

A STEP OF FAITH OR A STEP OUT OF IT?

“And Rebekah heard when Isaac spake to Esau his son. And Esau went to the field to hunt for venison, and to bring it. And Rebekah spake unto Jacob her son, saying, Behold, I heard thy father speak unto Esau thy brother, saying, Bring me venison, and make me savoury meat, that I may eat, and bless thee before the Lord before my death. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice according to that which I command thee...And Rebekah took goodly raiment of her eldest son Esau, which were with her in the house, and put them upon Jacob her younger son: and she put the skins of the kids of the goats upon his hands, and upon the smooth of his neck: And she gave the savoury meat and the bread, which she had prepared into the hand of her son, Jacob. And he came to his father, and said, My father; and he said, Here am I; who art thou, my son? And Jacob said unto his father, I am Esau thy firstborn; I have done according as thou badest me; arise, I pray thee, sit and eat of my venison, that thy soul may bless me” [Gen. 27:5-8, 15-19]

Here is a dilemma that an average believer faces. God has promised you a blessing, but He has not told you how or when He will bring it to pass. You are expected to cooperate by taking a step of faith. The danger, however, is that that step may turn out to be a carnal plan, a step out of faith! So, how do you move forward so that you do not delay the fulfillment of God’s word in your life? That is our concern in today’s lesson.

God told Abraham that he would father a son: “he that shall come out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir” [Gen. 15:4]. His wife, Sarah, then 75 years old, was barren. God did not tell them as yet which woman would be the mother of the said heir. What did they do? Sarah gave her maid, Hagar, an Egyptian girl, to Abraham as wife. She bore him a son, Ishmael, the patriarch of the Arab nations [Gen. 16:1-12; 17:20]. It was only 14 years later that God revealed to Abraham that his heir would be born by Sarah [Gen. 17:15-21]. Today, the Middle East crisis is a mortal combat between the descendants of Isaac [the Jews] and those of Ishmael [the Arabs], the children of Abraham! A single step out of faith has brought that about.

In our daily walk, we have run into similar ditches. Right now, some of us are confused, not knowing what next to do. We thought that we had heard from God to take certain steps. We took them only to discover that we have dug deeper into mire! Our faith has been shaken, tempting some of us to want to give up completely. There is no cause for alarm because God will “hold up my goings in [His] paths, that my footsteps slip not” [Ps. 17:5]. He has assured us, “thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, this is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left” [Is. 30:21].

In today’s lesson, we shall study the story of Jacob’s usurpation of Esau’s blessings to understand this important subject.

1. Jacob claims Esau's blessings

The crisis began from Rebekah's womb. Twenty years into her marriage to Isaac, there was no child because she was barren. Isaac prayed to God and she conceived [Gen. 25:21]. However, it was a troubled pregnancy. She did not go to her gynaecologist. Instead, she went to God who told her that she was expecting twins, two nations and two people, "and the elder shall serve the younger" [v. 23]. In due course, Esau and Jacob were born in that order [v. 25]. So, God's word on the twins was that the blessing of Abraham, received by Isaac, would pass on to the younger son, Jacob.

As we saw in last week's discussion, the birthright *ordinarily* belongs to the firstborn who is thereby to receive a double portion of his father's estate [Deut. 21:15-17]. However, by God's will, the birthright is transferable to children other than the firstborn, as in the case of Isaac over Ishmael [Gen. 17:19-20] and David over the older children of Jesse [1 Sam. 16:1-13]. God's promise to Rebekah was that the birthright would go to her younger son, Jacob.

Rebekah and her son, Jacob, went about fulfilling God's word by resorting to devious tricks! First of all, Jacob 'bought' the birthright from his brother, Esau, for a mere pot of lentils [Gen. 25:30-34]. Then, when Isaac was old and knew that he would soon die, he called for Esau to prepare him his favourite dish as a prelude to receiving the birthright blessing [Gen. 27:4]. Rebekah heard it and she called her favourite son, Jacob, and instructed him on how to supplant his elder brother so as to receive the said blessing [vv. 9-10]. Jacob knew that what his mother wanted him to do was wrong, and he said:

Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man. My father peradventure will feel me, and I shall seem to him as a deceiver; and I shall bring a curse upon me, and not a blessing [vv. 11-12]

