

All Change at Bethel

1. Intro

Jacob's encounter with I AM at Bethel presents us with a kind of case study of how God causes a person to change his thinking and direction in life. It provides us with a pattern of how he works to change a person's will. The will is "the mental faculty by which one deliberately chooses or decides upon a course of action." In the OT, the will is usually represented by the "heart," as the center of a person's inner being. Changing a person's "heart" or will is no easy thing because of its inherent inclination away from God and goodness (Gn 6:5).

In Jacob's case, the Lord was dealing with a man with a track record of lies and deceit, and liars are notoriously hard to change because truth becomes alien to them. But change would have to come about in the Jacob's will for the Lord had chosen him, not Esau, to be the one that he would bless and who would carry the torch of the Abrahamic covenant (Gn 25:23). It is therefore most interesting to observe how God accomplishes this inner change, this change of will.

There are four aspects of this work of God that I would highlight.

1. God Places Jacob in a Position of Need

Before God can change a person and use him in his service, he will very often put him in a position of need or in a situation of some extremity. Man's extremities, as has been said, are God's opportunities.

And it is so here. Jacob has been obliged to very quickly leave the protection of his parent's home due to the anger of his brother after he tricked him out of his inheritance. For his own safety, his mother Rebekah sends him far away to the northeast to the land of Haran where Abraham, his grandfather came from and where Jacob's brother lives. There he is to find a new life among his relatives and wait for Esau's anger to subside.

This is a time of great upheaval for this 'tent-loving' indoors man; he is entirely out of his comfort zone. He appears to be travelling alone, or with just one or two companions, without resources in a hostile desert environment in which he is vulnerable to the elements and robbers. Moreover, he has an arduous journey of over 300 km in front of him He is forced to sleep under the open night sky amid some stones for protection and possibly one for his pillow -- I say "possibly" because the Hebrew can mean "put stones around his head" for protection. His anxiety must have been considerable. Yet divine providence has brought him to this point, and it is in such comfortless zones that God often acts.

Speaking of pain and suffering, C.S. Lewis, author of the Narnia series and Christian apologist and writer in the mid 20th century, wrote: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” And so as Jacob gazed up at the stars, sighed with longing for home, and possibly felt the twinges in his neck from that unyielding stone pillow, God was getting ready to speak loud and clear to him.

Often, God will use this sense of need just by itself to turn a person to him, especially when the need is great. Jesus gave a classic illustration of this in his parable of the Prodigal Son. Only after the son had wasted away all his money living the high life and was forced to look after pigs to earn a meager living did his thoughts turn toward his father, who of course represents God and forgiveness. Providentially, God may do this shaking up gently or fiercely, depending on the case and the person’s resistance to him.

One who is recorded as receiving a strong shaking up was King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, who after priding himself on all his great achievements, is made to go into the fields and eat grass like an ox – probably indicating some kind of mental breakdown or disorder. Only at this low point does he acknowledge the supremacy of the Most High (Dan 4:34ff). Such a change illustrates Proverbs 21: 1: “The king’s heart is in the hands of the Lord; he turns it wherever he wills.”

Another in more recent times was Chuck Colson, who started the international Prison Ministry, used to be known as the Nixon’s ‘hatchet man,’ a tough, former US Marine who reveled in the Washington high life and the corridors of power. But as the special counsel to the White House, he was convicted of involvement in the infamous Watergate scandal, and his world of power and influence crashed around his ears when he was sent to jail. It was when he had reached this low point that he began to feel just how unclean he was inside that something needed to change. Interestingly, it was C.S. Lewis’ famous book “Mere Christianity’ that led to his conversion.

In this respect, we should note that a sense of great need will not always bring people to come to their senses and seek God. Some are actually hardened against God by their extremities. It has been said that situations of extreme need tend to reveal two sorts of people: those who are humbled and say to God “I’m listening,” and those who resist and to whom God says: “All right, then, have it your way.”

However, in many cases, only a gentle shaking up by the Lord is needed. Sometimes, the fact that a young person leaves home and has to fend for himself cause anxiety and self-searching. Being in a foreign land away from all one’s home influences is often when people feel the need to seek after God and truth. This is why AITCF is in such a strategic position in terms of the gospel.

Whatever the case, it is this being placed in a position of need that is so often a prelude to God’s working.

2. God Draws Jacob’s Attention

In Jacob's case, his sense of need in the wilderness was evidently not sufficient in and of itself to cause him to seek God. So, having providentially placed Jacob in this vulnerable position, the inspired author tells us that God proceeds to draw his attention heavenward.

We are told God spoke to men and women in the OT period "in various ways (Heb 1:1). He drew Moses' attention with an inexplicable burning bush that didn't go out in the wilderness. Sometimes he used angelic ministry, visions, natural disasters, or signs and wonders. In Jacob's case, he used a dream. Jacob dreamed that he saw "a stairway resting on the earth ...with angels ascending and descending... there above it stood the Lord." The vivid image indicated to Jacob the close connection between heaven and earth at that very spot. The presence of angels also indicated that something momentous was happening.

