

GROUNDS OF FAITH CAFÉ: “Genesis” (Subtitled: Is there a snake in your Garden too?) Further subtitled: Lessons from the Garden! Genesis Lesson 22 (Chapter 28): Some Summary Thoughts:

As we re-enter chapter 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 as he prepares to depart the “promised land” (28:10-22); the realization of the presence of God in the wrestling match at the Jabbok River as he re-enters the “promised land” (32:22-32); the final Divine appearance to Jacob at Bethel (35:9-15).

- Chapter 28 is one of two decisive hinge points in the life of Jacob. As noted in the lesson, it is best understood in the context of the initial Covenantal Promise of God to Abraham of “*land and descendants*” (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).

Chapter 28 brings the conflict that began in chapter 25 between Isaac’s two offspring, Jacob and Esau, to a head. It is not unexpected since in 25:23 God made it clear that the older (Esau) would serve the younger (Jacob) – a break in traditional custom – but certainly within the purview of the God of all creation who would eventually send His Son, Jesus Christ, to reverse values that were established by man but are unacceptable to God (see particularly Luke 1:26-56; 4:17-21). In our way of thinking, it does not seem fair that Jacob gained the birthright and the blessing of his father, i.e., the continuation of the “Promise” of God to Abraham and Isaac by deceit. But, as the chapters play out, we will learn that even deceivers can become reconcilers when they allow themselves to be guided by God. Perhaps this lesson alone is worth learning.

In chapter 28, 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 Jacob’s journey has a true Godly purpose to it. Isaac expects him to:

- 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. He has previously acknowledged God as the God of his father Isaac (27:20), but he must learn to accept God as his own protector and provider. At Bethel, he stands between a past 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 these “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). The immediate future for Jacob is set in a fascinating location: the land of Haran where Abraham first received his call!

The vision at Bethel (28:10-22) is God’s first clear representation of Himself directly to Jacob. The appearance, not coincidentally, is at a critical crossroad or period in Jacob’s life. While this example has God appear in a dream, it is not beyond reason to think that God also appears to others in their times of need in other ways as well. The results for them can be similar if not the same:

- **In essence, God challenges Jacob to refuse to let his shameful past dictate his future. Instead, Jacob is challenged to embrace God’s future for him.** This is the essence of what it means to have “faith.” One lesson, then, appears to be that when one sees God for who He is and embraces His call and His Presence as the guide for one’s life path, a person begins his or her walk “in faith.” But this is not the end of what God has in store. God does not let this walk be solitary.
- **It is also at Bethel that God promises Jacob His Presence (“*I am with you*”), His Protection (“*I will keep you*”). In addition, God reiterates His Covenantal Promise made initially to Abraham. The point is clear. Jacob, who is on God’s mission, 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).
- **But now note Jacob’s conditional response.** God’s promised Presence and Protection begins Jacob’s transformation from supplanter/ deceiver to promise-bearer. But Jacob’s response to God, while expressing trust, still appears to be only conditional (the 5 “ifs” 28:20-21). Jacob still has a lot to learn about God, even as God takes care of him. So how about us? Can the same be said for those of us who come to God, albeit a bit conditionally at the start? At least, Jacob marks the place as one where he has met God and then promises to sacrifice a tithe. Do we do as well?