

Grappling with Growth

Apart from Jesus Christ, there is no other biography like it in scripture. We observe his life literally from pre-cradle to post grave with a wonderful spotlight on both his highs and lows during the length of his pilgrimage. Jacob. And in his life, we find a treasure trove of insight into spiritual growth.

And we should care intensely about this subject for although much has been written about it, there are many wrong impressions that are rampant in our 'modern' understanding. Oriental mysticism has influenced contemporary thought and perspective on spirituality. Together with the false doctrines of the so-called 'faith' movement and myriad cult twists upon the scripture -- the garden of spiritual growth concepts can use some 'weeding' and 'watering'. So let's survey at a summary level the life of our dear brother Jacob.

We first find him in Genesis 25 where he was in the womb fighting with his brother! Here, though, we discover from Romans 9:10-13 that he was chosen and loved by God which amplifies the Bible's message of God's sovereignty, foreknowledge and grace. That is, the heavenly Father's love was not based upon Jacob's history, good deeds or machismo and stood in stark contrast to his earthly father's favor of his brother Esau. God loves you and I in the same way.

In fact, Jacob turned out to be somewhat of a 'momma's boy' if you would. "Smooth skinned" and a handy guy in the kitchen, he was not the proverbial 'man's man'. (See Gen 25:27,28)

But he was an intense competitor. In fact, it looks like he always had to come out on top. Taking advantage of his brother's hunger one day, he 'bought' the family birthright with a bowl of lentil porridge. (Gen 25:29-34) Later, though admittedly spurred on by his mother, he boldly lied and deceived his nearly sightless father in order to obtain the patriarchal blessing. (Gen 27) This ultimately propelled him into estrangement and isolation from the family. But still God loved him, and revealed Himself to Jacob in a glorious vision at Bethel. (Gen 28)

Now, I'll suggest that this latter event parallels and typifies the salvation experience of some Christians. You remember, Jacob saw the Lord in heaven with a ladder bridging the gap between heaven and earth, the holy and unholy, the perfect eternal realm of God and the broken, temporal prison of man. Jesus would later indicate that that ladder was Himself (see John 1:51). You could say that Jacob came to a knowledge or an awareness of the Lord. However, though he was awed, he was not yet submitted. His response was like that of many believers when he gave God a conditional allegiance. *"And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, **If** God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father's house in peace; **then** shall the LORD be my God."* (Gen 28:20,21) He had a lot of growing to do.

Eventually, he made his way to the household of his crafty old uncle Laban to reap a little of what he sowed. There he worked for seven years to merit the reward of the 'girl of his dreams' -- Rachel. Laban, though, pulled a fast one on him for in the dark he switched the 'goods' giving instead his older daughter Leah. Now she

must have been 'a sight for sore eyes' literally because that's what her name can imply -- she was someone who made your eyes hurt. So imagine Jacob's surprise in the morning! But he's got to come out on top, remember.

Consequently, he demanded to have his expected reward, Rachel. Laban capitulated -- but only conditionally -- kind of like Jacob being conditional with God. Hmm. You see, Laban was most certainly God's instrument in Jacob's life to mirror him.

Part of growing him up spiritually was to afflict him with a carnal replica of himself so to speak. As Jacob had deceived his dad who had been 'in the dark', so he was likewise deceived. Sound familiar? He was reaping what he'd sowed. You might already know this to be true -- as we are learning to walk with the Lord, it is often the case that the characteristics that rub us the wrong way are our very own -- in someone else. Generally, they are irritating because they are indeed sinful in nature. Jacob submitted himself to Laban but it was a rough experience.

I think we all understand that growth doesn't just take place in the peaceful sunny climes when all is going well but in the stormy circumstances of life as well. Adversity of environment drives plants to increase their root systems. Recall, the Bible says that the righteous flourish like the palm tree whose living cells are in its core rather than outside just under the bark as with other trees. In fact, palm trees actually bear more and sweeter fruit with age and prosper when their surface bark is scarred. (See Psa 92:12)

Jacob still had a lot of growing to do. Though he had relations with his wife Leah and they had several children as a result, he hated her. How many of us as believers hate the very things God brings into our lives as blessings

simply because they 'hurt our eyes'? If they aren't up to our expectation or if we only see the surface value, we often disdain the ordained so to speak. Conversely, because something is 'pleasing to the eye' doesn't make it heaven-sent.

