

Lent Reflections: How can we hear God? Week 1

Jacob wrestles with God - Read Genesis 32 v 1 to 30 but for context it's worth reading from Genesis 25.

As Christians, we believe that God has revealed himself to us through the written Word: the Bible and the Living Word: in the person of Jesus Christ. God is all powerful and almighty. He also longs to be in relationship with us and so there is no limit on how and through whom He can speak to us – but what He says will never be inconsistent with the Bible. When was the last time you felt you heard God speak to you personally? We can often feel extremely inadequate about our spiritual listening skills or just assume that it's the privilege of the super spiritual. Each week in Lent, we are going to be focusing on six different characters from the Old and New Testaments: ordinary flawed individuals like you and me, who did hear from God and that encounter changed their lives. If we have a deeper understanding of how God spoke to our forebears we will be in a better position to hear Him speak to us today. All the time we will be looking out for details and nuances in the text, so that we don't miss out on the richness of what the biblical writers want to tell us.

First up is Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham. Specifically we're looking at Genesis 32 vs 1 – 30 today, when Jacob wrestles with God, but it's important to understand first the context in which this story sits. Jacob had a decidedly chequered past – he was born the son and grandson of two great men of God: Isaac and Abraham, but showed no sign of any leaning towards God himself. He wanted to be the one in control of his life and was willing to go to extreme lengths to manipulate circumstances to achieve his own ends. He was the younger twin of Esau and came out of Rebekah's womb with his hand grasping Esau's heel (Genesis 25 v 26). This is a picture of the hostility that characterised their relationship. Growing up, Esau became a skilful hunter; a highly desirable occupation for those living in an agrarian society; whereas Jacob was a quiet man living among the tents (v27). We learn that Isaac loved Esau but Rebekah on the other hand, loved Jacob (v28). Unhealthy favouritism was rife in that home. Bitter not to be the firstborn with its accompanying privileges, Jacob the opportunist, persuades Esau to give up his birth right for a bowl of stew (v32). Genesis 26 follows and takes a step back in time to highlight the significance of the covenant promise of blessing that God had made earlier to Abraham (Jacob's grandfather): that because He had obeyed God, his descendants would be as numerous as the stars, they would be given land and all nations would be blessed through them (v 3-5). A particularly remarkable promise given that Abraham's wife Sarah was old and childless at the time. This covenant relationship between Abraham and his descendants (the Israelites) and God, lies at the heart of the Old Testament and the writer of Genesis wants us to appreciate how serious and foolish Esau was to just throw it away. Jacob went on to collude with his mother Rebekah to deceive the blind and dying Isaac into giving him Esau's blessing. He dresses up in Esau's clothes and wears animal skin to make his arms appear hairy. A brazen liar, Jacob attempts to appease his father's suspicions with a kiss (Judas Iscariot of course did the same when he betrayed Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22 v 48.) When Esau discovers what has happened he is furious and threatens to kill Jacob. Hearing of this, Rebekah instructs Jacob to flee immediately to her brother Laban in Haran and to marry one of his daughters. Jacob does and that night has a dream in which he sees angels going up and down a stairway to heaven (probably a ziggurat) and the Lord at the head of it (Genesis 28 v 12). God promises to be with Jacob and gives him the Abrahamic covenant blessing I referred to earlier and which Jacob must now be very familiar with, not least because that was what his father had prayed over him,

only a matter of hours earlier. Surely not a coincidence? But how does Jacob react? He is no doubt that it was God who was speaking to him but his response is nonetheless a tentative one.

Apprehensive about the future, heading into unknown territory and no longer in control, he makes a bargain with God that IF he will be with him and provide him with food and clothing and keep him safe so that he can return one day to his father's land THEN he will make God HIS God and will give him a tenth of what he has (Genesis 28 v 20-22). What follows in Genesis 29 is an extraordinary unravelling of events: Jacob meets some shepherds who are watering their sheep. Laban's daughter, Rachel, just so happens to be one of them. Overcome with joy and relief, Jacob kisses Rachel and breaks down (Genesis 29 v 11). Evidence perhaps, that God is moving in him?

Jacob spends the next 14 years working for his uncle and father in law: Laban. He is tricked into marrying Leah (Laban's elder daughter) but then marries Rachel. He sires 11 different sons and 1 daughter by Leah, Rachel and their maidservants Bilhah and Zilpah. Jacob acquired untold wealth through deception and now we find Jacob at the beginning of Genesis 32, on the night before he is due to meet his brother Esau for the first time since he had fled the family home as a young man after stealing his brother's rightful inheritance. He is scared and with good reason, that Esau will kill him and his family and take all he has. He sends messengers ahead of him and they return with bad news. Esau has already set out to meet him with an army of 400 men! Jacob is terrified and decides to split his household and livestock into two camps as a damage limitation exercise. That night, in Genesis 30 v 11-12 Jacob cries out to God. At last it's a prayer from the heart: "Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you have said "I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted."" He claims God's promise for his future, but is in fear for his life.

The following morning, in a desperate attempt to appease Esau he sends his servants ahead of him with a large number of animals as gifts. That night, he crosses the Jabbock River with his wives and children and then interestingly, chooses to stay alone in the camp. Jacob is dreading what the next morning will bring. And it is in this place of solitude when he has effectively been stripped of his possessions and family that God appears to him. Extraordinarily, verse 24 says that "a man wrestled with him till daybreak." Jacob wasn't dreaming, he was actually wrestling – physically. The wrestle was a metaphorical one too. Jacob was fighting an internal battle between his greatest fears; his self-will; and the call to submit to God. Jacob clearly put up a good fight, because it went on all night and it took God to wrench his hip out of its socket to defeat him – a physical manifestation of a divine encounter – that left him with a lasting limp. Even then Jacob would not let go until he was blessed – and what a blessing he received! "Your name will no longer be Jacob but Israel because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome" v28. In wrestling with God and ultimately submitting to him, Jacob became Israel – the father of God's chosen people – the people of whom we are a part today as Christians.

So where does all this leave us? Do you find yourself battling with God? Sometimes struggling to really believe that his promises we read in the bible are true for you? Do you believe that he really loves you, wants you to have life in all its fullness (John 10v10), that he will be there for you at the most difficult and toughest times in your life? Does part of you cling on to the lie that it's all down to you? That ultimately there's nothing there and you're on your own? And yet, and yet... this story seems to suggest that God has no problem with Jacob wrestling him. In fact it seems that **it is the**

very act of wrestling with God, and ultimately in submitting to him, that leads to him being blessed.

Jacob still had to face his fears and go and meet Esau the next day. Genesis 33 gives a moving account of their reunion; a beautiful picture of reconciliation and one that a Jewish audience would have had at the back of their mind when Jesus spoke of our Heavenly Father throwing His arms around the neck of the prodigal son and kissing him when he was still a long way off in Luke 15 v 20. Jacob had plenty of difficult times ahead but the encounter he had with God that night *changed* him forever. The concern and tenderness he shows for his family and flocks in Genesis 33 v 13 in the immediate aftermath illustrate that. He knew that he had met God face to face that night and it was by His grace that His life was spared (Genesis 32 v 30). No longer was he the selfish, heel-grasping deceiver, he was the father of a nation who knew deep down that he was loved and blessed by God and that whatever the future held, God would never leave him.

So what issues or unanswered questions are you wrestling with today? Don't run away from them - climb into the ring and wrestle!

Dear God, thank you for the way you spoke to Jacob and how his encounter with you changed his life. Please help me not to be afraid to climb into the ring and wrestle with you. Amen