

Jacob Prepares to Meet Esau

I. INTRODUCTION

God does not need to be visible or audible to be present and active. In the twenty years Jacob spent living in Haran, it is not once recorded that God spoke to Jacob or appeared to him until it was time for him to return home.

Yet as he set out for Haran, at Bethel, God had promised to be with Jacob and watch over him. For Jacob to live in light of God's promise, with no physical evidence of His presence, and with circumstances stacked against him, required faith.

It was a time of growth for Jacob, which God used to mold him through circumstances and trials into the man who would father and indeed embody the nation of Israel.

As Jacob clashed against Laban and his sons, and Rachel and Leah struggled for love and children, the resolutions that emerged show that God is in control and working out His purposes.

It was God who brought Jacob and Rachel together; who opened and closed wombs; who made Jacob prosper; who blessed and protected. Through all of this, God's providence was working. He is truly with Jacob, doing what He promised, even though He can't be seen.

That chapter of Jacob's life closed with a truce of sorts with Laban, but that does not mean his troubles are over. He must have been anxious about the reception he'd receive from Esau when he returned home to the Promised Land.

- Had Esau's anger abated?
- Will he need to fight for his life and position in the family?

Jacob, we have seen, is still 'Jacob,' the deceiver, the supplanter. He still tries to advance himself and attain blessing by his own power and trickery. He still knows

God as his father's God. But he made a pact and a promise at Bethel, and he recognizes that God has kept His part of the bargain.

Now it is time for him to return to Bethel and keep his. It's time for God to become Jacob's personal God, and for Jacob to move home and repossess the Promised Land.

Whereas Abraham's journey was one of direct tests requiring faith and obedience, Jacob's has been a life-long struggle against circumstance. As he leaves Haran for Canaan he will be faced with a new and formidable challenger: God Himself.

Pay careful attention when you read about this confrontation. It marks a turning point in Jacob's journey.

- Why would God wrestle Jacob and put out his hip?
- What kind of test is it, and what does it reveal about Jacob?

II. ANGELS MEET JACOB

Read: Genesis 32:1-2

[1] Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him;

[2] and when Jacob saw them he said, "This is God's army!" So he called the name of that place Mahana'im.

Obedient to God's direction, Jacob is returning with his sons to the land of promise after a 20-year absence. He is leaving conflict behind him but is probably dreading the conflict ahead with Esau.

You only have to think back to the circumstances leading to Jacob's flight from Canaan. He is certainly not expecting a friendly reception from Esau who had sworn to kill him.

- But God gives him immediate assurance.

The angels of God, last seen at Bethel as Jacob was fleeing Esau, meet Jacob as he leaves Gilead. The presence of God's army must have been an enormous

assurance as he prepared to face Esau again. Now Jacob knows that he does not travel alone; beside his camp is the camp of the angels of God.

- It was a tangible reminder that God had promised to bring him safely back to Canaan, and evidence that He had not forgotten.

A. The Role of Angels

In the light of all this we can appreciate the role angels have in the life of the Church, which benefits from “the mysterious and powerful help of angels” [CCC 334].

III. JACOB SENDS GIFTS TO APPEASE ESAU

Jacob fled his homeland because Esau was determined to kill him for stealing the birthright and blessing. With Jacob out of the picture for 20 years, Esau would have enjoyed if not the blessing, then essentially the rights of the first-born in his brother's absence.

He could hardly be expected to welcome the supplanter's return, which would put him out and force him to play second fiddle to his younger brother.

Read: Genesis 32; 3-20

[3] And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Se'ir, the country of Edom,

[4] instructing them, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, 'I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed until now;

[5] and I have oxen, asses, flocks, menservants, and maidservants; and I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight.'"

[6] And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men with him."

[7] Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies,

[8] thinking, "If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company which is left will escape."

[9] And Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O

LORD who didst say to me, `Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,`

[10] I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness which thou hast shown to thy servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies.

[11] Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, lest he come and slay us all, the mothers with the children.

[12] But thou didst say, `I will do you good, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.´

[13] So he lodged there that night, and took from what he had with him a present for his brother Esau,

[14] two hundred she-goats and twenty he-goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams,

[15] thirty milch camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty she-asses and ten he-asses.

[16] These he delivered into the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass on before me, and put a space between drove and drove."

