**God’s Plan of Grace**

Do you remember last week’s lesson? Sadly, we learnt about the consequences of sin in Isaac’s family. Do you remember that Rebekah was expecting twins. She couldn’t understand why there seemed to be so much fighting going on inside her womb. The Lord God told her that her children would fight all through their lives. He told Rebekah that the older son would serve the younger son, and that the younger son would inherit the birth right. Normally it was the firstborn who had the birthright, but the Lord said it would be different here.

Can you remember the name of the firstborn child? It was Esau and he was covered with red hair. The younger came out holding onto the foot of Esau and what was the name of this younger child? It was Jacob, which means “Supplanter”, that is “One who takes the place of another.” Even in birth, Jacob was trying to be first! Each parent had their favourite child; Isaac loved Esau, who loved being outside and cooked venison the exact way Isaac liked it, whilst Rebekah loved Jacob, who was far more interested in home comforts.

Isaac knew that the Lord would bring about his purposes His way. Isaac was now getting old and knew that he had to pass on his blessing. But he wasn’t going to take it into his own hands to make God’s prophecy come true, so he was going to pass on the blessing onto Esau, even though Esau had shown that he had no interest in the things of God. Can you remember how Esau had treated the birthright? He had sold it to Jacob for the paltry price of a bowl of soup. Esau thought his immediate hunger and need was more important than God’s plan of bringing a mighty nation forth.

When Isaac said that he would bless Esau and give him the inheritance – did Esau feel guilty that he had already given it away? Did he say to his father “You can’t give it to me, I gave the birthright to Jacob?” No, it didn’t matter to Esau. He had got what he wanted from Jacob that day, but as far as he was concerned, he was still going to get the blessing from Isaac, even though he cared nothing for it. He lived for the day and didn’t worry about the consequences of what he had done.

This was why, when he found out about how Jacob and Rebekah had tricked him out of getting the blessing from Isaac, his anger was so great that he wished to murder Jacob. He was out of control and let his emotions get the better of him. Esau cared absolutely nothing about the things of God and married two women from the land of Canaan, we’re told that these women were a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah, as they didn’t love the Lord God.

But now we leave Esau aside and think about Jacob. Was he any better than Esau? He was a quieter person; the bible describes him as a plain man, not noticed by many others, quietly helping at home. Did this make him a good person who never sinned? No, often it can be the quieter ones, who are the crafty, sneaky, underhand ones. This was Jacob’s character. We can see this by his treatment of Esau and by deceiving his own father. Together with his mother Rebekah, he schemed to make sure he cooked the tastiest of smelling soups and used his brother’s absence in order for him to get the birth right. He was devious and underhand, as he plotted with Rebekah to trick Isaac through his failing sight to ensure that he got the blessing. Jacob may have been outwardly quiet but inwardly, he was a devious and deceitful schemer, living up to his name as a supplanter.

However, this time his trickery was discovered, sin caught up with him and he couldn’t get out of trouble. His brother Esau was so angry that he wanted Jacob dead, so for his protection, he was sent away, far from home. They thought it wouldn’t be long, just a couple of weeks or months or so, and Jacob would soon be back. But Jacob was away many years before he returned. The home loving Jacob had to leave his home quickly; he had no time to pack, leaving behind a father who had seen him for what he was, a deceiver; leaving a brother who hated him so much he wanted to kill him and also leaving a sorrowing mother who didn’t realise it at the time, but she would never see her favourite son again. Sin ruins; it always brings pain and destruction.

There is a verse in the last book of the Old Testament, the book of Malachi, that is repeated in Paul’s letter to the Romans that says “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated”. There is a story about Mr Spurgeon, who used to be the Pastor at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in the 19th Century. Someone came to him and said about this verse, I just can’t understand how a God of love could hate Esau. What was Spurgeon’s response to this? He said “what I can’t understand is how God could love Jacob!”

