

“Stairway to Heaven”
John 1:45-51
(Preached at Trinity, March 1, 2017)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. In **Verses 35-37** John the Baptist introduced Andrew and John to Jesus and they believed. Andrew then tells Peter and he believes. As we came to **Verse 43** we find Jesus seeking out Philip and he believes. Christ is saving His elect.
2. In **Verse 45** we continue to find the pattern of evangelism – believers leading believers to Christ. Philip finds Nathaniel and proclaims the Gospel to him out of the Law and Prophets.
3. In **Verses 47-51** we find an interesting dialogue between our Lord and Nathaniel that is meant to draw our attention back to Genesis. He tells Nathaniel:
John 1:47 NAU - "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!"
 - A. Isaac and Rebecca had two twin boys, Jacob and Esau. Esau was the firstborn but God purposed that Jacob would receive the birthright and inheritance of the firstborn. This would happen through Jacob's deceit. Jacob's name is from a word meaning "to deal craftily or supplant."
 - B. Following the counsel of his mother he disguises himself and goes in to Isaac and convinces him to give the blessing of the firstborn to him. After receiving the blessing he departs.
 - C. Soon after Esau comes in and discovers Jacob's deceit. In **Genesis 27:35** Isaac tells Esau - "Your brother came deceitfully and has taken away your blessing."
4. Jesus' words to Nathaniel amazed him. How did Jesus know such things about him? Jesus went further:
John 1:48 NAU - "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you."
 - A. To Nathaniel, there could only be one answer
John 1:49 NAU - "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel."
 - B. Were his thoughts drawn to the Psalm 139?
Psalm 139:1-6 NAU - "O LORD, You have searched me and known *me*.
² You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar. ³ You scrutinize my path and my lying down, And are intimately acquainted with all my ways. ⁴ Even before there is a word on my tongue, Behold, O LORD, You know it all. ⁵ You have enclosed me behind and before, And laid Your hand upon me. ⁶ *Such* knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is *too* high, I cannot attain to it."

5. Jesus replies: "You will see greater things than these."

What things is Jesus alluding to? **Verse 51** opens with the double amen: ἀμήν ἀμήν which occurs 25 times in John's Gospel. The KJV translates it, "Verily, verily." It means "truly, truly" or "most assuredly." It precedes something of an absolute nature.

Our attention is again drawn back to Jacob.

Genesis 28:11-17 NAU - "He came to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place. ¹² He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. ¹⁴ "Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. ¹⁵ "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." ¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." ¹⁷ He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

I. The nature of Jacob's ladder

A. The ladder was a direct access to heaven

1. The Hebrew word used only here is סֻלָּם (*sullam*) translated ladder. The ESV & NIV translate it "stairway."

The picture is of a ladder or stairway leading into heaven

2. The nearness of heaven is striking. Angels are going up and down and God is at the top

3. God is near, ever present

Psalms 46:1-2 – "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. ² Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea;"

4. God is near, but inaccessible without this ladder.

B. The angels are sent forth up and down the ladder as ministering spirits

1. Hebrew: מַלְאָכִים mal'ak - to dispatch as a deputy; messenger, ambassador

2. Greek: ἄγγελος – messenger, envoy, one who is sent

3. Among God's purpose for the angels is to send them forth to minister to the children of God

Hebrews 1:14 NAU - "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?"

4. Nowhere do we see this more than in the life of Christ

- They were present in eternity with Him
- They were present at His birth
- They were present at His temptation
- They were present during His agony in the garden

- They were present at His arrest and crucifixion
 - They were present at His Resurrection
 - They were present at His ascension
5. Angels are also with us
 - a. In our darkest hours God sends His angels to strengthen and comfort us
 - b. We are never alone – We would be amazed if we could see God’s angels around us continually ascending and descending
 - c. Our assurance of God’s provision should remove every doubt, every fear
 6. Most important, God is with us. God said to Jacob:
Genesis 28:15 NAU - "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go"

II. The promise of the blessing

- A. God issued the covenant blessing to Jacob
Genesis 28:14 NAU - "Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed."
 1. Isaac's blessing of Jacob was the statement of God's blessing
 2. Not only does God reiterate His covenant blessing, He also comforts Jacob
Genesis 28:15 NAU - "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."
- B. When Jacob awoke from his dream his heart was lifted up in amazement
Genesis 28:16-17 NAU - "Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." ¹⁷ He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

III. But there is a grander fulfillment of Jacob’s ladder

- A. Jesus Christ is the ultimate fulfillment; the source of every blessing
 1. First, Jesus is the promised Seed. Jesus is God’s great blessing to the world.
 “in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed.”
 2. The NASB here is not accurate. The word for “descendants” is זֶרַע (*zera*). It is a singular noun. The KJV is much better.
“and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.”
 3. Paul makes this important distinction:
Galatians 3:16 NAU - "Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as *referring* to many, but *rather* to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ."

- B. Jesus Christ is the stairway to heaven. John will make this clear in **Chapter 14**
John 14:6 NAU - "Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."
1. Since the fall of Adam all access into the presence of God has been barred. In the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus it is described as a great chasm:
Luke 16:26 NAU - "And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and *that* none may cross over from there to us."
 2. God has sent forth Christ as the grand staircase that leads us into the presence of God. Jesus is the true Ladder. He is the Mediator. The only access to God is through Christ who is the only ladder. Every blessing from God comes by way of Him.
Colossians 1:19-20 NAU - "For it was the *Father's* good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, ²⁰ and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, / say, whether things on earth or things in heaven."
- C. How does one approach this ladder?
1. There has to be a recognition and admission of the problem. We are barred from heaven because of our sin. There can be no access without dealing with the issue of our sin.
 - a. We must see our guilt and condemnation.
 - b. We must repent of our sin, turning from it to God
 - c. We must look to Christ, who bore our guilt and suffered under God's wrath for us as our Substitute.
 - d. This is the nature of saving faith. Trusting in the sufficiency of Christ alone as the only stairway to heaven.
 - e. In other words, we can only approach the ladder by faith and repentance.
 2. Second, this ladder must be approached with holy reverence.
 - a. Jesus told Nathaniel:
John 1:50 NAU - "You will see greater things than these."
 In other words Jesus is telling him, "You shall see heaven opening up for you."
 - b. To know Christ is to be carried to the height of glory.
John 1:14 NAU - "and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth."
 - c. We must stand in awe of Christ our Mediator
 - d. When Jacob saw the vision he was terrified. The majesty of God inspires holy terror
Genesis 28:17 NAU - "He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! "
 - e. The word "awesome" has lost its force in our vernacular. We hear it used as a slang, "Awesome Dude!"
 The word for "awesome" is the same word translated "afraid"
 It means "fearful." KJV= "dreadful"

Conclusion:

1. We have in this passage the wonderful condescension of our God. Jesus Christ our Mediator has opened heaven's gates for us. All of the power of heaven is working on our behalf. Jesus has provided for us access into the presence of God.
2. As we approach Him we must come with awe, with fear and trembling. But it is not carnal fear but holy reverence. In Christ we experience true love. We know that God has opened heaven for us and that Christ our Mediator stands to receive us.