

can be blessed by what it says rather than be bound by its details, for obedience rather than ritual detail has always been God's pathway to true worship.

The death of Deborah, Rebekah's nurse

It is a remarkable fact that the death of Rebekah, Isaac's wife and Jacob's mother is never recorded. Her place in the 'family' grave alongside Isaac (49:31) is recorded, but not her death. Why then should we be informed of the death of someone who was her servant; indeed, someone whose name, up until now, we have not known? Some have guessed that Deborah might have been a greater influence on Jacob than we thought, hence her inclusion in the 'Jacob' stories; but these are things we simply cannot know.

The best explanation, in my opinion, is that this final part of the story of Jacob is structured around some reminders of the mortality of the great forefathers and their families (see the death of Rachel in 35:18). In the re-telling of these great epic stories, there would be a tendency to place these great characters 'on a pedestal', but the reminder of their deaths was a helpful way of saying that everyone was mortal, and we all meet our end, however famous we are or however great a servant of the Lord we may be considered to be. There is little else we can say about Deborah, except that she was deeply mourned, for her burial place, 'Allon-Bacuth', meant 'place of weeping'.

Application

There is much in this passage of Scripture which points forward to developments of worship in the life of God's people for centuries, and I have already alluded to many of these. It is important, however, to note the idea of God's 'self-revelation'. This is what God was doing all the way through the Old Testament; he led the people of Israel through a variety of experiences within which he taught them more and more about himself; the captivity in Egypt, the Exodus, the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the Exile in Babylon and the Return from Exile. If we follow the pattern of God's self-revelation over this period of time, it will help us understand why Jesus had to come when He did, for the salvation of the whole world.

Each of us today has the benefit of God's complete revelation of himself in Jesus Christ, but none of us can say that we have seen all of this; we all travel on a path of spiritual revelation in which the Lord shows us more and more of Himself. At the very least, it is worth considering that we will learn substantially about the God in whom we believe, if we take time to follow the path of His own 'self-revelation' through the Old Testament. It is a journey of discovery that will help us understand the saving work of our Lord with greater wisdom and insight; something for which we all long.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Do you think it was right for God to forgive the sons of Jacob for what they had done to Shechem and Hamor, and all their citizens?
2. To what extent do we prepare ourselves for worship? Is the current fashion for informality in church a hindrance to the true worship of God?
3. Can a Christian get by without the Old Testament from which to learn about Jesus?

Discipleship

Part of our discipleship is the worship of Almighty God. It seems to me that many of the current practices of worship which people are following can be equally enabling for some and distracting for others; performance-led worship bands, complex electronics and computer techniques for example. Reflect upon how we can find the true heart of worship today and take hold of the self-revelation of God that happens when His people truly worship Him.

Final Prayer

Help us, dear Lord, to offer ourselves to You in a true spirit of worship. We long to be set free to worship you in 'spirit and truth' and yet without the presence of Your Spirit, our efforts are meaningless. Grace us by Your presence each moment of our lives, we pray, and fill us with Your Spirit; then may our worship be a natural consequence of the lives we live for You; AMEN

Prayer

Time is precious, Lord Jesus. Guide our timing of the beginning of things, the doing of them and their completion, so that we may live according to Your gracious will for our lives. And when things go wrong, assure us, by Your great guiding hand which directs all history, that You are always in control, even if we are not. Thank You Lord Jesus. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Our Homes

Within our homes, we tend to have our own routines for where we sit, watch television, eat or play games. Each family member needs their own 'space' in order to be comfortable. Pray for your own home, ask the Lord to bless the way that you use its space and for the people who depend on it for the security and comfort of a home.

Meditation

So many people need your love and care, Lord Jesus,
Who can help all the wounded of body mind and spirit? Only You.

You can focus the mind of one who cannot face their debt;
You can help a man or woman face up to their difficult obligations at work;
You can liberate a battered wife within an abusive marriage;
You can give hope to a young person who cannot cope with the future;
You can bring freedom to those who feel trapped by their surroundings;
You can cure the heart of a mother or father, rejected by a child;
You can ease the pain of those who are trapped by chronic illness;
You can cure the soul and spirit of one who has been sexually abused.

So when we seek, in Christian love, to help or counsel those in need,
Give us the courage to be led by You alone, the creator and lover of all .