His mother encouraged him on. She did all the cooking and all the masking of Jacob's smooth body with animal skins, to make him look like Esau [vv. 13-17]. However, much as Isaac's eyes were weak, his ears were not. When he felt Jacob's body, Isaac said, "the voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau" [v. 22]. He had his doubts, and asked again, "Art thou my very son Esau?" and Jacob maintained his lie! [v.24]. Since Jacob's clothing smelt like Esau's and the food that he had brought tasted as expected, Isaac gave the blessing to Jacob, as follows:

Therefore God give thee of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine. Let people serve thee, and nations bow down to thee: be lord over thy brethren, and let thy mother's sons bow down to thee: cursed be every one that curseth thee, and blessed be he that blesseth thee [vv. 28-29]

So, using crooked means, he received the blessing that the Lord had promised him before he was born. What blessing did Esau get after all? First, he obtained the blessing of prosperity, “thy dwelling shall be the fatness of the earth, and of the dew of heaven from above” [v. 39]. Jacob had also received this blessing [v. 28]. However, he could not get the birthright blessing. Instead, “behold, I have made him [Jacob] thy lord, and all his brethren have I given to him for servants” [v.37]. That is in line with God’s plan, isn’t it? But, what of the methods used? Were they in line with God’s plan? I doubt!

2. Is God’s hand too short or too weak to deliver?

There was a leading member of a local church whose show of spirituality encouraged the whole congregation. One day, news spread to the church that he had been arrested for corruptly enriching himself. His pastor went to visit him in police custody and asked him, “How could you have done that?” He replied the pastor, “where did you think that I got all the fat tithes and offerings from?”

Believers tend to forget that God is not a man that He should lie, “hath He said, and shall He not do it? Or hath He spoken, and shall He not make it good?” [Num. 23:19]. God has challenged us, “Is My hand shortened at all, that it cannot redeem? Or have I no power to deliver?” [Is. 50:2]. In deed, “with God nothing shall be impossible” [Lk 1:37]. Therefore, could Jacob have received the birthright blessing without resorting to a sinful carnal approach? My answer is a bold YES!

It is remarkable that God used the same Jacob [now Israel] to prove that point. Israel had moved to Egypt with his family to join Joseph who had become the governor of that country. Joseph heard that his father was sick. So, he took his two sons, Manasseh [the elder] and Ephraim, to see their grandfather before his death [Gen. 48: 1]. Israel reiterated to Joseph God’s promise of perpetual blessings to him and his descendants. Then, he made the following pronouncement:

And now thy two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, which were born unto thee in the land of Egypt before I came unto thee in Egypt, are mine; as Reuben and Simeon, they shall be mine [v.5]

The spiritual meaning of that statement was that it would be Israel, not Joseph, who would give father’s blessings to Ephraim and Manasseh. Understandably, therefore, Joseph pushed the two boys forward for Israel’s blessings. Joseph expected the birthright blessing to go to Manasseh, the elder. Instead, the old man put his right hand on the younger one! Joseph was upset:

And when Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand upon the head of Ephraim, it displeased him: and he held up his father’s hand, to remove it from Ephraim’s head unto Manasseh’s head. And Joseph said unto his

father, not so, my father: for this is the firstborn; put thy right hand upon his head. And his father refused, and said, I know it, my son, I know it; he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great; but truly his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his seed shall become a multitude of nations [vv. 17-19]

The same God who was in control on this matter was in charge when Isaac was going to bless his two sons, Esau and Jacob. Therefore, *even if* Esau had not sold his birthright and Rebekah had not prepared Jacob to pose as Esau before his father, the birthright blessing would still have passed on to Jacob in accordance with the word of God. So, why then do we interfere with God's plans?

3. Why we interfere with God's plans

Among the possible numerous reasons, the following should be noted:

a) Impatience

We can't wait to see God's promise come to pass! A new job, a promotion, an anticipated transfer to a better location, marriage to the dream man or woman, a child after 15 years of marriage, a broken marriage being restored, etc. Awake or asleep, our thoughts are on the promises. We are already drawing mental pictures of how we would celebrate or give testimonies, how we would laugh last at our enemies and detractors! Since we had not been told when and how the promises would be fulfilled, we would get worried and anxious. We would get impatient. Then, Satan comes in with 'ingenious' ideas on the 'steps of faith' we can take to reach the point of fulfillment.

Abraham and his barren wife, Sarah, had waited for ten years for God's promise that "in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed" [Gen. 12:3]. Then, He told Abraham that his heir would not be Eliezer, his servant, "but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir" [Gen. 15:4]. The Lord has spoken! The problem is not with the man but with his wife. Quickly, find the man a young woman who can conceive the promised child. That should be in line with God's plan! Praise God! That young woman was Sarah's Egyptian maid, Hagar, but the son she had for Abraham, Ishmael, was not the promised heir! [Gen. 16:1-11; 17:15-20]. It took another 14 years and a painful circumcision for Abraham to reach the point of God's promise of Isaac. It is possible that the period could have been shorter if Ishmael had not come in.

