

# **GOD OF JACOB**

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## **COMING TO KNOW GOD'S LOVING MERCY AND GRACE**

Let us look at a person who was in God's loving mercy and grace all his life, but only came to know what that really meant later in his life, after he had been through all sorts of other things. That person is Jacob, in the Old Testament.

Some of us are younger and some of us are older; we are at many different stages in our lives. How are we to know God's loving mercy and grace for us, at whatever stage we are at, and how can the story of God's dealings with Jacob help us in that?

## **BEFORE WE WERE BORN**

It started before Jacob was born:

Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren;

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and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived (Gen. 25:21).

Every human birth is a gift and action of God—a great miracle—but this birth was one in which God’s action was particularly apparent: it came as an answer to prayer.

It turned out to be twins, and Rebekah had a very uncomfortable pregnancy:

The children struggled together within her; and she said, ‘If it is to be this way, why do I live?’ So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her, ‘Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger’ (Gen. 25:22–23).

Apart from what this tells us about how much our characters are formed even in the womb—these two twin brothers were fighting with each other even before they came out!—this tells us that God had already made a decision regarding them. It was God’s own free decision, and it was not according to the way we normally do things. In human societies, the oldest child usually becomes the chief inheritor and head of the family, but in this case God said, ‘the elder shall serve the younger’. Esau was going to be the firstborn, and Jacob the second, but Jacob was going to be the one to whom God gave the chief inheritance. Particularly the covenant promises made to their parents and grandparents, through Isaac and his father Abraham.

There is a saying of God in one of the later prophets:

I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau (Mal. 1:2–3).

This had as much to do with the descendants of these two

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men in the nations of Israel and Edom as it did with the two men themselves. It is a way of saying that God has set His love on Jacob in a way that He has not set it on Esau, and that Jacob will be in the way of God's covenant blessing, and Esau will not, and will be under God's wrath. The whole of sinful humanity is under God's wrath (as in Eph. 2:3), so that is nothing unusual for Esau, or for any of us. It is remarkable, however, that Jacob is to know God's covenant mercy and love, and that God has already determined this before he has been born.

Where they come in the family has nothing to do with this choice of God, nor does their character—whenever it is formed. The apostle Paul made this comment:

Even before they had been born or had done anything good or bad (so that God's purpose of election might continue, not by works but by his call) she was told, 'The elder shall serve the younger.' As it is written, 'I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau' (Rom. 9:11–13).

Normally we would say, 'I love so-and-so—he's a really good bloke, or she is a really lovely woman. But I hate so-and-so-else—he's a nasty piece of work, or she's a horrid person'. That's us, not God. God makes His choice of love regardless of character and actions.

That is good news for us. For are we any different? How come you are reading this right now? How do we come to know God's love and mercy and grace? Paul tells us, in Ephesians 1:

... he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that

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he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved (Eph. 1:4–6).

Don't think you can ever try to work out the mystery of God's choosing of you, or of any of us. But don't ever deny its reality. Just marvel at it, especially in so far as it touches you.

## THE GO-GETTER

In many ways, Jacob himself was a nasty piece of work:

When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob [that is *he takes by the heel* or *he supplants*] (Gen. 25:24–26).

That was the way Jacob was going to operate. He was a schemer, and a go-getter, with his eye on the main chance. He would take any opportunity to advance himself, no matter at what cost to others.

We see this in the first story that is told of the twin brothers after they grew up:

Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, 'Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!' (Therefore he was called Edom.) Jacob said, 'First sell me your birthright.' Esau said, 'I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?' Jacob said, 'Swear to me first.' So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way (Gen. 25:29–34).

See Jacob here, insistent and quite unfeeling in the face of his brother's extremity, intent on getting what he wants for himself: the privileges that rightly belong to Esau as the

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firstborn.

We see it again in Genesis 27, when he joins his mother in a scheme to deceive and lie to his father Isaac, taking advantage of the old man's blindness, to wrest to himself the blessing that Isaac was going to give to Esau as his firstborn son, leaving Esau with the second-best.

