

Renewing a Commitment to God

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[0 : 00] Please turn back with me your Bibles to the passages we read, Genesis chapter 28 and 29.

What's in a name? Well for us, not very much. Our names are essentially labels. They don't necessarily have any more significance.

My two Christian names are Neil and Angus. Angus means the one and only. Neil means champion.

But I don't honestly think that my parents had any great insight into my personality when accidentally they called me the one and only champion.

I was called after both my grandfathers. But in the Bible, names often have significance. And that was the case with Jacob.

[1 : 12] Jacob was given that name because the name means he grasps the heel. Remember, Jacob was born grasping the heel of his twin Esau.

But the name also has another meaning. Figuratively, it means he deceives. James or Jacob means deceiver.

And Jacob turned out to be a very flawed individual. He was a schemer, a manipulator. He was prepared to do whatever it took to get what he wanted.

That was his character. He was a schemer, a twister by name and by character. He took advantage of his older twin Esau's vulnerability to deprive him of his birthright.

And later, with the connivance of his mother, he tricked his father Isaac into giving him the blessing which was intended for the older son.

[2 : 25] Jacob really was a twister. Jacob really was a twister. And he belonged to a family which in modern day terms would be regarded as dysfunctional.

All that is true. And it's important to recognize the negative aspects of Jacob's character. Because the story of Jacob illustrates that God works with flawed individuals.

If he didn't, there would be no hope for any of us. Because 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 me and you. The Christian gospel is not for good people.

It's for bad people who see their need of God's mercy. But although Jacob was a flawed individual, God worked with him and began to change him.

[3 : 35] He began to mold him into the man he wanted him to be. As a result, Jacob became more aware of God and more dependent on him.

And it's still the case that when God forgives our sin and adopts us into his family, he doesn't simply leave us as we are. His purpose is to make us more like his son, the Lord Jesus.

To change us progressively into his likeness. And the good news for you and me this evening is that 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. Number one, over the course of his life, Jacob became a better man. But he didn't become perfect.

Although his faith in God grew and he became more godly, he remained a flawed individual as long as he lived. It's only in heaven that believers are made perfect.

[4 : 50] Only in heaven is every last trace of sin removed. And number two, God didn't have mercy on Jacob because he saw his potential to become a better person.

No, it was because God had mercy on Jacob that he was enabled by God's grace to become a better man. And in the same way for us, real change is possible only by God's grace as he enables

those whom he has brought into his family to change from the inside out.

This evening, I'd like to highlight three things about Jacob from the passages we have read. Three things which show how Jacob began to change.

The three things are, one, a new awareness of God, two, a new commitment to God, and three, a new discipline from God.

A new awareness of God, a new commitment to God, and a new discipline from God. First of all, then, we see in chapter 28 how Jacob received a new awareness of God.

[6 : 25] Look at what he says in verse 16. Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.

In verse 20, he goes on to speak about God's being with him and of his keeping him in the way that he goes. As a result of his experience at Bethel, Jacob has a new awareness of God's presence and protection.

It's worth remembering that 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 life. He was a marked man. The two brothers had never been close. But now the situation could not possibly be worse.

Jacob was on his way to seek refuge with his uncle Laban and his family in faraway Paddan Aram. He'd left his immediate family, the only family he'd known, to seek refuge with relatives he'd never met before.

[7 : 39] He was on his own, and he was heading out into the unknown. It's worth putting yourself in Jacob's shoes for a moment. You're anxious about the mess you've left behind.

You're afraid because the brother you've wronged is out to get you. He might come after you and kill you. You don't know what things will be like where you're going.

You've no one to turn to. You're all on your own. That's what it was like for Jacob when he arrived at Bethel as darkness began to fall and decided to try and get some fitful sleep with a stone for a pillow.

But as he slept, Jacob had a dream, and that dream changed his perspective on himself and his situation.

In his dream, he saw a ladder stretching between earth and heaven. Angels were going up and down the ladder or stairway. Not only that, Jacob saw the Lord and heard him speak.

[8 : 52] The Lord reminded Jacob that he was the God of his grandfather Abram and of his father Isaac. And he proceeded to repeat to Jacob the promises he had previously made to them.

Look with me please at verses 13 and 14. I am the Lord, the God of Abram your father and the God of Isaac. The land in which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring.

Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south. And in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

Here we have the familiar promises made to Abraham of a land to live in, a multitude of descendants and future blessing for the whole world.

