

Thursday Morning Bible Study: Jacob: Exile and Return (Genesis 25-35)

4. Jacob Returns From Exile: Genesis 31:17-33:20

What does it mean, what does it look like, to be taken into the inner life of God, into the interior world of the covenant and blessing? How are we taken to attain to mature humanity, to the measure of the stature the fullness of Jesus Christ (Eph. 4:13), what does it look like to be in the fullness of the whole spiritual blessing, sharing in the holiness and blamelessness of the Son of God (Eph. 1:3-4)? Or what is that Paul is asking in Ephesians 3:14–19:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

To be on the inside of the covenant and blessing, to be taken into the inner life of God, to be filled with all the fullness of God means a fundamental reassessment of what blessedness actually is. In Acts 20:35, at the end of his farewell address to the Ephesian church elders, Paul recalls a saying of the Lord Jesus that did not find its way into any of the four gospel accounts: ‘[R]emember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”’ The interior of the covenant, life in the fullness of God is life in the fullness of God who blesses rather than receives, who gives rather than takes. The interior of the covenant is the considering of others greater than yourself, of going even to death, death on a cross for the salvation of others. How do proud human beings get there?

At the end of the session last week, we ended on a cliff-hanger. After twenty difficult and complex years in Paddan-Aram, Jacob and his family were facing increasing hostility from Laban and his family (31:1-2). But the LORD spoke to Jacob and directed him that *now* was the time for him to return to the land, and promised His presence with him in the return (31:3). Jacob summoned his wives to see him out in the field (indicating some urgency and also perhaps some secrecy in what he was about to do.) He explained the situation to them—perhaps exaggerating the mistreatment he had experienced from Laban (31:6 “changed my wages ten times”)—saying clearly that he believed that God had been in his increased prosperity (not his clever tricks!), and that now the God who had appeared to him at Bethel was calling him to return to his home land. Leah and Rachel recognised that they were as estranged from their father as was Jacob and readily agreed to return with him. “Whatever God has said to you, do!” (31:16).

31:17–55 Jacob, with his family and all his possessions, set out to return. He had a good opportunity; Laban was away at the shearing of his own flocks. (Unbeknownst to Jacob, Rachel took her father’s absence as an opportunity to steal the idols from Laban’s tent. Why she did this is unclear—so he couldn’t call on them against the fleeing family? Or for her own good fortune? Or for their monetary value?) And so Jacob again being tricky was able to get a three day start away before Laban heard of their departure.

The news was not gladly received—learning of Jacob’s flight, Laban pursued him, catching up after seven days. (Jacob, travelling with his family and flocks was moving more slowly than Laban and his men who had no such encumbrances.) He was

annoyed particularly about his household gods—the things by which he hoped to guarantee his future. But just as he had Jacob again within reach, the LORD intervened and spoke to him in a dream, warning him, “Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.” (cf. Pilate’s wife)—which he almost obeyed, but he did try it on, seeking to shame Jacob for his sudden flight, implying threat, and demanding a search for the household gods. He was unable to find them, as Rachel who took them has placed them in a saddle on which she sits hiding it under her skirts, and claiming inability to rise for her father due to having her period (thereby rendering them doubly unclean). Finally Laban established a covenant with Jacob and the two men part in peace, with Jacob on the borders of the land promised to him. This peace after conflict is a new note in Jacob’s story—a sign of inner change in him perhaps.

None of this was the path that Jacob would have chosen—all the way through these chapters we see him tricky and tricked, manipulative and manipulated and scheming and outwitted. But however he may have planned his steps, it was the LORD that was establishing his steps. And in it all, the LORD was dealing with Jacob so that he would come to really understand the decision of the LORD about him, and so finally know that the LORD is his God. All that has been happening to this elect man is for him to learn the decision of the LORD about him. Jacob had been led through a path that exposed to him what is in him, what he is like to be with and live with, what it is like to be on the receiving end of his kind of behaviour...and now the LORD is going to make known that decision of His.

32:1-32 “Jacob went on his way...” (32:1). But heading back into the land of promise Jacob faced threat—Esau awaited, that older brother about whom the word of God said he will serve his younger brother; that older twin whom Jacob had tricked and duped at least twice; that older brother who had set himself to murder this manipulative brother of his. Jacob had no way of knowing just what Esau was thinking now; had his anger mollified? Or had it brewed stronger and stronger into an unquenchable rage?

But as he headed back, there almost right on the edge of the land of promise, he was met by angels of God. This meeting must have been an assurance of God’s protection for him. He called the place “Mahanaim”, meaning “two camps”—his and the angels—and that word “camp” indicated that the angels were mobile: they were going to travel with him. Whatever lay ahead for him—rejection or acceptance—God had sent help for him from His sanctuary (Ps. 20. Also cf Jesus after the temptation in the wilderness as he returns for the ministry...).

As he considered meeting his brother again, Jacob sent messengers to Esau ahead of him, seeking favour in his eyes. Initially he seemed to seek favour by trying to impress his brother whilst also politely deferring to him — the messengers have to tell “my lord Esau” about all the wealth that Jacob has accumulated. But when they came back they brought a disturbing report—Esau was charging out with 400 men. It is not entirely clear whether Esau intended to give him a right royal welcome, or a “right royal welcome!” To Jacob though, it looked pretty clear that those murderous thoughts of his brother had only got stronger over time, and he was “greatly afraid and distressed” (32:7). (This is very direct speech in Hebrew narrative—very rarely do we have outright statements of how a person feels; we are more often left to surmise the emotional state.) So, Jacob divided the party into two camps, hoping that at least one party would survive any attack that might come overnight unexpectedly.

