

“... WHY AM I THUS?” – A Word for 2011

“And the children struggled together within her; and she said, If it be so, why am I thus? And she went to enquire of the LORD” Genesis 25:22.

The patriarch Abraham dominates the pages of Genesis. His passing left a void that meant things would never be the same again. However, God already had in place the next stage in His purpose: his son Isaac. In addition, through him God will continue to work all the way to bringing His Son into the world (Romans 9:5). Therefore, we read, “after the death of Abraham ... Isaac” (Genesis 25:11).

Trial

Married to Rebekah, he soon had to face an unforeseen trial: “(Rebekah) was barren” (Genesis 25:21). Like Isaac’s mother Sarah, his wife has no child. This challenged their bright hopes of being parents. It was much more than the natural desire to be blessed with children. Isaac and Rebekah’s marriage was one of the most important in history. Abraham had ensured his son married within the covenant family (Genesis 24) in order to maintain the godly line. We read in Genesis more about Isaac’s marriage to Rebekah than about the creation of the world! All that providence led the couple to expect an heir as the next link in God’s purposes.

However, no baby was given. There must have been dismay and distress. However, “Isaac intreated the LORD for his wife ...” (verse 21) because godly people are driven to prayer by their troubles. The Lord heard, but did not answer for a time (Psalm 143:1). Finally, though, “the LORD was intreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived.” This proved the truth of the Puritan Timothy Cruso’s words,

Promises, though they be for a time seemingly delayed, cannot be finally frustrated ... the heart of God is not turned though His face be hid; and prayers are not flung back, though they be not instantly answered.”

New perplexity

For Rebekah, though, the joy of pregnancy turns into perplexity. Near full term, she utters the words of our text: “If it be so, why am I thus?” The Lord has answered prayer, and given not only a baby, but also twins, v.22a “children ...” (cf Ephesians 3:20). However, “... the children struggled together within her.” The phrase means literally “to crush.” She felt violent agitation, pressing together, discomfort and pain. “If I am blessed with this pregnancy,” she seems to say, “why this awful tumult in my womb? Is God displeased with me? Am I going to die in childbirth?” From feeling so blessed, she now fears the worst.

Ironic

This is ironic. Before, Rebekah’s problem was that she could not have a baby; now, *twin babies* are the problem. This seems a strange blessing! It reminds us, though, that every gift in this life tends to be a *mixed* blessing. Things are rarely as wonderful as we think they will be. This should moderate our desires for what we long for, and if granted, it should make us “rejoice with trembling.” Only *spiritual* blessings are in themselves perfect, because they come from heaven and lead us there. It also shows us that blessings from God do not necessarily solve our problems: they sometimes create new ones!

Enquiry

This accounts for the anguished enquiry from Rebekah. She reasons logically: “If this pregnancy has come in answer to prayer, if this is God’s will for us – why is this alarming thing happening to me?” It supplies an important lesson: sometimes God’s dealings do not

make sense to us. What *should* be a blessing brings, in fact, a deeper trial than before. Maybe this has been our experience over 2010 – or something similar will overtake us in 2011. We are told that “The blessing of the LORD, it maketh rich, and he addeth no sorrow with it” (Proverbs 10:22), yet hard experience tells a different story. What are we to understand from this? Let us see if we can resolve the matter, learn its lessons, and find encouragement for the New Year.

1. We can think of examples for ourselves.

We were newly married and before long, there were difficulties. The Lord clearly led us together, we have married “in the Lord,” yet things are not right. We rejected other approaches from unconverted admirers, our courtship was wholesome and God-honouring, yet now married, we are not happy. “If it be so, why am I thus?”

As parents, we strove to bring up our children scripturally. We devoted ourselves, taught, corrected and trained, prayed, set them an example, wept over their souls – and not all of them are converted. Some are breaking our hearts. Yet, in another less spiritual family, all are Christians. In this connection the Lord said, “Them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed” (1 Samuel 2:30) - “If it be so, why am I thus.”

That new job I applied for and accepted in good faith, following providence. It was clearly an “open door” (Revelation 3:7) and the will of the Lord. Now I discover what colleagues I have and what a boss he is! This is worse than before. Have I made a dreadful mistake? Or, has the Lord truly led me? “If it be so, why am I thus?”

