

Trust, but Verify

Genesis 32:1-23

A couple weeks ago Sharon and I enjoy the new movie Reagan, chronicling for us, of course, not just the life and history of the 40th president of the United States, but also the history of our country during our late teenage and early adult years. He was president when we got married in 1987. The movie has received mixed reviews, depending, not surprisingly, upon political affiliation, but I think it is far to say that one of the emphases of the movie rightly captured both the spirit and the corresponding actions that Reagan is known for as history moves on these past 40 years, namely his opposition to the whole system of communism, especially as it was then practiced in what was then the Soviet Union, the USSR.

That period of time is rightly identified as the cold war, and toward the end of the cold war, under the leadership of President Reagan, our country had a very well-defined approach to the the Soviet Union. Early in his presidency, Reagan had publicly labelled that nation as the evil empire, and he also used other very provocative words to describe our greatest arch-enemy since WWII. But then, as things began to change, particularly with the arrival of President Gorbachov, Reagan began negotiating with the Soviets in order to bring about an end to nuclear proliferation. And when asked how he could negotiate with a nation he had called the evil empire, when asked how he could trust our arch enemy at the bargaining table, he answered by announcing what that policy was, in a typically simplistic but extremely meaningful way. Trust, but verify!

Trust them, that is, negotiate in good faith. But verify. Hold them accountable. The bargaining position which was used to ultimately bring an end to the cold war was, in fact, the insistence

upon verification. Negotiate and sign treaties, then verify to make sure that the other side is complying with them. Trust, but verify. Negotiate peace through diplomacy, but verify subsequent actions through military presence.

I believe we can say that Jacob has a very similar approach as he prepares to meet Esau in Genesis 32. You seen two different approaches in Esau, though they are not contradictory. Jacob is gracious toward his brother, humble and generous. But he is also wise, for although he seeks a friendly response, he is preparing for that which he fears the most, a hostile response.

But above all that, much more importantly, we see again God's presence. That wonderful, precious, encouraging promise which God had given to Jacob many years earlier, back at Bethel.

Gen. 28:10 "Now Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Haran. 11 So he came to a certain place and stayed there all night, because the sun had set. And he took one of the stones of that place and put it at his head, and he lay down in that place to sleep. 12 Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. 13 And behold, the LORD stood above it and said: "I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. 14 Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. 15 Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you."

Here in chapter 32, God is fulfilling that promise. Jacob is in trouble. He has finally rid himself of Laban, who had oppressed

him the past 20 years. And, at the Lord's command, he returns home to Canaan. But remember, when he was sent away, his mother Rebekah said that she would send for him as soon as Esau's fury subsides, when he is no longer angry. We find no record that she ever sent for him. Perhaps therefore, Jacob must have thought, Esau's anger has developed into a twenty year grudge. With that uncertainty, he finds himself in very dangerous position. And as we see here, in times of danger,

I. THERE IS NO GREATER ENCOURAGEMENT THAN THE REMINDER OF GOD'S PRESENCE.

v.1-2

We're not told how far he got away from Laban, but the presumption is that this is somewhere near the border of Canaan. The angels met him. Angels of God. Angels sent from God. Not one angel. Not a guardian angel, but a host of angels. An army of angels met Jacob.

And what are angels?

Hebr. 1:14 "Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?"

Yes they are! Angels are ministering spirits. They are spiritual creatures, created by God as spirits, that is, without a body. They inhabit heaven, and they come to earth on God's behalf. They are, very literally, his messengers. The word "angel", in both Hebrew and Greek, means "messenger." A messenger sent with a specific job to accomplish. To minister to us. Because they are God's messengers, we can say, therefore, that,

A. Angels represent God's presence.

This is another example of God coming to Jacob in a personal, and for him, visible, way. There is no escaping the

reality of this. This was not merely an emotional or even spiritual experience in his own mind, this was not a figment of his imagination, nor merely the memory of a dream. Actual creatures, called angels, came to Jacob from the presence of God, to minister to his needs. And Jacob understood that. He understood that,

B. Angels represent God's help.

Look at what he named the place.

v.2

Camp is a military word. It was the camp of an army. Therefore the word can also be translated "host," which more directly means "army" or "host of soldiers." So when he saw the angels, Jacob said to himself, "This is God's army." So he named the place, Mahanaim.