[17] He instructed the foremost, "When Esau my brother meets you, and asks you, `To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these before you?´

[18] then you shall say, `They belong to your servant Jacob; they are a present sent to my lord Esau; and moreover he is behind us.´"

[19] He likewise instructed the second and the third and all who followed the droves, "You shall say the same thing to Esau when you meet him,

[20] and you shall say, `Moreover your servant Jacob is behind us.´" For he thought, "I may appease him with the present that goes before me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me."

B. Jacob faces Esau with Prudence and Humility

Jacob, strengthened and encouraged by seeing the angels, sent a message ahead to Esau. He does not take advantage of his position but instead is a model of

humility, calling himself "your servant" and Esau "my lord," and begging his brother's favour.

This seems to be an honest attempt to remove any lingering anger by being meek and non-threatening. Perhaps enough time has passed and Esau has forgotten his anger.

- Jacob dearly wants to be reconciled with his brother, yet he acts prudently.

Note: Prudence, which is much maligned these days, is one of the cardinal virtues. It has nothing to do with being a prude: for a good definition, read paragraph 1806 in the Catechism.

- St. Thomas Aquinas called prudence "right reason in action;"
- Proverbs 14:15 says "the prudent man looks where he is going."

Jacob is prudent. Anticipating the possibility of a hostile response, he presents a meek and gentle face, hoping not to provoke but to damp the flames of Esau's anger.

But fear seizes Jacob when he learns that Esau is coming to meet him with "400 men," which is a good-sized fighting force.

However Jacob hoped Esau might receive him, he is clearly distressed by Esau's response. The last time Esau came after him, Jacob fled. Will he flee again?

C. Jacob's Reaction

How Jacob deals with his fear shows how far he's come in 20 years. He takes immediate action to protect his family and herds by dividing them up, and then attempts to pacify his brother and perhaps hold him off a bit by sending ahead a series of herds as presents to him.

But most importantly, he prays. He prays to the God of his fathers, who he recognizes as the God who told him to take this trip and promised to be with him. What Jacob prays is important (and we will look at that later), but it is equally important that he prays.

The young Jacob longed for what God promised him and did anything and everything in his power to get there. The mature Jacob continues to want what

God has for him and does what is prudent to move ahead, but his prayer shows that he knows he is in God's hands and wants to work with Him.

It is evident that Jacob returns home a more humble and prayerful man than when he left.

- We can learn from Jacob's example. "Prayer is a vital necessity," the Catechism tells us. It and "Christian life are inseparable" (CCC 2744- 755).
- The Catechism also says "humility is the foundation of prayer" (CCC #2559);
- How does Jacob show humility in his prayer?

D. Jacob’s Prayer

Jacob humbly recognizes his unworthiness and acknowledges his debt to God. He knows he is where he is not because of anything he has done but because of God's steadfast love and faithfulness.

- And he recognizes that he is dependent on God to deliver him from Esau.

The fact that Jacob is where he is because God led him there, coupled with the way he prays according to God's will, repeating His promise back to Him, makes us confident that the prayer will be answered.

Jacob is praying for something that he knows God wants because God promised it to him. By lifting his voice to God and asking for it, he is cooperating with God's plan for him.

Gone is the sense of entitlement we saw in his youth, when Jacob saw the blessing and birthright as being there for the taking. He clearly acknowledges his debt to and dependence on God.

There is an element of trust that was missing in his prayer at Bethel, where he made his vow contingent on God's faithfulness.

- Jacob is praying to someone he now knows and has a relationship with.
- He has experienced this God in his life and no longer needs to depend on the word of his fathers.

E. Call and Response

God called Jacob first when he was in his mother's womb, and continued to call him throughout his life. After a time Jacob responded, and then he began to call back.

His life - like ours - is a journey, a dance of call and response in which his heart is gradually engaged and draws close to God. The "covenant drama," in which God makes and fulfills His covenant promises, is seen most clearly when Jacob is at prayer, in communion with God.

IV. JACOB WRESTLES WITH GOD

After crossing the river Jabbok [a tributary of the river Jordan], and making sure that his wives and children are safe, Jacob finds himself alone when God mysteriously came out to meet him and transformed him.

In his strangest vision yet, a man wrestled with him all night. Neither Jacob nor the mysterious man could win the struggle. Jacob finally realizes that he has been struggling with the angel of God.

Read: Genesis 32:21-25

[21] So the present passed on before him; and he himself lodged that night in the camp.

[22] The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.

[23] He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

[24] And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.

[25] When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

Alone again as he was at Bethel, Jacob came face to face with God, who came in the form of a man and wrestled him.

