

Israel at Beersheba—Finding Peace
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A blessed Christmas to you all. The theme of our second week in Advent is peace and this coincides with Israel's return to Beersheba—the point of origin of his flight to Haran, ostensibly to find a wife, practically to escape the wrath of Esau.

So Israel set out for Egypt by way of Beersheba where, in his spiritually revived state, he worshipped and sought counsel from the God of his father Isaac. His anxiety/or fears regarding the move to Egypt were a motivating factor. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob/Israel had all resided at Beersheba, a well site early on and a city later on, and either **called upon the Lord** or **built** sacrificial **altars** there via which they had consulted/communed with God. God appeared and spoke with each of them and that helped put to rest the fears of Israel prior to emigration. This response to worship indicates God's regard for anxiety, or fear in the life of His saints. This includes you and me. "God is not of a mind," writes Charles Spurgeon, in Sermon 2116 on Gen. 46:1-4, "that His servant should be a slave of dread." We can attest to this assertion from 2 Tim. 1:7: Paul is addressing another servant of God, Timothy, with a message that the gospel of Jesus Christ brings to those oppressed by anxiety: **For God has not given us a spirit of timidity (fear), but of power and love and discipline**—discipline¹ is the NAS rendering of the Greek which is translated elsewhere as "self-control, a "sound mind," "sound judgment," "instruction," or "moral integrity." All pointing to spiritual maturity and a God-given capacity for self-governance/or self-rule in a believer's life destabilized by dread, fear, or anxiety. This message has greatly assisted people afflicted with disorders ranging from anxiety, insecurity, mental illness, dissolution, fear and dread. Paul was speaking strong encouragement to Timothy who, appears to have been daunted by the demands of his pastoral office.

Our approach this morning is to, in a sense, walk backwards from Paul's exhortation to Matthew 6:24-34, that section of the Sermon on the Mount which deals with anxiety and, interestingly "worship," and to finally arrive at Genesis 46 as a point of convergence.

In Matthew 6 Jesus appears to be dealing with worry, or anxiety on a natural level—Jacob's fear appears to be natural, too—but Jesus' real target is

¹ This Greek word, σωφρονισμοῦ, used only here in the N.T. "Discipline" is not a very happy rendering, though it gives the meaning; "correction," or "sound instruction" is superior. A. Maclaren, expositing this verse, draws four conclusions: I. The first thing, then, that he would have us understand is that Christ makes fearless men; II. Christ makes strong men; III. Christ makes loving men; and IV. And lastly, Jesus Christ makes self-governing men.

service/worship. Yes, certain insecurities seem to grow with age (fear of heights, avoidance of things new and different). Perhaps we should label some of them anxieties instead of fears? However Matthew 6:24-34, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers guidance on natural fears, anxieties as rooted in a lack of faith (see verse 30) among believers:

24 “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and [a--wealth personified as an object of worship] wealth.

I take this verse to apply to more than “a servant’s conundrum” because Jesus moves directly to two *incompatible objects of worship*: **God and mammon, wealth, or money**. He is addressing two competing passions; mastery by only one is necessary to worship². God and Mammon are the first pair of passions. Then Jesus puts up anxiety/ fear versus faith/trust . . . **what to eat, drink and wear** versus **divine supply** in nature (implication: if God takes care of nature . . . is he unwilling, or unable to take care of us? Are we not more important than birds?

Then he teases “our anxiety”: Can we add a single day to our life by worry? Does worry get us dressed, or clothe us? *Suddenly, we are dealing with real life issues—deeper issues of life and death unmasked by the actual futility of worrying about food, or clothing, or about how long we are going to live!* Jesus is responding to our natural fear on one level with spiritual guidance on another—while suggesting a cure: faith and worship. **Call upon the Lord, trust in God—**do not worry.

25 “For this reason I say to you, [b-"stop worrying" is the command] do not be worried about your [c-soul, is the spiritual counterpart to the worshipping piece Jesus started with!]life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is life not more than food, and the body more than clothing?