Are dreams still a means that God can use to draw people's attention and communicate with them? Certainly, God often used dreams to communicate to individuals in the OT (Pharaoh, Joseph, etc) and the NT (Acts – Peter + Paul).

In the fourth century, the historian Eusebius wrote that the Roman Emperor Constantine had a dream in which he saw the sign of a cross and heard Christ telling him to use it for his protection in a battle the next day, which he won. After that, Constantine embraced Christianity – though by all accounts, he was a strange sort of Christian, apparently never attending church – and promoted the Church throughout the Roman Empire. If true, that was certainly a dream with far-reaching consequences and it may be that God was communicating to Constantine through it in a way he understood.

Let me give you another example. I read in a book recently that in a hundred years ago in 1912, an Englishman dreamed that a great ship sank in icy waters with many lives lost. For several days afterwards, this man felt strangely depressed. In fact, so disturbed was he that he cancelled his booking to cross the Atlantic on the SS Titanic! He apparently told his foreboding to friends who later, after the Titanic disaster, confirmed his story. I don't know if this man subsequently turned to God in gratitude for saving his life and giving him many more years on earth, but he should have done.

Such forebodings through dreams can and do happen, so I think we have to allow that under certain circumstances, God can use dreams to warn or forearm individuals for their own good or for some higher purpose.. However, let me add that the problem with dreams is first that though fascinating, they are notoriously difficult to understand and interpret; and second, the danger is that we may get into the habit of thinking every dream we have is in some way significant and look for some divine leading in each one. This can lead us down some very strange paths and into all sorts of vain speculation.

We must therefore allow, I think, that God may on rare occasions use dreams to grab our attention but recognize that our own dreams are normally without special significance.

God in his sovereignty may use many things to draw people's attention to himself. Before the great North African theologian Augustine was converted, he was outside reading a book when he seemed to hear the sound of a child playing a game and singing "Take and read; take and read." Struck by the words, he turned to the page opened before him and read the words: These verses led him to change his life and seek God.

God got the attention of C S Lewis on a London bus. Lewis, an atheist scholar at Oxford University, suddenly felt that his whole being was somehow restricted. He wrote: "I became aware that I was holding something at bay, or shutting something out. Or, if you like, that I was wearing some stiff clothing, like corsets, or even a suit of armor, as if I were a lobster. I felt myself being there and then, given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut; I could unbuckle the armor or keep it on." This led to a mental change, a willingness to open himself to Christian ideas, and finally, to his conversion.

III God Speaks to Jacob

In his dream, Jacob not only sees God, he hears him speaking. For impressive as the vision of the heavenly staircase is, it is nothing without God's verbal communication of truth. What makes Jacob's dream so compelling is the truth conveyed to him through it.

As a general rule, when God gives a sign, it is accompanied by his Word. For example, one may compare this episode with the resurrection appearance of Jesus to his disciples in a room in Luke's gospel. Luke tells us that following the astounding appearance of Jesus out of nowhere, Jesus took the startled disciples through the OT scriptures to show why the things that had happened to him had been necessary. In other words, the demonstration of his resurrection required a Bible study! The sign given required the light of the Word to be understood.

In this connection, we may note that in winning over Jacob's will, God first addresses his mind. This is a sequence we find throughout the Bible. Instruction comes before action, understanding before commitment. As a general rule, it is a mistake to seek to address the will directly. Sometimes, psychological techniques can be used to induce a person to take a certain path, but unless there is understanding on the person's part, the change will be short-lived. We do well, therefore, to instruct people in the basic truths of the gospel before we ask them to commit themselves to Christ. If the truth takes up lodging in the mind before the will is engaged, the commitment, when it comes, will be all the stronger.

And so in the dream, God outlines to Jacob the truths he needs to hear and understand. He first reveals his name: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac." This is God's covenant name and to know God's name is to have access to him and be empowered by him. Moreover, this name revealed to Jacob sets him apart from all others. Second, he and his seed are promised the land, just as Abraham was. Third, his descendants will be uncountable like the "dust of the earth." Fourth, amazingly, the whole world will eventually be blessed through him. And finally, Jacob is assured that God will never leave him until he has fulfilled his promise.

How much this heir of Abraham knew of God is unclear. It may be he knew of him but didn't know him in a personal way. But with these profound truths, God commissions Jacob for life; he is given his marching orders in the service of Almighty God, and his mind is filled with God-anointed truth that sets him above all other folk on earth.

5. God Elicits Jacob's Trust

On waking, Jacob is awe-struck and in some fear, knowing that his dream had been an extraordinary one and that God has revealed himself to him. In the tradition of the times, he erects a stone pillar and anoints it with oil to mark the spot, changing its name to Bethel, “house of God,” a not uncommon name of that period. He then commits himself to this God with a vow to follow him and give him a tithe of all his income.

It might at first glance that Jacob is bargaining with God when he precedes his commitment with “if,” but we must note that he is simply repeating what God has already promised him, i.e., that he will always be at his side and never forsake him and will bring him home.

