

# REAL PEOPLE, REAL GOD:

## Determined Jacob

### A REAL Man Runs for His Life

Our story begins with Jacob fleeing, determined to escape Esau's wrath. Though our REAL GOD intended Abraham's Covenant to be given to Jacob, Esau is rightfully angry that his brother stole the blessing and not-so rightfully vows to kill Jacob. Mother Rebekah suggests Isaac send Jacob to her brother's family in Haran, where Jacob will find a wife.

On the way, our REAL GOD meets Jacob in a dream—his first personal encounter with the God of his fathers.

“I am the Lord, the ***God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac***...All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ***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***.” Genesis 28:13-15 (*emphasis added*)

God basically promised: *I will hold onto you and not let you go*. It sounds a lot like Jacob, the heel-grasper, holding on for dear life—except Jacob's determination was plagued with deception. God's promise to never let go of Jacob is pure and motivated by love.

### Jacob's Response to God's Promise

Jacob gives a conditional commitment to God's ALL-IN promise:

“Then Jacob made a vow, saying, ‘***If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey...then the Lord will be my God...***’ Genesis 28:20-22 (*emphasis added*)

Why was Jacob so skeptical and slow to trust? Two reasons I could think of:

1. It's Jacob's first encounter with God – it takes a lifetime to know and trust God's character.
  - Do you know God well enough to trust Him? The more we study His Word, the more likely we are to believe His promises.
2. The mind of a deceiver expects others to deceive. Perhaps Jacob thought, “Yea right, God. You say that now, but you're just trying to get me to do what You want. I know this trick. I've done it a hundred times.”

- Do you project your own faults (or the faults you see in others) on God, thinking He's unfair, unloving, impatient, angry, or a liar because that's who *you* are, or that's how you've seen *others* act?

## Swindler Gets Swindled

Jacob arrives in Haran, and meets some shepherds. He tells them he's related to Laban, and they say, "Here comes his daughter Rachel now." Jacob sees her—love at first sight—and BOOM! He kisses her! There's that determination coming out! *Then* he introduces himself to Rachel as one of her father's relatives!

BTW: To walk up and kiss a girl in today's culture would be pushy, but in ancient Hebrew culture, it was downright OFFENSIVE!!!

Amazingly, uncle Laban takes Jacob in, gives him a job (tending sheep), and says, "Name your wage." Jacob wants his paycheck in Rachel dollars—he agrees to work seven years for Rachel's hand in marriage. *Determination* to have the woman he's already kissed.

Laban agrees. At the end of seven years, Laban throws a big wedding festival, Jacob probably drinks too much wine, goes into the wedding tent that night, and BOOM! Wakes up the next morning with Leah beside him, Rachel's older sister. Laban swindled him!

Good for Laban. Bad for Jacob. Absolutely heartbreaking for poor Leah!!!

Jacob—the heel grasper—is still determined to have Rachel and agrees to work seven more years if Laban will give him Rachel *at the end of his wedding week with Leah* (again, poor Leah!). Laban agrees and gives him Rachel also. My heart just breaks at these words:

“Jacob made love to Rachel also, and his love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah.” **Genesis 29:30**

And another dysfunctional family is born...

## REAL Dysfunction Grows

Our REAL God sees Leah's heartache and opens her womb to bear sons, but Rachel is barren. Rachel gives her maidservant as a wife to Jacob (like Sarah, remember?) and then Leah competes by giving her maidservant to him as well. Jacob is passed from wife to wife and maidservant to maidservant, becoming the father of ten sons and one daughter in a relatively short time.

Yikes! What a way to build God's chosen people! And all this time, Jacob loved only Rachel, and we see his determination to have a son from her in this decision:

“After Rachel gave birth to Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, ‘Send me on my way so I can go back to my own homeland...’” **Genesis 30:25**

Jacob worked, got Rachel, got a son from her—done. Now he's ready to go home. But his father-in-law isn't ready to let him go.

“But Laban said to him, ‘If I have found favor in your eyes, please stay. I have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me because of you.’” **Genesis 30:27**

Divination? Eee-gad! We'll talk about that later. The most important part is that Laban realized—and told Jacob—that our REAL GOD was using Jacob as *a blessing* to him. Did Jacob remember God's covenant blessing and that Abraham's promise included, “...you will be a blessing...all peoples on earth will be blessed through you”?

God blessed a swindler (Laban) through Jacob—even before Jacob himself had fully committed to God! That's the amazing grace of our God.

Whether Jacob realized God's faithfulness or not, he agreed to stay and work for Laban, setting his wages as the inferior speckled and spotted sheep of the flocks. Laban—being the slimy snake that he was—sneakily removed all the spotted, speckled, and striped sheep from his flocks. But Jacob peeled bark off some sticks and laid them in front of the watering troughs when the stronger sheep were mating—a little hocus-pocus in this land of pagan worship. Amazingly, the spotted and striped sheep increased by this method, so Jacob's wealth grew and Laban's decreased. These two swindlers matched deceit for deceit in a battle of the wills.

## **Our REAL GOD Steps In**

After Jacob had lived in Haran for twenty years, our REAL GOD speaks to Jacob, commanding him to return to his homeland—Canaan. He had also appeared earlier to Jacob in a dream revealing it was He who had blessed Jacob with all the livestock because He'd seen how Laban was treating Jacob.

