

Radically Devoted to God!



*how an **Extraordinary** God
uses **Ordinary** people
to achieve the **Impossible***



God is into the character building process. How does the God of the Bible, Who created all humanity, build character? What really is character? How would we know if we had been in God's school for character building? How would we know if we had "passed the test" for becoming a man or woman with character? Are the common criteria used for assessing character (power, possessions, prestige, or position) the criteria/standard God uses to build and assess character?

Obviously these questions and more will be examined during this series on biblical characters and how they were formed. The fascinating part of all of this is that God never gave up on any of them (even in their moments of despair, doubt, frustration, and even failure!) In fact, many of these people appear in the "Hall of Faith" recorded in the book of Hebrews, chapter 11. We could assume that God is much more interested in the process that He takes us through, with what we are becoming, more than in what we can accomplish. The process in character building has been described more precisely as a "refining process."

Once a silversmith was asked how he knew that the raw silver ore he submitted to intense heat was in its final stage of refinement. (Silver must be refined under increasingly higher temperatures in this process.) How does the silversmith know when the silver has reached the "finishing" stage? The smith remarked that he knows the silver is refined **when he can see the reflection of his image** in the silver.

What is God's purpose in choosing men and women just like us to fulfill his plan? He begins the refining process by first giving us great hope and confidence in Who He is. The world we live in is one of great fear, terror, doubt, conflict and tension. But to entrust our lives into the hands of our Creator is to take that all-important step of believing Him. To become a dynamic, vibrant "God-follower" is truly an experience of "living on the edge"! We can be certain that the refining process will be an interesting one, howbeit, requiring intense stretching and purifying (pruning) from the Master Refiner! (John 15:1-10)

There are those who see the life God offers us as one of constant conflict and turmoil. In the midst of an already conflictive and tension-filled world, many simply "bow out" and say "no thanks"! Unfortunately such a decision moves people into the realm of a low risk, comfortable, acceptable, style of life—"going with the flow" or "escaping from reality"! We can succumb to despair, disillusionment, and distress or we can enter into "extreme" spirituality and thus enter a life-long adventure in faith!



Most students of the Scriptures recognize that the “heroes of faith” that appear throughout the pages of the Bible were ordinary people God selected to live extraordinary lives. This series of studies should enable us to capture the essence of how God enables people like you and me to be all He wants us to be. As we examine each of these lives we should achieve the following:

- 1) Identify the “heart throb” of each hero, including the reasons why their response to God’s call led them into an exciting adventure of character building.
- 2) Describe the criteria God uses to advance His process of character building so that we can evaluate how well we are tracking with Him.
- 3) Develop a sensitive heart, spirit, and will that accept an unusual, abnormal, innovative approach to human development.
- 4) Respond to God’s initiatives to build our own character with specific Action Points that will be evaluated weekly at the group meeting by fellow pilgrims to assure increasing trust and obedience.
- 5) Covenant to continue the “walk of faith” until God has implanted in our lives the elements necessary for a vibrant, dynamic relationship with Him and His creation (which, of course, includes other people).
- 6) Depend on God the Holy Spirit to empower us to live in process—not as people who have already achieved, but as fellow pilgrims who can help evaluate our progress.

Jacob-The Great Deception

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Study 1– Genesis 27:1-28:9

Background

If there was ever any doubt about the veracity, authenticity, and relevance of the Bible, this study on the life of Jacob should eliminate any thoughts still caught in the vacillating web. Abraham was seen as a truly great spiritual giant; his son, Isaac (as we will see in this study since he is the father of Jacob) had a less committed faith in the one true God. Jacob is born in strife (in fact there was “jostling” between the twin boys in the womb of Rebekah!); that tension and strife continued throughout his life. In spite of all of this, our **extraordinary God** uses this very **ordinary** man and his family to fulfill the **impossible**; so much so that the Jewish people continue to describe Jehovah God as the “God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”. Our first encounter with Jacob is not a pleasant, harmonious scene. It reads more like a reality show or a soap opera unfolding from the very pages of “holy writ!”