Jacob was all on his own. He couldn't have felt more on his own, more alone. But here was God promising him descendants like the dust of the earth.

[10 : 08] Here was Jacob fleeing for his life from the land of Canaan. But God was promising him that his descendants would one day possess the land and his offspring would spread out in all directions.

You see, God hadn't given up on Jacob. He was assuring Jacob, despite his being a wayward, wily, flawed individual, that even he had a hope and a future.

He was himself part of God's great salvation plan. And in verse 15, God addresses Jacob's immediate needs.

Look at what he says. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

Imagine the 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.

[11 : 25] 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 or stairway that 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 at work in it through his heavenly agents. Jacob needed that assurance.

And so do we. So much 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 and pursue higher so-called spiritual realities. But the religion of the Bible strikes a different note.

[12:30] It's not a case of men and women trying to find God. The truth is that God has come to find them. Although he is infinitely great and infinitely majestic, he is committed to this world which he has made.

So committed in fact that he sent his one and only son to live among us and then to die a shameful death on our Roman cross to pay the penalty for our sins.

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.

Jacob, Jesus is there alluding to Jacob's dream and he's affirming that he is himself the ultimate bridge between earth and heaven.

No wonder C.S. Lewis referred to this earth as the visitor's planet. We don't need to go and find God even if we could.

[13:45] God has come down to earth to find us. He is God with us. Jacob had a new awareness of God when he woke up in the morning.

He now knew that there were open lines of communication between earth and heaven. God was present and at work in the world and he was himself an integral part of God's saving plan.

God was with him and would not let him go. Not surprisingly, Jacob's reaction was to say, surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.

Bethel was now for Jacob none other than the house of God, the gate of heaven. God was everywhere even in lonely, nondescript, isolated Bethel.

That was in many ways a comforting realization for Jacob. But it was also as verse 17 tells us a disturbing thing.

[15:03] Verse 17 tells us that Jacob was afraid and said how awesome is this place. Why do you think Bethel was awesome? I suspect it was because that God even as his most benign is an awesome God.

His presence is an awesome reality. And perhaps we should take a moment to think through what God's being present anywhere as he is everywhere means.

It means that he sees what I do. He knows what I say. He knows what I think.

He knows what I look at. He's aware of the company I keep. He knows everything about me. Isn't that an awesome prospect?

At Bethel Jacob received a new awareness of God. And it may be that if you're a Christian if you're a member of God's covenant family that's something you need this evening.

[16:17] We need to be reminded that God is indeed with us that he is committed to us and that he is working for our good. There's a sense in which we need to cultivate God's presence.

These days God doesn't normally communicate by means of dreams although he can do so. He may still do so. He has given us his word through which he speaks.

We need to take time to read the Bible and find out what he's saying to us. We also need to take time to respond to God in prayer. As we read and pray our relationship with the Lord develops.

We get to know him better and his grace is poured into our hearts and lives. We thus experience the reality of his presence and live in the good of it.

And if you're not a Christian your greatest need is to know God. The good news of course is that you don't have to go looking for him. Instead he has come looking for you.

[17:31] You need to come in repentance and faith to the Lord Jesus because he is the ultimate bridge between heaven and earth.

He is the way the truth and the life and he promises that whoever comes to him he will never turn away.

Jacob received a new awareness of God. Secondly at Bethel Jacob made a fresh commitment to God.

We see how following his dream Jacob made a memorial pillar of the stone which he had used as a pillow and anointed it with oil.

This was an act of worship on Jacob's part. And he then made a vow. Look with me please at the words of the vow in verses 20 to 22. Jacob said if God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear so that I come again to my father's house in peace then the Lord shall be my God and this stone which I have set up for a pillar shall be God's house and of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you what is Jacob doing here does something of the old Jacob the wheeler dealer Jacob come through in the words of this vow is Jacob as it were doing a deal with God if you do X for me then

[19 : 22] I'll do Y for you well it's certainly the case that the 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 certainly Jacob is at an early stage of his life of faith but I personally think that Jacob's vow represented a real and sincere commitment to God I think his vow was a heartfelt response to God's revelation of himself and of his purposes I'm pleased that Derek Kidner the Old Testament scholar agrees with me Kidner points out that the vow is in his view as thorough a response as