Now, you miss the significance of this unless you have some good footnotes. The Hebrew word for "camp" is the word is "mahaneh." And the plural is the word Jacob uses as a name for the place, "Mahanaim." So the name of the place is, somewhat literally, "two camps," or "two armies."

In other words, Jacob realizes that he is not dependent upon his own meager defenses for protection against Esau. His small army is not alone. There are two armies. His own, as weak as they were. And one infinitely more numerous and powerful. God's own army, representing all the power of heaven itself. Such was the encouragement of the angels of God!

For that reason, I don't like the concept of a guardian angel because it gives the idea that God's help for you is limited to a single, individual angel, when the biblical picture is of a great and mighty army. So you ought to picture yourself like Jacob, with that heavenly army at your side, defending and helping you at all

times. Not a solitary guardian angel, but the army of God.

Jacob had seen those same angels before in that great vision of a ladder which God gave him in a dream, as we studied in,

Gen. 28:12 “Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.”

The angels descended the ladder to communicate God’s help to man, and they ascend the ladder to bear man’s needs before God. The angels represent God’s help.

So what does Jacob do with this vision of God’s help? What does the encouragement of God’s presence cause him to do? Two things, which some people might think were contradictory. But they really aren’t, at least, not if they are both done properly.

What two things does Jacob do? He prays. And he makes plans for a peaceful reconciliation. He prays and he plans. Those two things don’t contradict each other. He doesn’t pray, then do nothing but wait around for God to help him. Nor does he vainly attempt to handle this situation by making plans in his own strength and ability.

He plans and acts wisely, even as he prays earnestly. Both are appropriate. Let’s study his actions first, then his prayer.
v.3

He sends his own messengers ahead of him to seek out Esau. He could have tried to avoid his brother, which was geographically possible. But he knows that would be foolish. Equally foolish would be to approach Esau with no sense of what to expect. His plan, as we’ll see, was to seek reconciliation. And the principle is valid for all circumstances, that in times of danger,

II. THERE IS NO GREATER WISDOM THAN SEEKING PEACEFUL RECONCILIATION.

Peaceful reconciliation is always a good idea, whenever possible. These are timely principles, applying now just as they did then. Human nature is still the same. Sin is still the same. And God’s wisdom is still the same. So we read in,

Rom. 12:17 “Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. 18 If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.”

Rom. 14:19 “Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another.”

Hebr. 12:14 “Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord.”

The command to live at peace with everyone, “as much as it depends on you,” implies the need for wisdom. It implies the need to seek reconciliation. Indeed, we are commanded to seek personal reconciliation.

Matt. 5:23 “Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison.”

So Jacob’s actions here are an example of that wisdom, and in seeking peaceful reconciliation,

A. Jacob demonstrates gracious humility toward Esau.

This is such a good example for us,
v.4-5

There is nothing here to indicate that Jacob is manipulating Esau. Nothing to indicate that he is condescending or using empty flattery. Just on the service, genuine graciousness. He tells his messengers exactly what to say. Esau is to be addressed respectfully as “my master” or “my lord.” Jacob is to be humbly described as “your servant.” His station in life is to be described, including his profitable service for Laban, so that Esau can be sure Jacob isn’t after anything. And his intentions are honorably described,

v.5b “I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight.”

What a marvelous application of the wisdom of,
Prov. 15:1 “A soft answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger.”

What a marvelous demonstration of gracious humility. It is a sad commentary upon our society that we are losing this sort of graciousness in dealing with people. As a society, we are harsh with one another. We speak often speak sharply, even disrespectfully. We openly reveal our impatience and our frustration, and vent our anger and bitterness as if that was a good thing to do! And we see that practiced in the public realm, even in the campaign for the presidency of the United States.

Jacob wisely had no such approach. But in his graciousness, he still takes precautions.

B. Jacob employs wise precautions regarding Esau.

Notice what he does, particularly after he gets a report back from his messengers that Esau is close by, accompanied by 400 men.

v.6

There is an immediate plan, a contingency plan, to be sure, but nonetheless a plan. A military plan actually.

v.7-8

The idea is that in the worst case scenario, at least half his family and entourage would survive. Knowing that they couldn’t possibly fight off an army of 400 men, they would essentially sacrifice half so that the other half could escape.

