

Divine presence with Jacob  
Genesis 29-31

Introduction

At Bethel, Jacob received a special promise and assurance of God's presence wherever he went (Genesis 28:15). As we look at the next episode in Jacob's life, we shall look at what the divine presence meant in everyday life of home and in his occupation. We shall see that though God had revealed Himself and given Jacob gracious promises, Jacob was not out of the woods. He had a long way to go in his knowledge of God and experience of His grace.

Jacob was in the school of experience. Book learning is vital, but it is useless till the experience is known. In and through all, God was there. And His presence made all the difference.

Picture of Jacob at home and at work

From Bethel Jacob travelled on, going eastwards. He was going to meet another branch of his family, his mother's brother, Laban. Laban had two daughters, Leah and Rachael, who both became Jacob's wives. But the relationship he had with each of them was very different. For Jacob and Rachael it had been love at first sight, for Rachael was more attractive in looks and figure than her older sister. Jacob had willingly agreed to work for Laban for 7 years to earn Rachael as his wife. **They seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her** (Genesis 29:20).

The trouble began when Laban tricked Jacob and made sure he married first the less attractive Leah, because the first-born should be married first. Jacob worked another 7 years for Rachael. So Laban got two daughters off his hands, and 14 years free labour from Jacob. But what an unhappy home for the two sisters. It was clear that Jacob loved Rachael more, but it was Leah who bore him children.

Imagine how Leah felt, because she was not really loved and cherished by her husband. Her sorrow and agony were reflected in her sons' names – Reuben means, **"It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now."** (Genesis 29:32); Simeon means, **"Because the Lord heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too."** (Genesis 29:33); Levi means **"Now at last my husband will become attached to me"** (Genesis 29:34). After each birth Leah hoped her husband would start to love her.

Rachael was no happier. She had her husband's love, but no children. Imagine the atmosphere. Every bitterness, jealousy, spite, cattiness – two sisters who had lived happily together before, now unable to live in peace as the wives of the same man. Sparks must have flown at times. Probably Jacob was glad to get out of the house for a bit of peace. No wonder the children growing up in this atmosphere turned out as they did. When Jacob reflected at the end of life, he described Reuben as unstable as water, Simeon guilty of cruelty, and Levi a willing accomplice in sins (Genesis 49). Bad relations between parents were bound to rub off on the sons. There is no question

that the home life of children is a powerful influence, although it is not true that all who turn out bad do so because of their home background.

If Jacob longed to get to work to escape the disputes at home, he must have been disappointed. He found it very hard to get on with his father-in-law, Laban, for whom he worked. Laban had not only cheated Jacob of his wife, and cheated him into a total of 14 years labour, but also cheated him by altering his wages ten times. He went on to take sheep that were by rights Jacob's. Then Jacob responded by sharp practice himself, attempting to alter the course of nature and produce the strongest of the flock for himself, and leave Laban with the weakest.

Father-in-law and son-in-law were constantly eyeing each other suspiciously, watching their back, afraid of what the other might do, and trying to outwit the other. It was daily combat at work. So Jacob was unhappy at home and unhappy at work. What a disgrace, after the promises he had been given at Bethel, that he was living as a godless worldling.

Sadly this is often the case, when men decide to doubt God and take care of themselves. Even the professed man of God can stoop low to take things into his own hands. He can end up with double standards – one for Sundays, and another for the rest of the week. He forgets God's precepts – **You shall not steal** (Genesis 20:15); **The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are truthful** (Proverbs 12:22); **Like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart** (Ephesians 6:6); **Trust in the Lord and do good** (Psalm 37:3); **In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight** (Proverbs 3:6); **I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread** (Psalm 37:25); **If the Lord delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm** (Psalm 37:23).

So this was Jacob's life – misery and quarrelling in the home, cheating and being cheated in work. And yet he had had that wonderful promise to him of God's presence at Bethel.

### Three evidences of the Lord's presence

- (1) Jacob was being taught lessons that he needed to learn. He had an unenviable record as a supplanter and deceiver. Now he had received a taste of his own medicine that he would not forget in a hurry. Now he knew what it must have felt like when he cheated his brother and his father. The deceiver had been deceived, had reaped what he had sown, and he did not like it.

God has no favourites. If His children wander from the pathway, they will hear from Him. He lets us see ourselves in a mirror, and He chastens and disciplines us. It is a sign of God's love to us that He chastens us. **The Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son** (Hebrews 12:6). Sometimes we receive the same treatment as we have meted out to others. Sometimes everything goes against us. Amid all the chaos and frustration, God is telling us we need to get back to Him.

To know the Lord's presence with us is very comforting and reassuring. It can also be disturbing and unsettling. His presence comforts the disturbed, and disturbs the comfortable.

- (2) Jacob had the privilege of being in constant contact with the Lord, and the Lord with him. Throughout the story it is interesting to note how the name of the Lord occurs on the lips of the chief actors, and in the record of the narrator. **When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb..."This time I will praise the Lord."** (Genesis 29:31,35). **Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and opened her womb** (Genesis 30:22). **Then the Lord said to Jacob, "Go back to the land of your fathers"... So Jacob sent word. "The God of my father has been with me"** (Genesis 31:3-5).

God was constantly in contact with Jacob and his family, and they with Him, in everyday affairs. We often only think of God in the great issues of life and death, and in the crises and crucial decisions. But God is concerned with everything. We must acknowledge Him in every aspect of our lives.

One of the principles and thrills of the Christian life is immediate contact with the God of heaven at any time and about anything. **Seven times a day I will praise you** (Psalm 119:164). **Pray without ceasing** (1 Thessalonians 5:17). If God is with us everywhere, we are never alone. His ear is always open to our cry. He is our sanctuary however great the bustle going on around us.

- (3) Jacob enjoyed the Lord's protection in danger. Jacob must have grieved the Lord by his behaviour, yet God had purposes of blessing for him and determined to achieve them, therefore protection was available when he was in danger. Jacob, realizing that Laban's hostility was growing, decided to return home at divine command. He led out his flocks and herds and wives and children and slaves, across the Euphrates and the desert. Three days later, Laban pursued him, and there was a moment of real danger. Then God interposed, warning Laban not to harm Jacob but to let him go on his way. The feud was ended by a covenant, and each went their separate ways. Peace was made. It was clear that God had not left Jacob, despite his sinfulness and waywardness.

God throws his protective arms around the erring child. He is kept safe amid danger. David Livingstone was refused by an African chief to pass through his land, so Livingstone planned to cross the river at night and get to safety. Then opening his New Testament, he read, "Lo I am with you always". He recorded, "This was the word of a Gentleman of most sacred and strictest honour. I will not cross furtively at night as I had intended. It would appear as flight. And should such a man as I flee?" The Lord was true to His promise. The Lord's presence secured Livingstone's safety. Someone stronger than our worst foes watches and interposes for us. **If God is for us, who can be against us?** (Romans 8:34)

### Conclusion

The presence of God ensures we are disciplined and corrected. It enables us to have constant contact in all places at all times. It ensures perfect protection whatever the danger to guarantee God's purposes for us. F.R.Havergal said about the Lord's presence: "That is a fact. The Lord said it, and you have to believe it, whether you feel it or not." He is there every day, through thick and thin, whether our way be light or dark, whether we are enjoying success or enduring disaster. The Lord is with you.