Interacting With the Facts

1.1 Identifying the “heart throb” of this “hero of the faith”—Jacob

1. As in every conflict, there are “two sides”. Describe the “spiritual blindness of Isaac” in this conflict. (Check God’s answer to Rebekah’s prayer in Gen. 25:23) Also remember that Esau was Isaac’s favorite; Jacob was Rebekah’s favorite.
2. What was one of the motivating factors behind Rebekah’s scheme? (Check Genesis 25: 21-26. Make note specifically of the “jostling each other in the womb”; the prayer of Rebekah and God’s answer; and the second baby “with his hand grasping Esau’s heel.”
3. Why does Jacob express concern about Isaac’s possible discovery of the deceptive strategy? What is his underlying concern?
4. What does Esau’s reaction to the “Great Deception” tell us about his spiritual/character development?
5. How does Rebekah “rationalize” the need for Jacob to leave Canaan (the promised land) and return to Haran? Literally she says in Gen. 27:46, “If Jacob marries one of these Cannanites (Hittite women) I would prefer to be dead!”

1.2 Describing the criteria God uses to advance His process of character building.

1. Why does it appear that Jacob can not “break the vicious cycle of deception”? Remember that he had earlier “stolen” his brother’s birthright (Gen. 25: 29-34).
2. With the dynamic of a communication breakdown between parents; a parental favoritism between the sons; and a father (Isaac) who has become spiritually blind, what hope is there for truthfulness, honesty, and family harmony?

1.3 Responding with Action Points (for weekly evaluation)

1. If you ever found yourself in a “deceptive mind-set or lifestyle”, what enabled you to “break-out”; become free?
2. What are some safeguards you can put in place to assure that you do not “regress” into that kind of mind-set or lifestyle again? Make certain that these safeguards are realistic and measurable!

The Deceiver is Deceived

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Study 2— Genesis 28:10-29:30

Background

God's process of building the character of Jacob has only begun. Obviously he is still at the "deceptive" stage in his life. In this second encounter we will examine how patient God is in the "refining process". There are two important incidents that occur in the life of Jacob that begin to turn him away from himself and toward a more complete awareness of who God is. Some researchers call the first incident the time when Jacob's head knowledge of God (from observing the faith of his father, Isaac) moves to his heart and becomes **real** for him. This is not different from the new-birth experience Jesus described to the religious leader Nicodemus in John 3. The second incident is a real shock to Jacob—ending up on his wedding night with the wrong bride! Surely these two incidents will make for some lively discussion!

Interacting With the Facts

2.1. Identifying the "heart throb" of this "hero of the faith".

1. What is the significance of the ladder in Jacob's dream that reaches from earth to heaven? (there are at least two important points.)
2. How does the blessing that Jacob received compare to the one Abraham received in Gen. 12? What does this mean?
3. Why does Jacob react to this "dream" by building an altar? What is he saying by this action?
4. How does the vow that Jacob makes to God reveal where he is in his character development? What deficiencies do you see in this vow?
5. What is God trying to teach Jacob through the deception of Laban (giving to Jacob the "wrong bride")? Remember that a bride in this cultural setting would have been veiled throughout the wedding festivities with a dress that would have covered her entire body, not just her face—similar from the "burka" Muslim women wear today.

2.2 Describing the "criteria" God uses to advance his character building process.

1. What does the willingness of Jacob to accept the "terms" of his work contract tell you about his quality of commitment and dedication to Rachel?
2. Laban's explanation for the "bride switching" is that the cultural custom dictates marrying the older before the younger. What does this tell you about the character of Laban and how God is using him to "refine" Jacob?
3. Although, culturally speaking, having two wives was not uncommon and was not prohibitive, what kind of dynamic do you think existed between Jacob and his two wives? What would that do to help his character development? How do you suppose the two sisters/wives responded?

2.3 Responding with Action Points (for weekly evaluation)

1. Describe the experience you have had where your intellectual perception of God moved to your "heart" and you became intimately related to the One true God?
2. How do you respond to "incidents" in your life over which you have no control? What does your reaction tell you about your character development? What corrective steps would improve your response?

