

A Blessed Life

By Brad Allison on 1/30/2005

Scripture Reference *Genesis 28:10-22*

Pretend for just a moment that you've never read this story of Jacob before. We saw last week that he received the blessing from his father Isaac. Through an elaborate deception, he was given the blessing that God had foretold he would receive. Now, how would you finish the story as this blessed man heads out into the rest of his life? What does a blessed life look like? If I were to describe someone by saying, "John is a blessed man", what kinds of images are stirred in your mind? Do you imagine a man who has a beautiful wife, three wonderful children, just the right amount of money, with enough to go skiing in Colorado in the winter and to Europe in the summer, but not so much that he has to isolate himself from average people? If you were writing Jacob's story from this point forward, would you record an ancient version of this kind of story?

Jacob was a blessed man. The Bible says of all who believe in Jesus that we too are blessed. In Ephesians 1:3, the Bible goes so far as to say that we have been blessed "with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." So what does a blessed life look like? In the chapter before us this morning, we see what it looked like for Jacob. I want to point out the circumstance, the content and the consequence of the blessing.

I. The Circumstance of the Blessing

Here's a multiple choice question for you. Which of the two following men would you describe as blessed? Person 1 has a rich father, three wives and many children. He had a pesky little brother with whom he always fought, but the little brother has now left home and won't be back for a long time. Person 2 has no wife, no money and no children. He is on a long journey that requires he soon cross a dangerous wilderness. You've probably discovered by now that I'm describing Jacob and Esau, and the curious fact about the two that the one who is blessed is the one who finds himself all alone.

If we take a snapshot of Jacob's life at this time, it doesn't look like he's just won the prize of his father's blessing. Instead of sleeping in the tents of his wealthy father, he finds himself sleeping out in the open with a stone as a pillow. The reason he left his father's home at Beersheba was the hatred of a more powerful brother who had stated publicly his intention of murdering Jacob. One commentator says it like this. "Behind him lays Beersheba, where Esau waits to kill him; ahead of him is Haran, where Laban waits to exploit him. He is situated between a death camp and a hard-labor camp... Back in Beersheba, Esau lies in wait like an angry lion. Ahead in Haran, Laban waits with his spider web to trap and suck the life from his victims" (Waltke, pp. 388-89).

This leads to an important application. We must counter the lie that says we are cursed when things are not going well for us. What is your instinctive response when things turn sour in your life? You wake up and discover that your washing machine hose has burst, and there is water all over your house. On the way to work, after being two hours late to clean up the mess caused by the broken hose, your car dies on you and you have to call a tow truck. Your mechanic calls you later to tell you that the car will need a new transmission at a cost of \$3,000, money you don't have. Later that afternoon, you receive an e-mail from your son's teacher saying that you need to call her to schedule a conference to discuss his bad behavior and poor grades. Our instinctive response, aided by the lies of Satan, is that we are cursed because of something we have done wrong. Remember that the blessed one in our passage, Jacob, is the one for whom everything seems to be going wrong, while the one not blessed,

Esau, is living in a situation of everything going smoothly. You simply cannot take a snapshot of your life at any given time and conclude based on the results that you are either cursed or blessed. But how is it that we resist this lie? That brings us to our next point.

II. The Content of the Blessing

Something happens to Jacob that changes both everything and nothing at the same time. What I mean is that much is changed within Jacob himself, but nothing about his circumstances. Notice that by the end of the story, he is still alone with no money. He is still facing the crossing of a dangerous desert as he heads toward Haran, and he is still awaiting his “labor camp” experience at the hands of Laban. All of God’s promises to him are future tense: “I *will* give you a land; your descendents *shall* spread out to the east and west; in you and your offspring *shall* all the families of the earth be blessed.” But Jacob is a changed man, full of joy and a sense of awe, with the result that he worships God. What is it that has the power to work such change in Jacob while leaving his circumstances the same? The change is caused by the fact that he both sees God in this vision of the ladder and hears God. His sight of God delivers him from fear, and his hearing of God delivers him from unbelief. Jacob’s greatest enemies were not Esau or potential thieves on the road. His greatest enemies were fear and unbelief, and those are also our greatest enemies. The blessing of God is seen not in delivering us from difficult circumstances, but in delivering us from fear and unbelief. Notice how God blesses him and delivers him from these enemies.

He delivers him from fear with this dream in which Jacob sees a stairway with angels ascending and descending. The traditional translation of this word is “ladder”, but it was probably closer to a stairway with a series of switchbacks until it disappeared into heaven itself. Remember who these angels are. We normally associate angels with harps and wings and such gentle things, while the Bible’s most common description of angels is much closer to that of warriors. Among other things, angels are the warriors of heaven. When God shut Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden, he posted an angel with a flaming sword there in order to prevent unauthorized entry back into the garden. When people encountered angels, they were often left trembling with fear. It is these mighty warriors that God has sent to Jacob, to protect him and care for him. Notice that this is a two-way stairway, with angels traveling both up and down. I think that speaks of their constant care for Jacob. As long as they are going both ways, there is never any question of running out of angels. God is saying to Jacob that he has abundant resources to care for him.

As long as God will take care of Jacob, he will not need to live in fear. That is the application for us as well. The Bible says that the angels are “ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation” (Heb. 1:14). One of God’s great blessings to Jacob and to us is to deliver us from fear. Consider for a moment how harmful fear is.