You see, Jacob's carnal attitude influenced his whole family -- they competed for his favor and attention, and as always, the competition brought envy and strife. But he never seemed to deal with it -- perhaps because he was blind to it or perhaps because he actually got some 'strokes' from it so to speak. It isn't until much later in the story that we find any virtuous qualities observable in his clan. They simply modeled what they saw.

You see, for godly parents, spiritual growth is not just an option -- 'a good thing to do'. It's more important than you or me for it dramatically impacts our families one way or the other.

Next, having given Laban an offer he couldn't refuse regarding his future wages, Jacob set out to do some 'genetic engineering' of the flock. (See Gen 30) Agreeing to take only the mis-colored animals as his wages, he carved some branches with various markings and placed them in the watering trough before the flock.

His method could perhaps be regarded as a little loony or even superstitious, but the Lord helped him anyway. God did, however, speak to Jacob in a dream and clarified that it was He who caused the brown, the spotted and speckled animals in the flock to multiply, not Jacob's branch carvings.

In this setting, Jacob learned that both Laban's past blessings and his own were from the Lord and not due to his ingenuity. It's not clear that he ever sought the Lord in Haran, but graciously God told him that he should

leave that area and return to Canaan and to his credit, he obeyed. One of the early lessons many of us as believers learn is that God will indeed take care of us. (See Phi 4:19)

But he still had a lot of growing to do. He obeyed God and left but he split the scene in fear in the middle of the night and tried to out run Laban. Meanwhile, his wife Rachel put some sticky fingers on her dad's family idols. When Laban discovered they were missing, he headed after them in anger. Seems like Jacob had a habit of leaving angry people behind him. But God directly intervened to protect him telling Laban in a dream not to harm his son-in-law.

Later, after peacefully parting with Laban, Jacob encountered a group of angels and as a result called the place Mahanaim, meaning "two camps" – his and the heavenly host's. However, in typical Jacob fashion, when he learned shortly thereafter that Esau and 400 men were fast approaching, his mind again started conniving. (Gen 32)

He made his own "two camps" by splitting the family into two groups hoping that if one was plundered, the other might escape. That is, he resorted to his natural tendency to scheme and was still not trusting God. Like many of us, he recognized God's presence but in times of testing leaned upon his own wits anyway. Many of us do the same thing.

Now, to his credit, he also sought the Lord humbly for deliverance. But, then immediately he started a caravan of gifts traveling toward Esau to buy his favor. This is really convicting, isn't it? Was Jacob double-minded or perhaps just thinking that he had to 'cover the bases' with prayer while really trusting in his own scheme? We can't know for sure. However, he was acting like many of us who seek

God only in times of turmoil and then act as if God doesn't hear us, like we really believe that it's up to us.

Anyway, by that time, all his fretting and scheming had worn him out, and he needed a good night's sleep so he retreated away from the camp and bedded down. Wouldn't you know it – just then, the Lord showed up in the form of 'a man', that is, a Christopheny, and Jacob wrestled with Him throughout the night. You know the story. During the tussle, the Lord touched Jacob's hip and put it out of joint.

It's not clear that he was 'a chicken', but Jacob had a habit of running away rather than confronting the source(s) of his adversity. We as believers must learn to trust God such that we can face our fears.

And this grappling was a critical point both for Jacob as it can be for us as we seek to grow in the Lord.

Jacob had for much of his life encountered difficulty. But it had always been of his own making. He had 'gypped' his brother, deceived his dad, angered his in-laws, but now God Himself crippled him and fixed it so that he couldn't escape his adversary. Many of us find it difficult to accept that God would 'lame' us, and we can be tempted to think that it's because He's mad at us as well. We can, at those times, let go of Him – stop trusting that He loves us. We can interpret his method as mean. But God's not mean. He's not upset or put off by our grappling with Him.

But this was where Jacob prevailed. He hung on to the Lord. Hosea makes it clear that at the end he cried out, not in victory, but in humility. (See Hos 12:3-5) *"This is an invaluable place for everyone to come to - the place where we are conquered by God. There is something to be said for every man doing his "wrestling" with God, and*

then acknowledging God's greatness after having been defeated. We must know we serve a God who is greater than us, and we cannot conquer much at all until we have been conquered by Him" (Guzik) Does God Himself bring difficulty into the life of His child? Yes.

Typically, most of the trials we face are of our own making – the consequences of our sins. But God sometimes demonstrates His compassion and love toward us in 'touching our hip' so to speak – limiting our options because He ultimately knows it will bring us closer to Him.

