
Stairway to Heaven

Genesis 28¹

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We are an interesting lot. We can move so quickly from moments of faith and spiritual experience to words and deeds of folly and sin. Even at our best, our walk and worship are mingled and mangled. We all recognize this. We can stand in worship and sing the most God centered words and music. Then the person next to us isn't controlling their child as they should and we will think the most awful thoughts. Our hearts can be swelling with gratitude towards God and almost immediately filled with anger towards our spouse.

Thoughtful Christians are never surprised and are always saddened by the remaining effects of sin. When indwelling sin rises its ugly head and tries to control, we sometimes despair. Regret and self-loathing lurk around the fringes of our conscience. Heaven seems dim, holiness hard; God is frowning. We sometimes wonder why God would even bother with us. We are such worms.

But there are worms like us in the Bible. Jacob is one of them. Your Bible is opened to one of the 5 most famous stories in the Bible. It is included in every children's Bible story book, coloring book and Sunday School materials. Yet, this is not just a children's story. This is an important event in redemptive history. It is one of two major turning points in Jacob's life. The Jacob-Laban narratives are book ended with Jacob's two encounters with God. Both of these serve to show Jacob being transformed into a man of God.

The pattern of God's interaction with His people is established in this text. Israel was to learn, in their place and time, how to be engaged with God. But this is not limited to Israel and the Old Covenant. It will be picked up later as coming to its grand fulfillment in Christ and therefore, through Him, for us.

An Act of Divine Grace (v.10-15)

Jacob is on his journey to Haran. This 550 mile journey probably would have taken almost a month. He has just been caught out in his deceit, bartered to get his birthright, connived to steal his blessing and sent away on the pretext of finding a wife in order to flee from his brother's wrath. He is leaving his beloved mother whom he will never see again.

But even more than this, he is alienated from God. Everything to this point in the text indicates that Jacob has not yet had a personal encounter with God. He knows God has appeared to Abraham and to Isaac. He knows that the God of his fathers is the one and true God. But, he is living his life as his own god. The idols of his heart all clustered around his self-centeredness, rule and master him.

What we have here is a wandering, alienated, confused sinner trying to work through the consequences of his sin. On this night, God moves in an act of Divine grace.

¹⁰ Meanwhile, Jacob left Beersheba and traveled toward Haran. ¹¹ At sundown he arrived at a good place to set up camp and stopped there for the night. Jacob found a stone to rest his head against and lay down to sleep. ¹² As he slept, he dreamed of a stairway that reached from the earth up to heaven. And he saw the angels of God going up and down the stairway.

¹³ At the top of the stairway stood the LORD, and he said, "I am the LORD, the God of your grandfather Abraham, and the God of your father, Isaac. The ground you are lying on

¹ All Scriptures in this chapter/sermon are from the New Living Translation (NLT).

belongs to you. I am giving it to you and your descendants. ¹⁴Your descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth! They will spread out in all directions—to the west and the east, to the north and the south. And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants. ¹⁵What's more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you."

Heaven and Earth Connected for His People (v.10-12)

What a hard place he has come to in his life. He is reduced to sleeping on the ground with a stone for a pillow. And he has a dream. In his dream he sees a ladder (or better, stairway) between heaven and earth. It is standing up in the earth and reaches up to heaven. It is wide and heavily trafficked by angels going up and down doing God's bidding.

Why does God give him this particular dream?

It will clearly demonstrate that *GOD IS PRESENT AND ACTIVE IN JACOB'S WORLD* and in his life. He sees that angelic servants are streaming up and down the stairway carrying out God's bidding. Earth is full of God at work. Jacob must never forget that. He is not alone. God is present everywhere.

It will remind him of *THE REBELLIOUS ATTEMPT AT BABEL* to erect a stairway to heaven. God stepped in back then to judge the builders and restrain further attempts. Through this, Jacob should see his own life and sin – God has stepped in to deal with him. This is not an act of punishment, but an act of grace. Unlike Babel God has put in place the only way to God.

It will become *A MOTIF THROUGH THE OLD COVENANT* so that when Jesus comes, He will be the one and only stairway to heaven. How can I say this? Look with me at John 1:51.

⁵¹ Then he [Jesus] said, "I tell you the truth, you will all see heaven open and the angels of God going up and down on the Son of Man, the one who is the stairway between heaven and earth."

