

Jacob's Brief Encounter

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[0 : 00] I loved hearing that story read. It's a passage that I love to read. It's going to be a favourite story in the Bible, but it's such a raw story in so many ways.

And there's no, I can't cover all of everything that happens in that chapter. There's so much going on, but hopefully we'll look at aspects of the chapter.

And the encounter that Jacob has as he's met by the Living God in this chapter. I want to think a little bit, just as we start, about Jacob and who he is. But first of all, just something I came across this week.

I don't watch a lot of television, but I started watching this programme and it's about, I suppose it's about politics in the US. It's not Kevin Spacey in it, and he's a congressman in Washington.

It's all based in Washington, and it's about power. He's a congressman who wants to be more than a congressman. And the entire show is based around his character and his wife, and the way that they work together to manipulate almost everybody they come across for their own ends and to their own purposes.

[1 : 23] So it's about power and it's about prestige. But I was thinking that his entire life, the character, the main character in this programme, almost every relationship he has is twisted by intrigue of some sort.

He's using somebody, or he's being used by somebody, or he's thinking about using somebody in order to get to somebody else. All because he wants to get somewhere.

And he's got a plan. So I just said that must be a terrifying situation to be in, as a human being.

He's constantly watching his back, all the people he's crossed, he's constantly thinking about the people he will cross. That must be an awful situation to be in. Now, I'm not going to make a direct parallel with Jacob, but Jacob would have known something of that sense of looking over your shoulder.

Who is Jacob? You know, Jacob Well, probably most of us. Jacob's a key character in the Old Testament. He was one of the fathers. And we hear often the phrase, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Who was he and what was he like? He was, as well as being a patriarchal figure.

[2 : 47] He was somebody who had been a manipulator. His name really bears reference to that. And he was somebody, you might describe him as a tricky customer.

Think back into his life. He'd been promised a blessing, but he'd taken it in an inappropriate way. He'd deceived his father. He'd taken from his brother. He'd spent time with his uncle in chapter 30.

We read particularly about how he had intrigue and crossings in the life of his uncle. Things weren't straightforward there. Actually, his uncle was not exactly straightforward with him either.

So there's all different kinds of complexities going in, going on, and the relationships that we find. When we read through all these different chapters leading up to where we're at here, it's...

Jacob has had to kind of manipulate things to get to where he sees he wants to go to. And so he also has that sense of previous with people.

[4 : 01] I don't know if you know that feeling tonight. There are people that you'd rather avoid. Maybe you can think back to a time where you had a relationship with that. You'd rather cross the road, rather than confront somebody or the issue that you had with somebody.

That's something of the experience of Jacob. But Jacob also has previous, if you like, with God. This chapter that we come across here describes in the latter section that we're going to look at a very raw, vivid description of what encounter he has with God.

The first time he's met with God, and it's not the only experience he has of him, he's received promises from God, particularly if you flip back to chapter 28.

And another amazing and slightly also mysterious encounter he has with God in chapter 28 as well. I'm not going to spend a lot of time at all looking at this, but from verse 10 onwards, you'll see that this is entitled Jacob's Dream of Bethel.

And Jacob is going on his way where he is a receiver of, if you like, a message, a communication from God. He got breaks into his life to speak to him and to convey particular information.

[5 : 23] And what he wants to convey to Jacob is the promise, the covenant promise that he will make with him. And so Jacob is in the line of those who are of God's people, who are his covenant people, and God works through him, believe it or not, in a very specific way.

He promises, I'll just read a verse in verse 13, he sees this stairway to heaven and says, 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 in your descendants the land of which you are live. So Jacob has had this experience with God, and God has broken into his life, and he's promised him something.

Now, the interesting thing about that is, if you were to ask the question, is Jacob a worthy receiver of a promise like that from God? You'd have to say, well, not really. I mean, what had Jacob ever done to deserve a promise, let alone God dealing with him in such a gracious and a personal way?

Now, nevertheless, this has been Jacob's experience, and as the story has gone on, and as things in many ways have become more complex, we now meet him on the way to another encounter. He's on the way to meet his brother.

