

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

2. Jacob Meets God and Trouble Begins: Genesis 28:1—29:20

God's blessing and promise is in many ways the start of all our troubles! The idea that things will go easily, smoothly, nicely—just the way we like it—for us once we have become recipients of the grace of God in Jesus Christ runs counter to what that encounter actually means. In the grace of God in Jesus Christ we have become those who belong to God, those whom God is saving from their sins, those who are becoming conformed to the likeness of the Son of God. In the grace of God in Jesus Christ we are brought into the midst of the people of God whom God Himself is sanctifying, i.e. including in His own holiness. The grace of God is the beginning of a history, not simply the establishment of a state. The work of grace is going somewhere, not simply staying at a point. Grace is essentially “transforming” not merely “accepting.”

One way in which the New Testament speaks about this process is in the matter of God's discipline. The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way (12:5ff.): ‘Have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons (and daughters)? “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” It is for discipline you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons... For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.’

This tells that God's grace coming to us is going to mean trouble for us, but trouble that is going to work for our good. It is because grace is at work in us that we are now children whom the Father disciplines for our good. The main trouble of it all will be our own Adamic resistance to what God is doing. It is a resistance that finds its expression in pride—the ridiculous thought that its up to us, and that we are capable, to make the promises and blessings of God work out in our lives. Either it's God's blessing or it isn't and it's all up to us. Alternatively, our resistance to what God is doing finds its expression in sloth—indifference, and even resentment, to what God is giving to us in Christ, and the pursuit of our own way and interests instead. Either grace takes hold of our wills or we haven't received it yet. And so, when God's grace comes to us, the first trouble we find is that we are led to an awareness of these things in our lives — our pride or our sloth, or both! God in His sovereign grace leads us into the wilderness, and in His grace He leads us home.

Genesis 28 opens with Isaac blessing the younger of his twin sons, Jacob and sending him off to Paddan-Aram, the ancestral home of his wife, Rebekah's family to find a wife. It is a remarkable blessing—an extension of the blessing of Abraham that had come to Isaac now falling on Jacob (vv. 3–4). It has taken quite something for Isaac to do this — his natural preference was to bless Esau, the older twin. But the word of the LORD to Rebekah during her troublesome pregnancy had indicated that the struggle in her womb was preparation for the fact that two nations would arise from these twins, and that “the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger” (Genesis 25:22–23). That word of the LORD directs and shapes all that happens in the history that follows. As we saw last week, chapters 25:24–34 and then 27:1–40 showed how Jacob proudly took hold of that promise and through

manipulation and outright deception tried to make it happen for himself. Contrasting that, Esau had slothful indifference to both the promises themselves and to being blessed through the recipient of those promises. Jacob's manipulation and deception finally deprived Esau of a blessing he thought was rightly his, and in his anger he plotted against his brother, to kill him once his father Isaac had died. And it is this plot that led Rebekah to intercede with Isaac to send Jacob far away for a while to her relatives, until Esau relented in his anger.

And so Jacob headed off with his father's blessing to find a wife and to find safety from Esau. He took the blessing into his hands gladly. But he didn't really get this "blessing" thing; he really thought that his future lay in his hands, that he was the mediator of what was going to come to him. At this point Jacob was on the outer surface of blessing. And that was exposed to him when he had a strange encounter with the Holy One in a dream in which God Himself pronounced blessing on him.

As Jacob slept he had a dream in which were three startling details (introduced with "Behold!") This first: he saw a ladder standing upon the earth and reaching up to heaven. The second: angels of God were ascending and descending on this ladder. The third: the LORD himself was standing above it. There is traffic and connection between earth and heaven: there are bigger things going on than Jacob—or you or I—have ever thought or imagined. Earth and the world of humanity is not left to its own resources to work its own purposes and plans. God Himself is active in all the earth working his purposes and plans, and earth and the world of humanity may and must finally count on the action and purposes of God. And blessing is not simply a matter of family loyalty and honour—blessing is actually the *active* domain of God who chooses how and when and who and where he blesses. If Jacob is blessed it is not really by his father, Isaac but by the LORD. No human being can effectively pronounce a blessing that God Himself has not given. (n.b. in the current discussion about marriage.)

And that is what the LORD does—the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac unilaterally and freely and graciously takes up Isaac's blessing as His own and even extends it. Genesis 28:13-15—All that He promised to Abraham He promises to Jacob. Jacob and his family is the one through whom the purposes of God for the world will be worked, and the LORD promises His own protection and presence to ensure that this happens. "I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

When Jacob wakes he says, "Surely God is in this place and I didn't know it. . . How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!" As for Adam, Abraham and others, so for Jacob—the LORD's great works begin as they sleep. They are inactive, comatose; these acts are for them, freely given and unilateral, not requiring the assistance of those who are receiving. Jacob has been brought to a point of humbling.

But Jacob's pride is seen in his determination to turn free promise into a deal, a negotiation with him setting the terms. He gets up early in the morning and sets up a small shrine and in an act of worship makes a vow. God will be his God if God does what He says—i.e. if He measures up! "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, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God" (28:20–22). In fact, though, what Jacob is on the verge of discovering is that in making these

promises, and blessing him, the LORD is going to shape him up... and that means trouble for Jacob. This is trouble that we see played out in the next chapters.

Of pride and sloth, the most insidious of the two is pride—it seems to have such spirituality about it—that we could bring about the blessing and promise of God! When the God of grace appears, the actions of sloth seem to fall aside far more easily than those of pride. But in fact the grace of God is an attack on our pride. To meet the grace of God is to find that what we really need to worry about is not so much what is obviously bad in our life of faith, our bad works, as about the pretention that comes with our doing good. The whole of the Christian life is essentially about what God is doing to bring our pious endeavours of self-assertion to their right end, that is to put us to death that we might actually live in Christ. And it will be through a strange process of giving us room to assert ourselves and frustrating those assertions that the LORD will discipline us, so that finally our lives are actually testimony to grace, to His grace toward us in Jesus Christ.

All this still lies ahead for Jacob. The next morning he continued his journey and eventually arrived at Paddan-Aram (29:1). It looks so promising at the beginning, like everything has been perfectly arranged by the LORD (and it has!) The whole of chapters 29 to 31 fall under the promise of God in 28:15, “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.” And so Jacob arrives in Haran, and immediately finds connection with his mother’s brother, Laban, through his “chance” (God-given) meeting with Rachel, Laban’s beautiful youngest daughter. After a month, penniless Jacob is promised Rachel as his wife, if he first works seven years in lieu of the dowry price. And that is no problem to him—the time flies by “because of the love he had for her.”

But then it all turns sour—not the way Jacob had hoped things would work out—not so perfectly arranged by the LORD (but it was!). And as we will see next week, it is this process of things going well and then being dashed to the ground that is the process of discipline that the LORD uses to bring Jacob to the point where he gets onto the inside of grace, so that he is not merely a beneficiary of God’s goodness but a participant in it, a man who is shaped and ruled by that grace....