

Genesis 28:10 - 29:30

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[0 : 00] from his word. Today is the first Sunday of a new year. A new year is always a time for new beginnings.

And what happened to Jacob at Bethel, in a sense, marked a new beginning for Jacob. And I'd like to look with you this morning at several things which mark this new beginning for Jacob. You may remember that Jacob and Esau were twins. They were the sons of Isaac and Rebekah. They had been born into the covenant family which God had originally established with their grandfather, Abram. Esau and Jacob were born into spiritual privilege.

But that didn't mean that life was straightforward for them. That was largely because Esau and Jacob, and indeed their parents, were flawed individuals.

Jacob was a schemer, a manipulator. He was prepared to do whatever it took to get what he wanted. He took advantage of his older brother Esau's vulnerability to deprive him of his birthright. And he then connived with his mother, whose favorite he was, to secure the blessing which was reserved for the older son. He tricked his father Isaac into giving him the blessing which was rightfully Esau's. Jacob was a twister. And it has to be said, he belonged to a family that nowadays might be described as dysfunctional.

[2 : 05] All that is true. And it is important to recognize the negative aspects of Jacob's character.

Because the story of Jacob illustrates how God works with flawed individuals. If he didn't, what hope would there be for any of us? We're all flawed. We're all sinners by nature and by practice. But if God can work with a man like Jacob, he can work with the likes of you and me too.

After all, the gospel isn't for good people. It's for bad people who recognize their need of God's mercy.

Jacob was a flawed individual. But that's not the whole story. You see, God worked on flawed Jacob.

And he began to change him. He began to mold him into the kind of man he wanted him to be. And as a result, Jacob became more dependent on God and more aware of him.

[3 : 26] It's still the case that when God forgives our sin and adopts us into his family, he doesn't leave us as we are.

He accepts us as we are, but he doesn't leave us as we are. His purpose is to make us more like his son, the Lord Jesus.

He wants us to change us increasingly into his likeness. The God who refined flawed Jacob wants all his sons and daughters to develop more of the family likeness.

Two preliminary points are worth making. The first is that over the course of his life, Jacob became a better man.

But he didn't become a perfect man. He remained flawed throughout his life for as long as he lived. It's only in heaven that believers are made perfect.

[4 : 37] Only in heaven is every last vestige of sin removed. That's one thing. The second point is that God didn't have mercy on Jacob because he saw his potential.

It wasn't because God saw Jacob as having the potential to become a better person that he had mercy on him. No, it was the other way around. It was because God had mercy on him that Jacob was enabled to become a better man.

We don't earn God's favor because of what we have achieved or can achieve. Real change is possible only as God's grace enables those whom he has brought into his family to change from the inside out.

This morning, I'd like to highlight three things about Jacob's experience in the passages we've read together.

These are, first of all, Jacob's new awareness of God. Secondly, Jacob's new commitment to God. [5 : 53] And thirdly, Jacob's new discipline from God. His new awareness of God. His new commitment to God.

And his new discipline from God. First of all, then, Jacob's new awareness of God. You'll see in verse 16 how when Jacob awoke from his sleep at Bethel, he thought, surely the Lord is in this place.

And I was not aware of it. As a result of what happened at Bethel, Jacob had a new awareness of God.

Jacob had ended up at Bethel because his brother Esau hated him and was out to get him. Jacob was on the run. He was fleeing for his very life. He was a marked man. The brothers had never got on well together. But now things couldn't possibly be worse.

[7 : 04] Jacob was in his way to seek refuge with his uncle Laban in faraway Paddan Aram. He'd left his immediate family, the only family he ever knew, to lodge with relatives he'd never met before.

He was on his own and heading out into the unknown. Just put yourself into Jacob's shoes for a moment. You're anxious about the mess you've left behind.

You're afraid the brother you've wronged might come after you at any moment. You don't know what is awaiting you, where you're going. You've no one to turn to.