[6 : 52] He's going home, and he's got to meet Esau, his brother. So one person I was reading was describing his situation as like, if you think about Jacob past, it was full of those kind of relationships that you'd cross the road to avoid, just the intrigue and the complexity and the discomfort, that's a word, of these relationships that Jacob had.

So that's his past, and his present was a present experience of fear, quite a fearful time that Jacob was in as we come into this chapter.

If you picked that up from when we were reading through, when David read through the chapter, he sends to Esau a message, and he sees back a message that Esau's coming with 400 men.

Now that's it. He has 400 men coming for him, and he thinks this is good news.

He's a fearful man, and he has this problem, and the future is uncertain. He doesn't know what's going to happen. He has these promises from God, which he remembers, but he doesn't know what's going to happen.

- [8 : 14] So this moment in his life is a pretty sharp one. It's one you were remembered. It's one that would have really stuck in the memory for him.
- Pretty dramatic time for Jacob. Honestly, coming to the chapter and lead up to really verse 22, I want to just ask, or seed rather, that what happens with Jacob is that he faces a time of reckoning.
- He has to confront some of the issues, some of the things from the past, and some of the situations that really he's been involved with. This is a time of reckoning for Jacob.
- What does Jacob do as we come further on in this chapter, as he prepares to meet his brother? How does he deal with it? He deals with it in a couple of ways.
- If you look at chapter 32 verse 7, the first thing he does is he organizes. Let me just read verse 7.
- [9 : 18] Remember he's heard the news, and it says in great fear and distress, Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks he heard some camels as well.
- Why? Well, he thought if Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape. So that seems sensible, doesn't it? He's thinking practically in the middle of his fear, and that's actually in character.
- Jacob, we mentioned he was a bit of a manipulator, a bit of a schemer. Well, he's a strategic thinker. He's got this problematic situation facing him, and so he acts accordingly.
- He divides his family, if you like, because his people into two camps. And that's the first thing that he does. But he's scared, isn't he? Because he thinks Esau's going to attack.
- So if one gets done, the other might get away. So he organizes. He also, though, he also prays.
- [10 : 25] Look at verse 9. We have this little semi-extended passage here. Actually, a really beautiful prayer.
- And it's a prayer which is in keeping with the covenant relationship that he has, that God has made with him. Then Jacob prayed, oh God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, the Lord who said to me, so he recognizes that God has come into his life, broken into his life, and has made this promise with him.
- And so he is responding. He's going to that God, and praying to him. And he recognizes the fact that when he had been on the outward journey as a were, he says, I had only my staff.
- But now, I have much more, he recognizes in some ways the blessing that he's had, and then he cries out to God. Now this is the one who's been a seamer, and has used his own skills and his own guile to create certain situations for himself.
- And now he's at the point where he needs to say, in verse 11, save me I pray from the hand of my brother Esau, for I'm afraid. I'm afraid he'll come and attack me.
- [11 : 46] And also the mothers with their children. But then he says, again, in keeping with the covenant promise that God has said, but you have said, I will surely make you prosper.
- So in other words, he's going to the gods, we promise with him, and we covenant with him, and he's saying, Lord, remember your promise. You promise that to me, and I am now in great need.
- I'm afraid, and I don't know what's going to happen. I can't see how this is going to turn out. I can't warm my way out of this situation. He organizes and he prays.
- It's quite telling this little phrase in verse 10, what he says, I'm unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you've shown yourself. Why is he really saying that?

The word kind of refers to, when he says I'm unworthy, he's really saying I am small, or I'm unable to deal with this by myself. He's saying, God, I need your help.

- [12 : 53] He also, and it's interesting, the different signs we see, isn't it, of his character, the different levels of what he operates in this chapter. He also, he kind of creates a buffer zone, because he's still scared.

Against his brother, and he sends a gift to Heaven. He comes behind the gifts, you'll notice.

And what he really wants to happen is for Esau to receive the gifts, and for his anger to be appeased. So that as Esau receives these gifts, which are coming ahead of him, he'll calm down, and so that by the time Jacob gets there, he'll be in a bad mood.