Bible Study - Genesis 35:1-8

¹ God said to Jacob, 'Get up and go to Bethel. Settle there, and make an altar there dedicated to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.'² So Jacob spoke to his family and all those who were with him; he said 'Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, then purify yourselves and change your clothes.'³ We shall now go to Bethel, where I will make an altar to the God who answered me at the time I was in distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.'⁴ So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods they possessed, and the earrings they were wearing; and he buried them under the oak at Shechem.

⁵ As they travelled, an awesome fear from God fell upon the towns all around them, and no-one attempted to come after the sons of Jacob.

⁶ Jacob and all the people with him came to Luz in the land of Canaan (that is, Bethel).⁷ There he built an altar and named the place El-bethel, because this was where God had revealed Himself to him when he fled from his brother.

⁸ Deborah, who was Rebekah's nurse, died and was buried near to Bethel, under the oak tree. So it was called 'Allon-Bacuth'.

Review

It is a relief, after the depravity and injustice of the previous story in chapter 34 of Genesis, to read a series of brief but telling descriptions of 'what happened next'. Whilst preparing for these studies, I read commentary after commentary in which Jacob was castigated for his apparent inability to do anything about the previous terrible events (ch 34) and if you have followed these notes you will realise that I am not of the same opinion. The Jacob who crossed the Jabbok and wrestled with God at Peniel (32:22-32) was a man weakened, but spiritually renewed by

the power of God and deeply conscious of both his past failings and also his role as the bearer of God's Covenant promises. All this is demonstrated in the way in which he dealt with Esau, before coming into the Promise Land (ch.33, see 33:18). Jacob's primary concern was the safe re-entry of his whole family into Canaan, which is reflected in most of his reported comments (33:9-12,13, 34:30). It is not surprising therefore, that after the tragic fighting, slaughter and pillage done by his sons, Jacob's ear was attuned to the Lord's instructions as to what to do next. It seems obvious that the entire family would have to leave the area of the city of Shechem where the previous incidents took place, but Jacob only acted when the Lord gave him specific instructions to leave.

'Get up and go ...' (35:1) are words often used when God commands one of his servants to do something very important (see Jonah 1:2, 3:2, for example), and this strong instruction reminds us that the re-entry into the Promised Land was the fulfilment of a vow made by Jacob when the young man had left Canaan many years previously (28:20,21). This vow asked the Lord to guide Jacob back to Canaan in safety, in return for which Jacob would worship the Lord at Bethel. Jacob had returned into the Promised Land but things had not gone well; and he now needed a word from the Lord before he could proceed to Bethel, the place where the vow had been made and where worship of the Lord would complete the vow. The time had now come.

The Lord made it clear that this journey to Bethel was the important conclusion to Jacob's long journey and the completion of his vow, and he responded by indicating to his family that their journey should be treated as a pilgrimage. All signs of the past were ritually 'washed' away ('purify' in 35:2 meant 'washing'), clothes were changed and all items that were linked with other religious beliefs were disposed of by Jacob (33:4). Then, as they travelled, God protected His people Israel so that no retaliation was attempted by the Canaanites upon his sons (33:5).

Our passage today includes one quite extraordinary event; the only place in Genesis where God commanded someone to build an altar. Whenever anyone else had built an altar, the decision to build it was part of the worship itself, but here, Jacob is called to a more profound worship of the Lord, to recall God's own 'self-revelation' (35:7). Verse 8 then concludes our passage with a report of the death of Rebekah's nurse, Deborah.

Going Deeper

There is a great deal of symbolism in these few brief verses; pointers to the future for God's people, for instance, purification by washing (35:2) is the first example of something in Scripture which we can relate to Baptism. Ultimately, the whole passage is about the worship of the Lord under His instruction.

'Get up and go to Bethel'

It is a characteristic of the Old Testament that a great deal of preparation went into the worship of the Lord. God led Abraham on a journey from his home country to the Promised Land and the first place to which he came was Shechem, where he 'built an altar' (12:6,7). He did not stay long, but moved to Bethel where he 'pitched his tent' and 'invoked the name of the Lord' (12:8). This journey was now retraced by Jacob, who followed his grandfather by journeying from Mesopotamia to Shechem and then to Bethel. It is highly likely that even then, stories of ancestors were told and regarded as sacred, and with this reminder of his grandfather's exploits, Jacob naturally understood that the call of God to go to Bethel had ancient as well as personal significance.

