

God's Plan or Mine?

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Date: 13 August 2023

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[0 : 00] Over the summer, I've been reading the autobiographies of two great football managers, Sir Alex Ferguson and Arsene Wenger. As you would probably expect, they come across as men who are really driven, whose lives are dominated by their love of the game and by trying to succeed in it, and who have a huge self-confidence, who believe that if they work hard, if they look after their staff, if they plan well, then they'll be successful.

Very self-reliant. I was particularly struck by one passage in Arsene Wenger's book. He wrote about how when he was growing up as a child in the Alsace region of France, he used to go along to the football matches of his local team clutching his prayer book, and he'd stand on the touchline and he'd be praying desperately that his team would win.

And then he says, In later years, I replaced the prayer book with good players, and being well prepared for the likelihood of winning.

Reason instead of faith. And it was that last phrase, reason instead of faith, that really struck me. Now, I wouldn't say it was appropriate for us to be praying about the results of football matches. But I think Arsene Wenger maybe is speaking wider than that. And if he is, then he reflects something I think is quite a common belief today. You can't rely on blind faith.

[1 : 38] You've got to rely on rational planning, on being able to do things for yourself, and on being in control. I hope most of us here, given we're in a church this morning, would recognise that faith and reason go together.

That we don't throw our brains away when we come to trust in Jesus. But I think there's still a question a lot of the time of how much we should be depending entirely on God to do things for us, and how much we should be trying to do things for ourselves.

So if you like, it's the kind of conflict between let go and let God, and the Lord helps those who help themselves. And I think that's what's at the heart of this passage we're looking at today.

It's a question of how much is Jacob depending on God, and how much is he trying to do things by himself. Now at the end, having read the passage quite a number of times, I still can't quite make my mind up about Jacob.

Was what he was doing really in faith, or was he trusting in himself and almost hedging his bets by praying in the middle? I'll leave you to come to your own judgments on that once we've been through the passage.

[3 : 01] But after we've done that, we will look more broadly. We'll try to find other answers from the Bible to this question. How much should we depend on prayer? How much should we be trying to work things out ourselves?

So we're in Genesis 32, and if you remember the story of Jacob, some of you have been here every week, I'm sure, or most weeks, the story of Jacob starts in Canaan with his father Isaac and mother Rebekah and his brother Esau.

And Jacob coerces Esau into giving up the birthright that was due to the first son. It was only a few minutes Esau was ahead of Jacob, but he was the first son, and he gave Jacob his birthright.

And then Jacob tricked Isaac into giving him the father's blessing. And then he had to flee because Esau was out to kill him. And for the last few weeks, we've been thinking about the 20 years that he spent with his uncle Laban far away from his immediate family.

Well, today he's come back, and he's come, in a sense, to face the music. He knows he's going to have to meet Esau, but he doesn't know what kind of response he's going to get.

[4 : 12] Is Esau still out to kill him, or is there a possibility that the two of them can be reconciled? As we go through this chapter, we see alternating Jacob interacting with God, and then Jacob trying to do things on his own, more interaction with God through the angels, Jacob trying to do things on

his own, and then finally the decisive interaction with God, which we'll be looking at next Sunday.

But there really is this tension in Jacob's mind, I think. I need to be saved from Esau. Do I do it myself, or do I rely on God?

So we look at the first of the sections in the chapter. I've called it Jacob's protector, and if you've got it in front of you, that's the first couple of verses. Jacob comes back from Laban.

He's on the border of Canaan, the promised land, and when he's there, he has a vision of a group of angels. Now, I think when we see this, we're supposed to think back to how Jacob had left Canaan in the first place when he was fleeing from Esau, and he came to a place he called Bethel, and there he had an encounter with God.

So angels going up and down the ladder to heaven, and he received promises from God. Now, I think as Jacob comes back to the land, this is God saying, I am still with you.

[5 : 38] I made promises to you in the past, and I am still there to honor these promises. And so Jacob gives the place a name, which means two camps.

There's his camp. He's come back with much more than he ever left with, but there's also God's camp. God is with him. God is there to be his protector.

Good for us sometimes to be reminded of God's goodness and of God's presence. When we are facing difficult or disturbing situations, to be able to think back and to say, God was with me in the past.

God is still with me now. Now, in the first book of Samuel, chapter 7, there's an incident where the Israelites are being attacked by the Philistines, and Samuel prays, and they are miraculously rescued.

And Samuel sets up a stone at a place called Ebenezer. And he says, Thus far the Lord has helped us. And that stone that was set up there, I think, was a reminder to the people that God was good to them, that he was their God, and that he would be with them through the most difficult times.

