

The following story is told by the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus in his Antiquities of the Jews 11.317-345

So when Alexander besieged Tyre, he sent an epistle to the Jewish high-priest, to send him some auxiliaries, and to supply his army with provisions (1); and that what presents he formerly sent to Darius, he would now send to him, and choose the friendship of the Macedonians, and that he should never repent of so doing. But the high-priest answered the messengers, that he had given his oath to Darius not to bear arms against him; and he said that he would not transgress this while Darius was in the land of the living. Upon hearing this answer, Alexander was very angry; and though he determined not to leave Tyre, which was just ready to be taken, yet as soon as he had taken it, he threatened that he would make an expedition against the Jewish high-priest, and through him teach all men to whom they must keep their oaths. So when he had, with a good deal of pains during the siege, taken Tyre, and had settled its affairs, he came to the city of Gaza, and besieged both the city and him that was governor of the garrison, whose name was Babemeses.(2)

But the Samaritan leader Sanballat thought he had now gotten a proper opportunity to make his attempt, so he renounced Darius, and taking with him seven thousand of his own subjects, he came to Alexander; and finding him beginning the siege of Tyre, he said to him, that he delivered up to him these men, who came out of places under his dominion, and did gladly accept of him for his lord instead of Darius. So when Alexander had received him kindly, Sanballat took courage, and spoke to him about his present affair. He told him that he had a son-in-law, Manasseh, who was brother to the high-priest Jaddus; and that there were many others of his own nation, now with him, that were desirous to have a temple in the places subject to him; that it would be for the king's advantage to have the strength of the Jews divided into two parts, lest when the nation is of one mind, and united, upon any attempt for innovation, it prove troublesome to kings, as it had formerly proved to the kings of Assyria. Whereupon Alexander gave Sanballat leave so to do, who used the utmost diligence, and built the temple, and made Manasseh the priest, and deemed it a great reward that his daughter's children should have that dignity; but when the seven months of the siege of Tyre were over, and the two months of the siege of Gaza, Sanballat died.

Now Alexander, when he had taken Gaza, made haste to go up to Jerusalem; and Jaddus the high-priest, when he heard that, was in an agony, and under terror, as not knowing how he should meet the Macedonians, since the king was displeased at his foregoing disobedience. He therefore ordained that the people should make supplications, and should join with him in offering sacrifice to God, whom he besought to protect that nation, and to deliver them from the perils that were coming upon them; whereupon God warned him in a dream, which came upon him after he had offered sacrifice, that he should take courage, and adorn the city, and open the gates; that the rest should appear in white garments, but that he and the priests should meet the king in the habits proper to their order, without the dread of any ill consequences, which the providence of God would prevent. Upon which, when he rose from his sleep, he greatly rejoiced, and declared to all the warning he had received from God. According to which dream he acted entirely, and so waited for the coming of the king.

And when Jaddus understood that Alexander was not far from the city, he went out in procession, with the priests and the multitude of the citizens. The procession was venerable, and the manner of it different from that of other nations. It reached to a place called Sapha, which name, translated into Greek, signifies a prospect, for you have thence a prospect both of Jerusalem and of the temple. And when the Phoenicians and the Samaritans that followed him thought they should have liberty to plunder the city, and torment the high-priest to death, which the king's displeasure fairly promised them, the very reverse of it happened; for Alexander, when he saw the multitude at a distance, in white garments, while the priests stood clothed with fine linen, and the high-priest in purple and scarlet clothing, with his mitre on his head, having the golden plate whereon the name of God was engraved, he approached by himself, and adored that name, and first saluted the high-priest.

The Jews also did all together, with one voice, salute Alexander, and encompass him about; whereupon the kings of Syria and the rest were surprised at what Alexander had done, and supposed him disordered in his mind. However, Parmenion alone went up to him, and asked him how it came to pass that, when all others adored him, he should adore the high-priest of the Jews? To whom he replied, 'I did not adore him, but that God who has honored him with his highpriesthood; for I saw this very person in a dream, in this very habit, when I was at Dion in Macedonia, who, when I was considering with myself how I might obtain the dominion of Asia, exhorted me to make no delay, but boldly to pass over the sea thither, for that he would conduct my army, and would give me the dominion over the Persians; whence it is that, having seen no other in that habit, and now seeing this person in it, and remembering that vision, and the exhortation which I had in my dream, I believe that I bring this army under the Divine conduct, and shall therewith conquer Darius, and destroy the power of the Persians, and that all things will succeed according to what is in my own mind.

