blesses him, how will others be blessed through him?

And for the rest of his life he is marked by this life changing encounter with God (32v31). Before the crown there must always come the cross.

Bethel: (Gen.35)

We shall look at Jacob's new name in the last study. But see how he has grown immeasurably between his first meeting with God at Bethel and this other meeting. Commitment and holiness (v2,4): proven experience instead of a promise doubtfully received (v.3 cp 28v15,20-22): a journey with power and authority instead of a panicked flight (v.5): the worship of a known God, "El-Bethel", the God of Bethel. (v.7): God no longer experienced in dreams but face to face (v.9,13-15).

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND
DISCUSSION:**

- a. for how long did Jacob wrestle with the angel? (32v24)
- b. why did Jacob call the place "Peniel?" (32v30)
- c. what was the lasting result of Jacob's encounter with the angel? (32v31)

1. We sometimes speak of "wrestling" in prayer. Has that ever been part of your experience as a Christian? What was it like: what happened: how were you and the situation changed?
2. Jacob pleaded with God to bless him (32v26) and God answered his prayer. Why do we find it so difficult to ask for blessing for ourselves? What does it say about how we understand God's nature and how we perceive ourselves?

If there was one thing that you would ask of God for yourself, what would it be? Now ask Him – and look to see how He will answer that prayer!

3. Jacob was marked for life by his meeting with God (32v31). What are the marks of a person who walks closely with God? Where do you recognise some of those distinguishing marks in the members of your house group or wider church friends?
4. Jacob told his household to purify themselves before meeting with God at Bethel (35v2). The closer we come to Jesus the more we become aware of our sinfulness as well as of His great love. Is there anything that is hindering you from a closer encounter with God and a deeper and more intimate relationship with Him?

Prayer:

Father, please give me a delight in Your presence: a confidence in Your love: and a heart to embrace Your world. Amen.

STUDY 8: FAMILY TENSIONS RESOLVED (32v1-21; 33v1-20)

Jacob always had a problem with trusting other people, for to trust (and to love) means becoming willing to be vulnerable. Through his marriages he had begun to learn something of being loved and of loving and of putting others first. For example he puts himself in harm's way ahead of his family when he finally meets Esau (33v1-3).

Yet what must he have thought when he saw his brother running towards him (33v4) and what sort of reception did he expect to receive, in spite of his praying and in spite of his night alone with God?

Yet why should he (or we) doubt that God can change other people, when after all He has been changing us? The real issue is that we define others by our last experience of them. The last time the brothers had met Esau had been trying to kill him and nobody had told him that things might have changed (27v45). Jacob still needs a lot of persuading.

So he insists on Esau receiving his gifts, thus creating a sense of obligation: is careful to say that he (Jacob) has been blessed by God, so to attack him is to attack one under God's favour: refuses to have Esau accompany him or leave any of his men with them, and chooses to settle away from his brother. (33v5-17).

But there are two further reasons why Jacob may be fearful. 1: *His own insecurity*. Because he feels uncertain in his relationship with Esau he projects onto him his own fears. Or to put it another way, he expects, fears and looks for rejection and so that is what he finds. 2: *Doubts as to his own self-worth*. When through your formative years you have been known as a cheat and treated as such: when in your adult life you have been exploited, what value do you think that you have and what is your self-image? Sometimes people will try to "buy" friendship through gifts, in order to make people like them.

In fact Esau's transformation is so complete that in Gen.36v6-8 we discover that he is no longer a restless hunter but has become a settled farmer and has become so much the peacemaker that he takes the initiative and separates his and Jacob's flocks in order that there might be no disagreements between them over pasture land (a common cause of dispute between neighbours).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

- a. what did Jacob pray for and why? (32v11)
- b. why did he send his possessions ahead of him? (33v8-11)
- c. what was the last thing that Jacob did? 33v20)