[6 : 53] Good for us to have these reminders as well. Paul says in Romans 8, If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

If our trust is in the Lord Jesus, then we have God's presence with us, and perhaps sometimes we need a reminder of that. Having got that reminder, Jacob kind of goes off on his own.

He thinks, well, what can I do? What are the options for me to get back in favor with Esau? And so he thinks, well, I should make contact with them.

And he sends him a bit of a groveling message, I think, talking about Esau as his lord, Jacob as his servant. Remember, they're brothers, twin brothers. And reminding him that Jacob has been a waste, not that he's been avoiding him, he says.

And he's come back having left with nothing. He's come back with two wives, two concubines, 11 sons, a daughter, lots of servants, lots of cattle.

[8 : 02] He's quite a wealthy man. I think he's saying to Esau, well, actually, I don't need anything from you. I just want to make up with you. And he sends them off, and he's told that Esau is coming back, and he's got a huge company with him.

He's bringing an army with him in Jacob's sight, and Jacob is terrified. What is Esau likely to do now? And Jacob, again, Jacob being the schemer he always was, he says, well, if I divide my group into two different camps, maybe remembering the two camps from verse 1, if one of them gets attacked and destroyed, then the other might be safe.

And if Jacob's in behind, then he's hoping he'll survive either way. That's the kind of man he was, and still had elements of that, it appears, in him. Trying to do his thing.

Trying to work things out for himself. But I think it's a bit more positive because Jacob prays. Sorry, I missed my point there. Jacob's plea to Esau. Then there's Jacob's prayer.

Lots of peas this morning, but we're spending, I think, a little bit of while thinking about Jacob's prayer. This is the first prayer that we really read of Jacob in the Bible.

[9 : 11] He refers to God previously, but it's the first time we see him actually coming before God and praying to him. And the four verses from verse 9 to 12, I've got one heading for each.

Verse 9, I've said, is Jacob's premise. The premise is the basis on which he thinks he's able to come to God and ask for things from him. A part of the premise is a promise.

It's what God said to him when he left the land. And the other part of it is a reminder of God's dealings with his ancestors. Jacob, at this point, isn't able to say, God is my God.

He says he's the God of Abraham, his grandfather. He's the God of Isaac, his father. Perhaps it was after the end of this chapter that Jacob would have been able to say that God was his God as well. But he did feel he had a premise for coming to God. Can I say, if we are Christians, if we are following the Lord Jesus today, we have a much stronger premise for coming to God.

[10:20] We come not because of any good in us, not because we deserve anything from God, but because through the Lord Jesus, our sins have been forgiven and we can come to God not just as our God, but as our heavenly father.

We have a stronger basis for approaching God than Jacob did if we are trusting in Jesus. Verse 10, Jacob then looks to his past. He recognizes his own unworthiness, recognizes all the times he's tried to trick people and do things by his own strength.

And he's recognized that despite that, despite everything he's done, that God has been with him and has blessed him. Again, if we know Jesus, good to recall the past and all that we've done wrong, not for the sake of dwelling on all our faults, but to recognize the grace of God that's in our lives and all that he has done for us through the Lord Jesus.

Verse 11, we need to go fairly quickly. Verse 11, there's Jacob's petition. What really struck me about Jacob's petition is the three words in the middle, I am afraid.

I am afraid. Isn't it good when we can come to God and recognize that we can be honest about how we're feeling? We don't have to come with flowery words and think that we need to approach God in a certain way before he will listen to us.

[11:48] If we will come to God and say exactly how we're feeling, he already knows, but he wants us to acknowledge that. That is the great basis for prayer and the basis on which Jacob can come and say, I'm afraid, I don't know what to do, but God can please you intervene in this situation.

And then finally in verse 12, Jacob talks about God's promise and what God has said to him that he will do. God has promised both prosperity in terms of having lots of descendants and prosperity in terms of wealth.

It's been partially accomplished so far, but Jacob clings to that promise. And like for us too, it's good to cling to God's promises. If we don't know what to pray in a situation, think about what the Bible says about something that's relevant, what God has promised to us and use that as part of your prayer.

So there's a lot in Jacob's prayer that we can learn from. But then he appears to kind of destroy it a bit by what he does next. He's not prepared to leave it with God and to let God work in the situation. Jacob has to make another plan. And this plan is to flood Esau with gifts. If you add up all the numbers of all the animals that Jonathan read about, there are 550 different animals in five different groups.

[13:13] And the idea is that Jacob sends them out in these groups one by one and he seems to be more and more generous to Esau as he approaches. Also, maybe an element that if Esau has all these animals coming along with him, then he's not going to be in such a good shape to make a surprise attack on Jacob.

And if Jacob thinks he's at all hostile, there might be a chance to escape. But this is very much Jacob back to his old scheming. And I find it quite difficult to think that having prayed like that, he would then be exercising faith in God by what he does here.