And when he had said this to Parmenion, and had given the high-priest his right hand, the priests ran along by him, and he came into the city. And when he went up into the temple, he offered sacrifice to God, according to the high-priest's direction, and magnificently treated both the high-priest and the priests. And when the Book of Daniel was showed him wherein Daniel declared that one of the Greeks should destroy the empire of the Persians, he supposed that himself was the person intended. (3) And as he was then glad, he dismissed the multitude for the present.

But the next day he called them to him, and bid them ask what favors they pleased of him; whereupon the high-priest desired that they might enjoy the laws of their forefathers, and might pay no tribute on the seventh year.(4) He granted all they desired. And when they asked him that he would permit the Jews in Babylon and Media to enjoy their own laws also, he willingly promised to do hereafter what they desired. And when he said to the multitude, that if any of them would enlist themselves in his army, on this condition, that they should continue under the laws of their forefathers, and live according to them, he was willing to take them with him, many were ready to accompany him in his wars.

God's ways are higher than our ways. (Isaiah 55:6-9)

In the Bible, we read about people... but there is always a larger purpose in the text.

Many people, preachers, reduce the lesson to just about people... examples to follow, examples not to follow.

Don't sin like Adam and Eve... or especially like Cain.

Obey God like Noah, but don't do what he did at the end of the story.

Be like Abraham, except when you should not be like Abraham.

Don't be like Isaac. Don't be like Jacob.

Don't be like Esau, except when you should be like Esau... as in this chapter when we find him gracious and forgiving.

Be like Joseph. Be like Moses, except that once when you shouldn't be like Moses.

Be like David, and not like everybody else. But don't sin like David did.

And, ultimately... be like Jesus.

But to read the Bible this way is to miss the big themes, the most important things, the theology in the Bible.

"theology" = the study of God.

And, maybe I should not even have to say this: The Bible is primarily about God.

And, so, usually, the most important question we can ask in any text is this one: What are we learning about God?

In order to understand the lessons in this text, context is the key.

This is a little part of a bigger story... the story of Jacob... that is part of an even bigger story...the Bible story.

It begins with Adam who God created and placed in a perfect paradise.

But Adam disobeyed, rebelled, and lost paradise.

Soon the earth that God created was filled with murder, sexual immorality, greed, and corruption. Sin carried a terrible curse.

And from that moment, God has been revealing an unfolding plan to restore people to Himself...

...to an intimate, eternal relationship with Him... without sin, without the curse, without all the pain and loss and grief.

It is God's plan... not a man's plan, not your plan.

In a day in which people like to put together their own religion... this is not that.

God begins to reveal His unfolding plan with a promise... to Noah, to Abraham, to Isaac, and now to Jacob.

And, these people were all full of flaws, and sin, and struggles... just like you and I. Of course, that is just the point.

Jacob had been clinging to this promise.

A promise of God's presence and blessing

A promise of land and God's protection

A promise of descendants as many as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore...

And, through those descendants God would bless all peoples in all the world.

But, Jacob had not been the sort of person who deserves the promise of God.

In fact, it was the birthright, the blessing... the promise that he had stolen from his own older brother.

Thus Esau wanted to kill Jacob. **Gen. 27:41-46**

But, the few days became 20 years.

Jacob fled to Haran and God met him on the way, but Jacob didn't know much about God.

In Genesis 28 God reminds him of the promise, but Jacob makes it into a bargain.

He found a wife, Rachel, actually two wives... or four, if you count the maids.

Jacob is then mistreated by his father-in-law and learned to live by his wits. He was hard working but didn't trust anyone.

This is what his name meant.

In Haran he works unappreciated for his father-in-law for 20 years and God gives him a family.

And, as his family grows we discover that it is as dysfunctional as Jacob himself is. Surely there is a lesson in that.

Yet, through all Jacob's struggles and troubles, God protects him and blessed him. God had made a promise.

Jacob is now on the way home. He is obeying God and returning to the land that God has promised to him and his fathers.

He stumbles upon an angel army camping out nearby.

But, He knows that he will have to face his brother, Esau... Jacob is terrified. Esau has 400 men with him... warriors.

He prays. But, he's never experienced answered prayer, nor does he know much about God or prayer.

So he prepares to rely on his own cowardly plan... sending his possessions and family out in front.

But, then, in the night, God attacks Jacob, wrestles him, cripples him, changes his name and blesses him.

