

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Lessons from the life of Jacob: Jacob at Bethel

Good morning. Did you sleep well? Our talk this morning is about a man called Jacob, whose sleep was disturbed by a dream - a dream which he found upsetting and which caused him some concern.

Jacob is one of those people who always appeared to attract trouble. The name Jacob means supplanter, someone who seeks to overthrow. Jacob was given this particular name at his birth because he took hold of his brother Esau's foot. You may remember that we read of this event last week in Genesis 25:24-26, "So when [Rebekah's] days were fulfilled for her to give birth, indeed there were twins in her womb. And the first came out red. He was like a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob." This action of Jacob as a new born baby was consistent with God's word to Rebekah while she was carrying the twins. Again, 25:22-23, "The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If all is well, why am I like this?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her: "Two nations are in your womb, Two peoples shall be separated from your body; One people shall be stronger than the other, And the older shall serve the younger."

From before the twins were born it seems that Esau and Jacob had been at odds with each other.

The family home had been far from ideal. This was a divided family with both parents having a favourite son. Esau was the favourite son of his father. Jacob was the favourite of his mother. The final uproar in the family had happened when Isaac decided to give a blessing to Esau, his eldest son. However, Rebekah schemes with Jacob to deceive Isaac so that the coveted blessing would be given to Jacob. The tragic family intrigue can be read in Genesis 27:1-29.

When the deception comes to light Esau was understandably upset. Esau complains that this is the second time Jacob has deceived him. It appears that Esau conveniently forgets the truth. Esau had despised his birthright preferring to satisfy his hunger with a bowl of vegetable stew, Genesis 25:34. How like people in general, preferring their own version of events rather than the plain truth! This is often the case in what is called "face saving" situations. No doubt Esau thought it convenient to blame Jacob for the loss of both privileges!

Now Rebekah seeks to protect Jacob by insisting that he goes to her family at Haran to find a wife. Rebekah said to Jacob, "Now therefore, my son, obey my voice: arise, flee to my brother Laban at Haran", Genesis 27:43. Rebekah also goes to her husband Isaac and says, "I am weary of my life because of the daughters of Heth; if Jacob takes a wife of the daughters of Heth, like these who are the daughters of the land, what good will my life be to me?", Genesis 27:46. Isaac appears to be willing for this to happen and gives Jacob leave to go. Isaac instructs Jacob that he must not take a wife from the daughters of the Canaanites. "Go to your mother's relatives for a wife". Isaac again blesses Jacob, Genesis 28:3-4, "May God Almighty bless you, and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may be an assembly of peoples; and give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and your descendants with you, that you may inherit the land in which you are a stranger, which God gave to Abraham."

Blessings given in this way in the Old Testament are sometimes prophetic. They may have already been fulfilled or will be fulfilled in a coming day. God would indeed bless Jacob and the nation of Israel which he represents. They did inherit the land for a time and in a coming day will inherit the land in a far greater way than even today. The fullness of the blessings of Abraham are yet to be fully completed. The blessings will be completely fulfilled in the Kingdom reign of Christ. "So Isaac sent Jacob away", verse 5. Isaac may have thought that the sending away of Jacob would stop the trouble in the home. Esau was now planning to kill his brother once his father was dead, see Genesis 27:41.

Jacob at Bethel

"Now Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Haran. So he came to a certain place and stayed there all night, because the sun had set. And he took one of the stones of that place and put it at his head, and he lay down in that place to sleep. Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And behold, the LORD stood above it and said: "I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac", Genesis 28:10-13.

What were Jacob's thoughts as he sets up camp on probably his first night away from home? He was on a journey north to his mother's relatives. Jacob had travelled about fifty miles to reach Bethel and had still more than 500 miles to travel before he would arrive at the house of his uncle Laban. Jacob may well have had troubled thoughts as he prepares to sleep that night in the open field with a stone for a pillow. It is not unusual for us to have dreams especially with troubles on the mind. However Jacob's dream is special; it comes from God.