And then he prayed (32:9ff.) This is the first time in the narrative that Jacob has actually prayed, where he has made petition about his situation. In ch 28, after his dream he had made that quasi-vow, but he hadn't really requested anything, but rather set terms. Spurgeon to a man who was prating in prayer: 'Call him "Father!" and ask for something!' Real prayer can only come from a broken and contrite heart, from a position of humility. Pride never prays, except as self-talk (cf. Luke 18:9–14).

We see in his prayer that something had started to happen in Jacob. His pride gave way to humility. All that had happened to him had humbled him; that exile in Paddan-Aram had broken him. Through the difficult process of success almost-granted being followed by success frustrated, through the process of having others deal with him as he had dealt with them, Jacob had been brought to a sober understanding of himself. The prayer is not at all like his arrogance at Bethel, "If you...then you shall be my God". Rather it is full of humility, "...I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant..." (32:10). He asked for deliverance, grounded on God's covenantal promises to him. "You said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude'" (32:12). This is a prayer of trust in the God who made freely gracious promises to him. Jacob does not present himself as the dictator of terms here; he simply calls on the free terms set by God Himself on Himself.

We are not told directly of God's answer, but it seems that Jacob was granted some wisdom in this new humility. Overnight he arranged a plan to show humility to his angry brother, sending him lavish gifts to placate him. Five droves of animals—goats, sheep, camels, cattle and donkeys—were sent ahead as gifts for Esau to prepare for his meeting Jacob who was coming behind them. Jacob took the position of the weaker one. That night also—still unsure of Esau's intentions—he wisely took precautions to protect his family, putting the Jabbok river between him and them so that they might be spared should Esau come upon him.

And then as he waited alone, a mysterious man, a fighter came to him and he had to fight—fighting him until break of day. Neither was able to prevail over the other, but then, as the sun started to rise, the man touched Jacob's hip and he was lamed, his hip wrenched out of joint. How strange—it seems this man could have taken charge at any point, but is prepared to be in the hands of Jacob, to meet him as an equal as it were, and even to seem to be close to defeat by him. But now, even lamed by the man, still Jacob held on to this mysterious stranger; "I will not let you go unless you bless me". All through this account of Jacob, what has mattered to him is that he have the LORD's blessing. But now in this strange defeat—the man could have defeated him at any time if he could lame him with a simple touch of his hip; but he allowed Jacob to wrestle—Jacob is really in a better place than before to understand blessing. Blessing is not a power that makes life the way we want it to be; blessing is the power of God that takes us into life in the very heart and action of God. In asking for blessing now, Jacob is in effect saying, "I am yours. Make my future part of your future." And that is a transformative prayer.

And so the blessing comes, and with it a name change. He's no longer Jacob (the supplanter) but he is Israel (who wrestles with God.) A new name means a new character and a new future. Everything has changed for Jacob; he is not simply the product of his own decisions and actions. He is no longer his own master. His life is not determined by the parameters of his own sinfulness. He has God for his God. His

life is determined by the parameters of God's grace and mercy. And then the blessing is given! Jacob's response tells us the heart and content of that blessing: he has seen God face to face and his life has been delivered! That is the very heart of blessing—to come to see that all we have and all we are comes to us as the gift of God who graciously deals with not as our sins deserve, nor according to our proud self-assertion, but according to His mercy and goodness. The LORD, the God of the covenant, the God of Abraham and Isaac comes at this time to truly be the God of Jacob.

To be humbled by God through the events of our lives and to discover He is utter grace and mercy— know that and nothing else can really intimidate you. For Jacob now, Esau, Laban and all the other dangers that faced him were small cheese. He had discovered that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, but that having fallen there, what is at the heart of the consuming fire of God is that His nature and His name is love!

33:1–18 Immediately Jacob lifted his eyes and saw Esau approaching, with his horde of men. He gathered his family into their smaller family groupings, Rachel and Joseph at the back (the safest place) and went in front of them, and bowed before Esau seven times. “The older shall serve the younger...” — but here Jacob bows? He took the humble part—he did not need to “win”, he could let God establish His promise and word.

Esau was won over by his brother's humility, embraced him warmly, kissed him and together they wept. It was then that he saw his brother's family. “...whom God has graciously given your servant...” Esau seems to me to realise in that moment that Jacob is now a man of substance, and asks Jacob what the meaning of the gifts is, to which he replies that it is to find favour in Esau's eyes. Esau tests him by offering to return the gifts (“I have enough”) but Jacob insists that the gift be received if he has favour with Esau. To see Esau's face is like seeing the face of God, “and you have accepted me.” The blessing of God is what lies behind Jacob's determination to be at peace, to be reconciled with his brother.

Esau doesn't seem entirely free in his response to his brother. He wants some degree of control over him, offering first to lead the way for him, and then when Jacob excuses himself from the offer due to the slowness of his travel due to his children, wives and flocks, Esau offers to leave some of his men with him “to help!” Again, Jacob tries tactfully to maintain his freedom. When Esau departed, Jacob went another way, out of Esau's (=harm's?) way, finally settling outside the city of Shechem where purchased a piece of land from the loval Hivite chieftain, Hamor. And there he erected an altar to worship God, the God of *Israel*.