

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver St.  
Flagstaff, AZ 86001

GOD'S BOOT CAMP

Genesis 29:1-30

by

Steven J. Cole

February 9, 1997

Copyright, 1997

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from  
The New American Standard Bible,  
copyright, The Lockman Foundation

February 9, 1997  
Genesis Lesson 54

GOD'S BOOT CAMP  
Genesis 29:1-30

At 3 a.m. you're awakened from a peaceful sleep when the lights come on and you hear a maniac screaming, "All right, you scumbags! I want you out of the sack and in formation in five minutes! And your beds had better be made or you'll be sea-bagging for two hours!"

Ah, the joys of boot camp! You arrive thinking of all the benefits the military has promised you, the valued recruit. When I was in boot camp, a recruit arrived with his fishing pole and water skis--the honest recruiter had told him that the base was located where you could fish and water ski. I suppose a *person* could do those things. But when a mean drill sergeant starts screaming in your face you learn that a *recruit* isn't a person! Reality sets in quickly!

In Genesis 28, we saw God's beginning with Jacob. At his time of great need, the Lord broke into Jacob's life, promised to bless him and to fulfill with him all of His covenant promises to Abraham (28:13- 15). In 29:1, the Hebrew says that Jacob "lifted up his feet," an expression which means that he had a new bounce in his steps as he continued his journey. God was with him, his guilt from the past was gone, his fear of Esau had subsided. Things were looking up!

What Jacob didn't realize was that he had just entered God's boot camp. He was in for a difficult 20-year term under God's unwitting drillmaster, Laban. God would use these trying years to knock a lot of rough edges off Jacob. Ultimately, yes, God would bless him. But part of the process involved breaking Jacob of his selfish ways.

God promises to bless each person who trusts in Christ. Like

Jacob, we say, "Sounds like a great program! Sure, I'll let You be my God if You'll bless me!" But we don't read the fine print that tells us that God's blessings always come through His discipline. To bless us and use us to bless others, God has to break us from our dependence on the flesh and shape us into the image of His Son, who learned obedience through the things He suffered (Heb. 5:8). So God enrolls us in His boot camp. It's a tough program that lasts many years.

Moses' readers were there. They had followed him out of slavery in Egypt, expecting to move right in to their luxury condos in Canaan, with milk and honey flowing from the tap. Instead, they had endured 40 difficult years in the wilderness and now faced the frightening prospect of fighting the giants who occupied those condominiums. It wasn't quite what they had signed up for. Jacob's story shows that ...

God graciously uses circumstances, consequences, and difficult people, over time, to shape His people.

1. God uses circumstances to shape His people.

Note the fortunate circumstances which Jacob encounters on his trip. He *happens* upon a well where there *happen* to be some shepherds, who *happen* to be from Haran and *happen* to know Laban. Just as Jacob is talking to them, Rachel *happens* to come along. What luck!

Or is it luck? At first you might think so, because the Lord isn't mentioned in 29:1-30. Unlike Abraham's servant who went to Haran in search of a bride for Isaac, who prayed and was led by the Lord to Rebekah (24:27), there is no word that Jacob prayed. How do we know that God ordered Jacob's circumstances?

There are three clues in the context, plus the teaching of the rest of the Bible, to tell us that God was behind all these

events. First, in 28:15 God promised Jacob that He would keep him wherever he went and would not leave him. God was with Jacob even though Jacob may not have acknowledged it. The second clue is in 29:2, where “behold” occurs twice [NASB margin], indicating the amazing providence of God in leading Jacob to the very spot he needed to be at the moment he needed to be there. The third clue is in 29:31, where we read, “Now the Lord saw ....” God wasn’t asleep, even though He isn’t mentioned in verses 1-30. He was watching, arranging the circumstances to shape Jacob into the man He wanted him to be.

Besides the context is the teaching of all the Bible, which shows that God sovereignly works out His purpose in the circumstances of history. He “works all things after the counsel of His will” (Eph. 1:11). David proclaims that in God’s book were written all “the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them” (Ps. 139:16). God ordains all our circumstances and uses them to break us of dependence on the flesh and to shape us into the image of Christ.

