

a specific request to God, in this case for protection because of Jacob's fear at what might happen (32:11) and a final verse in which Jacob expressed confidence in God's power to act and save him. With some care at interpreting exactly what is going on in the psalms, you will find this pattern similar to Psalm 3,4,5, 22,25, and many others.

Application

There is no doubt that this is the first example of such a prayer in the Bible, and is a form of prayer that is echoed time and again throughout Scripture. There is a great deal of emphasis today upon the freedom of the Spirit that is associated with extempore prayer, and I can assure you that I am a fervent believer in the importance of extempore prayer both privately and publicly. However, I also believe that the Holy Spirit uses structures and even set words which express for us the words that we either would like to say or need to say. If you have suffered the trauma of bereavement or the extreme distress of the loss of a child for example, you will readily understand that at such times, psalms (such as Psalm 23, for example), hymns and set prayers such as the Lord's Prayer, can play an important even vital role in helping the human spirit in its road of spiritual healing. In the case of this prayer of Jacob, we cannot all relate to the specific words that Jacob used, but the structure of the prayer is significant. It consists of a call upon God, a confession of sin or other problem, a request to God, and finally, words of confidence and trust in the Lord. It is a simple structure to remember, and when you find yourself with a problem, it is a good pattern to practice, with numerous Scriptural precedents. You can at least see that blurting a problem out to God may not be the most gracious way of approaching our loving Heavenly Father, and that finishing by offering Him praise for what He has promised us, or thanks His guidance in the past, can be an encouraging and important part of our prayer.

The other main aspect of this passage is the Lord's angelic protection of Jacob. We had a glimpse of this earlier in Jacob's story (28:12f.), but in this passage it appears that there is an army of God's angels ready to do battle on Jacob's behalf. The storyline of Scripture tells us this, but whatever Jacob saw, he did not appear to fully comprehend the extent of God's angelic provision. Is it not the same with us? We may talk of the Lord's provision and the heavenly work of angels by which we are protected, but how many of us believe that the Lord is active in even the smallest things of our lives, guiding us sometimes in inexplicable ways towards what He has for us. If we were to take full confidence in the Lord's guidance, we should still take the proper precautions against the works of evil and the world in which we live, as Jacob did in preparing for Esau; but we could live without the fear. That, surely, is God's desire for us.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss the help of angels. Do you think that it is helpful or unhelpful to think that angels are actively helping us in the everyday things of life, if we are doing God's will?
2. Should we worry about the troubles of the world if we know that God will protect us? How can evil affect us if Jesus has saved us?
3. Do you think you can use a pattern of prayer which is in your mind, but fill in words which fit the circumstances, as I suggest in the discipleship comments?

Discipleship

I make the strong suggestion that you consider spending the day going over the pattern of prayer that comes out of this text. I simplify it in this manner; adoration, confession, request, thanksgiving. Some people have difficulty saying prayers of 'adoration'; in this case, take Jacob's example, and address God in this way 'O Lord, You are the one who has saved me and guided me through my life ...' The rest will make sense after that!

Final Prayer

You have protected us, Lord God, when we did not know it; You have cared for us when we did not have the courage to hope for it, You have provided for us when we did not dare imagine it. Your grace is amazing. Help us to see the truth of Your love for us, which never fails. AMEN

Prayer

Thank You, Lord Jesus, for remaining faithful to us when we are at our most vulnerable. We find ourselves swept along by feelings and attitudes, some of which may be right or wrong, but You, O Lord know the difference. May we always be open to the prompting of Your Spirit by which we may dismiss the bad and uphold the good, and give You praise for Your help. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Young families and the Church

Pray today for children and the books they read at home. Ask the Lord to work through Christian publishing to provide good quality material through which children can learn the basics of morality and goodness. These are vital tools which will help them to grow in faith and stand firm for Christ in our changing world.

Meditation

Your love is a wonderful thing, O Lord;
We do not know the range of its power
Or the amazing warmth of its passion
Until we find ourselves in need.

We confess our faith in You, Lord God,
And find love's power to save:
We confess our sins through Jesus' name,
So that love can mend the broken soul:
We repent and turn from all that's wrong,
That love might lead the way to change:
We forgive all those who've done us wrong,
For love gives us and them another chance:
We are healed by Jesus, through and through,
By the passion of the Father's love.

May we never fail to see in You, O Lord;
Your only, truest nature, which is love.