How humbling for this bull-headed, determined man to realize that it was God—not his own efforts—that built his wealth. It was GOD who had protected him from Laban all those years. So Jacob listens and leaves Haran. But—like any lifelong deceiver—he sneaks away from Laban's household while Laban is away shearing sheep!

## A REAL Unhappy Father-In-Law

When Laban realizes Jacob has taken his daughters, his flocks, *and Laban's household gods*, he and his sons pursue Jacob in a rage. Before we get to that... what's with the household gods?

- Scripture tells us Rachel stole them, which sort of implies she worshiped them.
- How many others in Jacob's household worshiped idols?
- Did Jacob himself worship them?
- We don't really know, but it's further proof that Jacob wasn't yet fully committed to the God of his forefathers.

When Laban finally catches up to them, he's kept from harming them because our REAL GOD has stepped in to protect Jacob again:

[Laban said to Jacob] "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.'" **Genesis 31:29**

Jacob then testifies to his swindler father-in-law that it was his REAL GOD who had been with him and protected him all these years—EXACTLY what God had promised Jacob on his journey TO Haran twenty years before!

"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." **Genesis 31:42**

## Jacob's First REAL Humility

This journey was transformative for Jacob. We see evidence of his changed heart shortly after he parts ways with Laban. Jacob continues toward Canaan and realizes he'll soon come face-to-face with the brother who wanted to kill him. He sends messengers ahead of him to try to appease Esau, but the messengers return saying, "Esau is coming out to meet you... with 400 men." Terrified, Jacob gets REAL with his REAL GOD and asks for help.

"O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, Lord, you who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,' ***I am unworthy*** of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. ***I had only my staff*** when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps. ***Save me, I pray***, from the hand of my brother Esau, for ***I am afraid*** he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children..." **Genesis 32:9-12 (*emphasis* added)**

## Our REAL GOD Wrestles

After sending wave after wave of livestock gifts to Esau, Jacob then sends his wives and possessions across the Jabbok river and spends the night alone—wrestling with God before meeting his brother. Jacob’s bull-headed determination made him a pretty good wrestler.

Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.”

But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

The man asked him, “What is your name?”

“Jacob,” he answered.

Then the man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.”

Jacob said, “Please tell me your name.”

But he replied, “Why do you ask my name?” Then he blessed him there.

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.” **Genesis 32:26-30**

You can’t come away from a wrestling match without bruises, and **Genesis 32:25** tells us about the lasting consequence of Jacob’s wrestling match with God:

“When the man saw that he could not overpower [Jacob], he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.”

I believe God wrenched Jacob’s hip to teach him that bull-headed determination carried consequences. Jacob swindled Esau twice—the consequences were lifelong strained relationships. Jacob kissed Rachel on sight—the consequences were a fouled up family with four wives. Swindle your uncle and you’ll get swindled. But stubborn determination—in God’s hands—can bring good things as well. Jacob would forever walk with a limp, but his wrestling earned him a new name.

### ***Israel – Good Grasping***

Our REAL GOD changes Jacob’s name from “grasps the heel” (a Hebrew idiom for deceiver) to ***Israel***, “struggles with God” or “grasps at God,” if you will. The slight difference involves a change in Jacob’s life from one who grasps at what *he wants* and refuses to let go, to a man who grasps *at GOD* and is unwilling to let go.

Granted, Jacob still has a long way to go (don’t we all) in *really* grasping after God wholeheartedly, but the heart change has begun!

## Will the REAL Jacob Stand Up

Genesis 33 shows us the touching scene of Jacob and Esau being reunited in PEACE after twenty years. Jacob approaches Esau humbly, bowing seven times, and Esau runs to him. The brothers embrace, hug, kiss and weep. Awww, how cool that our REAL GOD has worked in Esau's heart as well. Love that!

But then Jacob goes back to deceiving again, promising to meet Esau at his camp in Seir. Instead, he heads in another direction and sets up his camp at Succoth. Ugh. Old habits die hard. Jacob is kind of like the rest of us—one step forward, two steps back. He set up camp at Succoth and then moves to the city of Shechem.

Remember those consequences we talked about?

- While in Shechem, Jacob's daughter Dinah is raped.
- His sons become murderers.
- Jacob fears (rightly so) that surrounding tribes will attack in retribution.
- All because Jacob stubbornly did things his own way. (Cue Frank Sinatra singing, *I Did It My Way*.)

## Determined and Committed

Our REAL GOD appears to Jacob yet again and commands him to go back to Bethel. Jacob obeys, but before he sets out, he removes *every idol* and buries them under a tree. As they leave Shechem, GOD again protects Jacob and his family by causing fear to fall on all the people so that no one pursues them (in retribution for killing the men of Shechem).

When Jacob arrives back at Bethel, the place where our REAL GOD first revealed Himself to Jacob, the determined son of Isaac has come **full circle**. He builds another altar, and God reaffirms his name and Abraham's Covenant.

This time, instead of replying with a half-hearted, conditional commitment, Jacob sets up a stone pillar and pours both a drink offering and oil over it. What a beautiful picture of a CHANGING life—not perfectly changed yet, but in process—pleasing to God.