Looking back on this story, Jesus connects this heavenward escalator with Himself. Nathaniel is a Jew with no guile or deceit, unlike Jacob. He truly acknowledges Jesus as the Son of God and the Messiah. Jesus is the stairway, the only one and true, stairway to heaven. If you want to have a relationship with God, Jesus is the only way. God has taken the initiative to provide the Way – through Christ alone.

God Revealing Himself to His People (v.13)

The focus of the dream is on the Lord. He stands above (or possibly, at the foot of) the stairway. Nevertheless, Moses turns the spotlight on God. God identifies Himself through His Names and through His relationships. He is the LORD, sovereign creator and sustainer. He is also the God of Abraham and Isaac. He stands over creation and angels, governing all. He engages people in relationship, graciously being their God.

He is a communicating God. He is not silent. He is not watching mechanistic wheels of law and choice roll on. He is the God who comes into the world He has made, discloses Himself to His people and speaks. He speaks here directly through a dream. He speaks at other times in the Old Covenant through prophets and psalmists. And then finally, he has spoken through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the final Word of God, the Logos.

Let us recognize the unique place this has in the Bible. Hebrews 1 tells us that up until God spoke with finality through His Son, He used various means to reveal Himself to the patriarchs and the prophets. So God has used dreams and visions in the Old Covenant to speak authoritatively to people. Now, God's authoritative communication is exclusively in His Word. Peter can say in 1 Peter 1 that having the sure Word of God is more reliable than even their first-hand experience of the Transfiguration. This being so, God has chosen now to speak authoritatively to His people through the Word of God. You have all you need to be pleasing to God in the bible. You do not need and should not pursue additional words from God. His will has been revealed. You are now to do that will and to walk in wisdom.

God Promising Good to His People (v.13b-15)

Imagine, here is the deceitful, conniving, stealing favored son and while he is reaping the consequences of his sin, God moves into his life. God does so, not in punishment, but in this marvelous act of grace.

He connects Jacob to the covenant and the promises God has made. God takes the initiative to assert and affirm that Jacob is the recipient and participant in the covenant. The covenant to Abraham and Isaac is confirmed to Jacob. The covenant includes the land and the people. The covenant also extends to the promise of a blessing through a descendent for all the people groups. The Abrahamic Covenant (Patriarchal Covenant) anticipates its fulfillment in Christ. Through the Lord Jesus, the blessing will not just be for physical descendants, but will also be extended to all the people groups.

God also promises to be with Jacob, to protect him and to provide him wherever he goes until he returns to the land (v.15). God's promise here is not just simply an affirmation of His omnipresence, but is the assurance that Jacob is the special object of his attention and care. This grand promise we studied a couple of weeks ago - what an amazing thing it is that God makes this promise precisely when it seems His people are the least deserving.

That is why this section is an act of Divine grace. Jacob does not deserve the treatment he is getting. He deserves punishment. But God has chosen Jacob, has extended His love to him, brought him into the covenant and now revealing Himself to Jacob. This act of grace begins the transforming work in Jacob's life. Repentance and growth and change will begin to mark this worm.

God is always the initiator, by His grace, in engaging His people.

A Response of Humbled Repentance (v.16-19)

How will a sinner like Jacob respond to such kindness in grace from God? What I see here is a response of humbled repentance.

¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I wasn't even aware of it!" ¹⁷ But he was also afraid and said, "What an awesome place this is! It is none other than the house of God, the very gateway to heaven!"

¹⁸ The next morning Jacob got up very early. He took the stone he had rested his head against, and he set it upright as a memorial pillar. Then he poured olive oil over it. ¹⁹ He named that place Bethel (which means "house of God"), although it was previously called Luz.

Experienced in the Fear of God (v.16-17)

When Jacob awakens, he is aware that his own shortcoming and sinfulness (v.16). God was here and he did not even know it. He is awakened from both physical and spiritual sleep. He

is now aware of what he had been insensible to before. God is real. God is here. And that is the single most important fact of your existence. Are you aware of it?

Second, there is a holy fear or awe of God (v.17a). The text says, "He was afraid." Listen, when sinners are suddenly confronted with the awesome fact of God's promises and presence, even in grace, there ought to be a response of awe and fear. When our giving the gospel produces primarily a man-centered, man-pleasing, man-fulfilling response, we are not preaching Christ as we ought. God's self-disclosure in your soul initially invokes fear not familiarity. The kindness of God in Christ should cast down our pride, strip us of our self-sufficiency, show us our utter sinfulness and wretchedness and bow us to God.