Relocating in the Lord’s will and prayerfully ensuring the best possible church beforehand, “I being in the way, the LORD led me to the house of my master’s brethren” (Genesis 24:7). Yet now things are not what they once were. Troubles have emerged we did not realise were there at the time, and Sabbaths are no longer a delight in the sanctuary. And this has followed our leaving our previous church that had changed and made our remaining there impossible! “If it be so, why am I thus?”

While I was in health, I sought to live for Him who died for me and rose again. Gospel-gratitude moved me to follow the Lord fully and serve Him with my ransomed powers. It was never as He deserved, or as I could have wished, but I sought to do His will from my heart. And now I am struck down with a debilitating condition that means I am almost helpless. With so much I wish to do in serving my generation, and so much that needs doing, “If it be so, why am I thus?”

As a new Christian, I find a greater problem with sin than ever before. Now I am sensitive to what is displeasing to the Lord, and yet I find I want to do it! I thought when someone is born again it delivers them from sin and brings them into peace and victory. Before my conversion I seemed at peace – now I am at war inside, being pulled toward sin while led toward holiness (Galatians 5:17). Is this the peace of God I read about? “If it be so, why am I thus?”

2. Rebekah did right in praying.

At first, it seemed she simply asked the question, “If ... why?” Whom did she ask? Her mother was in Haran (24:53,55), so probably she went to other women who had had babies. It is always good to consult with more experienced people. This is one way the older women can teach the younger (Titus 2:3-5).

However, she would find no real solution there. Some problems can only be resolved by the One who gave them – the Lord Himself: “and the cause that is too hard for you, bring it unto me, and I will hear it” (Deuteronomy 1:17; cf Jeremiah 32:17).

“And she went to enquire of the LORD” (verse 22). This is her true resort, and is one reason the Lord appoints strange happenings – to draw us to Him in prayer. If such conundrums are sanctified to us like this, they have proved a blessing already. As Cowper put it,

*Trials make the promise sweet;
Trials give new life to prayer;
Trials bring me to His feet,
Lay me low and keep me there.*

Rebekah received the answer, “And the LORD said unto her, two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger” (verse 23). This explains things, and the future shows the truth of it. Esau and Jacob are at war even in the womb. When born and grown up, the enmity will break out and Jacob will have to run for his life – to Haran, his mother’s former home (chapter 27). Their destiny as nations (Esau – Edomites, and Jacob - Israelites) shows the former “stronger than the other” militarily (Ezekiel 35:5). However, the “elder” did “serve the younger,” when in David’s time, Israel made the Edomites their servants (2 Samuel 8:14).

This answer assures Rebekah that the Lord knows what is happening to her. He is the One who has appointed this and is over the outcome and future. That will lead to “the fulness of time” (Galatians 4:4) when God will bring His incarnate Son into the world, born of this nation, Jacob’s descendants - the children of Israel. Therefore, this was not perplexing to Him. Nothing is a conundrum; He never has to react to new and unforeseen conditions as we do. And for us also: He knows the way that we take, and He knows where He is leading us (Jeremiah 29:11).

3. We can apply this to ourselves.

a] Rebekah has reasoned logically.

“If it be so, why am I thus?” Rebekah’s enquiry is a reasonable one, and the Lord respected it – He always does when we struggle with similar things. However, to reason logically is not necessarily to reason *spiritually*. What God is doing, while it does not go against reason, often transcends it: “his ways are past finding out” (Romans 11:33). This is why scripture cautions us to “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5). The solution is ultimately with Him.

*My favoured soul shall meekly learn
To lay her reason at Thy throne;
Too weak Thy secrets to discern,
I’ll trust Thee for my guide alone.*

b] Rebekah had assumed something.

She thought if she were obedient to God, she would have an even and straightforward path. However, who said that this would be so? The Bible contains many examples of faithful people, who were in the centre of God’s will, and yet were beset by perplexing difficulties. For instance, when Moses went to Pharaoh in Jehovah’s name to demand the release of the Hebrews, he and Aaron were greeted by angry rejection. This made the situation worse, and even the Israelites turned against them (Exodus chapter 5). Yet, these men were only doing what God told them to do!

Samuel anointed young David to be Israel's king. David had not sought this but it was what God appointed. He behaved himself wisely, and yet soon became a fugitive from Saul, was hated and hunted, betrayed and endangered. This must have seemed a strange path to the throne. Yet it was the path the Lord chose to make him the man after God's own heart. Those "first ways" (2 Chronicles 17:3) of David were among his best days.