You're completely on your own. That's what life was like for Jacob when he arrived at Bethel, just as darkness fell.

Jacob decided to try and get some fitful sleep there. But he must have been a very anxious and troubled man. As he slept, Jacob had a dream.

[8 : 18] And that dream changed his perspective on himself and on his situation. In his dream, he saw a ladder stretching from earth up to heaven.

Angels were going up and down the ladder. Not only that, Jacob heard the Lord speak. He saw him and he heard him speak. The Lord reminded him that he was the God of his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac.

And he proceeded to repeat to Jacob the promises he had made to them. Look with me, please, at verses 13 and 14.

The Lord said, I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham, and the God of Isaac. 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.

[9 : 25] God is repeating the promises he had made to Abraham years before. promises concerning a multitude of descendants, a land to live in, and future blessing for the whole world.

Jacob was wayward. But here God was assuring him that he hadn't given up on him. Jacob was all on his own.

But God was promising him that one day his descendants would be like the dust of the earth. Jacob was having to leave Canaan. He was having to flee the land of his birth.

But God was promising that one day he would possess the land and his offspring would spread out in all directions.

God was assuring wayward, wily, flawed Jacob that he had a hope and a future. He was part of God's great salvation plan.

[10 : 35] And in verse 15, God addresses Jacob's immediate needs. Look at what he says. 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. Just think what comfort there must have been for Jacob in these words.

He wasn't on his own after all. The God of his fathers was with him and was committed to looking after him. And one day he was going to bring him back to the land he was fleeing from.

Whatever lay ahead, Jacob was assured of God's presence and protection. The ladder, which Jacob saw in his dream, went all the way from earth to heaven.

It made the point that God was passionately committed to this world. Far from being confined to heaven, he was present in the world and active in it through his heavenly agents.

[11 : 47] Jacob needed that assurance at that time. And so do we. So much of religion in the widest sense of that term is all about men and women trying to find God.

They seek to rise above the things of this world to pursue higher so-called spiritual realities. But actually, the religion of the Bible strikes a very different note.

It's not about men and women trying to find God. It's the glorious truth that God has come to earth to find us.

He is infinitely great, infinitely majestic, but he's committed to this world, so committed, in fact, that he sent his one and only son to live among us and then to die a shameful death on a Roman cross to bear the punishment which our sins deserved.

In John's Gospel, Jesus says to Nathanael, truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

[13 : 05] Jesus is obviously alluding to Jacob's dream and he's affirming that he is the ultimate bridge between earth and heaven.

No wonder C.S. Lewis called earth the visited planet. We don't need to go and find God, even if we could.

The truth is that God has come to earth to find us. He is God with us. That was the new awareness of God that Jacob had when he woke up in the morning in Bethel.

He knew that there were open lines of communication between earth and heaven. God was present and at work in his world. And Jacob himself was part of God's saving plan.

God was with him and he would not let him go. That's why Jacob said, surely the Lord is in this place and I was not aware of it.

[14 : 20] Bethel was now for Jacob none other than the house of God and the gate of heaven. Jacob realized that God was everywhere, even in lonely, isolated, nondescript Bethel.

That was in many ways a very comforting realization to know that God was present there. But it was also in some ways disturbing.

That's why in verse 17 we're told that Jacob was afraid and said, how awesome is this place. Why do you think Bethel was so awesome?

Well, I suspect it was because God, even at his most benign, is an awesome God. His presence is an awesome reality.

Just think of some of the implications of God being everywhere. It means that he sees what I do. He hears what I say.

[15 : 30] He knows what I think. He sees what I look at. He's aware of the company I keep. He knows everything about me.

That in itself is an awesome thought for flawed individuals like us. At Bethel, Jacob received a new awareness of God.

Perhaps that's something you need this morning if you're a Christian. We need to be reminded so often that God is with us.

That he's committed to working for our good. That he will not let us go or let us down.