We may say, 'But isn't that just what God said would happen? So can we blame Jacob? Is there really anything wrong with that?' Here we need to be very discerning. There are Greek fables, like the story of Oedipus, and some fairy stories that we have heard that are like them, where a dire prophecy is made at someone's birth, and the attempts to prevent what is prophesied are the very things that end up making it happen. Fate works inexorably, and we are helpless in the face of it. That is not the way it is in the Bible. God rules, and He declares the end from the beginning, and His rule is personal and direct, and each of the participants also have free and responsible choices to make, in what they do and how they go about it, and they are held accountable for all of that. That is how God works in the holy love that He is. This is very different from the pagan myths that see gods and humans hopelessly locked into some inexorable process, with no one ever being able to be held personally responsible for anything in the end. Jacob is responsible for the way he went about getting what he did, and he is reprehensible for that. The fact that God still gives him what He has promised, as we shall see, has more to do with God's purposeful love and mercy than with Jacob's, or Rebekah's, conniving.

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### THE LORD WHO MADE YOU

For there is a deeper reality in Jacob's life than what he has tried to make of himself. It is given expression later in the history of Jacob's descendants in these words:

But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen!  
Thus says the LORD who made you, who formed you in the womb and will help you (Isa. 44:1-2).

Jacob was formed in the womb by God, and chosen by God to be helped by God. What mystery is at work in Jacob, and in us, to bring that to pass? All we know is that Jacob, despite his deficient character, and however he went about it, still had a heart to want what God wanted for him, and to want it desperately.<sup>1</sup> This is in contrast to Esau, who was prepared just to let go what he had, for the weakness of immediate satisfaction. For we are told, after Esau had eaten the stew and gone away:

Thus Esau despised his birthright (Gen. 25:34).

That is how lightly Esau esteemed the covenant blessing of God. How despicable is that despising! That is how much he cared about God's wonderful grace to the descendants of Abraham, of which he was one. And we are warned in the Letter to the Hebrews:

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled. See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single

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<sup>1</sup> See further: 'Thy Nature and Thy Name Is Love' in Geoffrey Bingham, *The Vandal*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1990, pp. 35-64.

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meal. You know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, even though he sought the blessing with tears (Heb. 12:15–17).

For we read:

When Esau heard his father's words [that Jacob had taken away his blessing], he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, 'Bless me, me also, father' . . . And Esau lifted up his voice and wept. Then his father Isaac answered him: 'See, away from the fatness of the earth shall your home be, and away from the dew of heaven on high. By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; but when you break loose, you shall break his yoke from your neck' (Gen. 27:34, 38–40).

It's a terrible indictment. It is like Jesus' parable of the bridesmaids (Matt. 25:1–13), when 'the door was shut', and those who were not single-minded about being in on the great wedding banquet were left outside, with no way in, outside of a relationship with the bridegroom.

### **'I DID NOT KNOW IT'**

So Jacob has the birthright and the blessing. But he still has not come to where God wants him to be.

Rebekah's matriarchal plot backfires, in that now Esau wants to kill Jacob (just as Cain had wanted to kill Abel), and Jacob has to leave home in a hurry, for a long time. There is no record of Rebekah the mother and Jacob the son ever seeing each other again.

This is where God takes Jacob another step along the way. Whether it is a step that Jacob is willing to take yet is another question:

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Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the LORD stood beside him and said, 'I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you' (Gen. 28:10–15).

This is the reiteration of the covenant-promise that God had made to Jacob's grandfather Abraham, and his father Isaac, and is now making directly to Jacob. How does Jacob respond? First of all, he realises that more has been going on than he has been aware of.

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!'

At least he is prepared to admit there was something that he did not know!

And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.' So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel [that is *House of God*]; but the name of the city was Luz at the first. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, 'If God will be with me, and



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will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you' (Gen. 28:16–22).

The response of fear and worship is an appropriate one. But note the tone of Jacob's vow. It is measured, and conditional, and still with an eye on what's in it for him; almost bargaining with God, and still seeking to hold Him at arm's length.

How much is that the spirit of our fear and worship of God?

Whether that is so or not, God's intentions with regard to Jacob are perfectly clear.