26 Look at the birds of the sky, that they do not sow, nor reap, nor gather *crops* into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more important than they?

27 And which of you by worrying can add a single [d-a cubit, or 18"] day to his [e-height] life’s span? 28 And why are you worried about

² This tension would equally apply to polygamy—an impossible/worrisome arrangement between two wives as *Jacob could attest*. Many a philanderer has come afoul of jealousies and demands that complicate his sexual adventurism.

clothing? Notice how the lilies of the field grow; they do not labor nor do they spin *thread for cloth*, 29 yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is *alive* today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, *will He* not much more *clothe* you? You of little faith!

This is what's really at stake, our faith/trust, or our anxiety/fear which will we choose as our ruling passion: God or Mammon/fear? Will we invoke the spirit of power, love and a sound mind? Ask for strength and courage from on high? Or will we invoke dread instead?

31 Do not worry then, saying, 'What are we to eat?' or 'What are we to drink?' or 'What are we to wear for clothing?' 32 **For the Gentiles** (foreigners, outsiders to the covenant promises, unbelievers even!) **eagerly seek all these things** (either it is all they know or they have no faith); **for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.**

God is for us! And this is why we don't worry, or fear about these things, **we have peace because** we are known, our true needs are known, and God is committed to meeting our most essential, highest needs **provided we meet the conditions!** Here, mark them well, are those conditions: be faithful . . . seek God! We also have peace because God is powerfully for us³, abides with us. **If God be for us who/what can stand against?!** (Rom. 8:31)

33 But [f]seek first [g]His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be [h]provided to you. Do you believe in providence, or not? Those "of little faith" do not.

34 "So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will [i]worry about itself. [j]Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Ain't that the truth!)

- a. [Matthew 6:24](#) Gr *mamonas*, for Aramaic *mamon* (mammon); i.e., wealth etc. personified as an object of worship
- b. [Matthew 6:25](#) Or *stop being worried*
- c. [Matthew 6:25](#) Lit *soul*
- d. [Matthew 6:27](#) Lit *cubit* (about 18 in. or 45 cm)
- e. [Matthew 6:27](#) Or *height*
- f. [Matthew 6:33](#) Or *continually seek*

³ It is a grave reminder to Christians of every age and degree that all cowardice, all dread of danger, all shrinking from doing one's duty for fear of man's displeasure, proceeds *not* from the Spirit of God. -Ellicott

- g. [Matthew 6:33](#) *Or the kingdom*
- h. [Matthew 6:33](#) *Or added*
- i. [Matthew 6:34](#) *Or look after itself*
- j. [Matthew 6:34](#) *Lit Sufficient for the day is its evil*

God is for us! This is Israel's reviving conclusion. This is what the testimony, words of Joseph, the transport wagons and provisions from Pharaoh all translate into for him. With that in mind we can now journey to Beersheba with Israel. But let's recall that we have dealt with timid Timothy with Paul (call down the spirit of power, love and bold instruction) and we have also dealt with the anxious believers (those of little faith!) whom Jesus challenged to trust God and meet their needs through worship.

Beersheba, meaning either "well of the seven" (alluding to the seven ewes with which Abraham sealed a covenant with Abimelech, king of Gerar, establishing peace as well as Abraham's right to the well which he had had dug), or "well of the oath" (referring to the same covenant establishing future affinity between Abraham and Abimelech), is the fourth place of abode⁴ of Abraham recorded in Genesis. But it represents much more than a pastoral asset, or the place where a significant accord was established between two parties with some history (remember the second episode of Abraham passing off Sara as his sister?). (Gen. 21) Beersheba is the birth site of Isaac, and the place from which Hagar and Ishmael were expelled! Hagar is a critical link between Abraham's past (in Egypt) and, due to its location in the southernmost part of the Promised Land (toward the Negev) suggests a proximity to Egypt that qualifies the extent of Hagar's challenge—she didn't have very far to go to get back to Egypt. Hagar and Ishmael lived in the wilderness of Paran, Ishmael grew up in the wilderness there, **God was with him . . . and he became an archer.** (Gen. 21:20-21)