Illustration: I often have the opportunity to do premarital counseling with couples. It is not unusual to discover that either the bride-to-be or the groom-to-be, or in some cases both, comes from a divorced family. Whenever that happens, I always want to talk about the damage that could be done to their marriage by fear. Here’s how that commonly works. A common response of a child of divorce is to say, “I have witnessed firsthand the damage done by divorce in a family, and I never want that to happen to my marriage. I would do anything I could to prevent this marriage ending in divorce.” That sounds like a healthy response, and it could be. But it could also be a dangerous response if the element of fear is not dealt with. Any fear other than the fear of God always leads you to do the wrong thing, and someone getting married who elevates the fear of divorce above all else will do the wrong things. He or she will often avoid taking the risk of speaking

honestly because of the fear that it might lead to divorce. The exact opposite is the case, because such honesty really leads to growing intimacy and a deepening of the relationship.

So a blessed life is one that sees God and his protection of us in order that we might apply that to our fears. What is it you're afraid of? You know that fear will lead you in the wrong direction, and it is needless. Did you notice that God is standing in this text? That is not a normal posture for God. It indicates God's intent purpose: he stands at the ready to bring help in whatever form is needful. See him there and be delivered from your fear.

Not only is deliverance from fear a key blessing God gives, but so also is deliverance from unbelief. It is the words of God that are designed to deliver Jacob from unbelief. God's words were words of grace. Notice that God came to Jacob though he wasn't seeking anything from God. Nowhere do we read that Jacob prayed before going to sleep that night, asking God to come to him. The grace of God is seen in the fact that God was seeking Jacob in spite of the fact that Jacob was not seeking God. And notice the content of these words. Even though Jacob has been filled with a sinful scheming, having recently deceived his father in order to get the blessing, God's words are full of grace. And they are directly targeted to Jacob's needs. Jacob was alone, homeless, and in danger. Notice that God's words address his solitude by reminding him that God is the God of his forbears Abraham and Isaac. They address his homeless condition by promising him the land he was now sleeping on. "The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring" (v. 13). And God's words address his sense of danger by promising him safe conduct. "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land" (v. 15).

Illustration: A couple of years ago, someone sent to me an e-mail that included the results of a survey of 4-8 year old children, asking them to define love. One of them said, "When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love." Here's another: "Love is when mommy sees daddy smelly and sweaty and still says he is handsomer than Robert Redford." Finally, there's this: "When you tell someone something bad about yourself and you're scared they won't love you anymore. But then you get surprised because not only do they still love you, they love you even more." The love of God is seen in the fact that even though Jacob is smelly and full of sin, God loves him.

Before moving on, we need to apply this in a couple of ways. First, it is absolutely essential that we resist the temptation to conclude when things aren't going well that we must have done something wrong and God is cursing us. Had Jacob looked at his lonely, precarious circumstances, he would have determined that God was cursing him instead of blessing him. Why is it so bad to conclude when things are not going well in your life that we must have done something wrong? Because it cuts you off from God's grace by forcing you into the opposite error of concluding when the circumstances in life are favorable you must have done something right. Well, if we don't look to our circumstances to determine whether we are being blessed or not, where do we look? Here's where we have an advantage over Jacob. Notice how in verse 14 God tells Jacob, "in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed." The apostle Paul points out how that is a promise of Jesus. He is the offspring of Jacob through whom all the families of the earth are blessed. We are blessed in Jesus, which means that we get the blessing his obedience deserves, and he gets the punishment our disobedience deserves.

The second application is to be comforted daily by God's word, just as Jacob was changed by the word of God. The Word of God is so powerful that nighttime terror gives way to deep

encouragement. Do you know what I mean by nighttime terror? Enemies always seem bigger and fears greater in the dark of the night. But the Word of God can transform nighttime terror into nighttime joy. The Word of God is so powerful that it can change Jacob even when his circumstances remained the same. He leaves Bethel a changed man, and it was the Word of God that did that. He had met with God and heard from him. The application is to let the word of God change you similarly. It is when we meet with God through his word that we are changed.

III. The Consequence of the Blessing

I want to point out just one thing about Jacob's life after God speaks to him. He becomes a worshiper of God in these last verses. All of the events described in verses 18-22 are worship activities. Let me point out two features of his worship that continue to be features of our worship. First, it was marked by a fear of the Lord. This is not the kind of fear that is equivalent to a terror. It's the kind of fear that would characterize all of us if we were having a party on the roof of a ten-story building with no wall around the edge. A proper fear of gravity in those circumstances would cause you always to keep in mind the location of the edge of the building. It would never be far from your awareness. That's the fear of God. It is a deep sense that God is really God, and the ignoring of him has similar effects to ignoring the edge of a ten-story rooftop.

Jacob was also filled with joy, as we see in the second aspect of his worship in which he gives himself to God. Notice the three things he gives to God in worship. He gives him this memorial that he makes. He gives him a promise in this first vow that occurs in the Bible, and he gives him a tithe. Jacob does none of this in order to acquire blessing, but rather because God has blessed.

CONCLUSION:

We are going to apply what we've been looking at in this passage as we now move to celebrate the Lord's Supper. Let us first affirm the truth that we are blessed in Jesus, not in our circumstances. Vaclav Havel, former president of the Czech Republic, was once asked why the "Velvet Revolution" against the Communists in the former Czechoslovakia was successfully nonviolent. Havel answered somewhat like this: "We had our parallel society. And in that parallel society we wrote our plays and sang our songs and read our poems until we knew the truth so well that we could go out to the streets of Prague and say, 'We don't believe your lies anymore'—and communism had to fall." In the Lord's Supper, we are rehearsing the truth so that we can know it well. The truth is that God has blessed you in Jesus. It is only by getting this down pat that we can say no to the Devil's lies. He wants to convince you that the reason things are not working out in your life is that you are doing something wrong. Or he wants to convince you that the reason things are working out for you is that you are doing something right. Both are lies. God blesses his children in Christ.

Second, let's give ourselves to God as we take these elements, just as Jacob gave himself to God in worship. It is appropriate that we should do so.