As he prepared to go to Bethel, he also knew that this was the place where God had first appeared to him (28:10-17) and he went expecting a revelation of God as he worshipped upon the fulfilment of his vow. His instructions to his family were to prepare for worship in a way that became traditional for Jewish people (as can be seen from the Psalms, for example, Psalm 24, also see Exodus 20:3). This entailed washing and cleansing, and the changing of clothes; often called 'purification' (see the ritual laws of Numbers 19 and 30), and it is most likely that the whole body was washed and all clothes were changed. Interestingly, the idea of purification was picked up strongly by the prophets (Isaiah 52:11, 66:17, Ezekiel 43:20, 45:18, Malachi 3:3), this last reference being critical to our understanding of the work of John the Baptist, who baptised people for the forgiveness of their sins; an act designed to make people fit for the worship of God. Baptism is now, of course, the important sign of cleansing that a Christian

submits to when making a public declaration of faith, and even if we do not readily use the Old Testament to help understand this great ritual, there is a very real sense in which the personal identification with Christ in Baptism, by faith, makes a person 'fit' for their future true worship of the living God. From the beginning of this fascinating Scriptural trail, it was clear that it was not the act of purification itself that made Jacob and his family acceptable to God, but the honesty and the integrity with which it was done; in other words, the 'spirit'.

Despite, and perhaps because of the horrors of the previous few days, all Jacob's family now obeyed his command (35:2) to prepare; but purification did not only mean washing and cleansing. Jacob's first instruction was for his family to rid themselves of 'foreign gods'. This is a little surprising to us, for why should Jacob's family have these 'gods' in the first place? The answer lies partly in the story of Rachel's stealing of the 'teraphim' from her father Laban; these small wooden or golden replicas of forefathers were used for divination (ascertaining the future by means of magic) and were common household objects of the day, irrespective of the gods worshipped in each area or tribal grouping; they were also a sign of authority and power. At the very least, Rachel now had to abandon these teraphim (31:34). Simeon and Levi had, of course, just finished the slaughter and sacking of a small Canaanite settlement (ch.34) and it would have again been the normal practice of those days for Jacob's sons to 'capture' the god's of those they had defeated and parade them as evidence of their military prowess; they were trophies of war. But these, too, had to go.

Finally, there is reference to the giving up of 'earrings' (35:4), which seems to us to be a little unnecessary. Scripture helps us here, however, for there is ample evidence that when people made objects of worship, they frequently pooled their gold in order to do so, and golden earrings are mentioned in Scripture as being major sources of gold used in the making of Aaron's 'golden calf' (Ex 32:2-4) and Gideon's 'ephod' (Judges 8:24-27) for example. By asking the people to cast away their earrings, Jacob was demanding that they dispose of any material from which they could in future remake the gods that he had told them to throw away!

God's people had to prepare themselves to worship and meet their Lord. It was not a casual thing. Throwing away anything that could draw the people away from worshipping God alone, had to be done, purification symbolised repentance and the abandonment of the past, and the walk to the place of worship was a holy pilgrimage, marched under the protection of Almighty God which indicated His forgiveness of their very recent sins (35:5).

Worshipping the Lord

Jacob kept the command of God to travel to Bethel, the place where he had seen his first vision and first heard the Lord speak to him (28:10-17). He then 'built' an altar (35:7) and named the place where he did this El-Bethel, strangely meaning 'God, the house of God', or possibly 'God of the house of God'. Because names like this are very important, scholars have puzzled over the meaning of this strange name for centuries, but although recent archaeological finds have verified other places where the name of a god appeared at the beginning and the end of the place name, one other explanation does seem possible.

The key to this is the fascinating expression 'God ... revealed himself' in verse 7. The Hebrew verb used here is one that is normally used in the Old Testament for prophetic revelation, and this leaves the reader with the strong impression that the writers of this story believed that Jacob was the recipient of a unique prophetic revelation of God, both in the first revelation when Jacob left the Promised Land (28:10f.) and now, as he returned to remember this great event and fulfil his vow. One might expect from our knowledge of Old Testament worship that acts of worship in really ancient times were a matter of slaughtering cattle or other animals on altars and offering them up to God. This is simply not the case here. The worship Jacob offered was the remembrance of a unique 'self revelation'. Is that not the same as what we do today when we break bread in remembrance of the unique self revelation of the love of God through Jesus Christ on Calvary? Also, the elements of repentance and preparation for worship are present both in this text and in most forms of 'communion' celebrated in Christian churches today.

This, however, was a homecoming of worship, and although it is only recorded briefly, Scripture performs its usual task of bringing to us the bare minimum of what we need to know so that we