### **JACOB AND LABAN DESERVE EACH OTHER**

And so in Genesis 29 – 31, Jacob comes to the household of his uncle Laban. Here Jacob, the conniving, manipulating deceiver, meets his match in Laban. Laban was his mother Rebekah's brother, so perhaps it ran in the family. Laban, I think, is God's retribution on Jacob for the way he has gone about things up to now. First, there is the way that Laban deceives Jacob on his wedding night by giving him the older daughter Leah as his wife after Jacob had worked for Laban seven years for the younger daughter Rachel, whom he loved. So then Jacob had to work another seven years for Rachel. Then there is the competition between the two wives to have children from Jacob, resorting to various ruses to try and make this

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happen, from bargaining over an aphrodisiac to proffering their respective maids to serve as surrogate mothers. Each time one of the children is born to any of these four women, it is made clear that this has happened by the action and blessing of God, however they may have sought to make it happen. Then there is the squabbling between Jacob and Laban over the ownership of the flocks, and Jacob's claim to his wives that 'your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times' (Gen. 31:7).

### **'I AM THE GOD OF BETHEL'**

In all this, Jacob was still capable of giving as good as he got, and his character and methods still had not changed. If anything, they had got worse, because they now had a sort of religious gloss over them. Of particular interest is the way Jacob went about building up his flock:

When Rachel had borne Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, 'Send me away, that I may go to my own home and country. Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me go; for you know very well the service I have given you.' But Laban said to him, 'If you will allow me to say so, I have learned by divination that the LORD has blessed me because of you; name your wages, and I will give it.' Jacob said to him, 'You yourself know how I have served you, and how your cattle have fared with me. For you had little before I came, and it has increased abundantly; and the LORD has blessed you wherever I turned. But now when shall I provide for my own household also?' He said, 'What shall I give you?' Jacob said, 'You shall not give me anything; if you will do this for me, I will again feed your flock and keep it: let me pass through all your flock today, removing from it every speckled and spotted sheep and every black lamb, and the spotted and speckled among the goats;

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and such shall be my wages. So my honesty will answer for me later, when you come to look into my wages with you. Every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, shall be counted stolen.' Laban said, 'Good! Let it be as you have said.' But that day Laban removed the male goats that were striped and spotted, and all the female goats that were speckled and spotted, every one that had white on it, and every lamb that was black, and put them in charge of his sons; and he set a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob, while Jacob was pasturing the rest of Laban's flock. Then Jacob took fresh rods of poplar and almond and plane, and peeled white streaks in them, exposing the white of the rods. He set the rods that he had peeled in front of the flocks in the troughs, that is, the watering places, where the flocks came to drink. And since they bred when they came to drink, the flocks bred in front of the rods, and so the flocks produced young that were striped, speckled, and spotted. Jacob separated the lambs, and set the faces of the flocks toward the striped and the completely black animals in the flock of Laban; and he put his own droves apart, and did not put them with Laban's flock. Whenever the stronger of the flock were breeding, Jacob laid the rods in the troughs before the eyes of the flock, that they might breed among the rods, but for the feebler of the flock he did not lay them there; so the feebler were Laban's, and the stronger Jacob's. Thus the man grew exceedingly rich, and had large flocks, and male and female slaves, and camels and donkeys (Gen. 30:25-43).

Here we see the basis that Laban is working on: he uses divination to find out what is going to be in his favour, rather than going directly to God for prayer and direction. Jacob, by the same token, is not averse to using his relationship with God as a bargaining-point in his negotiations with Laban. And then Jacob himself, in the face of Laban's faithlessness, resorts to magic and the occult to

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pursue his own ends. Use of the occult is the worst extent to which human beings can go in manipulation—control by religious means. It is devilish.

The fact that there were portable idols—‘household gods’—in his camp, hidden in Rachel’s saddlebags, although unbeknown to Jacob himself, was an indication of the rottenness that had infiltrated into his family, while Jacob hypocritically protested his innocence and righteousness before Laban (see Gen. 31:25–42).

The amazing thing is that, through all this, God keeps to His purpose and continues to bless Jacob. Even with the business of the rods and the flock, Jacob later admitted that God had shown him in a dream what was really happening there. It wasn’t all the trouble he had gone to with the rods at all —God Himself had been making the flock to turn out lots of striped, speckled and mottled animals anyway, to redress the injustices that Laban had done to Jacob (see Gen. 31:10–13). What kind of wonderful God is that!

