

Promise Reaffirmed

HN 16/05/04pm

Reading: Genesis 35, Romans 8:18f

Study: Genesis 35: 8-15

Psalms: 130, 34:1-9, 136sec 1-6, 136sec 21-26

Bethel was a special place in the life of Jacob. It is the focus of the whole story of Jacob. It was at Bethel, as a relatively young man fleeing from Esau, that God appeared to him in a dream and made promises to him. Now he is back at Bethel after more than 25 years – not without some prodding from God as we saw last time. He built an altar and worshipped God and God again appeared to him to reaffirm those promises.

In terms of the structure of Genesis we are coming to the end of the account/genealogy of Isaac (25:19). The next chapter begins the account of Esau and the following the account of Jacob. The account of Isaac includes Jacob as we have seen and the account of Jacob is mostly about Joseph – although Jacob remains the family head. In this chapter (chapter 37) therefore the focus on Jacob is drawing to an end. And as it draws to a close the promises are reaffirmed much the same as in Abraham's story which drew to a close shortly after Mt Moriah (ch. 22).

But there are events in this chapter itself, through which we can see God's reaffirming of the promises as a wonderful act of grace. What happened in the life of Jacob in this chapter? He suffered the loss through death of those nearest and dearest to him. First there was Deborah, then Rachel his wife and Isaac his father. The first two deaths seem to be close together.

Verse 8 which tells of Deborah's death comes as quite a jar in this narrative. Why are we told of the death of this person we hardly know anything about? In fact only here are we told the name of Rebekah's nurse who came with her from Haran (24:59). She pops up in the narrative simply to die. And as one scholar writes 'It will ever remain a puzzle how she came to be with Jacob at Bethel'. I must confess I was tempted to skip over this verse as unimportant – but then there must be a reason for it being in Holy Scripture and a reason for it being here.

Jacob's mother, Leah, was his mother's favourite. He was very close to his mother. But Rebekah's death is not recorded. Some think she died while he was up in Haran. Deborah would have nursed Jacob as a child and taught him as he grew up. Luther thought 'she was a wise and godly matron who served and advised Jacob...and had often counseled and comforted Jacob in dangers and difficulties'.

We must not infer too much but the fact that her death is recorded and that she was buried, presumably by Jacob under the oak of weeping, indicates that she had a special place in his heart. Her death was almost like the death of his mother.

As Jacob traveled on from Bethel towards his family home in Hebron he was struck and even heavier blow. His beloved wife Rachel died in childbirth. Deborah would have been quite old when she died but Rachel was still of childbearing age.

God appeared again to Jacob in the context of his 'weeping' and blessed him. The God of Jacob is a merciful God. He was watching over Jacob his chosen one. He knew his every need. When he needed correction and direction he said *Arise go up to Bethel*. When he needed comforting and lifting up God appeared to him and blessed him.

Is that your experience? Do you find your God, the same God who is the God of Jacob, knows your every need and is abundantly able to fulfill that need? Jacob did. Paul did. See what he prays with confidence in Philippians 4:19 – *My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus*. And in 2 Corinthians 1 – *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation*. Paul had no doubt, did he – notice the emphasis on **all**.

God appeared to Jacob and blessed him. How did he bless him? What did he do for Jacob? Did he lavish gifts on him that he might forget his sorrow? Did he say you will be okay, it just takes time? That would have been cruel to Jacob would it not for within a short time he lost another dear one? Did God speak to him a special word of comfort, something new and different for a now more mature man?

No. God spoke to him reaffirming the promises he already had. He was reminding him of the word of truth already given – most of that truth being given in fact to his grandfather Abraham. The change of name was of course specific to Jacob, but the other promises are basically the same.

Change of name

God gave Jacob a new name the night he wrestled with Him at Peniel. We have not seen this new name used much as yet. This is a reminder to him of the new name given by God. God purpose in election is sure. What he says will come to pass. *Israel shall be your name. So he called his name Israel*. The name Jacob persists during his lifetime but Israel becomes the name of his house and of his descendants. It is the name of the people of God throughout the rest of Scripture.

Many descendants

El Shaddai – God Almighty, the God who is sovereign over all creation speaks to Jacob. *Be fruitful and multiply* he said. Where do those words come from? They remind us of the God of Creation when he spoke to mankind, male and female in these terms (Genesis 1:28). We are briefly reminded of the high position given to man at that time – to rule over the Gods creation.

A nation and a company of nations shall proceed from you. This was what God promised Abraham. He would be a great nation and indeed all nations would be blessed through him (12:2-3). So nations here may refer to the Gentiles.

Then there are kings (cf. 17:6) – kings to rule over the nation. David of course was a great king who God raised up from the seed of Jacob but ultimately and supremely it was his own Son Jesus Christ who was born of the seed of Abraham and Jacob. He was born to rule over the holy nation, the chosen and special people of God – people who have obtained mercy, the mercy of God in redemption through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:9).

Land

The promise of land was reaffirmed also. To you and your descendants *I give this land*. Jacob had

bought a small piece of land at Shechem but the Lord here reminds him that the whole land of Canaan was his – as a gift from God – no cost. Jacob did not see the land come into the possession of his descendants but the promise of God stood firm.

After God went up from him, Jacob set up a pillar of stone and worshipped the Lord there at Bethel. His response was the same as when God spoke to him years before – see 28:18-19. He even reaffirmed the name of the place as Bethel. By faith he took hold of the promise.

God blessed Jacob with a sure and certain hope. A hope that went beyond his earthly life. So even as he saw his dear ones suffer death, even as he wept for them and his heart was full of sorrow, God lifted him up by reminding him of these great and eternal promises.

Jacob was distressed and fearful before he came to Bethel. He was insignificant, ready to be crushed by the people around him. Now he suffers the loss of dear ones. He must have been feeling very low – until God spoke to him.

If you have not already experienced such distress and sorrow then you will one day. Life was not meant to be easy as some clever fellow said. We do indeed go through many troubles in this life. We often feel insignificant in the eyes of the world and threatened by one thing or another. Life is not always easy but there is hope. Do not despair. You have a God who knows your need – even before you ask.

You are special in the eyes of God. As his chosen one he has set his love upon you and called you unto himself. *Those he predestined he also called and whom he called he justified and whom he justified he also glorified* (Romans 8:30). That is one of a multitude of promises God gives you in his word. He then goes on to say, *Who shall separate us from the love of God in Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine or nakedness or peril or sword.* No we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

Will you like Jacob and like Paul turn to the Lord in times of distress or sorrow and trust in his great and eternal promises? Life may not be easy at times but you have a God who promises to bring you through every time. Rejoice that nothing in all creation can *separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

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