Beersheba was a place where divine interactions saturated life⁵. The rescue of Lot from Sodom and Gomorrah is filled with engagement and interaction between God and

⁴ Fourth, or fifth. Scripture records Abraham building an altar at Shechem (Gen. 12:7), at a site between Bethel and Ai ((12:8), in the Negev (Southern Canaan) , at Hebron (Gen. 13:18), and at Beersheba (Gen. 21:22-34). Abraham and Isaac both worshipped there, only Isaac's altar is mentioned. (Gen. 26:25) All three patriarch (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) are recorded as dwelling in the Negev (Negeb)—Abraham and Isaac in Gerar, land of the Philistines.

⁵ This provides an insight into the religious life of Isaac. However, what struck me most about this reference to sacrifices by Isaac is that Beersheba was both a residence and the location from which the "offering of Isaac" transpired—and that is the subject matter of Genesis 22. Abraham took his son from Beersheba to **the land of Moriah**, the site of Solomon's future temple mount! This fifty mile journey featured Isaac as the designated sacrificial victim. And for the record, this incident is not an endorsement of human sacrifice, as we stressed when we visited that passage; it is a powerful repudiation. A substitute was found in the ram, **caught in the thicket** (22:13) and Abraham **took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son! Abraham called the name of that place, Yahweh Jiveh, meaning "The Lord Will Provide," as it is to this day—meaning, 'the Lord will see to it.'** Having been bound

his friend Abraham. Abraham's relationship was pre-eminently "conversational." Therefore, when we come to the conclusion of Genesis 21 and read: **Abraham planted a tamarisk tree at Beersheba, and there he called upon the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. And Abraham sojourned in the land of the Philistines for many days,** we are not surprised. *And this is the backdrop for asserting that Abraham communed with God at Beersheba* (Gen. 46:1)—Jacob was returning to a place where both his father and his grandfather had deep spiritual attachments. And is the place from which Jacob departed for Haran, in flight from Esau! In fact, the references in Gen. 46 are most pointedly to **the sacrifices of Isaac** which go with Abraham's **called upon the name of the Lord** (Gen. 21:33) in that place.

The spiritual and religious history of Beersheba conveys to us, beyond the significance of worship as attached to location and biography (family history!) helps us understand why Jacob returned there to commune with God. I wonder did he pull together the altar of his ancestors? Had they fallen into disrepair, or disorder? Or had worship continued on the altars of Abraham and Isaac? The record is silent on these human interest aspects (both historical and archeological). Besides, I think that these familial details, and physical aspects are secondary to 1. Jacob's spiritual revival noted in 45:27)—this "event" is evidence of his faith; as well as 2. a desire to recover the "conversational" relationship exemplified by Abraham and, to a lesser degree, Isaac.

*Jacob wanted to talk to, and to hear from God so he approached God through the offerings of sacrifices, through open worship at Beersheba {Seek ye first the Kingdom of God!}. God responded, through/in visions of the night [All these things will be added unto you!], God 1. called him **Jacob**, and 2. identified Himself **I am God, the God of your father** (meaning Isaac, and "the God" familiar to you!), and 3. God directly addresses Israel's *particular* fears. **Do not be afraid to go down down Egypt.** God confirmed that the move to Egypt was a good plan and he extended a promise to Israel: **there I will make you into a great nation⁶—beginning with***

and placed on an altar, as a victim for a **brunt offering**, must have made as indelible an impression on Isaac as the miraculous substitution did . . . yet Isaac continued to worship God sacrificially thereafter! All of this behind the phrase, **and offered sacrifices to the God of his Father Isaac?** (46:1)