Jacob will never be the same. He now realizes that he's more dependent upon God than ever.

Read **Gen. 33:1-20**

In the first few verses we learn that Jacob is learning a lesson about God.

I. God is changing us even when we are at our worst. vss. 1-3

Now, Jacob and his company are actually approaching Esau and his 400 men.

The first two verses remind us of Jacob's plan and the fact that it is being carried out... the family he values least out in front.

This is not one of Jacob's shining moments.

But, in verse 3 something changes. Jacob decides to go out in front and meet his brother.

Why? Well, we don't know.

But think about it. God has given Jacob much to think about in the preceding 24 hours.

Jacob knows that God has an army of angels nearby.

Jacob knows of God's promise to him. This much is clear from his prayer.

He prayed. Does God answer prayer? Maybe He does.

God personally revealed Himself to Jacob and wrestled him, changed his name, blessed him. Why would He do that?

And, he is no doubt thinking about his plan. It doesn't look good. He couldn't escape in his crippled state anyway.

So, Jacob, for the first time in his life decides not to rely on his scheming.

Maybe God is doing something.

Surely, what Jacob is doing is not going to work.

Maybe it is time to trust God.

Have you ever been there? Maybe you are there now.

You look at things in your life and you realize that your way is just not working.

Maybe it is time to learn, to change, to trust God, to do it God's way.

It might be that everything is happening because God is trying to teach you this.

II. God answers prayer even when we struggle to believe. vss. 4-11

Let's look back at that prayer that Jacob prayed, but then decided to help God in the answering. **Gen. 32:9-12**

Now, some people try to reduce prayer to something that is good for us, that helps our attitude.

But, this prayer did nothing that we can see for Jacob's attitude.

What was remarkable about this prayer is that Jacob asked for something that God had promised him...

And, more importantly, God heard him.

You see, when you pray, the God of the universe actually hears. And He can answer in whatever way He chooses.

In this case the answer to prayer is as great a surprise as Jacob's change of mind. God answers...

A. With reconciliation rather than rescue

God changed Esau's heart. Rather than coming in with his 400 warriors he ran to Jacob with a hug.

Then there is a marvelous reunion. Thoughts of murder are forgotten and Jacob's family is introduced.

Esau calls Jacob "my brother." Jacob calls Esau "my lord." Jacob is being respectful. Esau wants intimacy.

Jacob offers Esau his gift and finally Esau receives it... a big gift, flocks and herds.

Jacob prayed for God to protect him. He prayed for deliverance, and God did deliver him, but not with the angel army.

God delivered Jacob by changing Esau's heart. And, Jacob as well has been changed... unJacoblike humility...

He bows before Esau seven times. Seven times he calls Esau "my lord" or calls himself Esau's servant.

God may answer your prayer by, among other things, changing you!

You never know what God is going to do... so don't bother guessing. Trust Him... and pray.

He can change the headrest heart. He has angel armies standing by. God answers prayer...

B. In spite of our efforts to solve problems our own way

God was at work changing Esau's heart even as Jacob was arranging his flocks and herds and servants and family to protect himself.

God is constantly answering prayer even when we are not helpful at all.

We have our own plans that are not God's plans... but God can still answer prayer.

We might not believe that He can answer our prayer or that He will... God can still answer prayer.

We might forget our prayer and be filled with fear... God remembers. God can still answer prayer.

We might think that our situation is too difficult for God... God can still answer prayer.

III. God is faithful even when we are flawed. vss. 12-20

At the end of this chapter we find the two brothers parting their ways. Jacob does not want to be around Esau.

Jacob is still wary of Esau, though he has no need to be. Remember, God is changing him. But God is not done changing him.

Jacob says that he will part and then meet Esau again at Seir. He doesn't. He doesn't keep his word.

It turns out that the two brothers will never be close.

But, God brings him back into the land God has promised and he buys another portion of it.

Now he has possession of two small portions of the land.

Jacob is realizing a small part of the fulfillment of God's promise of land... just a taste.

We too get tastes now of the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to us.

This Lord's supper is just that, a little taste of the promise that God has made to us in Christ Jesus.

Now we have been freed from the penalty of sin... by the blood of Jesus shed for us on the cross.

Now we are being freed from the power of sin... by the work of Christ through His Word and Spirit in our lives.

Someday we will be freed from the presence of sin... when we join Him in a new heavens and a new earth.

It is the promise of God and God is faithful and He will not deny Himself. (2 Tim. 2:11-13)