And we for our part need to cultivate his presence more. We need to read his word. We need to pray because as we do these things our relationship with the Lord develops.

[16 : 31] We get to know him better and he pours his grace into our hearts and lives. In that way we experience the reality of his presence.

and live in the good of it. And if you're not a Christian your greatest need today is to know God.

To know this great God who has come to earth in the person of his son. And the good news is that you don't have to go looking for him. Instead he has come looking for you.

All you need to do is to come in repentance and faith to the one who is the ultimate bridge between heaven and earth. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life.

And his promise is that whoever comes to him, he will never turn away. At Bethel Jacob received a new awareness of God.

[17 : 44] Secondly, at Bethel Jacob made a fresh commitment to God. He made a fresh commitment to God. Following his dream in an act of worship, Jacob made a memorial pillar of the stone he'd used as a pillow and anointed it with oil.

He then made a vow. And look at his words in verses 20 to 22. He made a vow saying, if God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking, and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the Lord will be my God, and this

stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me, I will give you a tenth.

What is Jacob doing here? Does something of the old Jacob, the old wheeler-dealer come through in the words of this vow?

Is Jacob doing a sort of deal with God? You know, if you do X for me, then I'll do Y for you. It's certainly the case that Jacob's vow is expressed in conditional terms.

The ESV Study Bible comments that the conditional nature of Jacob's vow reveals that he is still ambivalent regarding his commitment to the Lord.

[19 : 22] But I'm not so sure. I personally think that Jacob's commitment, as he expresses it here, was real and sincere.

His vow was a heartfelt response to God's revelation of himself and of his purposes. The Old Testament commentator Derek Kidner takes that view too.

He says that the vow is as thorough a response as Jacob knew how to make. Kidner points out how Jacob's immediate reaction to the dream was a sense of awe in the presence of God, rather than preoccupation with the blessings which God had promised.

And Kidner also points out that it was standard practice in the ancient world to express about unconditional terms. Jacob is making promises to God in response to God's promises to him.

If you do X, then I shall do Y. is Jacob's way of saying, you have promised to do X, then I shall do Y. Some of the conditions which Jacob stipulates are very specific, but arguably they can all be extrapolated from the promises God has made.

[20 : 50] There may be room for disagreement as to the strength of Jacob's faith at this point, but there's no doubting that Jacob's vow represented a new level of commitment on Jacob's part to the God of his fathers.

And integral to that vow is the promise that the Lord will be my God. The Lord will be my God.

These are significant words. at the heart of God's covenant with Abraham was the promise that God would be God to Abraham and to his offspring after him.

The commitment of God to his people and the answering commitment of his people to God, that's a theme which runs literally from Genesis to Revelation.

We see it here in Genesis 28. And in Revelation 21, which is about the world to come, we read, I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.

[22 : 04] He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God. There can be no greater promise than that God will be our God.

and there can be no greater commitment on our part than that we undertake the responsibilities of being his people. I wonder if we recognize what a privilege it is to be the people of the living God.

Jacob made a new commitment to the Lord. Is that something you and I need to make two?

Perhaps you're a Christian but your commitment is not all that it should be.

It may not even be all that it once was. We don't do anything to earn our position in God's family.

But once we are his children there are family obligations we all need to take seriously.

We're expected to maintain the family's good name by living in accordance with our heavenly father's standards. We're expected to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and our neighbor as ourselves.

[23 : 29] We're expected to maintain good relations with our brothers and sisters. All these things require commitment. We don't do them in our own strength, of course not.

we need God's grace. But effort is required. We are to make every effort to make our calling and election sure.

And when we see the extent of the Lord's commitment to us, then surely it's appropriate for us to commit to being his people in practice.

this. And if you've never put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, there's something you need to do about that. Because whoever believes in the Son has eternal life.

But whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

[24 : 35] a new awareness of God, a new commitment to God. And finally, we have a new discipline from God.

For that, we turn to chapter 29. You might have thought that with this new awareness of God and this new commitment to God, life would go really well for Jacob.

