



Jacob

There was a woman who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and had been given three months to live. So as she was getting her things in order, she contacted her pastor and had him come to her house to discuss certain aspects of her, final wishes.

She told him which songs she wanted sung at the funeral service, what scriptures she would like read, and what outfit she wanted to be buried in. The woman also requested to be buried with her favourite Bible. Everything was in order and the pastor was about to leave when the woman suddenly remembered something very important to her.

'There's one more thing', she said excitedly.

'What's that?' came the pastor's reply.

'This is very important,' the woman continued.

'I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand'.

The pastor stood looking at the woman, not knowing quite what to say.

'That surprises you, doesn't it?' the woman asked.

'Well to be honest, I'm puzzled by the request' said the pastor.

The woman explained 'In all my years of attending church socials and suppers, I always remember that when the dishes of the main course were being cleared away, someone would inevitably lean over and say, "Keep your fork". It was my favourite part because I knew that something better was coming... like velvety chocolate cake or apple pie and cream. Something wonderful, and with substance!

'So, I just want people to see me there in that coffin with a fork in my hand. And I want them to wonder "What's with the fork?" Then I want you to tell them: "Keep your fork... the best is yet to come."¹

When I first preached in the evening at Meadgate Mones gave me Jeremiah 7, and this was followed fairly quickly by Job 39. And some time later I covered Jonah 3. Seemed to be that I was always going to be following the J's in the Bible. Tonight's sermon from the last chapter in Genesis is in the same vein, as it mainly deals as much of Genesis does with the life and in this case the death of Jacob.

¹ Form 'A Box of Delights' by J. John & M. Stibbe



In fact what this chapter mainly deals with is Jacob being buried in accordance with his wishes that he set out before his death, as covered in Genesis 49:29-33. So I wondered what I could say from the burial of Jacob. But at most funerals a eulogy is read out, that covers that persons life and character. So I thought I would do something of a eulogy on Jacob under three headings, these being:

- *Deceiver*
- *Death*
- *Destiny*

1. *Deceiver*

In today's world children's names are chosen according to what is fashionable or the in name at the time. But in those days children's names were thought to be significant.

In Genesis 25 we read of the birth of Jacob and his brother Esau. It is interesting that while they were in the womb they jostled with each other. I know many women who are expecting get quite excited when they feel their baby moving inside of them. They often say to their husbands put your hand on my tummy and just feel the baby kicking away. But Rebekah became a bit troubled at the amount of fighting that seem to be going on between the two unborn babies in her womb. When we become uncertain of things, the best course of action is to ask the Lord what is going on, which is what Rebekah did. And the Lord said to her:

Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.²

So even before they were born, the Lord had said, that the older one would serve the younger one.

The first born had a lot of hair at birth and was red. Esau does faintly resemble the Hebrew word sear which means 'hairy'. Esau grew up to be a man of the land and a hunter. The second baby was born grasping his brothers heel, and hence was why he was called Jacob which has the sense of grasping the heel or probably more accurately 'May he be at the heels'³. The root of the word for heel is common to a number of Semitic languages and yields a verb that means to 'trip up' and hence to deceive.⁴ So the name Jacob has about it the sense of to deceive. And Jacob unlike his brother was not a rugged outgoing hunting & fishing type, but a quiet reflective person. He also in his early life was very much a deceiver as we can see in two of the incidents in his life.

One day Esau came in from the countryside and smelt a stew that Jacob had cooked. Being very hungry he said to Jacob, "Quick let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!"⁵ Jacob the deceiver replied, "First sell me your birthright". After a bit of haggling, Esau swore and oath to Jacob effectively selling him his birthright.

² Genesis 25:23

³ Genesis - D. Kidner - Tyndale Press

⁴ Jacob - D. Roper

⁵ Genesis 25:30



It is interesting that it says that Esau despised his birthright. Jacob the thoughtful one, though he may have been a deceiver, thought more highly of his birthright, than did Esau.