Bible Study - Genesis 32:1-12

¹ While Jacob went on his way, he was met by the angels of God. ² When Jacob saw them he said, 'This is God's camp!' So he called that place Mahanaim.

³ Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, ⁴ with these instructions, 'This is what you are to say to my master Esau: Your servant Jacob says, "I have been living with Laban all this time, until now; ⁵ and I have cattle, donkeys, flocks, male and female servants; and I have sent this message to you, my master, so that I may win your favour."'

⁶ When the messengers returned to Jacob, they said, 'We found Esau, your brother, and he is coming to meet you together with four hundred men!' ⁷ Jacob was alarmed and distressed; he divided everyone with him into two groups, as well as the flocks, herds and camels, ⁸ thinking, 'If Esau attacks one group and destroys it, then the other group will escape.' ⁹ And Jacob prayed, 'O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, You told me, O LORD, "Return to your country and your family, and I will do good things with you," ¹⁰ I am unworthy of any of the faithful love and all loyalty you have shown your servant. I crossed the Jordan with only a staff; and now I have become these two groups. ¹¹ Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid of him, that he may come and kill us all, mothers and children alike. ¹² Yet you have said, "I will be very good to you, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which is too numerous to count."'

Review

This passage of Scripture contains the longest prayer recorded in the book of Genesis (32:9-12)! Jacob had just escaped the clutches of the devious and cunning Laban after twenty torrid years, and on his journey to the Promised Land, he faced the difficult and potentially disastrous task of passing through lands controlled by his brother Esau. Esau, you will remember, was the brother Jacob had disrespectfully cheated out of his birthright, and amongst many other word-plays in the story, this text has a number which remind us of Jacob's previous devious tricks. For example, the name of the land of 'Seir' (32:3) is the same Hebrew word for 'hairy', reminding us of the hairy skin Jacob put on his hand to deceive his father Isaac (27:11f.). In this and in many other ways, the narrative builds in intensity and tension as Jacob neared his meeting with Esau after so many years. Jacob prepared for this meeting by sending out a group of his own men to find Esau and relay a message of neutral goodwill (32:4,5), and upon receiving the news that Esau was already coming to meet him with what appeared to be a small army, feared the worst! He split his whole family and company into two groups on the simple principle that disaster for one might allow the other to escape (32:7,8). He then prayed his great prayer of petition to God.

Jacob's prayer is not the only significant spiritual feature of the passage. Right at the beginning, Jacob mysteriously met 'angels of God', and named the place where he had come across them 'Mahanaim', which means 'two camps'. It is quite unsure what is meant by these two camps; many have taken guesses, but it seems likely that as Jacob approached the Promised Land, he saw some angelic activity, perhaps in a dream, just as he had seen angelic activity when he had left Canaan (28:22f.) and the two camps prophetically spoke of God's protection of the two groups of his relatives, flocks and herds that Jacob prepared as he cautiously led his family back to the Promised Land, knowing that Esau stood in his way. This is one of a number of significant indicators of God's activity within the whole story, as it builds up to this great climax of Jacob's life.

The prayer itself (32:9-12) is remarkable in many ways. Jacob honours the God of his fathers, Abraham and Isaac, and it contains many of the words and ideas that we have previously associated with the Covenant, such as 'faithful love' and 'loyalty' (32:10). When we come to study it fully in the Bible study, we will find that it has a structure just like a Psalm, and is a very trusty and godly pattern for anyone who would bring a prayer request to God; the difference between this and a Psalm is that where most Psalms are general, this prayer is quite specific. Jacob was fearful about his brother because he had come to learn the warped and dangerous consequences of being bound by selfishness and grievance. He had seen this in Laban and it had taken him twenty long years to escape his clutches in a godly way. But if anyone had a grievance against Jacob, it was Esau, and Jacob prayed hard for the Lord's protection against the consequences of any further grievance. He did not know what lay ahead!

Going Deeper

Re-entry into the Promised Land was never going to be easy for Jacob; nothing was easy for him! However, Jacob showed in his actions that he was a different man than the one who had left Canaan looking for a bride, and his prayer is a masterful guide for prayer in a crisis.

The Angels at Mahanaim

The first two verses of this passage seem very strange. Surely, meeting significant numbers of angels was worth more of a mention in Scripture than just the naming of a place in the hill-country of Gilead! God gave this vision or insight to Jacob as part of his assurance that He was guarding and guiding him on his way. From the point of Jacob's exit from the Promised Land, God had promised him 'I am with you' (28:15), and Jacob had held on to this promise on a number of significant occasions (e.g. Gen 31:3,5). Now, on the eventful journey back, the angels met him (not the other way round, as in some Bibles), God blessed Jacob with this second great vision of angelic activity.

