

Open Heart, Open Bible

Genesis and Luke's Gospel. Overall Theme: Covenant

Passage for weekly reading (week 8):

Genesis ch.'s 31 – 36.

Jacob becomes Israel

We read in Acts 19 vs.13 – 16 that some Jews (the sons of Sceva) were attempting to drive out evil spirits when they had only a second-hand knowledge of the Lord Jesus. The consequences were unfortunate. This week's passage in Genesis tells of that part of Jacob's life when his knowledge of the God of his fathers became personal, i.e.- first-hand. We read initially of his ever-growing prosperity at the expense of his uncle, and the resentment this causes between Jacob and his cousins. At long-last he hears from God that it's time to return home, but notice that in telling his wives of this, he still speaks of "the God of my father" (v.5 and, later, v.42). The Lord has watched over Jacob, whether he realises it or not, and the angelic dream is given in confirmation of this (v.13) – even the success with the speckled and spotted herds was due to the hand of God, rather than Jacob's ingenuity.

After Jacob's hurried departure, when Laban catches up with him, the two of them are able to clear the air somewhat. The agreement they make to co-exist peacefully closes this long episode in Jacob's life. He is now released to meet the next challenge in the person of his brother (ch.32).

Jacob fears the worst to begin with, but he reacts well and turns to prayer (to "the God of his father"!). Nevertheless, he humbles himself before God, realising his unworthiness, asking for salvation and pleading the covenant promise. Spot on! He is not altogether confident of a positive answer to his prayer (the gift he prepares for Esau by way of appeasement testifies to this), and he feels he needs to spend more time seeking God. There's a time for "arrow" prayers, and there's a time for concentrated, intensive seeking of God's face. It was time for the latter, and Jacob knew it. The Lord had brought him to a place where he had no options left. He has a night of prayer alone, and wrestles with a male visitor (a pre-incarnate Jesus, as the one of the three visitors to Abraham (ch.18), or the One in the fiery furnace with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Daniel 3 vs.25,26)).

Jacob knows that he has met with none other than the living God (v.30). His name is changed, and he now bears the name that will become the name of the nation, God's nation. Jacob's blessing is renewed, and he realises his life has been spared for a specific divine purpose. He limps for the rest of it, reminding him of

his dependence on “the God of his father”, just as Paul’s “thorn” kept him dependent on the same God (2 Corinthians 12 vs.7-9).

When one meets with God, not only is one changed personally, but others around are also changed as the ripple effects go wider. This happens in revivals. Esau, too, was changed, and his response to Jacob is totally unpredictable (33 v.4). No gift by way of appeasement was necessary, but Esau accepted it with his brother’s insistence. Jacob appears to mislead him in settling at Succoth rather than going to Seir, (Peniel has not perfected Jacob, any more than Moriah perfected Abraham) but the most significant thing at the end of the chapter is that the altar Jacob builds is called “**El Elohe Israel**” – “**God, the God of Israel**”. He may be physically disabled, but he now has a God who is his own, his relationship is uniquely personal, and it will never be taken away from him. Any disability has to be worth that (perhaps Jesus had something of this in mind in speaking the way He did in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 vs.29&30), verses that seem incredibly severe to us).

Notwithstanding this beautiful transformation in Jacob’s life, the way ahead for him is anything but straightforward. The awful events following on Shechem’s rape of Dinah put Jacob’s family in a very fragile position in their relationships with the surrounding peoples (v.30), for the revenge taken by Simeon and Levi will almost certainly have even worse repercussions. They are unrepentant when confronted by their father (v.31). The Lord gives the family His protection in the immediate aftermath (v.5), as they obey Jacob, (a new strength in God is evident already) and the move to Bethel takes place without incident. The Lord meets with His servant again in reaffirming his new name and reminding him of the covenant promises. Rachel has another son, Benjamin, but dies in childbirth, Reuben proves himself as guilty as Shechem by committing adultery with Bilhah, and Isaac dies at the advanced age of 180. An eventful chapter!

Ch.36 breaks the flow of the narrative to inform us of the descendants of Esau, who became the Edomites. The word Edom was associated with Esau because it meant “red”, and that was his colouring. It was also the colour of the stew that Jacob had prepared when his elder twin “despised his birthright”. Vs.1-8 tell how Esau’s immediate family moved away from Jacob not long after his return, and how they settled in Seir (a part of what became Edom). Vs.9-19 list his sons and their descendants, who became tribal leaders. Vs. 20-29 list the Horite leaders who were displaced by Esau’s descendants (Deut. 2 v.12), and the last list shows that Edom became a kingdom much sooner than Israel did, naming the succession of rulers. It was a very untidy succession nevertheless, the outcome of a continual struggle for power, the very opposite of an ordered dynasty. In this it foreshadowed the historical development of the northern kingdom of Israel, as that kingdom experienced increasing anarchy before the exile in 722 B.C. The prophecy of Obadiah speaks of the ultimate downfall of Edom, and attributes this

downfall to her opposition to Judah in her time of distress and need. Those who would wrongfully oppose Israel today will come under the judgment of God for the same reason. To oppose God's people is to oppose God. This is the lesson of the history of Edom, the nation fathered by Esau.

Food for thought / discussion / prayer.

1) Jacob served Laban for a total of twenty years before being able to return to Canaan. They were all years in which the Lord was preparing him for the meeting with Himself at Peniel, which would change him so significantly. Jacob knew by then that his options were exhausted, and he could no longer strike a bargain or do a deal. Have you come to the place of having no options left, to your own Peniel?

2) Jacob, as I've emphasised, gets to know God personally during this phase of his life. God is now his God, not just the God of his father. Something like this happens for us when we abandon many of our traditions/prejudices/preferences respecting styles/places/personalities and can sense God much more readily for ourselves. (I'm thinking of the way Paul rebuked the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 3 vs.3,4.) This doesn't mean compromise, it means enlargement. We're no longer taking our spiritual cue from others - it's between God and us. Paul saw that the Corinthians narrowness, which in turn created division within the Body, was worldliness, or immaturity. Can we pray for a move of God amongst us that will enlarge and mature us for new challenges of faith?

3) Others are changed when we are changed, just as was Esau in ch.33. If I am always willing for change, others around me will change too, without me having to quote the Scriptures at them. (Peter is talking about this in relation to wives and husbands in 1Peter 3 vs.1,2). Have you had any experience of this?

Next week's passage: Genesis 37 - 43