- Do you think this is how Jacob expected God to respond to his prayer?

- Why do you think God wrestled Jacob and dislocated his hip?

Imagine the scene: Help me, God, Jacob prayed. Deliver me from Esau - I'm afraid he'll kill us all! But you promised to give me as many descendants as there is sand at the sea. You can't let us die!

Jacob did everything he could to protect himself and his family then retired for the night. Perhaps he lay wondering how God would intervene and help him fight Esau.

Did he imagine the battle? How surprised he must have been when a man appeared – to wrestle him! God's answer got his attention as surely as if He had shouted down from heaven.

“Jacob! Esau isn't the one you have to fear. He's not the one you have to wrestle for blessing, or birthright, or land or power or life for your children. That's all in my hands. I'm the one who gives, who takes away. Wrestle with me if you want blessing.”

All his life, Jacob has fought others for what he wants - first Esau, then his father, then Laban. But before he can re-enter Canaan and take his place as the one with the birthright and heir to God's blessing he must learn that it is GOD he must wrestle with to get it.

The struggle will leave its mark: God touched his hip as a permanent, tangible reminder as well as to show that however well Jacob could wrestle, God was still in control.

V. A NEW NAME AND A BLESSING

What does Jacob want from God (vss. 26-29)? What does he get?

Jacob wants two things:

- God's blessing, and
- to know God's name, or who He is in His innermost being.

Jacob gets the blessing, but not God's name. (God's name is shrouded in mystery; it is too great for us to comprehend. He cannot be encompassed within the meaning of a name).

Instead God asks him his name, and then gives him a new one before blessing him.

Read: genesis 32: 26-32

[26] Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

[27] And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."

[28] Then he said, "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed."

[29] Then Jacob asked him, "Tell me, I pray, your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him.

[30] So Jacob called the name of the place Peni'el, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

[31] The sun rose upon him as he passed Penu'el, limping because of his thigh.

[32] Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the sinew of the hip which is upon the hollow of the thigh, because he touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh on the sinew of the hip.

F. Jacob is Given the name Israel

After a night of outwrestling his mysterious opponent who refuses to give his name, Jacob is renamed “Israel” and limps away from the scene with a blessing and a bad hip.

As we learned in Gen. 17 with Abraham and Sarah, when God gives someone a new name, He marks them in a special way as His servant. This is a significant name change, for the nation that comes from Jacob, God's chosen people, will bear his name.

G. The Significance of the name “Israel”

What is the significance of God calling Jacob "Israel?"

All his life Jacob has wrestled with men, and his given name ("he supplants") reflects that. Now he has struggled with men and with God (Israel means "he who strives with God") and he has overcome. He has achieved the blessing.

This struggle to hold on to God for a blessing, to get to know His name, marks not only Jacob's character but will mark the character of the nation of Israel throughout her history, in her ceaseless striving to know God and be blessed.

It will also serve as an example to her in her own years of exile, when she is longing to return. From whom must she wrestle the promise and the land? Not from those who have taken it from her, or who live in the land in her stead; she must claim it from God who promised in the first place, hold fast to His promise and not let go until He answers.

H. Jacob’s Test

The struggle was a test of Jacob's determination, his perseverance, and ultimately of his commitment to God. That he passed the test is evident in his new name: he has struggled with God, and has overcome. The Church has long looked at this scene as a "symbol of prayer as a battle of faith and as the triumph of perseverance" (CCC #2573).

According to Wis. 10:12, "in his arduous contest [Wisdom] gave him the victory, so that he might learn that godliness is more powerful than anything."

Reflection

At first glance, Jacob's midnight wrestling match seems odd, even surreal. It is hard to imagine it actually happening. And yet it is a very important watershed in Jacob's life.

What happened that night was as important a test of Jacob as sacrificing Isaac was a test of Abraham. The tests may have been different, but in both cases they sealed the man's character and in some way proved him ready for the next stage in God's plan.

When Abraham offered Isaac on Mt. Moriah, he became the example of faith. He took on His Father's likeness, giving an illustration for all of us of what kind of sacrifice would be necessary for our salvation. And because he obeyed, God turned His promise of worldwide blessing into a Covenant oath.

Jacob's test is different - but when he wrestles God all night and prevails, he becomes what he has been striving for all his life: the one who struggles not just with man but with God, who persists until he achieves the birthright and the blessing.

