

This is the reason why Jacob acted to set up another pillar, copying the actions he had taken outside Bethel when he had left the Promised Land so many years before (28:18f.). Just as yesterday, when we noted that the worship of God was not focussed on altars and sacrifices, as we might expect from the Old Testament, but on God's 'self-revelation' (35:7), the act of worship performed by Jacob at this moment was one of pouring and anointing (35:14), symbolising the giving back to God of what He has already given. In a dry land such as the Promised Land, water or wine kept for drinking was a precious commodity, and pouring it out before God was regarded as a true sacrifice of life, of equal significance as the sacrifice of the life of a bull or a goat, for example.

Jacob again named the place 'Bethel'. Is this just the same place that was mentioned previously (35:8) as well as a confirmation of the naming that Jacob had done the first time he had been there (28:19)? This is probably the wrong question to ask, for the fact that Jacob named Bethel twice in Scripture is an indicator of how important this 'naming' was. It happened at the beginning of Jacob's long journey of faith, and it happened at the end.

Application

Today's passage of Scripture reminds us of the sovereign authority of God to order things in His Kingdom as He will; for every time He spoke about the Covenant to one of the Forefathers, His revelation of it changed according to the circumstances, but it was always centred on the themes of blessing and being fruitful, of growing in the things of faith, and ultimately taking hold of what God has promised.

We tell stories differently today, but it is not too hard to try and understand why it was important for Scripture for these extremely important matters to come together at the close of the cycle of stories about Jacob. This, after all, is what sacred history is all about. There is something personal and special about the way that God named his own people, and this personal touch is just a foretaste of the personal relationship that God's people now enjoy with Him through Jesus Christ. The stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob often seem far from the Gospel of Christ, but we will find the links if we persist in looking.

For example, great moments of spiritual revelation and insight, as in this passage (35:13-15), are best celebrated by worship. For Jacob and the early forefathers, worship was not something prescribed except by God, and they worshipped by offering to God those things which to them, symbolised life (water, blood, etc.). In other words, they saw 'worship' as a means of giving back to God something of what they owed Him. I wonder if our worship today could be liberated from its shackles if we learned more of how it started with the forefathers, copying the principles of what they did (not the details) and making sure we take full, personal responsibility for 'doing it'?

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What do you expect to happen when God 'blesses' you? Compare this with the blessing that God gave Jacob (35:9-12)
2. Read through the passage of Scripture again and identify places where you can see some specific connection with the Gospel of Christ. Explain this to your group.
3. Is there anything that we can do as a private act of worship which compares to that done by Jacob in raising a stone at Bethel? Discuss.

Discipleship

Think about the ways in which you have been blessed by God. Has God blessed you with a vision for something bigger than yourself, or have all the blessings been purely personal (healing, sorting out problems, etc.)? Because of the way in which our world today is extremely personalised, we can sometimes miss God's words to us which point us far beyond ourselves and indicate His greater plans. Pray, and ask the Lord to help you be open to this.

Final Prayer

We worship you, Lord God Almighty! We worship you in our words, in our deeds, in our thinking and our feeling, and we worship with all our heart as we give ourselves to do Your will. May we never stand back from giving our all to You; AMEN

Prayer

As this day runs its course, save us O Lord from being overcome by the mundane nature of its routines and ordinariness. Rather, may we rejoice in the security you have given us in our homes and in our relationships, but also see beyond the present to the greater glories of God's promises and eternal salvation! We lift our hearts to praise You, Almighty and Living God! AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Our Homes

Having prayed throughout the week for our homes, pray today for those people for whom home is a difficult and dangerous place; those who are abused within the home and cannot escape, for example. Pray also for those who do not have a good home to go to each night; the homeless and dispossessed. May we always be aware of their plight.

Meditation

The achievements of humanity reflect the power and majesty of God.
Which is only natural for those who are made in His image:

The astounding power of the internet can now connect everyone on the planet;
But the Lord already holds each created being in the palm of His hand.

Through quest and conquest, good and ill, humanity has come to rule its planet;
But the Lord still holds the key to everything that will happen in the future.

The secrets of the human mind are gradually being disclosed to medicine;
But the Lord still heals the broken hearted, as well as bones and sinews.

The variety and choice available to each of us grows more and more each day;
But the Lord has made each colour, plant and human character with infinite variety.