He'll be more willing to receive his brother. That's what he thinks, and that's what he's hoping for now. It's interesting, isn't it? I said this is a time of reckoning.

He's giving these gifts ahead of himself, back to the one, who in a sense he took from. He says in verse 20, he thought, I will pacify him with these gifts.

- [14 : 11] I am sending one ahead. So in any case, things have come around for Jacob. They've come around, but he's having this time of reckoning, he's having to deal with the situation.

And in between, we have this sense of his own desire to work things, coupled with this cry to God for help, and this prayer to God.

So it's a time of reckoning for him. Before though, he meets Esau. We have this incredible, dramatic incident, where all alone, God comes and meets with him again.

And he wrestles. There is this wrestler between God and him. And then it's a well-known story in many ways. I think lots of people today, maybe there aren't even Christians or who don't come to church, would have heard the whole thing about wrestling with God or Jacob and the angel of the Lord.

Maybe I'm being helped to mist it. But just to pull out a few things from this dramatic encounter, things that we can see going on in this story, and then things that hopefully we can learn.

- [15 : 27] See, first of all, in verse 24, he sent his family and his possessions across the floor.

And it says in verse 24, so Jacob was left alone. He's on his own. Now, if you go back to chapter 28 to the passage that we referenced briefly, where he receives the dream, he's on his own and he's travelling.

So this isn't the first time that Jacob was met with God. But it's another instance where Amor has dealings with Jacob, and he will meet with him, and he comes to him.

Where Jacob can get away and he can't bring anybody else on board. He's on his own. In the middle of nowhere, and he has to face up to God.

So that's the first thing. It's a personal one-on-one encounter that he will go through. The second thing is in this incredible story where we read that Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.

- [16 : 41] A man wrestled with him till daybreak. We don't immediately get the sense, it's not revealed in the text who this is. And as the passage gradually unfolds, Jacob and us as readers begin to see who exactly this is, who's wrestling with him.

And we come to see that it's the Lord who's coming into Vendem's life in this incredible way. There are two ways in which Jacob experiences this.

As he meets Jacob, I'll come back to this, but into chapter 33 there's a time where as he meets Esau, it says that Esau embraced him. But first of all, he has this embrace, if you like, with God.

An embrace for the wrestling of this violent encounter between the two of them. That is quite extensive and there isn't over on a flash.

And in many ways it seems incredible that Jacob prevailed in it, so that the man couldn't overcome it. But as we go through this passage, what does happen to Jacob is he's changed because his name is James.

[18 : 02] The second thing I just wanted to notice in this week that here, Jacob, remember I said that his name, Jacob, had a lot to do with his character as is often the case in the Bible. So Jacob's name had a reference to the fact that he was the supplanter.

He was the one who was like the grasp that he took. The man who's wrestling with him asks him a question, doesn't he?

In verse 29, Jacob says, please tell me your name. In verse 28, the man said, your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and men and helped people come.

Now the man who was wrestling with him had asked him, what is your name? And Jacob had had to reply, Jacob. And as he does that, we think back also to the time where he was asked by his father, he'd be like him to his father, and he dressed himself up to be like his brother.

And his father says to him, what is your name? Who are you? And he says, I'm Esau. And he deceives his father. And now as he's face to face with this one who he can't quite overpower and he can't quite, and he's beginning to comprehend who it is.

[19 : 26] And the man says to him, what is your name? Who are you? And he has to say, I am Jacob. And as he says that, he's saying, I am the one who took my brother, who deceived my father.

I'm the one who deceived her. He's had his time of reckoning, he's been forced to come to terms with his nature and his character in this so personal encounter with God.

But yet we see the way that God deals mercifully with him. And so his name, as I said, is changed. And as we come to the end of their encounter, he says to him, your name will now be Israel.

Because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome. He is the one who will now be known as someone who has wrestled with God.

He's someone who has had dealings with men and he's overcome. And he's wrestled with the Lord. And this is to be a central aspect of who he is now.

[20 : 36] Jacob is the one who has had a renewed experience of the power and the presence of God the Lord. And it changes him.

It doesn't completely change him. So he comes out of here a completely different man, honest in all his dealings. Because even in the next chapter when he meets his brother, he's still not completely straight with him.