And this was the pivotal point. *"Jacob thought the real enemy was outside of him - Esau. The real enemy was his own carnal, fleshly nature, which had not been conquered by God"* (Guzik) There, Jacob was renamed Israel -- from "heel-snatcher" or "sneaky-conniving guy" to "one governed or ruled by God". This wasn't Jacob's salvation – he already believed. It was his submission. His need for character adjustment was being brought to light. It was a point of demarcation, and from that point on he was a changed AND changing man. You see, he still had a lot of growing to do. *"From this point on, he will be called Jacob twice as often as he is called Israel; apparently, there was still plenty of "old man" left in Jacob."* (Guzik) In fact, he's not referred to directly as Israel again for a couple of chapters.

Jacob portrays the 'old man's nature' and Israel the new. And from hereon, we can observe the 'highs and lows' of his spiritual progress associated with his names.

Personally, I find this very encouraging. God never gave up on Jacob – in fact, the awesome divine promises were made to him, that is, to Jacob. God didn't wait till his character was godly to make his guarantees. I

suggest that's why we nearly always have the record of scripture stating that the promises were made to "Abraham, Isaac and Jacob". It's not at all that God prefers the 'old man' – to the contrary! But the promises are and always will be a matter of God's grace, not our merit.

Anyway, he met the day with new courage and went out in front of the family to face Esau. To his surprise, the reunion was wonderfully amiable, but Jacob continued in some bad habits -- he lied to his brother indicating he would follow him back to Mt. Seir and instead, he headed for a place called Succoth and then Shechem. So where was the fruit of his submission? He did show courage but recall, fruit requires patience (see Luke 8:15, James 5:7).

The same is true for us as Christians. *"A vine does not produce grapes by Act of Parliament; they are the fruit of the vine's own life; so the conduct which conforms to the standard of the Kingdom is not produced by any demand, not even God's, but is the fruit of that divine nature which God gives as the result of what he has done in and by Christ."* (Hooke)

We tend to look for 'McFruit' in both our own lives and the lives of our spiritual family. Failures weigh us down because we don't think as God does. *"Our weak hearts, prone to legalism and unbelief, receive these words with great difficulty: God is for us. . . They have failed Him; but He is for them. They are ignorant; but He is for them. They have not yet brought forth much fruit; but He is for them."* (Newell)

Yes, Jacob still had a lot of growing to do. Contrary to the pilgrim life-style of his father Isaac and Papa Abraham, he built a house in Succoth and later bought land near Shechem.

(Gen 33:17-19) Yes, it looked like the pilgrimage was over and he started settling down. With the fear of fratricide abated, the sky was blue again so to speak. Almost inevitably, we as believers come to the same place. Saved and 'somewhat' submitted (is that possible?), we can be tempted to abandon the 'highway' for the comfort of a 'little piece of Shechem'.

But God is faithful – it's been said that in this life, the most uncomfortable place for a Christian to be is a comfortable place. In some ways, that's true. You see, he'd arrived at Shalem (or Salem) which was then apparently a part of Shechem. Many commentators believe it to be the same Salem visited by his grandpa Abraham – i.e. Jerusalem. Here, Jacob built an altar to the Lord. All this looked good – a place of 'peace' and the arrangement of the altar. He had his own 'Ponderosa' and a place of worship too. But as nice as it seemed, it wasn't where he belonged physically or spiritually.

His kids were a mess – he'd allowed them to keep idols and apparently been an 'open-minded', tolerant parent – his kids did what felt good at the moment if you would. Here's what I mean – while out and about with her friends, perhaps shopping at the Shechem mall, his only daughter, Dinah caught the eye of the pagan prince. We don't know if she went along with it or not, but she was compromised sexually by him.

Now post facto, the prince figured he'd 'do the right thing' so he sought to formalize the affair with a marriage. Very contemporary. But Jacob's bent toward dishonesty had rubbed off on his boys -- though they agreed to the deal, they made the prince promise to circumcise himself and all the males

of the city of Shechem. A few days later, while they were in pain and incapacitated, two of Dinah's brothers slaughtered all the men of the city. Then the rest of the brothers spoiled the place taking all the goods, animals and enslaving the women and children. Whoa! Even Jacob was appalled. He told them that they had made his name to stink and feared a huge reprisal from the other inhabitants of the region.