The mysteries of the universe are slowly being unlocked by scientific endeavour;
But the Lord was there as all of it was made, and before, within all time and space.

So will humanity climb again its tower of Babel trying to compete with God?
Or will we use His awesome gifts of knowledge with wisdom power and love?

Bible Study - Genesis 35:9-15

⁹ When Jacob arrived from Paddan-aram, God appeared to him again, and blessed him.

¹⁰ God said to him, 'The name you were given was Jacob, but you will have this name no more. Your name will be Israel.' This is how he came to be called 'Israel'. ¹¹ God also said to him, 'I am God Almighty: be fruitful and increase in numbers; a nation and a group of nations will come into being from you, and kings will be descended from you. ¹² I will give you the land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac, and I will give the land to your descendants after you.'

¹³ Then God arose and left him, and at the place where he had spoken with him ¹⁴ Jacob set up a stone monument pillar, a pillar of stone at this very place. He poured out a drink offering on it, and poured oil on it. ¹⁵ Jacob then called the place Bethel, for God had spoken with him there.

Review

Chapter 35 of Genesis continues with further brief stories which draw to a conclusion the epic life of Jacob, and also conclude the story of the Covenant blessing given by God to the Forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. After a further chapter explaining the genealogies of all those involved (ch.36), the rest of Genesis contains the famous story of Joseph (chps. 37-50). This final story of Jacob's favoured son is very long and contains many important and sometimes hidden themes, but it forms a vital link with the book that comes after it in the Bible; Exodus.

As with the story fragments we read yesterday, the reading for today is focussed around a small number of highly significant issues, and each section is rich with meaning. You can easily imagine that in the world in which these stories were first told, it was essential that they ended in a memorable way, and in a manner that assisted people to remember the 'important points'. Yesterday's passage (35:1-8) memorably told us about three things; the unique call of God to His people to worship Him, the protection of God, and the mortality of all God's people. Today's passage highlights two things which have been essential to the whole story of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the name of God's people, 'Israel' (35:9-11), and the Covenant blessing of God on His people (35:11-12). It finishes with a reminder of the fulfilment of God's promise of the Land of Canaan, celebrated by Jacob's setting up of a landmark and naming the place Bethel. You will quickly notice that all of this appears to be material that is previously found in Scripture. Jacob was named Israel at Peniel (32:28), the Covenant has already been explained to Abraham and to Isaac (17:1-6, 22:17 etc.) and Bethel has already been named (28:19) by Jacob. Some scholars have waste much time hypothesising about different story sources, trying to find them, even discussing which are the most ancient. This has proved impossibly fruitless. These story fragments are subtly different from what has gone before, and they draw to a conclusion the important facts of the story that has been told.

One of these is of great importance; the name of Israel. When Jacob was given this name previously, it was in the midst of a great struggle between God and Jacob, and we discovered that the name 'Israel' was difficult to pin down; something like 'God struggles' or 'he struggles with God'. However, the name was also tinged with a sense of victory and overcoming; a concept for which we simply do not have a word. In our text today, the name 'Israel' is given simply as a gift, precisely at the point of Jacob's overcoming his own struggles and completing his troubled journey to the Promised Land. The very name of God's people therefore represents both the struggles of life and the great gift of God's blessing.

As Jacob came again to Bethel, his life was not finished, but his journey of faith to the Promised Land was completed, and his role in the bearing of the Covenant promises of God was nearing its end. Nothing was straightforward in the life of Jacob, though, and the final twists of the story all bear the marks of God's dealing with a very real human being. Jacob, of all the forefathers, illustrates the struggles of faith which so many people experience.

Going Deeper

The passage splits into three sections; the naming of 'Israel', the confirmation of the Covenant Promises and Jacob's setting up of the monument at Bethel. Each story is subtly different from the previous versions, and as we saw with 'Israel', the text teaches us even more about God.

The naming of Israel

All manner of theories have been put forward about why Jacob was named twice by God (32:28 and 35:10). After the first incident at Peniel, the Scriptures continued to use the name 'Jacob' despite the new name God had given, and after this second naming, both names; 'Jacob' and 'Israel' are used (see 35:22 and 35:27). This seems a little odd, because as soon as Abram was renamed Abraham (17:5), and Sarai who was renamed Sarah (17:15), the storyline in Genesis immediately picked up the new names.

