Genesis 28: 10-22, "Jacob – Reassurance"

Ian Olliver

To say that Jacob had thrown a grenade into his family situation would be an understatement. Having previously traded a bowl of stew for his brothers inheritance, Jacob has crossed the boundary from mere opportunism with his brother to downright deceit when it came to receiving his Fathers blessing. Dressing in his brothers clothes, putting goatskins on his hands to make them feel hairy like his brothers, he sneakily duped his nearly blind Dad into giving him the blessing that was intended for his brother Esau . It was not a good way to behave..he knew that… but he desperately wanted that blessing. His Dad Isaac was furious, and Esau was apoplectic.

"That brother of mine has deceived us. He deserves death…and I'm going to kill him.

The Fury of his hairy, athletic and super strong brother was something that Jacob didn't want to hang around for… His Dad had calmed down, but he realised that home was no longer a safe place for Jacob to live. His Mum kissed him and his Dad, Isaac, blessed him and they sent him on his way encouraging him to make a new life for himself and to marry one of his own people there. So Jacob packed a bag and ran. He ran and he ran and he ran. The place where he was headed was the only place where his Mum, Rebekah, thought he would be safe. The place where she was from, and where her brother Laban still lived Paddan Aram. Well over 400 miles away…. All the way north through practically the whole length of Israel and continuing up into what is now Syria.

I'm sure Jacob must have been wondering what was going to happen next. He had thought that getting the birthright and stealing the blessing would somehow make him into a brilliant person. Give him some kind of superpowers, change him into a popular and glorious leader perhaps. It all seemed like such a good idea at the time….But that hadn't happened at all. He just realised that he was, after all, just the pathetic excuse for a human being that Esau had always ridiculed so much. Surely he had been so deceitful, so rash, frankly so bad that even if once he stupidly imagined himself to be God's chosen person… there was no way on earth that God would have anything to do with him now. His brother hated him…and rightly so…. Surely God hated him even more?

And yet his Dad's blessing still stood? Didn't it? May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you… Isaac's words echoed in his brain….

Jacob didn't feel like the father of a great nation. He felt like a teenage scumbag who had somehow, by the skin of his teeth, gotton away from being beaten to death..

He had kept on going and going. He had to push on..who knows how far behind his angry brother is? Until he could push on no longer. Tired and hungry he stopped.

And as he sat down and reflected he must have thought…How did it ever come to this? Dad told me that he had this amazing encounter with God when he was a boy…. And that Grandad Abraham had all kinds of encounters with God and he heard all these great promises prophesied over him.. But I've never had that. I've never encountered God…and

now that I've cheated and lied and disrespected my brother…. any chance of God ever speaking with me has surely now gone down the toilet.

He had hit rock bottom. It was miles to get to Haran..and, even if he made it there alive, would the family even take him in?

Here is Jacob..alone…no friends…and the only friend he really had was his Mum who he would probably never see again. He had no possessions. Someone fleeing for their life is hardly going to be carrying big suitcases. His soul was dark.. Heaven seemed closed and distant and as if to emphasise all of this the narrator tells us that the sun had set. His surroundings echoed his heart….. It was getting very dark.

If you notice, Jacob doesn't cry out and rant and rave and say I'm so sorry God I messed up please forgive me… I think that the whole idea of heaven was so dark to him, so closed to him that he doesn't even give the possibility of an encounter with God a second thought.

Jacob was just exhausted. He was in the middle of nowhere. No local travel inn available. He found some flat ground. He found a stone that would have to just serve as a pillow and within minutes Jacob was fast asleep.

And Jacob has this vision…perhaps the most famous vision that has ever been recorded. There are these stairs that stretch all the way up to heaven. Not a flimsy ladder as the King James translates… But as Led Zeppelin once sang this is a magnificent and opulent stairway to heaven …I've no idea how big that is but clearly this is quite an impossible height….and there are these angels, messengers of God travelling up and down. Angels. And we're not talking 6 year olds with bits of tinsel on their heads. These are the frontline servants of the most high God. Majestic creatures. Seriously impressive and not to be messed with.

Royal heralds…. In this vision Jacob was able to peek into a dimension that we never normally see. Heavens connection with earth is a hive of activity. God… doing work on the earth, sending messages and royal decrees. God is involved with things on the earth after all.

What a dream…. But then there is more….

Suddenly God is there, right beside him . God doesn't use an angel….he is there himself, close and intimate, he speaks with Jacob directly. Not like a terrifying angel… but in a gentle and very personal way. Like God has taken human form and can just speak with him.

For God knows Jacobs situation…and he speaks right into the things that are making Jacob doubt his situation… God recognises that Jacob is alone and friendless and he says to him.

"I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. 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." Jacob is not alone and friendless. God is with him. Jacob is not exposed and vulnerable. The God of Heavens Armies is there to watch over him and protect him.

Has Jacob messed up and done bad things… absolutely the answer is yes…. But does that mean that God has abandoned him and decided not to continue with his promises? …..absolutely not!

God just wants to give Jacob this reassurance that he is loved.

"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."

That is exactly what Jacob needs to hear at that moment.

But God then addresses the next thing.. does he have a future? Will things work out ok?

And God says : I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.

God is there as his friend, he is there as his protector and he is there as his provider.

Jacob gets this glimpse of heaven, this encounter with the one true God and he has this life changing moment. He wakes up and his whole outlook has changed.

It is not just the sun coming up that has made everything brighter… Jacob has met with God and he knows for sure that he does have a hope and a future….and even though he is on his own in the middle of nowhere Jacob is up and dancing around. Somehow needs to make a response to what he has seen and heard. A permanent record of this incredible moment… so he spends the morning building a monument recording the place where he first had this personal encounter with the living God. He is so joyful and so excited that he doesn't know what to do with himself.. He builds this pillar and he pours oil over it and he says to God 'Lord..if you are really going to bless me with all this stuff that you are promising, then I make a vow to give a tenth of it back to you. "How awesome is this place. This is none other than the House of God; This is the gate of Heaven!". Something that last night seemed so fanciful and remote and closed off to him has now been revealed to him as the reality of his life.

To get a glimpse of heaven you first have to find the gate…. And is the gate really some pile of rocks in the middle of Israel? No the gate is the way by which Jacob encountered God.. And it is the way we still encounter God today

God becomes real and personal when we encounter him in a real and personal way. What was made uniquely possible for Jacob in his dream becomes possible for all believers through the presence of Jesus. Jesus had a hard time of it explaining to the Jewish leaders of the day that an encounter with God like Jacob had could be at all possible. But this is what he says.

John chapter 10 – I'm sure you all know it

7 Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. 9 I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

My prayer for you…indeed my expectation for you is that you will encounter this same God of Friendship, of love of protection of provision. For our God is also the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac the God of Jacob. The God who wants us to make his name and his purposes known throughout the world.

God is still looking for Jacobs who will encounter him, discover him and have their hopeless, despairing lives turned around with the reality of knowing that God is still doing his work of transformation across this world. How we have behaved and the things we have done in the past do not define us. God always looks to the future, to the possibilities which lie ahead. If our eyes and hearts and minds are open to the presence of Jesus. If we then decide to draw a line, change direction and follow him, then the gate to heaven is open to us too.. Indeed open to everyone. What an amazing joyous and brilliant thing that is.

From the darkest and loneliest place Jacob sees the truth of his awesome God and the great love which God has for him.. A love that will never fail him, never give up on him and never run out on him.

A promise for Jacob, and all his descendants, which by the adoption made possible by Jesus also includes you and it includes me. All praise to his name.

Amen