I can’t be dogmatic, but if I read the first part of this story correctly, Jacob is still trying to arrange his own circumstances for his own advantage, not realizing how God is superintending the whole process. Remember, Jacob is coming to his uncle with only the clothes on his back (32:10). He doesn’t have any gifts, as Abraham’s servant brought, so he needs some bargaining power. These shepherds seem somewhat lazy and passive. So Jacob sees his opportunity. When Rachel arrives, he moves into action. He rolls the large stone from the mouth of the well and waters her sheep. While she’s trying to figure out this hero, he kisses her, breaks into tears, and then introduces himself. It’s a blitzkrieg approach!

Why did Jacob weep? It was probably an overflow of

emotion that hit him when he realized how well everything had worked out--he was safely in Haran with his mother's relatives, and that this particular relative happened to be a strikingly beautiful young lady. Perhaps she reminded him of his mother ("mother" occurs three times in 29:10). While Jacob may not have planned his tears, it added to his opening advantage. The point is, even though Jacob is still his old self, trying to arrange everything for his advantage, God was there behind the scenes, ordering everything. God would use these circumstances to shape Jacob in ways Jacob couldn't yet imagine.

## 2. God uses consequences to shape His people.

Things went well for Jacob for one month. He fell head over heels in love with Rachel. Going to watch over the sheep with her had given the shepherding business a whole new dimension for Jacob. Life was taking a turn for the better. His past was behind him. Uncle Laban seemed to like him--even called him "my bone and my flesh" (29:14). He was part of the family. Until now, it would look as if Jacob had skated away from his past sins. Rebekah's scheme seemed to work. Jacob received the blessing. Esau's murderous anger had been thwarted. Jacob had arrived safely in Haran and had met beautiful Rachel. And Laban was treating him like a son. Besides, God had forgiven him. So Jacob shrugged off his past.

But God never lets us sin and walk away without consequences. He forgives the eternal penalty of our sin when we trust Christ, but He doesn't remove all the temporal consequences. If He did, we'd take sin lightly and not deal with its roots in our lives. It may take a while for the seeds we've sown to sprout, but they will come up.

After a month, Uncle Laban comes to Jacob with what sounds like a generous offer: "Because you are my brother,

should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" (29:15). But don't be fooled! Laban is a shrewd operator who always has his eye on his own advantage. He's actually serving notice that Jacob isn't going to freeload indefinitely. He's going to have to work for his keep.

While the wily Laban calls Jacob his brother, he also makes it clear who is serving whom ("serve me"). Laban craftily put Jacob under his thumb!

So Jacob begins to reap some of what he's sown. He's never worked for anybody in his life. No doubt he had helped tend his father's flocks and done household chores. But he was the son of a rich man. Servants had served *him*. If he hadn't deceived his father and brother and fled for his life, he would have had ample resources. Like Abraham's servant securing Rebekah for Isaac, Jacob could have offered his gifts, taken his bride, and been on his way. But because of his deception, he didn't have anything. He would have to work for his bride.

So he tells Laban that he will serve seven years for Rachel. Laban agrees to the deal, but doesn't tell him the catch: His seven years for Rachel will follow seven years' work for her older sister, because they had a custom that the older girl had to be married first. So Jacob has to work seven years for a woman he wouldn't have served seven days for if he had his choice.

Finally, Jacob's seven years are up. He has to remind Laban of that fact (29:21). You can be sure that both men were counting (for different reasons), but Laban wasn't going to remind Jacob if he could get a few extra days of work out of him. Jacob was ready for his wedding night (29:21), but he wasn't ready for Laban's treachery. The text delicately puts it, "So it came about that in the morning, behold, it was Leah!" It was dark when Jacob took her into the tent. Leah was veiled, probably dressed in Rachel's clothes and sprinkled

with her perfume. She must have been about the same size as Rachel. There is debate about what “weak eyes” (29:17) means; probably, she didn’t have the sexy sparkle in her eyes that Rachel had. But in the dark, the unsuspecting, overanxious Jacob didn’t notice the finer points. But when he rolled over in the morning to embrace his bride, he got the shock of his life!

So the deceiver is deceived! He’s met his match in Laban. There are obvious parallels between Jacob’s deception of Isaac and Laban’s deception of Jacob. Jacob deceived his blind father; he gets deceived in the dark. He deceived his father; he is deceived by his bride’s father. He cheated his brother out of the rights of the firstborn; he gets cheated because of the rights of the firstborn to be married first.