He's being crafty, but does he need to be? But when we come on to see what happens when Jacob meets Esau, spoiler alert, it works out well. But it works out well, I think, because of what God does in Esau's heart more than what Jacob does to soften up his brother.

But that's the story in Genesis. Jacob alternating between throwing some faith in God and depending on what he's doing himself.

I think Jonathan's taking us through the last part of the chapter next week, which is Jacob's real encounter with God. But let's go back to the question that we started with.

[14:33] How much is it right for us to say, I just need to pray and everything will work out? And how much should we be planning and trying to work things out and acting upon it?

Let me present you with four different scenarios, and I hope they'll help us to think through what the issues are. First thing I suggest is sometimes we just need to act.

There's no question of what we should do, we just need to do it. When I go to bed, the first thing I do, or last thing I do rather, is I turn the keys in the locks.

I don't pray to God that there won't be any burglars in the area tonight because my doors are open. I take sensible precautions to make sure my house is secure. If I have toothache, I don't just pray. I probably would pray about the pain that I'm suffering, but I don't just pray about it. I phone the dentist and I take some painkillers. And actually in these situations, what God expects is my common sense that he's given to me will tell me what to do, and the skills he's given to the dentist will help resolve the issue.

[15:47] Now if you're particularly worried about your security at home, or if I'm particularly anxious about going to the dentist, of course we should pray. God wants to hear all our prayers, all our anxieties.

But in these situations, there's really no question what we should do. We should just do it. And do, as I said, perhaps in a prayerful way, and this wonderful verse from 1 Peter, cast all your anxieties on him because he cares for you.

Okay, so that's the first situation, probably the most straightforward. The second, I think, is probably the most dangerous. This is situations where we have to make decisions, we have to do things, and we think, yes, I know what to do here.

I can deal with this. And maybe in thinking that, we don't really think, well, I should be putting it before God, I should be speaking his guidance.

It's only when things go wrong that we suddenly think, well, perhaps I should pray about it. If I stood up this morning and said to you, I haven't read the passage for today, but I'm going to pray that God will give me the right words to say, I suspect you wouldn't be very impressed.

[17:01] But actually, it would be worse if I came along and I felt, I've got a wonderful sermon, I'm really going to impress people. And I was totally depending on myself and not on God.

No prayer, no reliance on God. And if God isn't directing my thoughts as I prepare and working in all our hearts as his word comes to us, then we're wasting our time being here.

And I think there are lots of situations where we might be tempted to just do things ourselves, to make decisions on our own, when actually what we really should be doing is bringing them to God in prayer.

And that's not always the first thing that comes to mind, but actually it is almost always the most important thing. Jacob, after all these years away, as he had been trying to do things in his own strength, and he's finally having to come back to face the music, he realizes at least to some extent that the most important thing is that he depends on God and brings his prayer to him.

So for us, when we're in situations where we might think initially, yes, I know what to do here, let's just pause and say, well, let's seek the Lord's guidance on this.

[18:23] Let's try and do it in his way. Maybe remember this verse from Proverbs, Proverbs chapter 3, trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.

Going our way, things are liable to go wrong and they won't work out the way we expect. If we go God's way, he will guide us and help us.

So that's situation two. Situation three, in some ways, is almost the opposite. So sometimes we get things that come into our lives and we think, what can I possibly do about this?

And perhaps we pray about it, but we really struggle with the doing part of it. During the last week, I got a phone call from someone who said that some of my relatives were in a real crisis situation.

They felt I needed a family member involved. And I just thought, well, what could I possibly do? So I could pray and I sent a WhatsApp to my sisters to ask them to pray as well.

[19:25] But then I had to think about the situation, think what the priorities were, and any way I could help. In the end, my main contribution was connecting people together who were much better placed on the ground to do it than I was.

But we do get quite a lot of situations like that, I think, where something comes up and we think, I just don't know what to do in this situation. I'm just totally struggling and perhaps we pray about it. But also in these situations, perhaps God is saying to us, you need to act, you need to do something. When Paul was on his second missionary journey and going with Silas and others, he went and visited the churches he'd established on the first missionary journey and then they weren't sure what to do next.

So what do you do? Well, they could pray and I'm sure they did pray. But they also tried to explore where God wanted them to go. They thought, we'll go north to Asia Minor. We're in Turkey, basically.

We're going north within Turkey and the Holy Spirit prevented them. They thought, well, we'll go to Bithynia and see if we can serve God there. And again, it says the Holy Spirit closed the door. [20 : 35] And eventually, they ended up going right the way along west through Turkey to the coast at Troas and there, Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia saying, come over and help us.