Interestingly, however, despite the fact that Jacob knew that God was looking after him—a fact he was very willing to use for his own advantage in his dealings with Laban—Jacob still was holding God at arm’s length. I think he rather thought of God as another negotiating partner—much as he had done at Bethel. Perhaps Jacob still had no other way in his own mind of thinking about it. We may be the same.

Why do I say that? Although Jacob had said at Bethel that, if God did this, this, and this, ‘then the LORD will be my God’ (Gen. 28:20–21), yet right through this period, Jacob did not acknowledge that relationship with God as

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his own. In all these chapters, Jacob always refers to God as ‘the LORD’ (Gen. 30:27), or just as ‘God’ (31:7, 9), or ‘the God of my father’ (31:5, 42), or ‘the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac’ (31:42, compare 31:53), or even ‘the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor’ (31:53—Nahor was the father of Laban, as Nahor’s brother Abraham was the grandfather of Jacob, so this was a use of the name of God to try and keep them both honest!). But never does he refer to the Lord as the God of Jacob.

How often do we seek to evade direct and personal relationship with God by thinking of Him as the God of our forbears—of our tribe and culture—and not the God of *us*?

## THE FACE OF GOD

The time was now coming when the wily and resourceful Jacob was to find that in truth he had nothing by which he could secure himself, in a situation that was out of his hands, over which he had no control. We all need to come to that point sooner or later in life, for it is at that point often that we truly meet God.

Just before this happened, God gave Jacob another wonderful sign—as if he needed any more!

Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him; and when Jacob saw them he said, ‘This is God’s camp!’ So he called that place Mahanaim (Gen. 32:1–2).

‘Mahanaim’ is here taken to mean ‘two camps’. That’s lovely, isn’t it? God’s camp alongside our camp. It’s good

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to know. Except that here there are still two camps, rather than just one.

The situation is that Jacob is returning to the land where his brother Esau lives. Last time Jacob had seen Esau, Esau had wanted to kill him. Jacob's fears were not calmed by the news that came back to him:

We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him (Gen. 32:6).

That was not good odds, and required desperate measures:

Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies, thinking, 'If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape' (Gen. 32:7).

Then Jacob prayed, now perhaps for the first time really from the heart:

O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac . . .

—still the only way he knows to address God, but he does go on to say this:

O LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,' I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies.

That is the first time we have heard Jacob praying in that way: no bargaining, no tit for tat, just saying it as it is, for a change. Then he prays, quite straightforwardly:

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Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. Yet you have said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number' (Gen. 32:9–12).

There. Holding on to nothing but the promise and the faithfulness of God.

He still made a point of sending droves of goats, then sheep, then camels, then cows and then donkeys on ahead as presents for Esau to soften him up:

For he thought, 'I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me' (Gen. 32:20).

He is still coming from the mind-set that has a desperate need to be accepted, but still thinks he can trade his way into that position. The droves of animals actually made no difference—Esau, when he came across them, didn't even know what they were for (see Gen. 33:8–9)! God had already softened him up (see Gen. 33:4).

But Jacob didn't know that yet, and God still had something to do to him:

So the present passed on ahead of him; and he himself spent that night in the camp. The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak (Gen. 32:21–24).

We're going to see that this was more than just a man. It was a heavenly being. It was God Himself. That is what

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Jacob had been doing all along, wasn't it. Wrestling with God, to try to get out of God what Jacob wanted, but in a way that battled against God. Something needed to happen:

When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him (Gen. 32:25).

The *RSV* says the man 'touched' him on the hip. That was enough. Something broke in Jacob that night, and it was the making of him. Now Jacob's wrestling was no longer against God, but with God for all that God desired for him. Jacob's real God-given heart for the covenant blessing of God now comes through:

Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' So he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed' (Gen. 32:26–28).

'Israel' can mean one of two things: 'the one who strives with God', which is what Jacob had been doing, or 'God strives', in other words, when we know God's striving on our behalf and strive with God for that. In those two meanings is encapsulated the whole story of Jacob, and the whole history of the nation of Israel. And, perhaps, our own story as well.

There is now more that Jacob wants to know, whether he can know it fully or not:

Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said,



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‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ And there he blessed him (Gen. 32:29).

God is not at Jacob’s disposal. Jacob can never use God’s name in any attempt to manipulate God. But Jacob knows God’s blessing. And Jacob then knew who he had really been with:

So Jacob called the place Peniel [that is, *the face of God*], saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.’