Later on the deceiver stole the promise of Isaac to his oldest son. We read this in Genesis 27. Isaac asks his son to go out in to the open country side and catch him some wild game. To then prepare this tasty food that he likes and he will then give his blessing to his oldest son. But if you read the story, Rebekah over hears this and with her help gets Jacob to deceive his elderly father and steal the blessing that was meant for Esau. Isaac does give Esau a blessing before he dies, but it is a lesser blessing.⁶

So we see that Jacob lived up to his name as a deceiver. Never the less this is the man that God had chosen to carry forward his purposes, particularly the promise given to Abraham. A promise that was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus for the whole world. He and his mother didn't need to force things along. They could have let the Lord work out his purposes, in the promise given to Rebekah that the older would serve the younger.

Let this teach us a couple of lessons:

Firstly God may use all sort of imperfect people to accomplish his purposes. I am sure we can think of many other men and women in the Bible who were weak or sinful, but never the less God used them in fulfilling his purposes. Let this encourage us to see that God can use us even if we feel at times weak and inadequate for the task.

Secondly, we should let God accomplish things and bring them to fruition. We don't need to push things along or make them happen. I know that one of my weaknesses is that often I am very impatient. I want things to happen almost immediately even in Christian areas. And I easily get tempted to make them happen. I don't think I used deception like Jacob did with the approval of his mother. But I do sometime force the pace. I need to allow the Lord to accomplish his purposes for me and through me, as we all do.

2. Death

But our passage from the lectionary Genesis 50 is all about Jacob's death and funeral. So having seen that Jacob was a deceiver, let's look at his death. But rather than just his death see how as he comes to the end of his life, his attitude and outlook have been changed. He is still not perfect and sometimes even in his later life his deceiving nature still emerged.

In Hebrews it says of Jacob:

By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff.⁷

⁶ Genesis 27

⁷ Hebrews 11:21



It also says that Jacob was looking for the fulfilment of the same promise that Abraham and Isaac were, namely:

Instead, they were longing for a better country— a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.⁸

And before he dies, Jacob or Israel as he is now known, blesses all his sons. He had been changed by God, particularly within himself.

Two incidents played the major part in bringing this about.

The first his the dream he had a Bethel. This is recorded in Genesis 28 and in the first part we read:

He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD, and he 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.⁹

The term ladder or stairway as in this translation actually suggests a stone stairway or ramp like those that lead up to top of ziggurats, the terraced pyramids raised to worship the gods of that era. The ziggurat with its steep stairway was essentially a symbol of man's efforts to plod his way up to God.¹⁰

But what caught Jacob's attention was not the stairway, but the fact that God was standing *beside* him or *alongside* him, for that is meaning of the preposition translated "above" in verse 13 of Genesis 28. (The same Hebrew word is translated "nearby" in Genesis 18:2 and "before" in the sense of "in front of" in Genesis 45:1)¹¹

So Jacob realises as he has his dream in a desolate place that the God of Abraham & Isaac is there with him, effectively by his side. We all to need to remember that God is with us, or as Jesus said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you'. This knowledge that the Lord was with him, must have been one of the things that started to transform Jacob and change him into Israel who is 'longing for a better country'. Who in a sense was looking to the future when Jesus would bring God's kingdom to earth.

⁸ Hebrews 11:16

⁹ Genesis 28:12&13

¹⁰ Jacob - D. Roper

¹¹ Jacob - D. Roper



The second very significant incident is when he wrestled with the angel of the Lord when he had crossed the ford at Jabbok. At the heart of this encounter in Genesis 32 we read:

When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, Let me go, for it is daybreak. But Jacob replied, I will not let you go unless you bless me. The man asked him, What is your name? Jacob, he answered. Then the man said, Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome. Jacob said, Please tell me your name. But he replied, Why do you ask my name? Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.¹²

So Jacob is given his new name of Israel. In itself it would convey the meaning, 'May God strive for him'. But like other names in Genesis it takes on a new colouring from its occasion and commemorates Jacob's side of the struggle and his character thus revealed. The key verb 'strive', (possibly 'persevere'), is found only here and in Hosea 12:4&5.¹³

This event surely changed some of Jacob's thinking as revealed in his new name. A name given to the place where God's people lived. And today the same name is used for the Jewish state.

One of the characteristics implied in the name Israel is to preserve. One of the fruit of the Spirit is patience, the Greek word being makrothumia.