1. Jacob was terrified at the prospect of meeting his brother (32v7). Should a Christian ever get afraid? What are the things that make you fearful? How, as Christians, do we handle fear? What do the words "Perfect love casts out fear" (1 Jn.4v18), actually mean?
2. In marriage the key is to remember that "*the Relationship is always more important than the issue.*" Esau seems to have embraced that truth for himself and his brother (33v4). How can that truth be experienced and expressed within our Church life?
3. Jacob settled at a place that he named "Succoth", meaning "shelters." It was a name that later came to be attached to the autumn Feast of Tabernacles (Succoth), where the people of God remembered their wilderness wanderings and how fresh God's love had been to them (Hos.2v14-15). Jesus chides the church at Ephesus for "losing their first love." (Rev.2v4). How do we keep our faith and love for Jesus fresh and alive?
4. Jacob calls the altar "The God of Israel," i.e. his own God, in fulfilment of that promise made at Bethel all those years before (28v20-22). Not only Israel's God but Israel's mighty God. Share the journey that took you from knowing about God to knowing God, and of how you became a Christian.

Prayer:

Our loving Father, transform my fears, my relationships and in my journey with You and to You. In Jesus' Name I pray. Amen.

STUDY 9: JACOB IS GIVEN HIS NEW NAME (32v27-28; 35v1-15)

All those years ago Jacob had been given a name that had defined and confined him – “the Deceiver.” Now he receives a new name that releases him – “Israel,” i.e. “one who wrestles with God.”

As with “Jacob” his original name, “Israel” is first of all saying something to God, before it ever says something about the man. So “Israel” is a request – “May God strive for him,” which is something that God has done right through Jacob’s life. The secondary meaning is then of a man who through prayer has striven with God and has prevailed, in that his prayer for blessing has been answered.

The Blessing carries with it two aspects, one personal and one universal, but both linked together. The name change itself is part of God’s response to the plea for blessing, and is the final nail in the coffin of being called “Deceiver,” and the final affirmation that he is a new creation, with a new calling and a new future. (In the same way that Peter will twice receive his new name from the lips of Jesus Jn.1v42; Mt.16v17-18).

The second, universal aspect is that the promise for the world, made through Abraham and confirmed to Isaac is now also confirmed to Jacob (35v12). He seeks blessing for himself in order that the world may be blessed through him (28v14; 32v26). He cannot offer to others what he himself does not possess or know personally.

In what sense has he “striven with men and have overcome”? Perhaps simply that in looking back over his life with all its ups and downs, dangers and uncertainties, he has come safely to this pivotal moment in his life, where he can see God (32v30; 35v9), hear God (32v26-29; 35v10-15), and receive God’s promise into his life (32v28-29; 35v10-12).

Later on God would speak to the nation of Israel in terms of the consequences of living under His blessing or under His judgement. One way of knowing if they were walking well with God was “the Lord will make you the head and not the tail” (Deut.28v13). For the majority of his life, in spite of all his schemes and plans, Jacob had been reacting to circumstances, responding to what other people did or might do to him. In this new place in God, the tail would no longer wag the dog, for this was **Jacob – a life transformed**, a man walking with God!

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

- a. what was Jacob to do at Bethel? (35v1)
 - b. what did his household do with their pagan gods? (35v4)
 - c. by what name did God describe Himself? (35v11)
1. Jacob repeated the actions that he had earlier performed at Bethel (28v18; 35v14) but previously it had been promise, now he celebrated fulfilment (35v3). How do we develop and maintain a constant attitude of thankfulness towards God? How good are you at celebrating as a Christian?
 2. In a sense Jacob returns to the place where it had all begun for him. Paul speaks to the Corinthians about the essential foundation for faith and of the importance of building carefully upon that base (1 Cor.3v10-11). Hebrews 6v1-2 speaks of “elementary” Christian Foundations. What are the foundations of your faith? Who and what gives you security as a Christian? How do you build up your Christian faith?
 3. Tragically Rebekah never saw Jacob again after she sent him away. Her nurse dies and her grave is the “oak of *weeping*.” As those believing in *resurrection*, how much do we find ourselves looking to the past, in terms of our personal Christian life and our Church life and how much do we look to the future? Why is it that find it so hard to let things cease and to “die”?
 4. “Not my faith but God’s faithfulness”. How much do you think this is an apt description of Jacob’s life but also of yours? Jacob’s life was a life transformed. In what ways has your life been transformed since you came to know and love Jesus?

Prayer: *Father God, thank You for Your faithfulness to me throughout my life.*