Yet Jacob is a changed man after this encounter and after this rest up that he has with the Lord. Now why is that?

He says in verse 30 something very noticeable. After he's been told that his name will be changed, and when he's received the blessing that he craves from God, he then says in verse 30, Jacob called the place, Peniel, saying, It's because I saw God face to face and yet my life was spared.

I saw God face to face and yet my life was spared. And I said at the start, it's a really raw, very visceral story of this.

[21 : 54] It's a story about two men in a gorge at night, grappling and a real wrestle going on.

And also at the core of this story is an encounter with one man, Jacob, being changed by the living Lord.

And going to him and changing him in the way that he understood and the way that he knew God. He sees in the way that God has dealt with him, the grace and the mercy of God.

Who should be able to stand before God, let alone grapple with God and live? Jacob knows, should be nobody.

Jacob also knows as he comes to realize his character and as he comes to face up to all that he has done in his life, all the detritus of the past and the rubbish that he carried with him and the deceitfulness.

[23 : 01] As he faced up to all of that and stood before and wrestled with this God, there's no way he should have lived. But yet he says, I have seen God face to face and my life was spared because of the mercy and the grace of God.

That's a central core experience in his life, in his existence. I bet you haven't expected that that would happen to him that evening.

As he faced up to the situation that he had, who could have thought that that was the way, that was a very specific way that the Lord dealt with him in that particular encounter.

But as we take a story like this and we reflect on it, how do we take an ancient, if you like, story about a particular incident in the life of one man and a flight to ourselves?

Well, that core central experience that he went through at that particular time showed us the way that God deals with men and women always.

[24 : 14] It shows us once again the way that God deals in mercy as he comes to people like us. And mercy in grace is something that really comes out of this passage.

It comes out, and I'm not going to go into this, but it comes out as he goes on from here, he meets his brother. Because surprisingly, what happens when he meets his brother?

In chapter 33 verse 4, in an incident that in many ways prefigures one of the stories that Jesus would tell, he saw Ram to meet Jacob and embraced him, he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him and made weapons.

So he's shown mercy by his brother, and in many ways one of the important things in his life is that that relationship, there is reconciliation and the relationship to a large degree is restored between the brothers.

But there's also mercy shown of course as we've already seen by God. God deals with Jacob in an incredibly gracious way. And that's something that we have to take out of this passage.

[25 : 26] God always deals with men and women merciful. Because again, what one of you or I could ever stand, if we were to stand on our own tent before God, God has always worked in human history, mercifully, at a big level. If you think about the big picture of the way that he's worked to bring salvation, remember that we said that the prayer that Jacob made, as he remembered the covenant that God had made with him, this is like the big picture. Had Jacob deserved God to come to him, I'd have promised him.

Well no, but God had dealt with him and dealt with his people mercifully. And he had promised to save our people for himself. And incredibly Jacob was one who he chose to do that.

And so we see that in the big picture, but also at a very personal level. Like I said before, this wasn't the first time Jacob had experienced God.

This wasn't out of the blue revelation, where he suddenly saw the Lord and was converted on the spot. But this was another instance where the Lord came into his life and if you like, moved him on.

He met with him again and he changed him and he caused Jacob to be face to face with him.

[27 : 00] I'll put it any more bluntly than that, but that experienced Jacob had of being face to face, of being right in front of the presence of God. That was something to move him on in his personal walk.

And that's the way that the Lord deals with you and me. That's the gospel, that's the experience that every one of us has when we come face to face with our lives.

And the messiness or the confusion or the fear or the current perplexity or mess of any relationships we may have. And the sins that keep breaking in and following us and calling for us to follow them.

We have that experience where we know the forgiveness of God. You know that as if you're a Christian, somebody who has come face to face with the Lord and confess Jesus as your Savior.

But it's not a once in a lifetime experience. It's not something you forget about, certainly shouldn't be. And it is something that we need on an ongoing basis.

[28 : 20] So you and I can't go into this week thinking we don't need to know the presence of God. Because we always do.