Bargaining with God is not something we find in Scripture. Of course, we can ask God to help us pass an exam, etc, but we shouldn't bargain in this respect, e.g., by telling God that if he helps us pass, we will do this, that, or the other for him.

Let us observe that **his trust is elicited by the assurance of God's abiding presence:** “I will be with you.” This is the first recorded instance of this oft-repeated promise in the Bible. How often does God give this promise to his chosen people! It is a most precious promise that is given to every child of God and one we should hold close to our hearts. Are you going through a period of transition in your life, facing a change of career or country? The Lord promises to be with you every step of the way; his unseen presence will see you through. Are you facing a challenge in your life that seems overwhelming, way beyond your ability to cope with? Remember the all-powerful one at your side and the divine resources at your disposal. You are not alone. Emmanuel is with you.

Let us also note that Jacob's **trust was in promises that would take decades, if not centuries, to fulfill.** It would be some twenty, hard years before he would see his father again and return to the promised land; and he himself would not die in the promised land but in Egypt. In being called to trust in God for things that were a long way off, he entered the gallery of the faithful ones (Heb 11:39) who saw the future held out by God but never inherited the promises.

This is also our position. We have promises that we will not necessarily see fulfilled in our lifetimes. Does this mean that we cease to trust in them? Not at all. All the promises of God will be fulfilled at some point and we should fill our minds with them. There will be a new heavens and earth in which dwells righteousness. There will be a resurrection of the dead to glory and honor. There will be a time when God wipes away all tears and the leopard lies down with the lamb. There will be a second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ with the angels. These things may well be far off in time, but the believer is directed by the Word to anticipate them and delight in the prospect.

In fact, trust at its highest says of these promises: “I see them fulfilled already. They are as good as done because God has made them. I rest in and on the promises.” In other words, faith “is the substance of things not seen...the evidence of things hoped for (Heb 12). It matters not to faith whether they are fulfilled; what matters is that God has promised that they will be; on this all trust hinges. Faith sees the absolute inevitability, the utter certainty, of what must take place due to God's determination.

Note also that Jacob committed himself to God with a **solemn vow**. Vows feature regularly in the Bible, as when Paul took a solemn vow and shaved his head. But the greatest vow we can ever make is to give our lives to the Lord. In this sense, all believers can have a Bethel in their lives, a place where a covenant is made with God in Christ. Mine was when I was a student some 48 years ago, not in a wilderness but in my bedroom. There is now anointed pillar of stone to mark the occasion -- just me, a pillar of flesh, anointed, I hope, by the Lord. That Bethel experience, that turning point, will be with me till I leave this earth.

6. Conclusion

Having looked at this account in Scripture about Jacob's encounter at Bethel and his changed life and direction, we might ask how it is relevant today. In fact, it is very relevant. There is a direct line from Bethel to Bangkok, not to mention Boston, Bangalore, Budapest, and anywhere else in the world. This is because God's central promises to Jacob are being fulfilled right now.

First, **God's promise to bless the whole world** through him and his descendants is being fulfilled through the gospel. Jesus commanded that the gospel be preached in all the world. The worldwide gospel is what God had in mind when he gave that promise to Jacob.

And so the grace of God that changed Jacob the 'heel grabber' overnight in the wilderness is still with us but in more powerful form, for it is extended to us in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. That wondrous grace that converts the soul and gives it a heavenward direction has been multiplied for poor sinners through the power of God manifested in the gospel and will do so until the world ends.

Is your life committed to God? Have you made a solemn vow to follow him? Can you point to a Bethel in your life? If you cannot answer affirmatively, then let me urge you to ask God to steer you toward understanding of his grace in Christ. Ask him to direct you heavenward and reveal his Son to you. Ask him for a Bethel experience in your soul and a new start.

Second, **God's promise of a land for his people**, a land "flowing with milk and honey," has found its fulfillment in Christ, for he is the terminating point for all the OT promises. Essentially, what the land represented was fellowship with God and his covenant blessings. All those OT blessings are found and fulfilled in Christ. If we are "in him" through faith and the work of the Spirit, we are in the promised land; we have entered into unbroken fellowship with God and his Son; we have entered the heavenly Zion; we are part of the new Israel. Col 1:13 puts it like this: "For he has rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves." We are in the kingdom of the Son of God. In this hallowed realm are blessings innumerable, joys unending, and grace abounding.

So, this Sunday morning, as Christians, let us see ourselves as those who are living pillars anointed by God to mark his saving, illuminating grace; privileged inhabitants of Emmanuel's land; favored citizens of the kingdom of light; contented consumers of 'milk and honey' that the world cannot see or taste. Let us be encouraged by all that God has given us

in Christ; let us sing his praises for his great plans and purposes, of which you and I, like Jacob, are a part; and let us live as people he has formed for himself, determined to glorify him from morning to night each day of our lives, knowing he will surely bring us to his heavenly home in all its glory and fullness.