⁶ The **seventy persons** is a figure representing the heads of families and tribes—not a census of all that went down to Egypt at that time. Unless the accumulating, burgeoning households of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob simply disappeared, we are talking about the relocation of thousands of persons attached to the household of Israel/Jacob. In Ge. 26:16, Abimelech, king of the Philistines, said to Isaac: **Go from us; for thou art much mightier than we** (KJV), meaning that their growth in population, translated into military potential was too threatening! A similar concern was voiced by a much later Pharaoh in Exod. 1:8-10: **8 Then a new king, who did not know Joseph, came to power in Egypt. 9 "Look," he said to his people, "the Israelites have become too numerous and too powerful for us. 10 Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase even more; and if a war breaks out, they may join our enemies, fight against us, and leave the country."** That dealing shrewdly with the Israelites, already enslaved for centuries, included the infamous policy of infanticide (kill all the male babies) which Moses' mother eluded by floating Moses on the Nile in a pitched reed

seventy heads of household, or tribes. (There is a place for nationhood in God's plan of redemption—and nations are a permanent feature of this present world order until the Last Day!) Then, God, after calling Jacob by name, identifying himself and confirming the goodness of the choice to emigrate, sealed with a promise (like unto that given Abraham!) offers this assurance:4. **I myself will go down with you to Egypt and I will also bring you up again.** Then God tenderly addresses Jacob's fear of dying a lonely death: 5. **Joseph's hand will close your eyes.** *I draw our attention again to the direct address of Israel's fears—that's how God overcomes our worry, anxieties, our fears—especially see steps 1-5 just presented!*

Israel's lifelong struggle with fear (with insecurity bred of faithlessness? and which also bred greed and self-centeredness) resurfaces when he (Jacob, the weak) experiences fears regarding his relocation at age 130 from the Promised Land to Egypt—where he would reside for the last 17 years of his life. *He suffered from a crippling bondage to insecurity and dread—a tendency towards cowardice (he would rather take flight than fight!)* He had been a self-serving liar, thief and played favorites with his children—all grown-up wounded adults at this point in time! Was this the right move, at the right time?

I can identify at least five fears. In order to have peace, for Jacob's fearfulness was very much on the line, Jacob would have to overcome his crippling bondage to insecurity and dread—his emotional “limp”—framed here as five fears.

- fear of loss (of property, possessions and inheritance—of religious identity)
- fear of reprisal (from an infuriated, cheated brother)
- fear of revenge (from outraged neighbors and tricked in-laws)
- fear of enemies (strangers as well as provoked in-laws, Laban and his sons)
- fear, perhaps, of personal (lonely?) death

Being known by name (meaning entirely), by the one true God, being confirmed in courage (**Fear not!**), being assured that God is with you (**always, to the end of the age**) and has a plan forward, blessings ahead (**I will go down and come up again**) and I will attend to your fears of dying (alone? Have no dread of dying from any natural causes!)—all received by faith (for our God is for us. He wants us with him, has prepared a place for us where all our necessities will be met including fellowship with him (forever), goes a long way towards breaking the bondage of fear which Jesus came to cancel! God is not only of a mind that we not live in dread, he has done something about ending dread's dominion.

Are you afraid of dying of COVID-19? Draw near to God, consult with Him about it. But understand this: if God has purposed for you to die of COVID-19—none of His promises are voided by that fact. None of his plans are derailed by that death. None of his purposes are cancelled. So, press on. . . **seek first the kingdom, and his righteousness.** COVID-19, cancer, cardiac arrest . . . death by accident or by disease,

basket! Draconian measures of forced population control have been a feature of human history for thousands of years! More to the point, the “chosen family” was a tiny fraction of that crowd. This qualification makes the growth of Israel, the nation, to several millions at the time of Exodus understandable (and feasible!).

or simply natural causes makes no difference. Those who are raised from the dead are raised regardless—it is irrelevant how they died! And until Christ returns, every believer will pass through the same door—but it is not the end, rather it is the beginning of the next stage of life eternal, a life filled with glory, blessings and all that is amazing, delightful and satisfying. If you really understood where you are headed and who you will ascend to be with—how you get there will diminish in significance. It will cease to worry you!

This, or something very like it, is the remedy for our fear. And this is the source of our peace. May God work that peace into you hearts and minds and souls this Christmas season—deeply, indelibly and savingly. May your faith be increased to meet your every need. **And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.** (Phil. 4:7)

Amen.