What happens to Jacob in this encounter? Jacob has known God's presence, he's known the promises of God. But what does God cause him to experience again? Well, he's humbled by the God who is over all things and who has a purpose.

And he's working using Jacob for that purpose. And he's the one who will rule over Jacob's life. Jacob is the one who is often manipulated in order to be in control of a situation.

And it comes to the point where he's humbled. Now, you and I need that. It's not for us and we can't think that we control every aspect of our life to see ourselves tempting it sometimes seems.

He experiences, as we've said, the unmerited grace of God. He didn't change, become a better person and then receive God's favor.

[29 : 29] The Lord was gracious to him. And every time we know the Lord working in our lives, the Lord is gracious to us.

And he knew also the presence of God. Let me just read. As Jacob moves on and as he returns home, I'm just going to read a verse from further on.

It really speaks of Jacob's ongoing learning of God and of who his God was.

So Jacob, in chapter 35, so Jacob said to his household and to all the girl with him, get rid of the foreign gods you have with you and purify yourselves and change your clothes. Then come, let us go up to Bethel where I will build an altar to God who answered me in the day of my distress.

And who's been with me wherever I have gone. So there may have been something of the way which he had learned of the faithfulness and the presence of God in his life.

[30 : 38] So now, one more illustration, footballing illustration, if I may. I read a quote this week from Louis Van Halve, a Manchester United man.

He was angry. I think that's quite common to see, judging by his character. He was angry because the footballers in England have to play three games in two days. When I was young, I used to love playing three games in two days, but obviously that doesn't suit him.

Anyway, the particular reason he was angry wasn't just because he thought his players would be tired, but because he says, I have a specific way of preparing my players. May you such and such on one day, and then another thing on another day.

So he has a very defined formula. He says, I can't do that with my players if I've only got one or two days to prepare them.

They won't be ready. I know. When you and I think about, not just the coming year, around this time we think about the new year, and not just the coming week, but the coming day tomorrow.

[31 : 50] And the things that face us, and the challenges that we have, not least the challenge of our own hearts, where you and I are tempted, time and again, to grow cold in our love for the Lord and in our knowledge of the Lord, the key thing that we need is this kind of encounter.

Now again, this is a very specific encounter that we've had experience, but to be able to know the presence of the Lord, to be humble before, and to know his mercy, and to know his ongoing presence is what we need.

And it's what we should pray for. And the Lord will work in different ways at different times to meet with us. But let's not be believers who have a distance and a cold walk with the Lord.

Let's be believers who look forward to fresh experiences and encounters in maybe very mundane ways by leading the word of prayer, and not speaking of anything supernatural, mystical, here, necessarily.

People who know the ongoing presence of the Lord, which helps them in their day-to-day life. And that's something that we can pray for, and encourage each other.

[33 : 24] Pray for, encourage each other. Amen. Let me just pray. Lord, we praise you for the honesty of the Bible and the way in which there are so many incredible stories.

But the stories tell us that you don't stay away from fallen mankind. You come to many women to reveal your purposes and to change them.

To bring them to a knowledge of their need of you. To get them, like Jacob, to the point where they're really at the end of themselves. And that, if we're believers, has been our experience where we know we can't save ourselves.

And so we trust in you. And we pray also that we would have an ongoing knowledge of you in our lives that we would meet with you regularly. And we pray that you would meet with us, Lord.

And that we wouldn't keep the Bible as a closed book on our shelves. And that we wouldn't deflect away from our prayer times.

[34 : 36] And avoid any conversation with our Christian brothers and sisters where we might speak of you. And help us to love these times, Lord.

And we pray that we wouldn't be church or churches who rely on just programs or anything external, but that we be churches full of people who know the living God and who love to know and to speak about the living God.

We need you to do this, Lord, and to meet with us and to renew us and to refresh our souls. And we pray that we would know the gospel of Jesus Christ as an ongoing salvation.

The one who has saved us and the one who transforms us day by day to become more like him. So be with us, Lord, and bless us. Thank you that we can worship you.

Thank you that we can come into your presence and pray and say to you. Thank you that even in so doing, Lord, you stayed us in your mercy call towards us.

[35 : 47] We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.