The first thing that Jacob sees in his dream is a ladder - a ladder set up on earth with the top reaching to heaven. On this ladder are angels, God's messengers, who move up and down between earth and heaven. Above the ladder Jacob sees God standing. God speaks to Jacob and introduces Himself as "the LORD God of Abraham your father (or ancestor) and the God of Isaac". In the declaration "LORD God" there is both, Jehovah, the one "Who Is", an expression declaring His eternal being, and also God, the one who requires worship from His creature. Does Jacob worship the eternally existing LORD God? This will be considered a little later.

Then Jacob hears God speak of four promises, verses 13 to 15.

1. The land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants
2. Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south
3. In you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed
4. 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 spoken to you

First promise. "The land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants".

This promise had already been made both to Abraham and Isaac. Now it is being repeated to Jacob, who in type is a picture of the nation of Israel. The promise is not to any other descendants of Abraham or Isaac but to Jacob and his descendants. It will be many hundreds of years after Jacob before the nation is able to take possession of the land. Those nations who quarrel and war with Israel today can trace their ancestors back to Abraham or Isaac!

Second promise. "Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south".

This promise had also been given to Abraham, see Genesis 13. The promise is now continued to Jacob and primarily speaks of the growth of the nation of Israel. If we consider the vast numbers of Jewish people today, we can see how wonderfully this promise is being fulfilled. Initially the spread of the nation was to fill the Promised Land going north, south, east and west. Secondly the nation was intended to represent God in this whole world, but this has never been fulfilled in the way God intended. However, during the millennium reign of Christ, they will be God's ambassadors throughout all nations.

Third promise. "In you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed".

This promise was also given both to Abraham and Isaac and it is again confirmed to Jacob. As mentioned to Abraham and Isaac, blessing will flow out to all other nations, especially during the millennium. When the promise is repeated to Jacob the blessing goes to a much smaller unit of people, down to families. The promise is now to families within nations to receive a blessing. How will this be accomplished? I believe we have a prophetic reference to the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. As a result of the cross, blessing has come down into the family circle. God is interested in bringing salvation to individuals and families. The Philippian jailor was given the simple promise, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household (or family)", Acts 16:31.

Fourth promise. "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 spoken to you".

This is a personal promise to Jacob. Jacob was moving away out of the promised land. Here God is promising to keep him wherever he goes. God will bring Jacob back. Jacob will be away for 20 years before he sets foot back in the land of promise.

The Impact of the Dream

"Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it. And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place!" This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven! Then Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on top of it", verses 16 to 18.

The dream was so real and the impact so great that Jacob wakes up. The first thoughts of Jacob were "The LORD is in this place, and I did not know". Jacob is afraid but with a godly reverence as he realises that this place is the "House of God, and this is the gate of heaven!" Jacob is not at ease with God and as yet has not come to understand that God is a giving God who delights to bless those who trust Him.

As yet Jacob had also to learn that he could trust God for everything. It takes great faith to live a life where God is trusted for all things. To trust in God in this way is to say that God knows best how to deal with my life. What a challenge for Jacob! What a challenge for the Christian today!

Jacob is awake early the next morning, the dream still very fresh in his mind. The fact that God had talked to him in this way deserved a response. Jacob takes the stone that he had used for a pillow and sets it up as a pillar. On the pillar Jacob pours oil on the top. A pillar which is not used for construction and support is seen in Scripture as representing a witness and testimony.

How much Jacob fully appreciated the LORD God who came to him in a dream is made clear by his response. The pillar witnesses that here is God's house and Jacob calls the name of the place Bethel (the house of God).

It is interesting to note that the original name of the place was Luz, meaning perverse, the turning aside from right or truth. This was largely the course that Jacob had been set upon. The dream is the start of bringing Jacob back. God would have him encouraged and have in his mind the seeds of truth and hope. God would bring this night's dream back to his remembrance, see Genesis 31:13, but that is twenty years away.

