

GENESIS 31-36

1) JACOB'S FLIGHT FROM LABAN - CHAP. 31

There are 3 reasons for Jacob's decision that the time had come to depart. First, he is conscious of the growing hostility toward him by Laban and his people, and he can feel little affection toward a man who has acted as Laban has done. Second, Jacob's wives now show a readiness to leave their home for an unknown land, feeling alienated from their father. Third, Jacob receives directives from God to return to the land of Canaan. Jacob uses deception to the last to plan and execute his escape.

Laban pursues them and could have done harm to them had God not communicated to him to be careful toward Jacob.

Tension arises between Jacob and Laban around Laban's 'household gods' that go missing. Jacob doesn't know Rachel has them, and this reveals a fluidity of faith not only in Rachel, but in people of that time. Everyone has their gods and believing in one particular God did not preclude faith in others as well. Laban's religious practices were clearly not those of the God of Abraham, Isaac and now Jacob. This is also indicated by the fact that when Jacob and Laban make a covenant, the god of Nahor is distinguished from the God of Abraham. Evidently, The God of Abraham is not yet seen as the one God of all, creator and sustainer of the universe. At this stage, each tribe, people, clan, and even family have their own gods. The God of Abraham, Isaac & Jacob is revered as one among many. We have already noted earlier how the God of Abraham would have been revered by some of the clans of Canaan (e.g. Melchizedek and Abimelech).

2) JACOB'S MEETING WITH ESAU - CHAPS. 32-33

In order to return to Canaan, Jacob has to deal with his brother Esau and his past. He sends word through his servant, seeking to discern what the atmosphere may be like. Once he hears that Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men, he is understandably terrified. What does he do about it? He schemes once again in the following order: 1) Sends messengers, 2) Splits up his goods, 3) prays about it, 4) sends a huge present in advance (perhaps to atone for taking the inheritance from Esau).

In regard to his prayer, Jacob doesn't ask for forgiveness, but deliverance. He acknowledges, at least, that the blessings he has received from God have not been merited. Nonetheless, he reminds God that in order to fulfil the promise of a great nation to come from him, God will have to continue to show steadfast love and faithfulness to him.

With this plan of action, Jacob sends everyone ahead, and he stays back alone through the night. Why does he do this? We don't quite know. However, his night alone proves to be a severe experience of testing for him. He seeks assurance from God as he wrestles with his demons of doubt, anxiety, fear and, perhaps, some guilt? This passage is very mysterious. What we are left with in the end, however, is unmistakable. First of all, it is with no less than God that Jacob has been wrestling. Secondly, Jacob is left limping after the ordeal. Finally, besides the limp he also receives the assurance he is looking for. The sign of this assurance is the new name given to him: Israel, which means - one who strives with God and prevails. After this ordeal, Jacob will not be the schemer he's been, although old habits will take a little time to die.

What does this experience teach us about faith? Faith is grounded in a relationship and such a relationship is not always easy. The opposite of love is not hate but apathy. We argue with those whom we care about because we care about them. We strive to stay engaged and connected when the easy way is letting go. The opposite of faith is not wrestling and struggle, but meek submission. Whether it's Jacob or Job or others in the bible, we witness faith that is not fatalistic or laissez-faire, but active, questioning, and engaged. For all his unworthiness, Jacob wrestles with God to discern a way through. Inner wrestling, struggle and prayer are also how important changes happen within us in terms of our behaviour and life commitments.

Finally, we get to the encounter of Jacob and Esau. Remarkably, even though there has been no official reconciliation or amends, Esau harbours not the least animosity or bitterness toward Jacob. So astonished is Jacob by this that he equates Esau with God - Esau's loving forgiveness is equivalent to God's gracious favour and love. And even though Jacob doesn't end up travelling with Esau (maybe he still doesn't trust him?), he has truly received the blessing of God in the form of unmerited forgiveness and undeserved generosity. Esau, the victim, the wronged, has become the forgiver, who has received all the blessing he needs in life. What a miracle of divine grace incarnated in the heart of Esau. He is the true hero of this story.

3) VIOLENCE AND TREACHERY IN JACOB'S FAMILY - CHAP. 34

This chapter contrasts totally with the chapters prior to it. Jacob's family have learned little from the generosity and compassion of Esau in terms of how they treat those who wrong them. Actually, the wrong befalls their sister Dinah, who is raped (although it may also be that the sexual standards of the Canaanites are laxer than those of the Hebrews). Whatever the case, the Hivites who have done the wrong come to Jacob and try to make amends. Shechem wants to marry Dinah to save her honour and they are open to giving whatever Jacob asks as atonement and dowry. What the Hivites are also hoping for is good relations with Jacob's clan, openness to intermarriage and inhabiting the land side by side. Jacob, on his part, asks them to be circumcised, which is also a way for the Hivites to meet the Hebrews halfway (the Hebrews feared a loss of

distinctive identity). This they agree to do, and it signals a happy conclusion to an otherwise violent beginning (although we hear nothing of how Dinah feels about all this!). Unbeknownst to Jacob, however, two of his sons (Leah's sons, brothers of Dinah) harbour bitterness toward the Hivites and an unwillingness to forgive and be reconciled. As a result, they attack the Hivites when they are vulnerable (they are healing after being circumcised) and slay them to the last man. And if this is not bad enough, they enslave the women and take all the livestock and property. What an awful story. They will be rebuked harshly before the book of Genesis comes to its conclusion.

A further horror in this story is how Dinah is treated. She is silenced both as a rape victim and then in the violent revenge her brothers exact. It has nothing to do with her honour but their pride. Dinah is like their property which has been violated. There is nothing here of comfort and compassion for her victimization.

4) TRANSITIONAL DETAILS - CHAP. 35-36

Simeon and Levi's act of revenge and treachery only leads to relationships of fear and mistrust with the surrounding peoples as Jacob and his clan continue to journey. Several details are given us before we move into the next round of stories. First, God gives Jacob the promise again, only more pronounced and assured than ever before. Jacob has to ensure that all forms of idolatrous worship are purged from his people. Benjamin, the youngest, is born and Rachel dies during his birth. The 12 sons are now named, and the death of Isaac is recorded. Finally, the descendants and clans of Esau are named. They will be perpetual neighbours of the Israelites. Their founding relationship is one of brothers, in conflict at first, but reconciled in the end. Also, Genesis does not record the story unfairly. Jacob has not earned the privilege of being chosen as a Father of Israel. Israel is not chosen over Edom (Esau's people) because they are more righteous. In fact, the contrary is true. Rather, the choice is one of responsibility. Israel will have a role to play, as will Edom, as will every other nation and peoples. The question always is this: What do we do with the opportunities and challenges set before us? Do we seek to conform our lives and our plans to the way of God, or do we seek out, deceptively or selfishly, that which will give us the greatest advantage over others?