How could a sinner like Jacob, or any of us, see God face to face, and yet be preserved in life? Only by having a Saviour who, by bearing us and our sins and their terrible entail in his own body, could take our sins away and bring us into the presence of our Father, holy and blameless before Him in love as his children. It was still 1,700 years or more before Jesus would hang on that cross, for Jacob and for all of us, but he was destined to do that in the Father’s love for us from before the foundation of the world (see 1 Pet. 1:18–21; Rev. 13:7–8). That is what happened to Jacob that night. He saw God face to face, and was preserved in life. That is what happens to us when we put our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Do it now, if you have never done that before.

I love this next picture:

The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip (Gen. 32:31).

It often takes something like that, doesn’t it? Something permanent, that you’ll never be healed from, that will be

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with you for the rest of your life: a gladsome little gift from God, as a constant reminder.

So Jacob now, at last, knew utter security in his relationship with the faithful Creator. There was something else that went with that. Remember the present that Jacob had sent on ahead to appease Esau? As I said, Esau didn't know what it was for. Because when Jacob came towards Esau:

Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept (Gen. 33:4).

The whole thing had changed. And when Jacob said that the present had been to obtain Esau's favour, Esau said:

'I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.' Jacob said, 'No, please; if I find favour with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favour. Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want.' So he urged him, and he took it.

Very different from the grasping kind of Jacob that we saw earlier, isn't it? But what does Jacob say to his brother Esau? Jacob has just seen God face to face. And now, he says that seeing his brother Esau is no different from that: 'for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God'! A loving relationship with God brings with it a loving relationship, of the same order, with your brother or sister, or with whoever is next to you at any point of time. And that is just what Jesus and his apostles said (e.g. Matt. 22:44–40; John 13:34; Rom. 13:8; 1 Pet. 1:22; 1 John 4:10–11).

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The telling thing comes at the end of Genesis 33:

Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, on his way from Paddan-aram; and he camped before the city. And from the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, he bought for one hundred pieces of money the plot of land on which he had pitched his tent. There he erected an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel (Gen. 33:18–20).

The name Jacob gives to the altar is a very significant one. 'El-Elohe-Israel' means 'God, the God of Israel'. Jacob here is rejoicing in his new God-given name. And for the first time he is saying that God is not just the God of his fathers Abraham and Isaac but also, at last, the God too of Jacob: 'God, the God of *Israel*'! Are we happy to rejoice with him in God as the God of *us*?

### IN THE WORLD, BUT NOT OF IT

It would be good to say, after all that, that Jacob and his family then lived happily ever after. But families don't always work that way, even among the redeemed. Immediately following this high point, Genesis 34 gives the account of how Jacob and Leah's daughter Dinah was raped by a son of one of the local princes, and when he wanted to marry her, two of Jacob's sons, her brothers Simeon and Levi, dealt deceitfully with him and his whole community and, with their other brothers, slaughtered and plundered the city and took off the women and children. You can imagine the heartbreak and shame and fearfulness that poor old Jacob had to endure on account of that. He appears to be quite helpless in the face of it. How would he have handled the situation, given half a chance? We are

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left with no way of knowing. But it is clear that Jacob, who now knows God's grace, now moves in a very different atmosphere from his vengeful and headstrong sons. This comes out in the prophetic pronouncements that he makes over each of his sons on his deathbed:

Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. May I never come into their council; may I not be joined to their company [*NASB*: Let not my glory be united with their assembly]—for in their anger they killed men, and at their whim they hamstringed oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel (Gen. 49:5–7).

Jacob and these sons of his are now poles apart. And it is true that the later tribes of Simeon and Levi had no separate territory of their own, but had to make do with places in the territory of the other tribes.

Interestingly enough, even in this unsavoury situation, Jacob and his household were preserved by God from the threatened pursuit and destruction. Jacob insisted on a clean-out of all the foreign gods and idols and charms that were even now cluttering up the camp, so they would be fit for the true worship of God. And, as they moved, 'a terror from God' fell upon the surrounding cities, and none of them dared touch Jacob and his family (Gen. 35:1–5).