Patience is critical for "in returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength" [Is. 30:15].

b) A misunderstanding of what God has promised

God speaks promises to us either directly [by dreams, visions, etc] or indirectly [through prophets, spiritual counselors, etc] [**Num. 12:6-8; Joel 2:28-32**]. Since we can only know and prophesy in part [**1 Cor. 13:9**], there is a strong possibility to misunderstand what God has said. Therefore, unless we are spiritually tuned into God's channel, we could get things quite wrong.

The children of Benjamin had committed a sin, when they raped to death the wife of a Levite who was passing through their territory at night [**Judges 19:22-30**]. When the whole nation of Israel took up the matter with the Benjamites, they were not remorseful at all. So, Israel assembled 400,000 men to go to war with the tribe of Benjamin that had 26,000 troops [**Judges 20:1-17**]. The children of Israel prayed to God and asked "which of us shall go up first to the battle against the children of Benjamin?" God replied, "Judah shall go up first" [**v.18**]. In that first battle, Benjamin won, killing 22,000 (5.5%) of the men of Israel! [**v.21**]. The children of Israel went back to God and wept bitterly before Him till evening. Then, they asked Him, "shall I go up again to battle against the children of Benjamin my brother?" God replied, "go up against him" [**v. 23**]. They went into a second battle against the children of Benjamin and lost again! This time, 18,000 Israelites [another 4.5%] were killed.

The third time, the people of Israel went back to God. This time, they prayed and fasted for a whole day, and offered burnt and peace offerings to the Lord. This time, Phinehas, the priest and son of Eleazar, led their request and he asked whether they should go again or cease the attacks. Listen to God's response: "Go up; for tomorrow I will deliver them into thine hand" [**vv. 26-28**]. They went to war this third time and defeated the people of Benjamin, killing 25,000 (96%!) of their troops [**v.35**]. If you examine what God said to them, you will find that He did not promise the people of Israel victory during the first two attacks! In the third attack, however, He told them the *time* and the *outcome*. They misunderstood Him until they had lost 40,000 (10%) of their troops. But when they stepped out in obedience, they destroyed 96% of the enemy's troops.

4. Lessons: Any best practices?

So, how can we avoid taking carnal steps, which can derail, or delay the fulfillment of God's promises for us? Let us use David's experience in Ziklag to underline what I consider a best practice on the subject [**1 Sam. 30: 1-31**].

a) *David's problem*

While David and his men were away to help the Philistines [who had given him refuge when he was running from Saul], the Amalekites invaded his camp in Ziklag, abducted their women and children, looted the

camp and burnt what they could not carry away [**vv. 1-2**]. David and his men wept bitterly [that's natural and it's okay!]. His men even talked of stoning him, out of frustration and grief, but "David encouraged himself in the Lord his God" [**vv. 4-6**].

b) *God's promise*

David prayed to the Lord, and asked for his chances. God assured him: "Pursue: for thou shalt surely overtake them, and without fail recover all" [**v. 8**]. Now, note that David was not given a road map or a time schedule. All he knew was that he would recover all.

c) *David's steps*

David left with 600 men. By the time they reached a brook [Besor], 200 of them were too faint to continue. So, he left them there. Soon after, they came across an Egyptian. He stopped, gave the young man food and water and revived the dying man who had not eaten or drunk anything for three days and nights [**vv. 11-12**]. Most of us would not waste such valuable time! Instead, we would simply ignore the poor man in pursuit of our goals.

As it turned out, the Egyptian was the servant of one of the Amalekites who had raided Ziklag! His master had abandoned him to die in the wilderness because he had fallen sick [**vv. 13-14**]. He was now the one that took David and his men to the place where the Amalekites were resting. David defeated them and recovered all as God had promised [**vv. 15-18**].

d) *Key to David's success*

In the absence of clear guidelines on when and how God would fulfill His promise to David, he behaved wisely, for "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; and the knowledge of the holy is understanding" [**Prov. 9:10**]. He continued to walk by faith by demonstrating to both his men and the Egyptian servant that he drew his strength from God, for He has not given us the spirit of fear but of power, love and a sound mind [**2 Tim. 1:7**].

May God also give us the courage and patience to continue to walk by faith, and wait on Him while we are waiting for Him.