

GOD MEETS JACOB AT BETHEL

Genesis 27:1-28:22

Lesson 13a

Key Verse: 28:20

"Jacob made a vow, saying, `If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear...'"

God called one man Abraham, gave him great promises and made a covenant with him. He raised Abraham up to be the father of many nations and the source of blessing for all people. God blessed Isaac's family and renewed with Isaac the Abrahamic covenant. God helped Isaac in many ways. Especially, he gave him a faithful woman of prayer to help him maintain the covenant life and its blessings. The third patriarch in the trilogy of patriarchs is Jacob. The nation of Israel bears his name. More chapters in Genesis were written about Jacob than about any other person. When we take a superficial look at Jacob, we don't like him much. (Maybe because he is like us!) His name came to mean "deceiver", and in this lesson we see why. But when we take a closer look at Jacob, we are amazed to discover that he was a truly great man. His strong human character made it difficult for him to become an ancestor of faith. But God chose him from his mother's womb to be the bearer of the covenant, and a patriarch of faith.

Jacob also had some great strengths of character from which we have something to learn. He was a faithful and hard-working man. He was faithful to his first love, Rachel; he worked hard--first for Laban, then for his own family. He learned how to be faithful to God. Jacob did not wait passively for God's blessing. He used all his human guile and skill and ability to take blessings by any means. So he made many enemies, and suffered needlessly. His human priorities, however, are worth learning.

First, he sought honor; then he sought love; then, wealth. In each case, he got what he wanted, only to discover that none of these things could really satisfy his soul. So he struggled with God until God changed him into Israel.

In his later life, he confessed, God...has been my shepherd all my life to this day." (48:15) The God of Jacob is great. He patiently trained Jacob until he could be changed from Jacob the deceiver to Israel, the man who struggles with God. (32) Then, he continued to work in Jacob through his 12 sons, who became ancestors of the nation of Israel. The God of Jacob can change any sinner into a useful man of God and a blessing to the world.

It is ironic that Jacob sought the honor of being the firstborn through deception. He wanted to be number one, so he took advantage of Esau's weakness and bought the birthright for a bowl of stew (25). In

this lesson, we meet Jacob the deceiver. He suffered for his lies and deception. But God met him at Bethel, and made a personal relationship with him that lasted throughout his life time. We want to meet the God of Jacob.

1. Jacob gets Isaac's blessing (27:1-46)

Isaac had become blind. He felt sorry for himself, and felt that he would surely die soon. Actually, he did not die until he was 180 years old--around 60 years later. Perhaps his blindness made him feel that death was near. So he asked Esau, his favorite and eldest son to go hunting, and bring and prepare some wild game for him. He would eat it and then give Esau his blessing.

Rebekah overheard Isaac speaking to Esau. She respected her husband as God's servant, and knew that the one he blessed would indeed be blessed. She believed that the blessing of the firstborn belong to Jacob, not Esau, for this was God's word to her when the two boys were in her womb. So she coached Jacob to pretend to be Esau and get his father's blessing. In order to do this, Jacob risked being discovered and receiving a rebuke and even a curse from his father, so he was hesitant. (11,12) But Rebekah was determined: She said, "Let the curse fall on me. Just do what I say..."

So Jacob dressed in Esau's clothes, put goatskin on his arms and

neck (Esau was hairy), took the delicious meat dish and bread that Rebekah had cooked and went to his father Isaac. He lied to Isaac. Isaac was a little suspicious, but he believed Jacob's lie and blessed him. This was not the covenant blessing--that would come later--but it was a promise of abundance; it was a promise that nations and peoples would serve him; and it was a promise that he would be lord over his brother.

As soon as Jacob left, Esau came in with tasty venison steaks for his father. When he learned what Jacob had done and heard the poor blessing that his father had left for him, he was furiously angry. He decided to kill Jacob. Isaac was not angry at Jacob or Rebekah--perhaps he knew that it was right for the blessing to go to Jacob.

Rebekah had no choice; she must send Jacob away. She decided to send him to her brother Laban for a while. Then she talked with Isaac. She complained about the Hittite women Esau had married, and suggested that they take a hand in finding a wife for Jacob. So Isaac called Jacob and blessed him and sent him to Paddan Aram, to his mother's people, instructing him to find a wife among Laban's daughters. Rebekah taught Jacob the supreme value of God's blessing, but she also taught him to lie and deceive. Lying and deception are never good, and the means are not justified by the end. She paid dearly for what she did. Because of Esau's wrath Jacob had to leave home and live as an exile in a foreign land. Rebekah lost the son she loved--as far as we know, she

did not see him again, for she died before his return. But God is sovereign. He used these difficult things to train Jacob and ultimately, to bless him.

Before Isaac sent Jacob away, he gave him the blessing of Abraham. "May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. May he give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien, the land God gave to Abraham." (28:3,4)

(Esau revealed that he was an animal man, with no spiritual understanding when he married a daughter of Ishmael--in addition to his two other wives--to please his father.)

2. The God of Bethel (28:1-15)

Jacob left Beersheba and started for Haran. The sun set and it began to grow dark. Jacob was tired, and his heart was full of sorrow, for he was leaving home for the first time. He found a rock for a pillow and lay down under the stars to sleep. He was fearful. He was leaving because his brother wanted to kill him; he was fearful about his future and now, out in the wild open country all alone at night, he was afraid about the present reality.

From a human point of view, he was worthless; he had become a wanderer because of his sins; he didn't even have a roof over his head. But that night the Almighty God, the Creator and Possessor of heaven and earth, came to visit him. God did not wait until Jacob surrendered and came to God. God came first. That lonely wilderness became the gate of heaven. Jacob saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven and the angels of God ascending and descending on it. Above it stood the Lord. He spoke to Jacob. He introduced himself as the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac. He promised him the land, and descendants like the dust of the earth. He promised, "All peoples on earth would be blessed through you and your offspring." God went on to solve Jacob's immediate problem. He promised the lonely wanderer that he would be with him. Verse 15 says, "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." God came to Jacob and planted a great hope and vision in his heart. He promised to go with Jacob to Paddan-Aram and bring him back home safely.

3. Jacob's vow (28:16-22)

Jacob woke up. He couldn't sleep the rest of the night, for a awesome fear of God filled his heart. The next morning he took the stone he had used for a pillar, poured oil on it and called that place "Bethel." Then Jacob made a vow. He said, "If God will be with me and

will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth." (28:20-22)

Jacob was not interested in God's plans. He did not think about God's calling Jacob to be a source of blessing in God's redemptive work. He was only concerned about his own urgent security problem. He promised God that if God would indeed do as he said and solve Jacob's immediate problems, then God would be his God and he would give him a tithe. His faith is self-centered and worldly, but is real. He knew that God is a living God. This vow became the handle by which God could take hold of Jacob's life. It meant that Jacob had begun his life of faith. He began his vow-prayer talking about God in the third person, but he concluded by talking to God--"And of all that you give me I will give you a tenth." He no longer lived on the borrowed faith of his parents. His own faith was weak and small, but it was his own, and it would grow through God's training. Someday he would become a man who could bless others.

There has to be a point in everyone's life when he meets God for himself and makes his own personal promise and commitment to God. For some people, there must be more than one such time. Abraham had made a decision to leave his homeland according to God's word of command;

Isaac had decided to obey God and stay in the land of the Philistines.

Jacob made a conditional vow. God accepted them all. He helped Jacob keep that vow.