And that was how the gospel reached Europe. I think the thing they must have thought when they were looking back on it was we didn't know what to do. But we knew we needed to try and reach out with the gospel, reach to others and in the end, it was God who was directing us west.

We were thinking of going north and God kept saying, no, go on and eventually, we went west and got to Europe. And again, there will be many situations where we say, well, what can I do?

What is the best thing to do? And we just need to rely on God's guidance. And it doesn't always come apparent immediately as it didn't for Paul and his companions, but God knows what's happening.

God knows what's best. And if we proceed trusting in him, then he will guide us. So here's the verse for this one. It's from James. It says, if any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given to you.

[21 : 48] We need to trust God in the situations where we don't know what to do, that he will guide us and it may be a step at a time rather than everything becoming clear at once.

And then finally, there are situations where there is nothing we can do but pray and rely on God. when actually we really are helpless and we can only pray and know that God is in control of everything.

That comes up, I guess, in situations which we see in the news in our world, in Ukraine or in Yemen, what's been happening in Hawaii and other things that are going on that we look and say this is terrible and we just have to pray and depend on God who knows best to do his work.

And one specific situation where that is definitely true is when we think about our relationship with God. We are in no position ourselves to come to God and to say we have anything that deserves his attention.

We've all gone wrong, we've all sinned in the language of the Bible, we've all been far away from God and there is nothing in ourselves we can do about it. However hard we try, however religious we may try to be, there is nothing that we can do that is going to restore that relationship.

[23 : 10] And the only way back to God is through Jesus. Through Jesus dying on the cross, taking the punishment for our sins and then rising again and we can put our trust in him and know that we will be forgiven.

Nothing we can do apart from pray and accept the forgiveness that is on offer when we recognize our sins and trust in Jesus. You'll probably be familiar with this verse from Ephesians if it comes up, there it is, it is by grace you have been saved through faith.

This is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works so that no one can boast. Let's all make sure we understand that and have applied it this morning that we need Jesus as our Savior, that there's no other way back to God.

Let's finish with a story about a spider's web and it's not going to be about Robert the Bruce. It's about a man called Frederick Nolan. Frederick Nolan was a Christian who was living in North Africa and for whatever reason he had enemies who were pursuing him.

They were hot on his tail, he was on his own and he knew that if he got caught he would be killed. And he was almost exhausted, he was at the end of himself when he came to a cave and he thought well at least I can make some kind of effort, I'll go and I'll hide in this cave, I'm sure my pursuers will get me but at least I've done my best and I know that he went in and he prayed.

[24 : 45] You could hear the pursuers coming closer but as he heard them he also saw that there was a spider that was building its web at the entrance to the cave. That was a bit of a distraction for him, didn't think very much of it but the spider was there and it was building its web.

Then the pursuers came and they were outside the cave and they said he can't be in there, there's a spider's web, if he had gone in he would have destroyed the web and they went on and he managed to escape.

They later said this, where God is, a web is like a wall. Where God is not, a wall is like a web.

In other words, if we try to do things just by our own efforts, if we do the best we can in everything, it's like a spider's web that can easily be destroyed and that doesn't give us any protection.

If we realize that we are weak, that we need God's help in every aspect of our lives, even though we may feel we're a bit like a spider's web and there's nothing that we can do that's productive. [25 : 58] With God, says Frederick Nolan, it's like we've got a wall because God is so much stronger and God can be with us and protect us in every situation.

That was a lesson that Jacob needed to learn. He was getting there, I think, in today's passage. I'm not sure he's quite got there yet. It's a lesson we too need to apply in our lives.

If we try to do things in our own strength, we will fail ultimately. If we do it in God's strength and trusting in Jesus, we can know we have salvation and we have eternal life and we can also experience God's help and God's guidance in all the difficulties of life.

If you're in a difficult situation today, you don't know what to do. Pray about it. Talk to some Christian friends you can trust and they can pray with you and perhaps can help give you spiritual guidance.

If you've not yet come to put your trust in the Lord Jesus, recognize today that without him, you can never be forgiven. With him, your sins can be forgiven. You can have God as your heavenly Father. [27 : 06] Let's join together in prayer. Father, Father, we thank you for the account of Jacob's life that we've been reading. Thank you. There are so many lessons we can learn not just from Jacob's good things but from his failures.

And thank you for the reminder that we need you in our situation. As Jacob prayed that we are afraid often, we don't know what to do and we need you to intervene.

Help us to trust in you but help us also when you would want us to act, when you would want to guide us in the right way. Help us to be obedient in that and to do the appropriate things following you and living for Jesus.

Help us above all to have our trust in the Lord Jesus and to seek to follow him. We give you our thanks for our time today. We commit ourselves to you now in Jesus' name. Amen.