Jacob knew he deserved punishment. He knew that he had sinned and yet the Lord God, in His infinite mercy, had a plan for Jacob, a plan of grace and mercy. The Lord had chosen this scheming, devious and underhand Jacob to bring about his purposes and through Jacob would come many descendants who would be the children of Israel and ultimately, would come that promised seed of the woman, the Messiah, the Saviour Himself, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jacob left his home in disgrace, with nothing; when it was night-time, he had no comfortable bed and nothing to sleep in. Maybe you’ve been camping but even in a tent, you might have a comfortable sleeping bag, but Jacob had nothing like that; the only place that he could lay his head upon was an uncomfortable rock. When he was at his most alone, frightened and conscious of his sin; that was when the Lord came to him and spoke to him through a dream. We read of it in the hymn we sang earlier “As to the holy patriarch, That wondrous dream was given, From the burning of the noontide heat, So seems my Saviour’s cross to me”. Can you remember what that dream was? It was a ladder (or perhaps better a stairway) up to Heaven and there at the top of the stairway, was a vison of the Lord God Himself.

What’s the purpose of a ladder? It helps you to get somewhere that is out of your reach. The Lord was showing Jacob that as a sinner, by himself, he could not reach God; He was not good enough for God or for heaven. However, because the Lord knows that no one is good enough to reach Heaven by themselves and keep His law, then He Himself has made a way to Heaven. Jacob couldn’t put that ladder there, in fact no man could, only the Lord Himself could make the way to Heaven open for us.

You may remember that in the Gospel according to John, the Lord spoke to a man called Nathaniel, who would become one of His disciples and He said to him “…Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man”. He was teaching that it was the Lord Jesus Christ Himself who was the ladder that Jacob saw. It is only by Christ Himself, that we can be made good enough for God and be forgiven. It is not our righteousness but His alone and we need that to be given us.

There is a chorus that you may have sung at Sunday School and Bible class many times “O the love that drew salvation's plan! O the grace that brought it down to man! O the mighty gulf that God did span at Calvary. Mercy there was great and grace was free, Pardon there was multiplied to me, There my burdened soul found liberty – At Calvary.” There is a gulf, a chasm between Heaven and earth and it is only through his death on the cross that the Lord Jesus Christ has bridged that gulf, that span so that we can be saved.

A further comfort to Jacob from his dream was that there were angels going up to Heaven and down again from Heaven. What was the point of the angels there? Surely they were ministering to the Lord’s people, bringing messages and encouragements from the Lord to His people. God has given many messengers throughout history, He has given preachers and teachers, who have faithfully proclaimed the Gospel message of salvation and He has especially given us His Word, the Bible. There are great transactions pictured between Heaven and Earth, and it is especially through the Lord Jesus Christ Himself that the greatest transaction of all has taken place, the death of Christ on the cross to take the punishment for our sin and to give us His righteousness.

The Lord then spoke to Jacob and explained to him that He would give him the land that he was sleeping on and make a great nation from sinful Jacob! God in His great mercy was going to use Jacob the sinner, Jacob the deceiver. He was ready to forgive him because of what the Lord Jesus Christ did on taking the punishment for those who would believe on Him. What grace! What undeserved mercy and kindness shown to one such as Jacob.

What was Jacob’s response? He awoke and was filled with a mixture of fear and gratitude. This was a never to be forgotten moment, as he understood for the first time about The Lord’s Holiness and the way of salvation. Jacob was converted and promised to serve the Lord. He was so overcome with God’s mercy that he took the stone that he had slept on and pushed it upright into the ground to mark that an incredible thing had happened there. He renamed the place Bethel “the House of God” because the Lord had brought Heaven and forgiveness to him.

That same grace is offered to you and indeed to all. We don’t need dreams to teach us these things anymore – we have the complete word of God to tell us about this grace and mercy. The Lord will come to us if we see that we are sinners. Just like Jacob, we may squabble, argue, cheat, lie and be mean to others. We deserve judgement for our sins, but the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who promised Abraham, Isaac and now sinful Jacob forgiveness, promises the same to each one of us if we will cry out to Him for forgiveness and help. Have you seen that you, yourself are a sinner needing God’s merciful forgiveness because of the Lord Jesus Christ? Will you seek and find Him? Will you trust that the only way to be saved is by the Lord Jesus Christ? When each of us is saved it is a transformation in our lives, and if you come to the Lord for yourself, you will know that you are truly His.

Come next week and see how the Lord had to deal with Jacob to make him truly earnest in following Him as his Lord and Saviour.