Elijah's magnificent victory on Mount Carmel was soon followed by depression and suicidal thoughts under the Juniper tree (1 Kings 18,19). He had hazarded his life, stood almost alone, been favoured by divine visitation, and seen the power and faithfulness of God. Now he is filled with fear and near-despair.

The Shunammite woman never wanted to be rewarded for giving hospitality to Elisha. Yet she and her older husband are blessed with a son. Then that son falls ill and dies. Her desperate journey to see Elisha ends in her saying, "Did I desire a son of my lord? did I not say, Do not deceive me?" (2 Kings 4:28). This sounds very much like Rebekah's "... why am I thus?"

Our Lord sent the disciples across the lake to the other side. Yet, when they were only halfway over, a furious storm blew up and they were terrified. Carrying out the Master's orders did not exempt them from a storm of trouble – and neither does it for anyone in His way.

These, and other examples, show that we can be doing what is pleasing to God, and yet be tried and afflicted in that same divine pleasure. The Lord's way is not the easiest way, but it is the safest and most blessed. As Matthew Henry said, "The way of duty is the way of comfort."

c] Being in trouble does not mean we are in the wrong.

Why was Rebekah "thus?" Because Esau and Jacob are God's will for His purposes in the world. There is a bigger picture and wider scheme of things, which will mean blessing for every family in the earth. What an honour to be part of that, even if it costs something now!

So it is for you, dear reader. See your perplexing situation in this light. The Lord is not against you but for you. Nothing has gone wrong, irreparable damage has not been done, disastrous decisions have not been made, it is not a question of "making your bed and having to lie on it." This is His way for you and He is with you: "He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honour him" (Psalm 91:15). And even where genuine mistakes have been made, God can work around those and still bring us to the desired haven (Exodus 13:18; Psalm 107:7).

And as for the inward struggle that every new Christian finds, this is nothing strange. Rebekah's inward commotion illustrates the inner conflict of the two natures in the regenerate: "the children struggled together within her" - "For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other" (Galatians 5:17). When we were unregenerate, the devil left us in peace. Now we are the Lord's, we find that remaining sin struggles for the former mastery, stirred up by the evil one. Hard though this spiritual warfare is, it shows whose side we are now on. As Matthew Henry put it, "A holy war is better than the peace of the devil's palace."

Moreover, remember the prophesy, "the elder shall serve the younger" (verse 23). So it is in spiritual experience. Older carnal nature *shall* serve younger grace. Because the Spirit indwells us, we are enabled to "mortify the deeds of the body" and "walk in the Spirit ... and not fulfil the lust of the flesh" (Romans 8:13; Galatians 5:16). We are on the victory side.

d] It is true that our troubles may be because of sin.

Gideon, when the Midianites overran Israel, asked a similar question to Rebekah's: "if the LORD be with us, why then is all this befallen us?" (Judges 6:13). In this case, the answer was clear enough, given what we read earlier, 6:1 "And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD: and the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian seven years" – Israel was under chastisement. However, they had repented (verse 6) and now the Lord had come to deal with the Midianites through Gideon and restore His people.

This reminds us that there is always a place for self-examination. It might be that we need to ask, "Is there not a cause?" ... "Lord, is it I?" (1 Samuel 17:29; Matthew 26:22). Moreover, if *that* is our question, the Lord will answer us, either to reassure or to kindly show us the cause. Gracious souls are sensitive to this and long to be right, and if not, to be *put* right (Psalm 139:23,24). However, the fact of our being concerned here implies all is well because a good conscience does not mind being searched (John 21:15).

e] Let us have confidence in God's dealings

If we have examined ourselves and believe that all is well with us, we can believe that "As for God, his way is perfect" ... "and he maketh my way perfect" (Psalm 18:30,32). We can submit to Him, and patiently wait for Him to make everything beautiful in His time (Ecclesiastes 3:11). As another patriarch could affirm, "But he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:10).

He is Rebekah's God, and the God of Isaac - and "this God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death" (Psalm 48:14). Why only until then? Because after death we shall need no guide: we shall then be home. And every question will be answered to our satisfaction, forever.

*Blest Three in One, to Thee we pray;
Defend and guide us on our way;
That we at last with joy may see
The new year of eternity!*