Jacob’s “reaping” doesn’t end here. Laban later would take advantage of him by changing his wages (31:41), even as Jacob had taken advantage of Esau with his birthright. Jacob deceived his father with regard to his favorite son (Esau) by covering his hands with goat skins. Jacob later would be deceived by his sons regarding his favorite son (Joseph) when they dipped his robes in the blood of a goat (37:31). Jacob had sown deception; he would reap deception. God uses the consequences of sin to shape His people.

### 3. God uses difficult people to shape His people.

God doesn’t just use circumstances; He uses people like Laban to be His drill sergeants. That doesn’t excuse Laban’s sin. He was a self-centered money-grubber from the word go. Later, his two daughters, who didn’t agree on much else, agreed that their dad was using them for the financial gain he could make from them, and consuming the profits on himself (31:15).

But it’s that kind of person that God often uses in the lives of

His people to sandpaper off their rough edges. It may be an employer or fellow employee, a family member, or a neighbor.

He or she may or may not claim to be a believer. Laban had some knowledge of the Lord, but he also had his idols (30:27; 31:30). But God will use him to drive us to depend on Him. In His boot camp, God uses circumstances, consequences, and difficult people to shape His people. But notice also:

#### 4. God takes time to shape His people.

When Jacob's mother sent him away, she told him that he would be in Haran for "a few days" (27:44). Jacob wasn't expecting a 20-year boot camp, but that's how it turned out. For 14 of those years he didn't earn anything except board and room and two wives, one of whom he didn't even want. Yet God didn't seem to be in any hurry to push Jacob ahead into His program to bless all nations through Abraham's descendants.

God always takes whatever time He deems necessary to train His servants. Joseph spent his twenties in an Egyptian jail. Israel spent 400 years in slavery in Egypt. Moses spent 40 years tending sheep in the wilderness, and another 40 in the wilderness with a stubborn nation. David spent his twenties running from the mad King Saul. Even the apostle Paul spent about ten years after his conversion in obscurity before his ministry began to take off. God has an eternal perspective. His boot camp has no nine-week courses. It takes the long haul to shape His people into the image of Jesus Christ.

All this may sound rather gloomy, and I suppose in one sense it is. "All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful" (Heb. 12:11). But even during the pain of God's discipline, there's a strand of grace that lightens the burden.

5. God weaves grace into the process of shaping His people.

God *graciously* uses circumstances, consequences, and difficult people, over time, to shape his people. God's grace shines through in these events in Jacob's life. There is no record of Jacob's seeking the Lord in this passage, even though he is facing some crucial decisions. Abraham's servant stopped to seek God's guidance when he went looking for a bride for Isaac, and he paused to thank the Lord when he received it. But here Jacob never seeks God's guidance, but is graciously guided to the very spot he needs to be just when he needs to be there. Jacob doesn't bother to express his gratitude to the Lord or to praise Him in front of others, as Abraham's servant did.

Jacob commits himself to seven years of work for Laban without asking the Lord's will. He commits himself to marry Rachel without seeking God's guidance on that most important decision. He accepts a polygamous situation without getting God's approval. Later, he takes his wives' handmaids, as Abraham had taken Hagar, without a prayer. Yet in spite of Jacob's spiritual immaturity and self-directed life, God graciously gave him the woman he loved, blessed him with 12 sons and some daughters (46:7), blessed him financially in spite of Laban's tricks, and returned him safely to the land of Canaan, where his brother received him without a trace of revenge. That's God's grace!

Jacob's trials were especially softened by his love for Rachel. It seems to have been a case of love at first sight. The seven years of waiting seemed like days to him because of his love for her. Although he seems to have been more attracted to her looks than to her spiritual qualities, it seems to have been a lasting love, not just infatuation. On his death bed, about 50 years after her death, Jacob recalls his sorrow at burying Rachel when he returned to Canaan. Jacob's love for Rachel

was God's gracious provision to soften these hard years of boot camp.