Jacob. In some ways, it did go well, but in other ways, there were a few problems along the way.

And that is true of the Christian life in general. The fact that we are Christians doesn't mean that life is going to go swimmingly. There may be all sorts of issues we have to cope with.

But there is a purpose behind these things. In chapter 29, we read how Jacob finally reached Haran.

[25 : 43] And there at a well, he happened to meet his cousin Rachel for the first time. Rachel had come to water her father's sheep. And for Jacob, it was love at first sight.

Jacob falls in love with his beautiful cousin. And he's happy to work for his uncle Laban for seven years in return for her hand in marriage.

You see, true to form, Jacob knows what he wants. And he's prepared to work to get it. So when Laban suggests that Jacob works for him for seven years in order to win Rachel's hand, Jacob's happy to do that.

Verse 20 is touching. So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.

Jacob was willing to spend seven long years working for Laban because he valued Rachel so highly. family. But then there was a problem.

[27 : 00] After the seven years were up and it was time for the wedding, Laban played a trick on his nephew. He didn't give Jacob Rachel as his bride, as he had promised.

Instead he gave him his older and less beautiful daughter, Leah. It was probably pitch dark when the marriage took place and Leah may well have been veiled.

It's only the following morning that Jacob realizes that he's been given the wrong daughter and it's then too late to do anything about it.

Jacob remonstrates with his uncle, but Laban eerily informs him that in their country it's not the custom for the younger daughter to marry first.

Laban then makes Jacob an offer. He can have Rachel as well, provided he agrees to work for Laban for seven more years.

[28 : 08] It's obvious, isn't it, that Laban and Jacob are cut from the same cloth. They share the same genes. Jacob was by nature a twister.

So was his uncle Laban. Jacob manipulated situations for his own benefit. So did Laban. Jacob used deceit to displace his older brother and Laban used deceit to substitute his older daughter for the younger.

Derrick kidnar comments, in Laban Jacob met his match and his means of discipline.

I find these words really striking. In Laban Jacob met his match and his means of discipline.

You see, Jacob was given a taste of his own medicine. He needed to see that he couldn't always get his own way. He wasn't in control of every situation.

[29 : 29] He needed to be humbled. He needed to learn patience. He needed to learn the importance of trusting God instead of relying on his own unaided efforts.

And in his wisdom, God used wily uncle Laban to teach Jacob these lessons. It was a hard lesson for Jacob to learn.

But you see, God was in the business of refining Jacob and making it into the man he wanted to be.

God is still in the business of transforming believers and making them more like the Lord Jesus.

He loves us too much to let us remain as we are. And he will use whatever means he chooses to effect change in our lives.

We may not always appreciate the means he uses, but we can be sure that he's at work for our ultimate good as he uses situations good and bad to shape us into the people he would have us be.

[30 : 48] James writes in his epistle, consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

You see, what James is saying is that God uses trials to make his people mature and complete. So often when difficult things come into our lives, we tend to ask the question, why is this happening to me?

Perhaps the better question to ask would be, Lord, what can I learn from you in this situation? The writer to the Hebrews makes a similar point as he encourages his readers to accept the Lord's discipline.

He says, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them.

[32 : 04] But he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Bethel was a new beginning for Jacob. He received a new awareness of God. He made a fresh commitment to God.

And yes, he received a new discipline from God. At the beginning of this new year, do we need that new awareness of God?

Do we need to make a fresh commitment to God? And perhaps we need to humble ourselves under his mighty hand as we accept those things he brings into our lives to mold us into the people he would have us be.

Shall we pray? Lord, we thank you for the example of Jacob.

[33 : 32] We thank you how his story illustrates how you work with flawed individuals and make them into the people you want them to be.

we pray that we might have a new awareness of you in this new year. May we commit ourselves afresh to you and may we humble ourselves to accept any discipline you bring into our lives for our good and for your glory.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.