

In the Beginning, God...

Introduction - Jacob

We are studying three key pivot points that will demonstrate the carnal state of Jacob's thinking, yet also show the faithful nature of God in fulfilling every promise He has made.

Last time, we looked at Rebekah's plot to deceive her husband and to elevate Jacob above Esau, and at Jacob's willing participation in the deception, which caused anger and hatred in Esau toward Jacob, leading him to put to murder his brother.

This is reminiscent of Cain and Abel, and how God accepted Abel's offering but refused Cain's.

God had made His promise to Rebekah that the older would serve the younger, yet she felt the need to circumvent His plan and put her own plan into action. Additionally, Isaac was not an innocent player in this drama.

He too knew of God's promise, yet he determined to elevate Esau. Thinking that he was about to die, he hurriedly set the stage for the drama that would become conflict with the Israelites and the Edomites for eons.

That conflict would last until AD 70 when Rome destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and the last of the Edomites, known then as Herodians or Idumeans, would be killed as they defended the Temple to the last man.

About 8,500 were killed inside the Temple grounds while the other 12,000 were killed inside the city or at the gates of Jerusalem.

Ironically, 700 years prior, they had celebrated the destruction of Jerusalem, at the hands of the Babylonians, yet at this point in history they defended it to the last man.

The descendants of Esau will disappear from the pages of history after the fall of Jerusalem just as Obadiah had predicted.

Obadiah 10 (ESV) 10 Because of the violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever.

So Jacob has to run for his life, and in doing so he heads north - back to where Abraham had left his family over about 161 years earlier.

About two generations have passed. Two men, different times. One leaving in obedience, the other returning in desperation.

Message:

2. Jacob's Encounter at Bethel

Genesis 28:10–22 (ESV) 10 Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. 11 And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep.

12 And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!

The Hebrew word for ladder is (סֻלָּם *sullam*) and refers to a set of steps or a great ramp leading upwards.

It might have been an image of a gigantic stairway made up of piles of mountains placed one upon another leading to heaven. It is, in effect, a vision of a highway to heaven.

The ladder functions as a visible symbol of uninterrupted fellowship and access between God and His people.

John 1:49–51 (ESV) 49 Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” 50 Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” 51 And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

Jesus makes clear that He is the pathway - the ladder leading to heaven - and it is through Him that we have uninterrupted fellowship and access to God.

Consider Jacob's condition. He has just deceived his father and received the blessing as if he is the first born. He is now fleeing for his life with the certain knowledge he may never see either of his parents alive again.

He was alone, poor, helpless, without any resources. He was in a wilderness of his own making, as well as a desolate place to which he has fled. Whatever he thought would come of the blessing and birthright, this was not what he expected.

And in the midst of his grief-God steps in. His vulnerability opened him to the revelation that God is not far from those He has appointed to His work, regardless of the condition of the heart and the sinfulness of the life.

This ladder was a divine connection from heaven to earth. It was not made by men; it was fashioned and revealed by God.

That describes the lostness of humanity. We needed God to step in and, He did - in the person of Jesus Christ.

And at the top of the ladder:

There stood Jehovah - eternal - self-existent - God

13 And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. . .”

No matter where we may put ourselves, when He has laid claim to our lives, there is no place we can go that He is not there and ready to assure us of His plan.

God now reassures Jacob of the promise He made to Abraham and Isaac. That promise now passes to Jacob.

14 Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. 15 Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

For a man who is alone in the world, this must have been both comforting and a solace to his soul. It also reaffirmed that, regardless of the guilt and the shame that may have plagued his mind and heart, he was God’s.

God has just spoken.

No conditions.

No hesitation.

No uncertainty.

“I will be with you... I will keep you... I will bring you back... I will not leave you...”

That is the language of grace.

But watch what happens next.

Because while God is speaking in certainty...

Jacob is still living in contingency.

16 Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.” 17 And he was afraid and said, “How awesome (fearful) is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

Bethel - House of God - בֵּית-אֵל Bêyth-Ël

There is no specific geographic place mentioned in the Gospels that is considered this place. Yet Jesus in John 1 makes plain that He is the House of God. It is in Him that any who believe are connected to God.

And no matter where a believer finds himself, every place is Bethel.

18 So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.

Throughout the pages of the Old Testament, a memorial stone would be set up as a reminder of what had occurred in that place. Many of the major characters of the Old Testament, from this point onward will raise stones of remembrance.

Moses - Joshua - Samuel - The entire population of Israel at Achan's grave.

19 He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, 21 so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, 22 and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you."

God has promised, now Jacob makes a conditional covenant with the Lord. He wakes up overwhelmed by the presence of the Lord, but not yet transformed by God's promise. His immaturity is on display and it comes out in his vow to God.

Provide for me, clothe me, and allow me to return to my father's house, and YHWH will be my God, and I will give back to Him one tenth of all I possess.

This is the difference between grace and bargaining for God's favor. This isn't negotiation, it is a covenant made by God and based solely on God's character.

Jacob makes a vow...

but a vow is not transformation.

Words are easy in a moment of fear.

Promises are easy in a moment of need.

But what matters is not what you say at Bethel...
it is how you live when you leave it.

And what follows is twenty years of learning what obedience should be. Until finally, God calls him back home.

Genesis 31:13 (ESV) 13 I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now arise, go out from this land and return to the land of your kindred.' ”

Twenty years of labor and blessing have passed, and now God tells him to return. God remembers both His and our promises.

It is no small thing to make a vow to God. He hears and He will collect.

Nowhere in scripture is it recorded where Jacob ever returned to God the tithe he had promised. But there are other books not considered sacred scripture that shed light on what happened when Jacob returned home.

The book of Jubilees records this; Jubilees 32:2 And Jacob rose early in the morning, on the fourteenth of this month, and he gave a tithe of all that came with him, both of men and cattle, both of gold and every vessel and garment, yea, he gave tithes of all. . . 4 And on the fifteenth of this month, he brought to the altar fourteen oxen from amongst the cattle, and twenty-eight rams, and forty-nine sheep, and seven lambs, and twenty-one kids of the goats as a burnt-offering on the altar of sacrifice, well pleasing for a sweet savour before God. . . .

5 This was his offering, in consequence of the vow which he had vowed that he would give a tenth, with their fruit-offerings and their drink-offerings.

Next time we will look at what happens before Jacob meets his brother.

3. Jacob Wrestles with God and Prevails

Conclusion

The blessing of God is often circuitous and may lead us into some very troubling places in our lives, yet God's promises are true, His Word is sure and we can rest in what He has offered to us through Jesus.

None of us are perfect and our growth into obedience and faith may take some time. But are you learning to trust Him regardless of the time or the struggle along the way?