And when Jacob is re-named Israel, and the nation that comes from him takes on his name, we see that he exemplifies the nature of that nation in its ceaseless striving to know God and be blessed. Having struggled with God, he is ready to return to reclaim his position as heir and bearer of God's promise.

I. GOD’S PURPOSE IN TESTING US

We learned earlier in our study of Abraham (and earlier still, far back in the Garden of Eden) that testing is part and parcel of the way God deals with man. Belief is no more than empty thought if it is not acted upon; it is not true faith if left untested, undemonstrated.

It is part of God's loving way with His children that He tests them to draw out the kind of self-donating love embodied in the Trinity; to prove their faith; to conform them to Himself.

In the larger-than-life tests faced by the Patriarchs are images of what is required of those who would say "yes" to God and become His children:

Abraham is the essence of faith, the belief that obeys. His eyes were clearly fixed on God and on His promises, rather than on appearances. His faith is the kind counted as righteousness, the kind necessary to begin the journey as well as continue and complete it.

Isaac represents the willing self-sacrifice of faith that all must make to die to self daily and live for Christ instead.

And Jacob in his struggles shows us persistence in prayer and the perseverance that is necessary to live and grow in the faith until the end.

II. WRESTLING WITH GOD

What does it mean to wrestle with God? Saint Ambrose writes “what does fighting with God mean if not engaging in the combat of virtue and aspiring to the highest, making oneself, above all, an imitator of God? And because his faith and his devotion could not be overpowered, the Lord revealed to him the secret mysteries.” [*See Come and See Catholic Bible Study- Genesis*, pg 144].

“Each person struggles with some doubts, dryness in prayer, disappointments, or unanswered prayers. Why do loved ones die prematurely? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do trusted people betray loved ones? Why do some people endure such intense suffering?”

“Why do evil people sometimes prosper? Why are people unfaithful? Why is it so hard to forgive and forget? Why is it challenging to find time to pray? Why is virtue hard to attain, while some vices come so easily?”

“Perhaps each human being wrestles in some way. This world may be the testing ground, the wrestling mat” [*See Come and See Catholic Bible Study- Genesis*, pg. 145].

III. PRAYER

Excerpted from The Catechism of the Catholic Church:

CCC #2572: "God renews his promise to Jacob, the ancestor of the 12 tribes of Israel. Before confronting his elder brother Esau, Jacob wrestles all night with a mysterious figure who refuses to reveal his name, but he blesses him before leaving him at dawn.

A. Prayer as a Battle

From this account, the spiritual tradition of the Church has retained the symbol of prayer as a battle of faith and as the triumph of perseverance." (2572)

B. God’s Initiative: Our Response

CCC #2567 [On prayer]: "God calls man first. Man may forget his Creator or hide far from his face; he may run after idols or accuse the deity of having abandoned him; yet

the living and true God tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter known as prayer.

In prayer, the faithful God's initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response. As God gradually reveals himself and reveals man to himself, prayer appears as a reciprocal call, a covenant drama. Through words and actions, this drama engages the heart. It unfolds throughout the whole history of salvation." (2567)

CCC #2725: "Prayer is both a gift of grace and a determined response on our part. It always presupposes effort. The great figures of prayer of the Old Covenant before Christ...all teach us this: prayer is a battle. Against whom? Against ourselves and against the wiles of the tempter who does all he can to turn man away from prayer, away from union with God." (2725)

C. On Perseverance in Faith

CCC #162: "Faith is an entirely free gift that God makes to man. We can lose this priceless gift, as St. Paul indicated to St. Timothy (I Tim. 1:18-19)... To live, grow, and persevere in the faith until the end we must nourish it with the Word of God; we must beg the Lord to increase our faith; it must be 'working through charity,' abounding in hope, and rooted in the faith of the Church." (162)

The Twelve Tribes of Israel

*Jacob fathered twelve sons: Asher, Benjamin, Dan, Gad, Issachar, Joseph, Judah, Levi, Naphtali, Reuben, Simeon, and Zebulon. They are the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel, and the ones for whom the tribes are named. Joseph is the father of two tribes: Manasseh and Ephraim.

The tribes were encamped around the four sides of the wilderness Tabernacle [except for the tribe of Levi, which was set apart to serve in the Holy Temple].

Eastern Tribes	Southern Tribes	Western Tribes	Northern Tribes
Judah	Reuben	Ephraim	Dan
Issachar	Simeon	Manasseh	Asher
Zebulon	Gad	Benjamin	Naphtali

*Above excerpted from: ***Understanding the Scriptures – Didache Series.***

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