

Tricky Hearts 10-14-01

Genesis 25:21-23, 25:29-34, 28:12-22, 31:22-45, 32:10

One of the things the Holy Spirit is faithful to reveal to those He indwells is our reliance upon self. He is trying to bring us to that place of maturity where we can say with the Apostle Paul that it is no longer I that live but Christ in me. Our old nature is crucified with Christ but we have some ingrained attitudes and patterns that must be transformed by the renewing of our mind. He indwells us even as we are learning to live in Him, in His Word of Life. To live in the victorious new life there has to be that mutual abiding, Christ in me, and I in Christ.

When we came to Jesus for the salvation of our souls we realized we had nothing good in ourselves. We knew He was our only hope. He revealed that all we thought was good within us was really self-righteousness that even contested God's rightful place in our lives. But now that we have been in Christ for a time we forget that initial revelation of our great need for Him. Nearly every backward step begins here, at the failure to recognize Christ as our only hope. We think, "I have come so far by His grace that I am not as needy as I once was." What a lie that is! We will always be as needy as the day we were saved for Christ is our Life. He didn't give us a gift – a thing – named 'eternal life', He is Eternal Life in us. Our new heart is not a thing but an indwelling Person. That one essential need is the need of every moment of your life. Acting outside of that Life (in the analogy of last week, outside the ark) is to live in the pride of self-dependency. God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God.

The story of Jacob is a perfect illustration of this tendency of the old nature to help God. Genesis 25:21-23(NIV) ²¹ *Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant.²² The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, "Why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the LORD.²³ The LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger."* How many times did God reverse the traditional order and have the elder surpassed by the younger? (In a quick search I found six examples.) I think God was giving us a picture of the Spirit of God within us ruling over our soul. Our soul life was born first and claimed supremacy over our life. But when we were born again, the Spirit caused the elder to serve the younger. The old soul life had to give way to the new Spirit life within us.

Jacob has this promise that he will rule over his brother, but he goes about making sure the word of the Lord comes to pass, in his own way. I don't believe God has ever needed a helping hand, just a cooperative heart. First he tricks his brother out of the birthright. That meant inheriting 2/3rds of his father's estate versus the 1/3 that the younger would receive. It also meant becoming head of the clan and responsible for the care of the women and property. All this could be summed up in the promise of God to his mother, that Jacob would "rule over" Esau. As Rebekah's favorite, I imagine she told her son of this promise of God. Jacob catches his brother in a weak moment and sets a plan in motion to help God out. Genesis 25:29-34 (NIV)²⁹ *Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished.³⁰ He said to Jacob, "Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!" (That is why he was also called Edom.)³¹ Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright."³² "Look, I am about to die," Esau said. "What good is the birthright to me?"³³ But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.³⁴*

Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright.

If that wasn't enough, he cooperates with his mother's scheme to steal the blessing also with an elaborate plan of deception. His father is blind and bedridden. When Isaac sends Esau to shoot some game and prepare a dinner so that he can receive a blessing, Rebekah cooks up a goat and has Jacob pretend to be Esau. He successfully deceives his father into giving him the blessing.

I can imagine all the justification going on in their minds. "This is God's will, so it can't be wrong. We'll just make sure everything goes according to God's plan. Hey, maybe this scheme is God's inspiration. How can it be wrong when the result is the promise of God?" I'm sure you can come up with as many as I can because we all have these same patterns developed by our old nature. Instead of trusting God to fulfill His Word in His way and His time, we set about to insure we get what we desire. The results can be devastating.

In Jacob's case it meant fleeing to the land of his mother, the place Abraham had come from. He lives in fear for 20 years. He never saw his mother again. His children and wives follow his deceptive traits causing conflict and its resultant misery. (Consider Reuben's revenge killings through lies, and the deception of what happened to Joseph) Esau had promised to kill him as soon as their father Isaac died. Rebekah does not like Esau's wives so Jacob is sent to his uncle to find a wife there that will please his mother and father. On the way, God confronts him in a dream. Jacob tells us a lot about his heart and ours, when he offers God a deal. Genesis 28:12-22 (NIV)¹² *He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.¹³ There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying.¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.¹⁵ I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."¹⁶ When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it."¹⁷ He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."¹⁸ Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it.¹⁹ He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz.²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear²¹ so that I return safely to my father's house, then the LORD will be my God²² and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth."*

God renews His covenant with Abraham and Isaac to Jacob. Jacob's response is to offer God a deal. "Be with me, feed and clothe me, and bring me back, and then You will be my God." He talks to God as if God was some kind of idol. Do what I'm asking and then I'll call you mine and build a church and give you 10%. Who's making the deal? God asked nothing of Jacob. He told Jacob the reality of what he was going to experience by grace. Jacob offers God a deal as if God needed Jacob. What is really wonderful to me is the patience and humor God must have. Jacob sounds so arrogant, like he is holding all the cards, when God

is giving him this great blessing. That is God. He remembers our frame that we are dust, and He looks at what He is making out of us, not our present stupidity and pride. God knew Jacob would respond like that before He blessed him, but He blessed him anyway. He does the same with us. We have so much growing to do.

Oswald Chamber's says that God brings us into contact with people who show us what we are like to God. That is what God did with Jacob. Enter Laban, Rebekah's brother. If you thought she was deceitful, wait till you meet her brother. Jacob fell head over heels for Rachel, Laban's daughter. He worked seven years for the bride price. Laban gets him drunk and puts his older daughter Leah in the marriage bed with Jacob. It's dark and Jacob consummates the marriage with Leah. In the morning he cries, "I've been tricked!" Right, and you've never tricked anyone? Jacob begins reaping what he has sown. God is revealing to Jacob what his heart is like, through someone who is trickier than he!