Jacob knew how to make he points out how Jacob's immediate reaction to the dream was all in the presence of God rather than preoccupation with the blessings God had promised and Kidner also makes the point that it was standard practice to express a vow in conditional 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 his way of saying you have promised to do X then I shall do Y some of the conditions which Jacob stipulates are specific but they can arguably be extrapolated from the promises that God has made there may be room for some disagreement as to the strength of Jacob's faith at this point but there is no doubt that his vow represents a new level of commitment to the

God of his fathers and integral to the vow is the promise in verse 21 that the Lord shall be my God the Lord shall be my God these are significant words at the heart of the covenant that God made with Jacob's grandfather Abraham was the promise that he would be God to you and to your offspring after you the commitment of God to his people and their answering commitment to him is a theme which runs literally through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation Revelation 21 is about the world to come and there we read I heard a loud voice from the throne saying behold the dwelling place of God is with man 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 Jacob made a new commitment to the Lord I wonder if that's something that you and I need to do too perhaps you're a Christian but your commitment is not what it once was and it's certainly not what it should be we cannot possibly do anything to earn our position as members of God's family but once we are his children there are family obligations we 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 with all our soul with all our mind and with all our strength and our neighbor as ourselves we're expected to maintain good our brothers and sisters all these things require commitment we don't do them in our own strength we need God's grace but effort is required in the words of the apostle Paul we are to make every effort to make our calling and election sure when we see the extent of the Lord's commitment to us surely there is need for fresh commitment on our part to him after all we love him because he first loved us and if we've never put our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that's something we need to do whoever believes in the son has eternal life whoever does not obey the son shall not see life that the wrath of

[24 : 59] God remains on him a new awareness of God a new commitment to God finally in chapter 29 we see how Jacob received a new discipline from God Jacob finally reaches Haran and there at a well he meets his cousin Rachel as she comes to water her father's sheep for Jacob it's love at first sight he falls in love with his beautiful cousin and he agrees to work for his uncle Laban for seven years in return for her hand in marriage true to form Jacob knows what he wants and he's prepared to work hard to get it and so he works for

Laban without complaint for seven years verse 20 is touching so Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her this is a real love story but then there's a problem after the seven years when it's time for the wedding Laban plays a

trick on his nephew he gives to Jacob as his bride not the beautiful Rachel but the older less beautiful Leah it's probably pitch dark when the marriage takes place Leah is probably veiled and it's only in the morning that

Jacob discovers what has happened and it's then too late for anything to be done about it Jacob remonstrates with his uncle but Laban simply says well in our country it's not the custom to marry off the younger daughter before the older daughter Laban hadn't said that before but he then makes Jacob an offer he tells Jacob that he can have Rachel as well provided he agrees to work for him for seven more years and that's what happens so Jacob ends up working for 14 years for his uncle Laban it's obvious isn't it that Laban and Jacob shared the same genes Jacob was by nature a twister so was

Laban Jacob manipulated situations for his own benefit so did Laban Laban used deceit to substitute his older daughter for his younger daughter just as Jacob had used deceit to displace his older brother very kidner comments in Laban Jacob met his match and his means of discipline in Laban Jacob met his match and his means of discipline I think these are weighty words they're well worth pondering you see Jacob at the hands of Laban 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 Jacob 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 the Lord is still in the business of transforming believers and making them more like his son 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 don't always appreciate what he's doing but we can be sure 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 : 18] James writes in his epistle count it all joy my brothers when you meet trials of various kinds for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness and that steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete lacking in nothing when we face difficulties in our lives we so often ask why is this happening to me perhaps it would be better to ask the question lord what can I learn from this situation the writer to the Hebrews similarly encourages his readers to accept the lord's discipline he writes 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 but he disciplines us for our good why 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

Jacob was a flawed character but God worked on him and with him and in his circumstances for his good as a result Jacob received a new awareness of God he made a new commitment to God and yes he also received a new discipline from God Jacob was a twister by name and by character but you know Jacob received a new name in due course he received a new name he was given the name Israel which means a prince with God

Jacob became Israel because there were two sides to his story he began as the flawed Jacob but in God's providence he ended up as a prince with God shall we pray our gracious God we can recognize ourselves in flawed Jacob we can identify with him at so many levels forgive our sin forgive our waywardness of heart and life Lord we pray that you would grant us in your mercy a new awareness of yourself that you would enable us by your grace to make a new commitment to you and that you would also help us use any discipline that you send into our lives in such a way that it may be become for us a blessing

Lord we pray that we may humble ourselves under your mighty hand that we might be exalted in due time have your hand upon us and do us good we pray in Jesus name Amen Amen Thank you.