We as believers just cannot allow ourselves to think that all material 'blessings' are necessarily good. We can't think that because we've got our little piece of Shechem and we've even 'built an altar' that we're still following the Lord. Jacob had his ranch and his religion, but because he wasn't in the 'place' (spiritually or physically) God wanted him, he wasn't growing spiritually – bearing good fruit. And not only so, but his family was corrupted. (See Luke 8:14)

Fortunately, the shock of the whole business and the concern over potential new enemies seemed to re-awaken the desire for a pilgrim's progress in Jacob. The Lord graciously spoke to him and directed him to Bethel – back to Bethel. It means "the house of God."

This was where he originally encountered the Lord, remember? This was where he said he'd return, and that God would be his God. This was the place where God delivered him in his hour of distress. In type, it speaks of our need as believers to return to the basics of our faith when we've strayed or when we've settled down in the wrong 'place'. We all need to return to our own Bethel. It's a humbling thing and crucial to our growth. It speaks of humble repentance.

He told the family to 'cough up' their idols, their pagan ear and nose rings, and to change their clothes. Yes! Way

to go, Jacob! He didn't just allow his kids to 'find the truth' on their own. There's a time for that – when you've been truly living it out yourself. But Jacob realized his error and knew that he had to set the record straight. For the first time in a while, he exerted healthy spiritual authority. He was repenting himself and resetting the moral parameters of the family. Regardless of Walt Disney's propaganda, friends, believe me, kids cannot make it on their own!! There's a time for gentleness and a time for sternness, both in love. But Christian parents who are growing in the Lord must not abdicate their responsibility to guide their kids.

At Bethel, God visibly appeared to Jacob and told him, *"Your name is Jacob. Your name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." And He called his name Israel."*

Much lay ahead for Israel – many sorrows and grief, times of dejection and feeling like 'all things were against him'. (Gen 42:36) He also had times of joy and restored hope. But from this time forward, he actually does get called Israel once in a while. In fact, as you tract it, he's generally referred to as such more and more vis-à-vis Jacob and the last mention of him in the recounting of his life is indeed as Israel (see Gen 50:2).

You see, the old man, though he raised his ugly head now and again, ultimately diminished. He never disappeared, but in the end, it was the new man that prevailed. He even chose to be buried with Leah, the wife whom he'd hated. Thus it is with us as believers in Christ. It's backwards but it's correct. It's the opposite of our natural inclination but actually it's right. It's totally counter-intuitive yet all together perfect. To be born again, you must die to self. To grow, you

must diminish. To mature, you must be childlike.

And this is my main point. John the Baptist said it, *"He must increase, but I [must] decrease."* (John 3:30) I submit to you that as long as Jacob was 'added to' be it people or possessions, family or flock, he remained Jacob. His 'salvation' brought him 'happy feet' so to speak (see Gen 29:1 in the Hebrew) but the change was to his attitude and awareness, not his character.

From that point on, he undoubtedly learned a lot. But his character didn't start changing until **he started decreasing, diminishing**. He lost his ability to run. He lost his daughter's purity. He lost his dear nanny, Deborah. He lost his ranch in Shechem. He lost his wife Rachel. He lost his relationship with his concubine Bilhah. He lost his son Joseph, his wife Leah, on and on it goes. God caused Jacob to diminish, but in the process Israel grew. It was gradual and with stubbornness.

Friends, growing in God is not a matter of how much you can add to yourself. Contrary to popular theology, it's not even a matter of how big your ministry is. It all comes down to self-diminishing. That is, who is going to live in you and through you – you or Jesus? Is Christ increasing in you or are you just learning about God?

Now, the Lord offers **no condemnation** – only hearty encouragement for the end result for all believers is Christ-likeness! I'll conclude with this -- it was the apostle John, a good Jewish boy, recall, who would never worship anyone but his Lord, who fell to worship before the one showing him the heavenly Revelation. His companion quickly forbid him to do so saying, "Worship God" and clarified that he was simply

his brother and a fellow servant.

Clearly, the old apostle knew to worship only the Lord so why did he fall before his brother? I submit that it was because he thought he was indeed Christ. In fact, it happened twice! (See Rev 19:10 and 22:8,9)

Yes, in heaven, with our souls restored, we will truly resemble Him for Christ will be "all in all". David wrote, "*I will be satisfied when I awake with Your likeness.*" (Psa 17:15) John wrote, "*when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.*" (1John 3:2)

And to give us a wonderful picture or type of which character continues on in eternity – with over 2500 mentions in the scripture – we read of the land, the nation and the people of **Israel**, not Jacob. Praise God!

We have a LOT to look forward to but like Jacob, we've got a lot of growing to do. In love and faith and hope -- in heavenly mindedness -- may we each grow in godliness as we 'lose ourselves' in Him!