A Phenomenal Wrestling Match

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Study 3— Genesis 32:22-32

Background

This incident in the life of Jacob brings us to a fascinating test of his character. Jacob is on his way back to the “promised land”, having prospered greatly in Haran. In fact, he has become so prosperous that there is great envy among Laban’s sons and Jacob perceives it is time to return home. The only concern about returning is that Esau is very much alive and present! Jacob is literally traumatized, thinking about meeting his brother again. In addition he has been informed by servants who have “scouted out” the situation, that Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men! Nonetheless, he begins the trip back (now with his two wives, children, many servants and large herds). Before he meets Esau, once again he has a unique face to face confrontation with the living God!

Interacting With the Facts

3.1 Identifying the “heart throb” of this hero of the faith.

1. What are some of the concerns Jacob must have as he prepares to meet his brother? How valid and realistic are these?
2. How do you suppose Esau will react to the “contingency” Jacob sends on ahead with gifts for Esau?
3. Spending the night alone on the other side of the Jabbok, Jacob has this phenomenal wrestling match with a “man”. Why is it important that the “man” could not overpower Jacob? What does this tell you about Jacob and his character development?

3.2 Describe the “criteria” God uses to advance his character building process.

1. The “man” hurts Jacob in the process of the match. What is the significance of the limp Jacob acquired as a result?
2. What is the importance of the name change? (Remember what “Jacob” means and what his new name means). What does this tell you about God’s character development process?
3. What enables Jacob to realize that he has “wrestled” with God? How does Jacob react to that fact?

3.3 Responding with Action Points (for weekly evaluation).

1. Describe a time in your life when you were “desperate” for God to bless you. What happened as you “wrestled” with God?
2. What is the purpose of God “hurting/discipling” us before He helps us? How should we respond to those painful, stressful, agonizing times in our lives?
3. How will you recognize when you are in God’s school of discipline/discipleship? What steps will you take to submit to the process? (Check out Heb. 12:1-12)

Bringing It All Together

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Study 4— Learning from Jacob

Background

If you have had the impression that “dysfunctional families” are creations or trends discovered through present-day psychological research, this study in the life of Jacob should have corrected those impressions. Dysfunctionalism is as old as the human race. In fact, the really scary reality is that over the process of these many years (from Jacob’s time to our 21st century), human nature really has not progressed in matters of personal and family relationships. We continue to struggle with the same pressure points, tensions, stress, and strife. Now that’s the bad news!

The good news: God has a better design and plan! In fact, He progressively reveals that through the **ordinary people** he selected to achieve the **impossible** through his **extraordinary power and designs!** This study in the life of Jacob is certainly proof of that. A man (who one scholar describes as a “split personality”—aggressive to the world outside the home, but a passive husband and father at home) was placed in the “refining process” by God and the result is fascinating. But it was a **process** and it was not an “**instantaneous** transformation”, by any means. His home life and marital relationships were “high-risk” at best. His deception and manipulation of those in the world outside his home were disastrous. **BUT GOD** continued His work!

This, then, is the purpose of this series of studies. If the God of the universe, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, could use ordinary people to accomplish His extraordinary plan, that should give us great hope today. Let’s look at some of those principles we have gleaned from this study and see how we can “enter into this process” of character development—for His glory and so that others will come to know Him!

Now It’s Our Turn

4.1 Covenant with God to “walk by faith, not by sight”!

1. Describe that initial encounter with God when you became aware that “head” knowledge was not sufficient—He wanted a **heart and will** commitment!
2. What concrete steps can you take so that you “see yourself” from God’s perspective, including your deficiencies and limitations?
3. How can you seek out “encounters” with the living God so that you can hear his directives for your life?
4. Specifically, how will you “wrestle with God” until you receive the confirmation that He is truly your God?

4.2 Develop a sensitive heart that accepts God’s process of developing character.

1. List some ways you can move from “having my own way”—via manipulation, controlling, deceiving—to doing it God’s way. Make certain you put some guidelines in place so that a trusted friend can help evaluate your progress (preferably weekly).

4.3 Develop dependence on the Spirit to empower you to live on the “radical edge”.

1. Jacob “struggled” to understand God’s way in his life. He had his own controlling way of getting what he wanted. But God progressively “broke down his resistance” and brought a vital, dynamic change into his life—even a name change! How do you envision that happening in your life?