Actually the Greek word is probably more accurately translated as persistence. It was used of the Roman army who would never give up. So it is a kind of conquering patience. Sometimes we imagine patience is a very passive attitude. Almost we act in a fatalistic attitude. Oh, well I will sit back and let it happen because it will probably happen any way. I'm sure that Paul's idea was that we actively wait patiently, trusting that God will act for us and be in the situation. And through his grace we will not give up or give in, even when the going gets tough. But we will be patient and persevere.

Earlier in his life Jacob should have adopted this patient approach, and allowed God to bring about his purposes for him, instead of stealing the birthright and the blessing from Esau.

¹² Genesis 32:25-29

¹³ Jacob - D. Roper



We also as he comes to point where he realises that he is dying he blesses all his sons one by one. He shows concern for them rather than his earlier self centred deceiving and grasping nature. As R. Martin-Achard says, 'The dying Israelite seems to be less concerned about the unknown world he is entering than about the future of God's people'¹⁴

Our passage tonight really covers Jacob's being buried in accordance with his wishes.

As he is draws towards the end of his life we read in Genesis 47:

*'When the time drew near for Israel to die, he called for his son Joseph and said to him, If I have found favour in your eyes, put your hand under my thigh and promise that you will show me kindness and faithfulness. Do not bury me in Egypt, but when I rest with my fathers, carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they are buried. I will do as you say, he said. Swear to me, he said. Then Joseph swore to him, and Israel worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff.'*¹⁵

So in the passage from Genesis 50:5 & the following verses we read the following:

'My father made me swear an oath and said, I am about to die; bury me in the tomb I dug for myself in the land of Canaan. Now let me go up and bury my father; then I will return.' Pharaoh said, Go up and bury your father, as he made you swear to do. So Joseph went up to bury his father. All Pharaoh's officials accompanied him—the dignitaries of his court and all the dignitaries of Egypt.

In verse 13 we read:

They carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre, which Abraham had bought as a burial place from Ephron the Hittite, along with the field.

So we see that this deceiver in his death is buried with great dignity and respect in accordance with his wishes.

¹⁴ From 'Death to Life' quoted in Genesis - D. Kidner - Tyndale Press

¹⁵ Genesis 47: 29-31



3. Destiny

But finally and very briefly let's consider Jacob's life in the place of God's destiny. We need to go back the covenant that God made with Abraham, as set out in Genesis 15. As God made this agreement he took him outside and said to him:

Look up at the heavens and count the stars— if indeed you can count them. Then he said to him, So shall your offspring be.¹⁶

It made me wonder how many stars there are in the universe. Well scientist estimate there are around a 100 to 125 billion galaxies in the universe¹⁷. A typical galaxy like our own Milky Way probably contains 100 billion stars¹⁸. So there are at least a 100 billion time a 100 billion stars in the universe. For the mathematical it 10 to power of 28. It is beyond comprehension or understanding. Abraham and his generation would have had no idea of how many and wouldn't even be able to comprehend this sort of number. Effectively the Lord is saying that the descendents of Abraham will be infinite in number.

This is was the birthright that was being passed down to Jacob and through him to the children of Israel. It was the birthright that Esau thought so lightly off when he sold it to Jacob for a plate of stew.

It is through this birthright given to Jacob that we get it's fulfilment in and through Jesus. The descendents of Jesus will be infinite is what God promised Abraham. And surely God meant what he said in that early covenant and fulfilled it in his son Jesus. This is the destiny that God fulfilled in and through the life of Jacob as just one man in the chain of people through whom God would work out his plan of salvation. And the amazing thing is that God used a deceiver like Jacob.

How much more then can God use you and me. We may be weak and far from perfect at times. But he wants to use us as part of fulfilling his destiny for all mankind. As part of that he wants us to fulfil our personal destinies in him.

Let's open our hearts, minds and wills to allow him to work in and through us, so that he may indeed carry on fulfilling the Abrahamic covenant and promise that was passed on through Jacob, even though he was a deceiver for much of his life.¹⁹

¹⁶ Genesis 15:5

¹⁷ The Rebirth of Cosmology. New York: Knopf, 1976: 187.

¹⁸ Vidali, Gianfranco, Marco Falcioni & Eric Gregory. Galaxies. SETI Module Astronomy Tutorial Page. Syracuse University.

¹⁹ Number of words 2914