Still, God is keeping His word and blessing Jacob. Jacob does some more trickery to end up with most of the flocks, but Laban stays at it, changing his wages 10 times. Finally, God calls Jacob back to his homeland. Instead of facing his father-in-law, Jacob sneaks off with his family and herds. Laban goes after him and they have this huge argument that I find very amusing. In the East, you try to word things so that the other party looks bad, if they don't agree, while appearing generous at the same time. It is quite an art. You can see it at every poke and jab between these two tricksters. I think this is where Jacob finally begins to see himself in Laban.

Genesis 31:22-45 (NIV)²² *On the third day Laban was told that Jacob had fled.²³ Taking his relatives with him, he pursued Jacob for seven days and caught up with him in the hill country of Gilead.²⁴ Then God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream at night and said to him, "Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad."²⁵ Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country of Gilead when Laban overtook him, and Laban and his relatives camped there too.²⁶ Then Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done? You've deceived me, and you've carried off my daughters like captives in war.²⁷ Why did you run off secretly and deceive me? Why didn't you tell me, so I could send you away with joy and singing to the music of tambourines and harps?²⁸ You didn't even let me kiss my grandchildren and my daughters good-bye. You have done a foolish thing.²⁹ I have the power to harm you; but last night the God of your father said to me, 'Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.'³⁰ Now you have gone off because you longed to return to your father's house. But why did you steal my gods?"³¹ Jacob answered Laban, "I was afraid, because I thought you would take your daughters away from me by force.³² But if you find anyone who has your gods, he shall not live. In the presence of our relatives, see for yourself whether there is anything of yours here with me; and if so, take it." Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen the gods.³³ So Laban went into Jacob's tent and into Leah's tent and into the tent of the two maidservants, but he found nothing. After he came out of Leah's tent, he entered Rachel's tent.³⁴ Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them inside her camel's saddle and was sitting on them. Laban searched through everything in the tent but found nothing.³⁵ Rachel said to her father, "Don't be angry, my lord, that I cannot stand up in your presence; I'm having my period." So he searched but could not find the household gods.³⁶ Jacob was angry and took Laban to task. "What is my crime?" he asked Laban. "What sin have I committed that you hunt me down?"³⁷ Now that you have searched through all my goods, what have you found that belongs to your household? Put it here in front of your relatives and mine, and let them judge between the two of us.³⁸ "I have been with you for*

twenty years now. Your sheep and goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten rams from your flocks.³⁹ I did not bring you animals torn by wild beasts; I bore the loss myself. And you demanded payment from me for whatever was stolen by day or night.⁴⁰ This was my situation: The heat consumed me in the daytime and the cold at night, and sleep fled from my eyes.⁴¹ It was like this for the twenty years I was in your household. I worked for you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flocks, and you changed my wages ten times.⁴² If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been with me, you would surely have sent me away empty-handed. But God has seen my hardship and the toil of my hands, and last night he rebuked you."

⁴³ Laban answered Jacob, "The women are my daughters, the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks. All you see is mine. Yet what can I do today about these daughters of mine, or about the children they have borne?⁴⁴ Come now, let's make a covenant, you and I, and let it serve as a witness between us."⁴⁵ So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar.

Jacob invites all the relatives to a going away party at his expense. The next morning, Laban says his good-byes to the family. God has blessed this rascal Jacob, not because of what he had done, but because God has chosen him. He will change him into a man of God. Along the way he did it his own way and helped God out a lot more than He needed help. Jacob hadn't learned to yield to God and trust His Sovereignty or His promises. He did not see God as the One who had the power to fulfill His Word. Still, God blessed him, and brought him to a realization of where his heart was. He is about to wrestle with God Himself. Perhaps this is what he had been doing all the while he was in Laban's home, trying to come to grips with letting God be God and not make things happen. When he hears Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men he is afraid that he will fulfill his old vow, to kill him. Then Jacob prays: Genesis 32:10a (NIV) ¹⁰ *I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant.* He has gone from arrogance to humility.

Jacob was coming to grips with the fact that without God, he could do nothing. It was God that had allowed his schemes to work. God would have blessed him without the scheming methods which would have reaped good things instead of problems. God spared him from the wrath of Laban. Now only God could spare him from the wrath of Esau. He is coming to a place we all need to come to. This is where we realize God does not need our schemes. God can fulfill His own word. He is God. He does not perform for our promises of what we will do for Him. He is not a great wish genie. Jacob does not say, "I will make you my God" but "I am your servant". He alone is Sovereign God. He set His love upon us and draws us to Himself in spite of all our ignorance and arrogance. He has a goal in mind for us, Christ-likeness. He will bring us there, through our experiences, through the working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, and all by His grace. What a patient and loving God! May the Lord help us to respond with loving trust, to move at His direction, to lay down our schemes and have faith that He will finish what He has begun.

Jacob has been a busy boy all his life, obtaining what he thinks are blessings. He is about to spend a little time alone wrestling with God and find out that blessings sometimes come in different packages. He will learn God knows our needs better than we know them. He will learn to stop trusting in his ability and look to his Maker. He will make a generous restitution to his brother. He is changed from the supplanter to one who endures with God and man. May we all learn the same.