Further, they also decided to go ahead and cross the Jabbok River that night, freeing themselves from having to start the next day with that potentially difficult crossing.

v.22

My point is that this is a very wise precaution. Such a plan doesn’t contradict his faith in God’s protection, but just takes into account our human responsibility to act with wisdom in our affairs with other men. Jesus gave his disciples that same advice,

Mat.10:16 “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.”

The final part of Jacob’s plan was to offer gifts. And we see that,

C. Jacob offers generous gifts to Esau.

Let me read it.

v.13-21

This was a substantial gift. A total of 580 animals, revealing the depth of Jacob’s wealth! Even the method of giving of the gift was intended to bring about peace, providing for intervals between the gifts which makes the effect of the gift even greater.

These gifts should not be seen as a bribe on Jacob’s part, but rather as an expression of good will and conciliation. The words

given presenting the gifts express that,

v.17-19

His motivation is expressly revealed in,

v.20b “I will appease him with the present that goes before me, and afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me.”

The gifts represent a humble petition to be received kindly. It was the best outward gesture that Jacob could make in an attempt to be reconciled to Esau, or more accurately, for Esau to be reconciled, or appeased, toward him. The gifts went to Esau first.

v.21

Again, let me emphasize the wisdom of seeking peaceful reconciliation. If we will apply these principles to one another in the church, then whatever differences arise among us can be resolved. Apply these principles in your home, too, even in those closest of relationships that can so easily become strained. Husband and wife. Parent and child. Brother and sister.

Seek peaceful reconciliation. Do it among friends and neighbors. Do it with those with whom you work. Whatever your circumstances, “if it is possible, as much as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” But don’t forget the other thing that Jacob did. He prayed.

It is his prayer, above all, that proves to me that his actions were sincere. By themselves, you might view these actions with some suspicion. But not in the context of this prayer. In times of danger,

III. THERE IS NO GREATER DUTY THAN TO PRAY FERVENTLY.

And pray he did.

One of the best ways to learn how to pray is to study the examples given to us in the Scripture. And this prayer of Jacob is a great place to start.

v.9-12

How does Jacob start? “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, the LORD.” He calls to mind God’s name and his identity, his personal name and his personal identity. For Jacob, God is very, very personal. There is a family relationship established, a history of faithfulness. Jacob knows God!

And he knows God as the LORD, or Jehovah, or a bit more accurately, Yahweh. That is God’s covenant name, the name which refers to his covenant promises. It is a name which means “I am,” or even, “I am who I am.” It is a name that means that God will be faithful to keep every single promise he has ever made, because he is, and always will be, the same. He does not change like a man.

Jacob recounts that one precious promise as he talks to God, v.9b. “...the LORD who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your family, and I will deal well with you.’”

Surely that is an example for us that,

A. When we pray, we should call to mind God’s name and his promises.

As Jesus taught us to pray, we should begin with a recognition of God and who he is, and understanding of our relationship to him, praying, “Our father, which art in heaven.”

Praying is talking to God, as we might well explain it to our children. It is talking to God as our father, as our children might

talk to us. And every conversation should be conducted in that family context. So one of the keys to effective prayer is knowing God, knowing what God is like.

And how do you know what God is like? He has revealed himself in the Bible. So when you pray to God, address him with some of the names which you find in the Bible. Begin your conversation with God by calling him by name, a name which he has revealed himself. Just like Jacob.

v.9a

And as a child talking to a father, remind him of his promises.

v.9b

We should do that with God, remind him of his promises to us —not that he forgets them, of course, as we might be prone to do with one another. But the reality that God will often carry out his promises as a direct result of our prayers. So we are to pray! Be confident, though respectful. Be bold, yet submissive. But appeal to God on the basis of what he has promised to you. Just like Jacob.

Jacob even repeats the promise,

v.12

An example?

God has promised to be our God and the God of our children. Plead with God for your children, by repeating to him his promise. Particularly if you have children who stray from the Lord, pray that God would bring them back. For he promised to be our God and the God of our children.

