Lesson 5 Study Guide: Jacob’s Family: God Shepherded Them on a Pilgrimage of Faith

\* Jacob’s dysfunctional family

In Jacob’s family we find many unethical activities; he deceives his father Isaac and steals his brother Esau’s birthright; he marries two sisters Rachel and Leah and takes their concubines as wives as well; Rachel and Leah compete with each other for children and Jacob’s love; Jacob leaves behind a broken relationship with their father Laban; when they leave, Rachel steals her father’s household gods. In modern terms, this was a very dysfunctional family that in no way exemplifies Christian standards. But we see that God had a purpose in their lives. God was training the family until they became men and women of faith.

\* Some positive lessons from Jacob’s family

At the same time, even from his youth Jacob has a quality that God uses and blesses. Jacob’s twin brother Esau takes two Hittite wives, who were a source of grief to his parents (26:34–35). On the other hand, when his father Isaac gives him direction not to marry a Canaanite woman but to go back to his family to find a wife, Jacob obeys (28:1–2,6–9). Women can also learn spiritual lessons from Jacob’s wives. From Leah women can learn to put their hope in God, not in their husband; from Rachel women should learn not to be idolatrous with their husbands or other material things.

\* The maturing of Jacob’s faith

In the course of his life Jacob’s faith transforms. In chapter 28 God appears to him personally at Bethel, and Jacob makes a vow; it was for his own purpose, to make use of God. In chapters 29–31 Jacob lives at Paddan Aram. There he pursues his own goals: love and wealth. He had deceived his brother Esau, but there, his uncle Laban deceives him. Through this experience Jacob learns not to depend on his own abilities; he realizes that it is God who helped him to be blessed. In chapters 32–35 Jacob returns to the Promised Land, where he meets God personally and is healed of his inner fear. But he tries to settle down with God’s blessings and disaster ensues. God finally challenges him to go back to Bethel to keep his vow, and he obeys and names it “El Bethel” and worships God (35:7,14–15). He learns that he cannot make use of God; rather, God is leading his life.

Later, in chapter 46 God brings Jacob and his family to Egypt through Joseph. There, Jacob finally learns that his life is actually a pilgrimage back to God (47:9). Instead of envying Pharaoh or grabbing something from him, he blesses him (47:10), knowing that he has the real blessing, God himself. He also makes Joseph promise to bury him back in the Promised Land (47:30). Jacob worships God and blesses Joseph’s sons Ephraim and Manasseh as if they were his own (47:31; Heb11:21). He also testifies that God had been his Shepherd all his life (48:15). Finally in chapter 49 he blesses each of his twelve sons appropriately and passes on the covenant blessing to Judah.

\* God’s shepherding of Jacob’s family

We learn in these chapters mainly how God shepherds Jacob to become a source of blessing. God chooses him even before he was born (25:23). Under his mother’s influence he learns a spiritual value system (25:31; 27:13–14). Through his father Isaac he receives the covenant blessing given to Abraham (28:3–4). When God first appears to him at Bethel and gives him his covenant promises, the seed of faith is planted in Jacob’s heart. When Jacob makes his vow, God takes hold of it as a handle by which to train him. God is patient with Jacob at Paddan Aram for twenty years and lets him pursue all that he had in his heart, but through his struggle with his uncle Laban God reveals that he is the Sovereign God who was helping him (31:41–42). Whenever he is in a desperate situation, God comes to Jacob, and Jacob responds (31:1–3,10–13; 32:7–12,24–30; 34:30; 35:1–5). God helps Jacob by repeatedly reminding him of his vow to come back and worship him (31:13; 35:1). In this way God shepherds Jacob to be a God-centered man who leads his family to worship God (35:2–4).

In the latter part of his life Jacob’s family plunges into many painful problems. His daughter Dinah is raped (34:2) and his sons Simeon and Levi become murderers (34:25–26). His beloved wife Rachel dies in childbirth (35:19). His firstborn son Reuben sleeps with his concubine Bilhah (35:22). His beloved son Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt by his own brothers (37:28). His son Judah runs away from home and marries a Canaanite woman (38:2). Judah’s first two sons from that marriage turn out to be wicked, and God puts them to death (38:7,10). Later, Judah himself sleeps with his daughter-in-law, thinking she is a prostitute (38:15,18). Jacob’s family is devastated. Still, God was patiently working through these events to take human blessings away and to help Jacob turn his heart toward him, his Good Shepherd. God never gave up on this family. God even used tragedies for his own good redemptive purpose (50:20).

Finally, God leads Jacob to Egypt and helps him to become a source of blessing. God fulfills his promise to Abraham to make his offspring a blessing to all nations (28:14), and through Jacob’s descendants the Savior Jesus eventually came (49:10; Nu24:17; Mt1:1). In the end, God was pleased to be called the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob (Ex3:15; Heb11:16b). Through this we learn that God our Shepherd can help all kinds of sinful people and dysfunctional families.

\* Applications for house churches

God’s work in Jacob’s family gives us great hope. Like them, many families today struggle with painful relationship problems and tragic events. These are the times not to despair but to put our hope in God. God always has a good purpose (Ro8:28). He can work even in dire situations, and he never gives up. God wants us to come to know him as our Shepherd and to live by faith in him. Through his patient training he transforms people and families into holy pilgrims who worship him and are a source of blessing to the world.

Also, like Jacob’s family, many families today are pursuing human happiness, even trying to use God to do so. They want to settle down and enjoy life’s best blessings here on earth. But from Jacob’s family we learn that we cannot live in this world forever, settling down and holding on to human blessings. Sometimes this can even lead to disaster. Instead, God wants us to realize that he himself is our true blessing. He wants us to worship him with all our hearts and learn that our lives here are actually a pilgrimage back to his kingdom (Heb11:9–10,13–16). When we live by faith with our hope set firmly in God and in his heavenly kingdom, we can be a blessing to those around us, to our descendants, and to future generations.