The name 'Mahanaim' means 'two camps', as above, The connection with the two groups of his family that Jacob was about to prepare seems obvious, but is extremely close to a group of words in Hebrew that could mean 'great army of God'. This reminds us of the great occasions when in fear of the army of Arameans, Elisha had to remind his servant 'there are more with us

than there are with them!' (2 Kings 6:16), and proceeded to open his eyes to the host of God! The story tells us that God has invested a great deal in Jacob, and was not going to let him fall. His protection was real, as it is for us today if we could but see the way that He works in the world!

Preparing to meet Esau

Whilst Jacob had been in Mesopotamia, Esau had created his own clan, and had been busy evicting the Horites from a region to the east and south of the Dead Sea, known as Seir (Deut 2:12). In later years the land of Seir became known as 'Edom' (32:3). The history of all this is not clear, for both words have strong connections with Esau, 'Seir' being the Hebrew for 'hairy' and 'Edom' being closely related to the word for 'red'. Esau was red at birth (25:25) and the stew that Jacob has tricked Esau with was 'red' (25:30). All this sounds very incidental, but to anyone who reads the story in its own language, the tension is firmly built into these early verses of Genesis 32 concerning what would happen when Jacob and Esau finally met!

Jacob then sent messengers ahead of him. Again, a play on words is used in Hebrew, for an angel (just seen in the previous verses) was God's 'messenger', and now Jacob sent his own 'messengers'. Perhaps the sight of God's messengers had encouraged Jacob to send his own! There is more, though. The words that Jacob gave to the messengers began with a formula of words that is closely linked with the prophets. We know the famous prophetic declaration 'thus says the Lord ...' used by many prophets to announce a 'Word from the Lord', but what is not clear to a reader in English is that the instructions of Jacob which I have translated 'this is what you are to say to ...' (32:4), begin with the same Hebrew words, and have a powerful force. They seem to declare in advance that Jacob knows that the Lord is with him, despite his fears.

Jacob was sufficiently confident in the Lord's care to speak strongly to Esau and claim that he was now no longer a threat to him; he was blessed and had family and possessions, and had no further need of tricking him out of anything! Jacob, however, was extremely wary, and despite sending a strong message, could not be sure of the reception he would receive. The news that four hundred men were coming was the cause of his 'distress' (32:7), for how could he know what the meaning of this was. This force of men was the equivalent of an army! Esau's intent was by no means clear, however, for if he was intent upon war, the messengers would not have returned alive, or at least they would have come back with that message. The whole incident gave Jacob real concern for his safety and that of his whole family group. This was the reason for his dividing his family into two groups; but we will not examine this further today, as it is a major theme for tomorrow's reading.

The prayer of Jacob

Jacob's prayer is the key to all that happened next. In it, he demonstrated that he was a reformed character; someone who spoke to God and acknowledged Him as his own and knew the heritage in which he stood. Whatever his flawed character, he could no longer resist the awesomeness of the God of his fathers, who had established a Covenant that was designed to bring a blessing to all the nations of the earth (12:2,3 etc.). He used words in his prayer that were strongly associated with this Covenant such as 'loyalty' and 'faithful love' (32:10), and his final words (32:12) again showed his familiarity with the Covenant that had been passed down through his forefathers. He also recognised that he was totally dependant upon God; 'I crossed the Jordan with only a staff; and now I have become these two groups' (32:10); he showed a proper and respectful fear of Esau, his brother, the man he had previously cheated, showing true remorse for what he had done in earlier years (32:11), and remained confident in the promises of God nevertheless (32:12). It is relatively straightforward to spot these important features of the prayer, each of which is spiritually significant in its own right, and shows that Jacob was ready to fulfil his role as the son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham.

What we do not easily see is the parallels that there are between this prayer and many of what are called 'psalms of complaint'. These are psalms in which people ask the Lord to help them because of problems of various kind, and although most of them begin with the psalmist airing some personal 'complaint' to God, they end, just like this prayer of Jacob, with glory being given to God! Jacob's prayer begins with an address to God, a feature often called an invocation (32:9) and then a confession (32:10) in which he opened his heart to God. The next section is