What is happening here, though, is different from anything that has previously happened. The re-naming of Abraham and Sarah were unique events but they applied to two individuals. The blessing on Jacob, however, was different, because Jacob was the man who (eventually – see tomorrow's reading, 35:16f.) had twelve sons which were to become the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel. Israel was to become a generic name for all God's people in Old Testament times, and it was therefore natural that the name Jacob remained as a personal name even though this forefather had been named 'Israel' by God.

Whilst it is important that we note the meaning of the name of Israel, this text does two things; firstly, it reminds us that to be a member of God's people is a gift from God (see above), and secondly, it is closely linked with the fulfilment of God's promises that the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would become a nation; more than that, a 'group of nations' (35:11).

The complete Covenant promise

Whilst no real explanation is given in our passage for the meaning of the name 'Israel', it is immediately followed by a set of promises from God which we recognise as the Covenant

promises (35:11,12). Throughout history, Israel has been inextricably linked with the Covenant promises of God. From this point onwards, we hardly think of Israel as the name of an individual, but as the name of a nation.

To signify the importance of the moment, God appeared as 'El Shaddai' meaning 'Almighty God'. This was the great name of God previously revealed only to Abraham (17:1) but also referred to with reverence by Isaac when he told Jacob to go away to Mesopotamia to find a wife (28:3). God revealed Himself by this name to Abraham at the time He spoke to Abraham about both the Covenant and its sign of circumcision; chapter 17 of Genesis in which it occurs is regarded as probably the most important statement of the Covenant in Abraham's life, and certainly the most important of the several revelations God made to Abraham. We should therefore think of this passage as the most important revelation God made to Jacob.

The Covenant promises are summarised here under three headings; firstly, being fruitful and becoming nations; secondly, the bearing of kings; thirdly, the occupation of land. The first promise reads almost like a prophecy rather than a promise: 'I am God Almighty, be fruitful ...!' Jacob had indeed been fruitful, and at last one of the forefathers had produced a significant number of children who would fulfil the hopes of Abraham and Isaac. They had received the same promise of abundance (17:6, 22:17) but had not seen this come true themselves! To be 'fruitful' was, of course, the first blessing God gave all humanity (1:28), so it was natural that this blessing should be expanded and explained in the case of God's chosen people Israel. Some may be puzzled as to why the Covenant promise states that Israel would become not just a nation, but, literally, a 'group' of nations (35:11); certainly more than one. It is easy to forget that after the time of Solomon, Israel split into two kingdoms, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah; indeed, there are signs of a split between the tribes even before the time of Saul (e.g. 1 Sam 11:8); so for most of the Old Testament, God's people were divided into two nations. From a Christian perspective, the work of Jesus threw the doors open to all people of any nation to be called 'God's people', by faith. So for us, the Covenant promise made to Jacob is certainly prophetic of what God has done through Jesus.

The promise of 'kings' (35:11) was also given to Abraham (17:6,16), and the only difference between that promise and this is that the words are a little more specific about descent, and what is implied in chapter 17 is made more clear in this passage. Interestingly, the only other place in Scripture where a similar Hebrew phrase as this is used about descent within the line of Israel is in 2 Samuel 7:12-14, which is commonly regarded as the first Messianic prophecy in the Bible, and for that reason I quote it here:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who will be descended from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.

We may be a long way ahead of the time when God's people anticipated a Messiah who was a King, but this text tells us that it was certainly in God's mind!

The final promise of land does not add anything new to what we know about the inheritance of the Promised Land, except that the last two words of verse 12 tell us that the full occupation of the land will be some time coming, and we will have to wait at least until after the death of Jacob before this promise would be fulfilled. This verse explains why Jacob was brought by his sons from Egypt to be buried in Canaan together with Isaac and Abraham (50:13) and why Joseph made the Israelites promise to carry his bones back to Canaan. The land was yet to be occupied, but the promise of it was already very powerful.

The stone monument at Bethel

It is very difficult to convey in translation, but the first few words of verse 13 'then God arose and left him' read something like an ascension, for another translation could be 'then God rose up above him ...', and it is only when you read it in Hebrew that you have the sense of something very special occurring. When we read it in English, it simply sounds as if God went his way, but just as this formal announcement of the Covenant to Jacob was introduced by the great name of God 'El-Shaddai' (35:11), it concluded with what some scholars call a 'theophany', which means a special and powerful experience of the presence of God.