

Text: Genesis 32:1-33:20

Title: Jacob Returns to the Promised Land

Truth: Relying on God's promises keeps us steady in trials.

Date/Location: May 21, 2023 at FBC (previously April 30, 2006)

Introduction

Two decades have passed since Jacob left his parents and his angry brother Esau. He has just dealt finally with Laban who was upset at him. He hopes that Esau will receive him kindly upon his return home but is not very confident about that. He has had quite some struggles with these people over the years. So far God has kept him all the way.

I. Jacob Prepares to See Esau Again, chapter 32

A. As Jacob continued his homeward journey, the text of Scripture records that several angels met him along the way. This undoubtedly reminded him of the angels he saw on the heavenly staircase in Genesis 28:11-22. This time, Moses does not record what the angels said to Jacob, if anything. But their presence called back to his memory God's promise to him, and his promise to God. They may have encouraged or strengthened him in light of his deep concern about the near future. The passage in chapter 28 reminded us that God is involved in the events and with the people of earth. He has angelic servants caring for those things as well. He is not far off, unable or unwilling to interact or help with human problems.

This was not the same location as Bethel from earlier. Jacob gave it a different name: "Ma-ha-nie'-im" which means "dual camp". It was in Gilead near the Jabbok River, east of the Jordan River.

B. In verses 3-6, Jacob sends ahead messengers to his brother, outlining his situation and asking to find favor in his sight. The messengers return with an ominous report: Esau is coming to meet you, and he has 400 men with him.

C. Jacob is deeply distressed, v. 7-8. It appears there may be an armed conflict. He begins to take steps to mitigate a disaster by splitting his group into sub-groups.

D. When facing distressing situations, we must go back to God's prior word and promises. Remember what God had said, again in chapter 28:13-15, reflecting the continuance of the covenant with Abraham now passed down to grandson Jacob:

1. I will give you and your descendants this land.
2. Your descendants shall be numerous and spread out geographically.
3. In you and your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.
4. I am with you.
5. I will keep you wherever you go.
6. I will bring you back to this land.
7. I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken.

It was at this point that Jacob decided that the God of Abraham and Isaac would be *his* God as well. This was his time to choose, to decide to follow the true God of his fathers. He had to make that conscious, explicit choice.

We too face the need to choose. Our parents cannot choose for us. If you believe, there is a list of promises for you as well: not exactly the promises that are listed above because we are not under the terms of the Abrahamic Covenant. But there are dozens of promises in the New Testament to Christians. We can be fully confident that God will keep those who belong to Him. There is no need to fear the future, even if 400 men try to take your faith away. "No one is able to snatch them out of my father's hand." God has never failed to keep a promise.

E. Jacob prayed earnestly in 32:9-12 based on God's promise (28:15, 31:3, 13). As God had called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees, now Jacob was being called back from Haran and Padan Aram to the promised land. But he is facing a very foreboding situation in that Esau was coming to see him, but cries to God to fulfill His promises.

He also acknowledges a key truth: "I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant." He knew that he had left home with nothing, and now he was returning wealthy in family and flocks. As your friend and

pastor, I commend this truth to *you* as well. Neither you nor I are worthy of the smallest of God’s mercies. We gratefully receive those mercies and must live accordingly.

Jacob asks for deliverance because he is very fearful. You might say that Jacob should not have been fearful, but let’s give him this: *when* he was fearful, he prayed!

- F. In vv. 13-21, the Bible tells us that Jacob sent several waves of animals to Esau as a gift. The number of animals in total was 550. That is a huge gift (\$100,000?). He hoped that this would appease his brother after 20 years of (he supposes) stewing about the “stolen” birthright and blessing. By the way, if you are still not forgiving a brother or sister for something 10 or 20 or 30 years later, there is something sinfully wrong—in you. The fact that this “stewing” is so common gives rise to Jacob’s understandable pessimism. Yet he should still trust God to keep His promises!
- G. The next section (32:22-32) records one of the most interesting encounters in the book of Genesis, in which Jacob wrestles with a man who is a Theophany—an appearance of God. More specifically it is probably a Christophany, meaning a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus Christ (see Hosea 12:4-5). Several things happened:
1. Jacob wrestled with God until daybreak.
 2. God put his hip out of joint. This is the reason that the children of Israel do not eat the muscle around the hip socket. I do not understand the anatomy underlying this statement, but I also do not perceive that is a very important point to understand the meaning of the passage.
 3. God blessed Jacob.
 4. God asked Jacob what his name was. Note 27:18ff where Jacob lied about his identity.
 5. This time Jacob told the truth about his name.
 6. God renamed Jacob to Israel, meaning “he struggles with God.”
 7. Jacob asked the name of the man with whom he wrestled, but God would not give it.
 8. Jacob realized that he had seen God face to face and had lived. This is why he named the place Peniel, which means “face of God.”

- H. The physical wrestling represents the struggle that Jacob had with men and ultimately with God over several decades. He persisted, persevered, and prevailed against them all (Esau, Isaac, Laban, the drama with his wives, more of Laban, and finally God Himself). God blessed Him.
- I. In Christianity, this wrestling match has come to symbolize struggling with God in prayer in times of difficulty, seeking blessing from Him and not giving up, especially in prayer through the night.

II. Jacob Meets Esau, chapter 33

- A. Upon seeing Esau afar off, Jacob arranged for his family to arrive in a certain order (in order of dispensability?). Jacob led the way; the family followed in its group order. Jacob insists that Esau receive his present, even though Esau needed nothing and did not initially want to receive the gift.
- B. Time had healed Esau's wounds. He found that life was not bad despite not receiving the Abrahamic blessing. He was, again, the recipient of collateral blessings from God. They were reconciled.
- C. Jacob insisted that Esau take the gift. He was relieved that there was no conflict, and God had blessed him with much.
- D. They agreed that Esau would go ahead to his home in Seir, and Jacob would follow behind at a slower pace because of the need to drive the animals carefully.
- E. Eventually Jacob arrived near the city of Shechem and set up camp. He bought a plot of ground from Hamor for 100 pieces of money (silver?). It is somewhat unexpected that the land God promised to Him still belonged to others, and he had to buy a plot of it from them. In the future, the land was not purchased with money, but God gave it to the nation as the spoil of battle. The land is God's to begin with, and He can do with it what He sees fit.
- F. As in times past, the place of rest became a place of worship where he built an altar. He named it, "God, the God of Israel."

Conclusion

One of the truths we encountered in this section is that we must rely on God's promises to keep us steady in difficult trials. We must not "freak out" in the face of problems. God will be with those of us who belong to Him. Period.

Another truth: while I do not wish trials upon you, I do wish you the blessing of wrestling with God in prayer and prevailing. Maybe sometimes you will not "prevail" to get the answer you want, but time spent with the Lord will never be a waste.

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