Jacob had some consolation in the birth to him and his beloved Rachel of their youngest son Benjamin. Except that Rachel died in childbirth, and was buried before they moved on. That was when Jacob's oldest son Reuben had sexual intercourse with Bilhah, one of the maids who had been mother of some of Jacob's children (see Gen.

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35:22). Again, it seems, there was not much Jacob could do about it at the time. But it did not go unnoticed, and Reuben also came under censure in the prophetic pronouncement:

Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the first fruits of my vigour, excelling in rank and excelling in power. Unstable as water, you shall no longer excel because you went up onto your father's bed; then you defiled it—you went up onto my couch! (Gen. 49:3–4).

So Reuben, the eldest son, became a bit of a non-entity, both as a person, and later as a tribe in the history of Israel.

This was also the time when Jacob, with his brother Esau, buried their father Isaac (Gen. 35:29). These things happen in the families of the elect, just as they happen in the rest of sinful humanity. We are not immune. We may not now be of this world, but we are still very much in it. As Jesus prayed for us, 'I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one' (John 17:15, *NKJV*).

## SHUT UP TO GRACE

In the stories of Joseph that follow, we see Jacob now as an increasingly frail and dithering old man—with moments of keen lucidity. His favouritism of Joseph was not a good start, though God's greater purpose was being worked out through it (see Gen. 37:2–11). Then remember when the brothers soaked Joseph's robe in animal blood and made out to Jacob that Joseph had been killed? He was morbidly inconsolable, only interested in dying

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himself (Gen. 37:31–36). The same was true when the brothers tried to take Benjamin with them down to Egypt (Gen. 42:38). All he can do is feel peevisly sorry for himself: ‘All this has happened to me!’ (Gen. 42:36). ‘Why did you treat me so badly as to tell the man that you had another brother?’ (43:6)—and they have to try patiently to explain to him.

Those of us who have had the care of elderly parents or others may recognise some of the signs. The things that come out in us as we get older are, I guess, things that have been there all the time. But don’t you sometimes wish it was some of the nicer things that would come out? Sometimes, of course, they do. But often it seems that it is the meaner things, the sillier things, the less attractive things, that get accentuated. Even among the saints. What is God doing with us there? Let’s face it, there’s not that much left of us, in many ways, the closer we get to dying. And I think God is saying: If you ever thought there was a time when you could get by without My grace, I’m just making sure that in this time you are left with no illusions about that! He is wonderfully shutting us up to grace, in immediate preparation for the time when He will be our one-and-only all-in-all. Isn’t that good?

So you can imagine what Joseph thinks when his father is ill and he takes his two young sons in to see him (Gen. 48). And Jacob summons his strength and sits up in the bed, and tells Joseph again the promise that God has made to him about the descendants and the land, and acknowledges Joseph’s two sons as his own. Wonderful. And then the next moment, Jacob is peering at these two boys and saying, ‘Who are these?’ Well, the old man is sick, and practically blind. And Joseph says, ‘They are my sons,

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whom God has given me here'. And Jacob says, 'Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them'. So Joseph carefully brings Manasseh towards Jacob's right hand, because Manasseh is the eldest, and Ephraim the younger towards Jacob's left hand. And Jacob promptly crosses over his hands, to put his right hand on Ephraim and his left hand on Manasseh, and he blesses them. And Joseph, thinking the old man has lost it again, picks up his hands and says, 'Not so, my father! Since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head'. And Jacob says, 'I know, my son, I know'. He knows what he is doing. He knows that God's grace in his own case has not been bound by such strictures, and he has a sure prophetic sense that it will be this way with these boys—as it turns out to be in Israel's later history. And in the prophetic pronouncement on his twelve sons before he dies, he is as clear as a bell, and knows exactly what each one's situation is, and how that will turn out.

Going back to the two sons of Joseph, listen to the blessing he gave to them, because this tells its own story:

The God before whom my ancestors Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all harm, bless the boys; and in them let my name be perpetuated, and the name of my ancestors Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude on the earth (Gen. 48:15–16).

It was, in part, Jacob's own acknowledgement of God's great goodness to him:

By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, 'bowing in worship over the top of his staff' (Heb. 11:21).

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And whether our life runs smoothly, or whether it has been more rugged, like Jacob's was, if we can say as he did, at the end of our lives: 'The God before whom our forebears walked, the God who has been my Shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all harm . . .' we shall be doing well.