God has promised us that if we seek first his kingdom, he will give us everything we need for life, things like food and clothing

and housing. If you face a particular need, financial or otherwise, and if you are, indeed, seeking first his kingdom, then claim that promise as you pray. God has promised.

Mat.6:31 “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”

If you have committed a particularly troublesome or grievous sin, claim God’s promise even as you confess that sin to him.

1John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

If you need guidance, claim God’s promise.

James1:5 “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.”

In general terms, claim the promise of,

Luke 11:9 “So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. 11 If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? 12 Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? 13 If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!”

When you pray, you should call to mind God’s name and his promises. But you must do it with humility, for,

B. When we pray, we should acknowledge our own sinful unworthiness.

Again, Jacob's example.
v.10

"I am not worthy." Don't ever lose that perspective. Don't ever think, "You know, I am worth it." Don't ever think that even the littlest, tiniest speck of worthiness is in you. Don't think for a moment that you can pray to God on the basis of your own righteousness or good works. For in the words of the prophet Isaiah,

Isa. 64:6 "But we are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; We all fade as a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, Have taken us away. 7 And there is no one who calls on Your name, Who stirs himself up to take hold of You; For You have hidden Your face from us, And have consumed us because of our iniquities."

Don't ever lose the sense of your sin. But with that awful sense of your own sin, don't ever lose the sense of God's grace either. In fact, Isaiah's very next words are,

Isa. 64:8 "But now, O LORD, You are our Father; We are the clay, and You our potter; And all we are the work of Your hand. 9 Do not be furious, O LORD, Nor remember iniquity forever; Indeed, please look—we all are Your people!"

Don't let your sense of unworthiness drive you away from God, but rather let it drive you closer to God, for the purpose of emphasizing your own sinful unworthiness is to magnify the glorious grace of God!

Again, Jacob's example. Jacob doesn't deny God's kindness. He accepts it, with a sense of his own unworthiness.

v.10 "I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all

the truth which You have shown Your servant."

It's the sense of that so familiar hymn, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." Don't lose the sense of your own wretchedness, but let it cause God's grace to seem all the more amazing. How sweet a sound it is, that God would save a horrible, wicked sinner such as I am.

The devil will make you think that because of your sin, God will not show kindness and faithfulness to you. But of course, the Hebrew word for Satan means accuser, and his accusation is false. The truth of the gospel is that despite your sinful unworthiness, God has, in fact, shown you kindness and faithfulness.

So when you pray, acknowledge your own sinful unworthiness, but don't let Satan accuse you or make you think that God won't forgive it. Instead, acknowledge the depth of your filthy sin, so that you can be reassured by God's promise of forgiveness and cleansing. That is called grace.

God doesn't hear our prayers because we are righteous. He hears them because he is a God of grace. And he will often wait to answer those prayers until we freely confess our sinfulness.

Notice the progression of,

2Chr. 7:14 "...if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. 15 Now My eyes will be open and My ears attentive to prayer made in this place."

A NT example.

1Tim. 1:5 "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all

acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. 16 However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life. 17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Finally,

C. When we pray, we should specifically ask for help.

Notice what Jacob asks for.

v.11

Very specific, very direct, very bold. The instructions for how to pray are easy. Ask. There should never be a question in your mind of whether or not you should ask for something, unless, of course, you know that what you are asking for is sinful. Don't ever try to guess if you should ask a specific petition or not. Just ask it, if it is the desire of your heart.

You know that you must also submit to God's will, and that God might well say “no” to your request. You should pray even with the words, “if it is your will,” but with that proper submission, ask for anything. That's the whole point of prayer. Ask for specific requests. It is often true that,

James 4:2 “You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask.”

So ask, and keep on asking! That is a sign and demonstration of faith, as Jesus teaches with this incredible parable about prayer,

Luke 18:1 “Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, 2 saying: “There was in a

certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. 3 Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, ‘Get justice for me from my adversary.’

Luke 18:4 And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, ‘Though I do not fear God nor regard man, 5 yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.’” 6 Then the Lord said, “Hear what the unjust judge said. 7 And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? 8 I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?”

Sometimes we make prayer too hard, when it really is quite simple. Acknowledge God. Acknowledge your own sin. Then ask for whatever it is you need or want.