The dream also produces in Jacob a desire to hold onto the God of Bethel. As mentioned earlier, Jacob does not fully understand his God. The four promises that God makes to Jacob in verses 13 to 15, depend completely upon one person. That person is God Himself. It is not a contract between God and Jacob with each to fulfil their part. It is God committing Himself to do certain things, with Jacob being the beneficiary. This is exactly like salvation and the full scope of eternal blessing. Such blessing is available now to every believer who has accepted Christ as their Saviour. Salvation was purposed long ago in eternity, put in place by the work of Jesus on the cross and fully completed. We only need to accept God at His word and receive Jesus as our Saviour.

Jacob bargains with God

Jacob was a man who liked to be in control. Jacob wanted the very best for himself and he did not mind how he acquired this. Although Jacob was aware and in some measure knew God, he was not spiritually mature to depend fully upon God. It is here that the first vow of scripture is mentioned.

"If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God. And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You", verses 20 to 22. In this vow Jacob seems to challenge the four promises God had made to him. "If God will be with me" said Jacob, and yet God had already said He would be with him, see verse 15.

"And keep me" said Jacob when God had said He would keep him, see again verse 15. Now in Jacob's vow he adds his challenge to God: "in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on". God had said he would be kept wherever he went. If God promised to keep him then he would be fed and clothed. Yet Jacob wants to be very specific. Jacob is materialistic in his outlook. Jacob wants a God who will supply all his wants. Would God respond? Have I set a course for my life and asked God to be with me or have I asked God what course in life I should take? Is God leading my life?

Jacob continues with his vow, "so that I come back to my father's house in peace". God had again said He would bring him back; what grace from God! What was obviously worrying Jacob is the family peace. Jacob had left behind a family filled with anger, hatred, worry and mistrust. It was no longer a peaceful family and Jacob was largely to blame. Jacob was a worried man as he journeyed on.

After placing all these conditions upon God, and only if God was able to fulfil each one, would Jacob then let God into his life. Until then Jacob was determined to lead his own life and continue his scheming ways. The stone pillar not only marked the place as the House of God but the heart of Jacob is exposed. "Of all that You (God) give me I will surely give a tenth to You". Is Jacob generous or is he expecting God to be generous? Is Jacob the schemer deserving of God's generosity?

Jacob probably received more than he expected, ending up with four wives, twelve sons, one daughter and a vast amount of wealth. God blessed Jacob indeed but what trouble resulted from his wives, children and wealth!. Jacob was greatly blessed, but the path he had chosen for himself was liberally covered with difficulties and problems. It was

to be a long time before Jacob came to appreciate Jehovah his God. Jacob was not yet ready to worship the LORD God. There is a reference in Hebrews 11:21, "Jacob, worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff." Sadly, this did not happen until just before Jacob died, see Genesis 47:31.

To conclude

A dream might not be the way that God communicates today. The Christian has in the Bible the complete revelation from God. What God needs to communicate to you and me is in the scriptures. The challenge from the scriptures is three fold. Am I ready to listen to God by reading the Bible? Do I seek to understand what I read through prayer and meditation on the scriptures? Do I live out what I understand? Alternatively, do I want my way, to live my life style and expect God to follow along? This is what Jacob expected! Does my life style commend my Lord to others?

Jacob went through great troubles and hardship in the long years he was away from the land of promise. Our journey through life today might not be like Jacob's. But, like him, we are often beset by difficulties - physically, morally and spiritually. There is a need for prayerful commitment day by day, so that we might know God's all preserving care in our life. Romans 7 is a reminder that the power is not in ourselves. Help is "through Jesus Christ our Lord!" verse 25. The Lord looks for and expects that continuous total commitment as expressed in Romans 12:1, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." For us, this means more than just a tenth given back, it is one hundred percent!

Let us pray. Lord, we thank You for the examples in Your word of the real life problems that believers encountered. Give us all the necessary help to learn the lessons of life through the scriptures in order that we may truly in our lives represent Yourself. Amen.

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