

GROUNDS OF FAITH CAFÉ: “Genesis” (Subtitled: Is there a snake in your Garden too?) Further subtitled: Lessons from the Garden! Genesis Lesson 21 (27 & 28): Some Summary Thoughts:

As we review lessons from chapters 27 & 28, it is worth recalling that the Jacob cycle revolves around four key appearances of God: the womb (25:23); the first divine appearance to Jacob at Bethel (28:10-22); the realization of the presence of God in the wrestling match at the Jabbok River (32:22-32); the final divine appearance to Jacob at Bethel (35:9-15). Chapter 27 reminds us of the manipulative, deceitful manner of Jacob, and the conflict that type behavior generates.

Chapter 28 serves as a powerful transition and is depicted as one of two decisive hinge points in the life of Jacob. It is best understood in the context of the initial Covenantal Promise of God to Abraham of “*land and descendants*” back in Genesis chapter 12:1-3; and the subsequent call from God to Abraham to “sacrifice” Isaac (the child of promise) in chapter 22 as a “test of Abraham’s faith” (see particularly Heb 11:17-19 for this interpretive nuance). In the Genesis sacrificial account, Abraham responds to Isaac’s query “*where is the lamb for the burnt offering, 22:7*” with the powerfully insightful statement, “*God Himself will provide...., 22:8.*” After the “test,” Abraham appropriately renames the place “*The LORD will provide, 22:14.*”

- Two extremely powerful themes emerged from chapter 22 which, in effect, pictured Abraham’s entire life-response to the call of God: the themes of “**divine testing**” and “**divine providing**.” They truly picture Abraham’s life [perhaps better understood as his “faith”] as a journey, a test, and as trust in the promise of God. They also prepare us for similar themes of presence and protection that will prevail in the Jacob account!

The conflict between Isaac’s two offspring, Jacob and Esau, that began in chapter 25 where God makes clear that the younger will serve the older (25:23) dominates chapters 26 and 27. By deceit, Jacob gains the birthright and the blessing of his father, i.e., the continuation of the “Promise” of God to Abraham and Isaac. At the end of chapter 27, the conflict reaches the point where Esau has had enough and is plotting to kill his brother, 27:41 (shades of Cain and Able all over again). So, in order to save her son’s life, Rebekah connives to have Isaac send Jacob out of the Promised Land to secure a wife for himself – a great contrast to the story of Isaac, who was forbidden to depart the Promised Land by Abraham when it came time to secure a wife for Isaac.

Thus, we come to the fascinating depiction in chapter 28 as Jacob, the conniver/promise-bearer is departing the promised land. As a consequence of his deceptions with his brother Esau, he must flee for survival. Or, at least, that is most likely how he views the purpose for his actions. The purpose for his flight as seen by God through Isaac’s blessing, however, differs. In Isaac’s blessing, we see that Jacob is enjoined to go:

- take a wife (28:3) so God can bless him by making him a community of peoples (28:3), in order that
- Jacob can return and “*take possession of the land where [he] now lives as an alien*” (28:4).

The picture drawn is powerful. This is a life crossroad for Jacob. At Bethel, he stands between his past which is filled with deception, albeit within the confines of the Promised Land, where the younger brother is allowed by God to supplant the older; and an unknown future to begin outside the promised land (where the “new” rules apparently do not apply) – witness the admonition by Laban to Jacob regarding his wife-to-be “*This is not done in our country – giving the younger before the firstborn*” 29:25-26; and the interesting fact that Rachel, like Sarah and Rebekah, is barren). The immediate future for Jacob is set in a fascinating location: the land of Haran where Abraham first received his call! So the really key question inferred from the text is: as Jacob departs from the Promised Land to his unknown future, will he travel alone? Is the “Promise” going in reverse?

The vision at Bethel (28:10-22) answers both questions decisively as **God Himself appears and challenges Jacob in his dream to refuse to let his shameful past dictate his future. Instead, Jacob is challenged to embrace God’s future for him.** In effect, this turning point changes his flight for survival into the beginning of his journey unto faith, albeit still a conditional one. And who is it that confronts Jacob at this crossroad in his life? It is the Living God, the “*LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac*” (Gen 28:13). **It is at Bethel that God will promise His presence (“*I am with you*”) and his protection (“*I will keep you*”), and reiterates His Promise to Jacob. Jacob will not travel alone! God will be with him.** These verses link Jacob’s story with that of Abraham, and give similar reassurance to us today as we recall Jesus’ words to his followers: “*And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:20). For Jacob, the presence and promise of God begins its transformation of him from supplanter/deceiver to the promise-bearer. But we note that Jacob, as he departs the Promised Land, still responds conditionally (the 5 “ifs” 28:20-21). Manipulation, or the desire to manipulate, is still a part of him.