#### CONCLUSION

Let me mention five lessons to apply this section of Scripture:

1. *Recognize and submit to God's hand in the daily events of your life.* Things don't just happen to you. You haven't had a spell of bad luck. God arranges your circumstances to shape you into the image of Jesus Christ. We all tend to see God's hand in the big crises, but we need to see His hand in the little irritations--car trouble, the sick child who forces you to change your plans, interruptions. I find that if I will recognize God's hand in those things and submit to Him, I can grow through it. But if I grumble, I'm "regarding lightly the discipline of the Lord" (Heb. 12:5), and I'll miss the opportunity for growth.

2. *Submit to God when you reap the consequences of your sin.* God uses the consequences of our sin to shape us. He doesn't do this to get even or because He is cruel. He does it out of love to teach us how serious our sin is. We all tend to excuse ourselves and blame others for our sin. A deceiver doesn't think deception is all that bad--until he gets deceived! Jacob is truly shocked that Laban could pull such a dirty trick on a nice guy like him! There's nothing like a dose of our own medicine to help us see how our sin hurts others and displeases God. So God lovingly allows us to suffer the consequences of our sin so that we will see ourselves accurately and turn from our sin.

When the consequences hit, our tendency is either to accuse God of being unfair or to try to skate out from under things through some new scheme or sin. But God wants us to submit to Him. David responded properly when the child he had sinfully conceived with Bathsheba died: He worshiped the Lord (2 Sam. 12:20). Later, when David's kingdom suffered because of his sin, he didn't blame God or scheme to turn things around. He

submitted to his affliction and to God's sovereignty as to whether his kingdom would be restored (2 Sam. 15:25-26, 16:11-12). We need to be careful not to malign the Lord and to acknowledge, publicly if need be, that God is just and that we deserve all and even more than is happening to us.

3. *Don't run from the difficult people in your life until God gives you the okay.* If you're married to the difficult person, God isn't giving the okay! But with Jacob, the day came when God told him to leave Laban and return to Canaan. Then it was okay. Before then, Jacob would have been wrong to run. We all tend to run from the difficult people God puts in our lives to shape us. A teenager gets married to escape her difficult parents. Guess what? She marries a difficult husband! Or a teenager is fed up with his parents' rules, so he joins the army. I've never been able to figure out that one! If you've got a difficult person in your life, rather than complaining about him and running from him, ask yourself what God is trying to teach you about yourself through this person.

4. *Plan to persevere over the long haul.* Christianity isn't a 100-yard dash; it's a marathon. A lot of people want instant answers to their problems, and when they don't get them, they bail out and go looking for some other solution. Years ago, I counseled a young mother who was a drug addict. At one point I described for her what a walk with God looks like in daily practice. I asked, "Have you ever done that?" She said, "Yeah, I tried it, but it didn't work." I asked her how long she had tried it. She said, "Two weeks." She wanted easy, instant deliverance. She didn't like the idea of a lifetime of disciplining herself for the purpose of godliness. When you become a Christian, you're in for life, so don't faint when you are reproved by the Lord (Heb. 12:5). Settle in for the long haul.

5. *Thank God for the gracious blessings He bestows in spite of your sin.* Although God was abundantly gracious in leading and protecting Jacob and in giving him the joy of love for Rachel, there is not one recorded word of gratitude on Jacob's part (Gen. 47:9). Sure, the

discipline hurts, but God only does it because He loves us as a father loves his children. With the discipline, He weaves in ample doses of grace, so that we can enjoy even the hard times.

Dr. John Hanna, one of my seminary professors told of how, when he and his wife were moving to Dallas to attend seminary, their VW caught fire. They were only able to pull to the side of the Interstate and watch helplessly as everything they owned went up in flames. What would you do at that point? He and his wife knelt down by that burned car and sang the doxology!

Instead of complaining because God doesn't give you what you want, be thankful that He doesn't give you what you deserve! He lovingly, graciously uses the circumstances of your life, the consequences of sin, and difficult people, over the long haul, "for our good, that we may share His holiness" (Heb. 12:10). It may be boot camp, but it's a whole lot better than living apart from His gracious promises in Christ!

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If God uses difficult circumstances, when is it okay to try to change things for the better? Must we always be passive?
2. Discuss: Does God ever lighten the harvest after we've sown to the flesh (Gal. 6:7-8)?
3. Why is God's usual method growth through discipline rather than instant deliverance from problems?
4. How would you answer the charge that God condones polygamy, especially in light of this passage?
5. Is it wrong to confront the difficult people in our lives? Must obedient Christians just be doormats?