Expressed in the Sacrifice to God (v.18-19)

In the morning, Jacob arises and for the first time in the Biblical record, he worships God. His worship is in two common rites which he knows will please God.

He builds an altar. He takes the stone pillow and raises it up as a pillar of memorial. He is setting a marker at this place both geographically and personally. This is the place, in his travel and in his life, where he came to know God personally. Here is the place of faith for him. The pillar also serves as an altar. He apparently has no animal to sacrifice, so he pours oil over the top as a sacrifice. Israel knows that God is pleased with the sacrifices of oil. Later, they will learn that these aromatic sacrifices bring a smile of pleasure to the face of God.

He names the place. Here is the founding Bethel. This is the house of God. It is the house of God because it is gateway to heaven and the place where God is present and promises. Yes, it used to be called Luz. But now, it will, even to this day, be called Bethel.

Do you begin to see why Jesus alludes to this text and why John recorded it? John opens his gospel by asserting that God has disclosed Himself, in the midst of darkness, through the Lord Jesus Christ. He is God with us. In His incarnation, we see God's glory, full of grace and truth. Nathaniel is like Jesus, without deceit or guile. Nathaniel sees what every one is supposed to see: Jesus is the promised Redeemer, the fulfiller of all the Old Covenant and the stairway to heaven.

God's awakening our souls and becoming real to us causes us to bow in humble awe at His grace.

A Promise of Grateful Worship (v.20-22)

First, we have to settle something: Is this an honorable vow or a dishonorable negotiation? Is Jacob attempting to manipulate God? Is he simply responding to God as a Benefactor, gratefully promising along the trajectory of God's blessing?

²⁰ Then Jacob made this vow: "If God will indeed be with me and protect me on this journey, and if he will provide me with food and clothing, ²¹ and if I return safely to my father's home, then the LORD will certainly be my God. ²² And this memorial pillar I have set up will become a place for worshiping God, and I will present to God a tenth of everything he gives me."

This has been hard. My mentors see a meanness and conceited negotiation here. They see an attempt to manipulate God. I wonder. Yes, in fact, we all respond to God with self-interest. But hasn't God designed us, not to serve that self-interest as an idol, but as a means to cause us to seek our greatest good in the best Benefactor? Isn't this prayer and its promise simply Jacob engaged with God according to his light? How else will he know for certain that God is his God? Hasn't God consistently asserted that His promises of His personal presence, provision and

protection are how His people know He is their God? And what greater Bethel will there ever be for us than Jesus, our Bethel, in whom God is with us, near us and for us?

But then this so much sounds like Jacob is trying to establish the terms of his relationship with God. What God has promised, Jacob will turn into a way to manipulate God. So can we believe what God has said and find our responses mingled with our own cravings and desires? All of us know deep in our souls this is true. We also know that there are religious groups that actually teach you to hold God accountable for what He has said. So often their praying sounds like Jacob here.

Jacob seems to be responding directly to what God has promised. He is responding to God's promise with a vow of his own, each phrase in harmony with God's revelation. But it is mingled with his own tendency to manipulate.

In a Prayer of Dependence

He begins with what I call a prayer of dependence. It recognizes that God must keep His Word or He is not God. God had promised to protect and provide. God had promised to be with him all the way till he returned. So, he expects that God will keep His Word and then the Lord will be Jacob's God. It has the ring of God's asserting that He is the God of Abraham and Isaac. Since He had covenanted with them and this identified Himself as their God, Jacob expects that God will identify Himself with Jacob through the keeping of the promises He has made.

He still seems to be finding it difficult to rise above his own worminess. The way this is phrased is a "if you will then I will". Yes, it is based on what God has said and believes what God has said. But it still is an attempt to shift the initiative from God to Jacob. Jacob, even in this prayer of dependence, is attempting to become sovereign. God is the one who dictates the terms of our relationship with Him. He is the one who declares that He is our God. But we so want to be in control! We so want God to be at our call, to be the petitioner waiting for the sovereign choice of accepting Him.

The second part of this commitment shows the strength of his faith. He has already acknowledged that this is the house of God. He is not going back on that assertion, but is reinforcing it. This is the house of God. This will be known as the house of God, Bethel, if God keeps His promises. If this one claiming to be God does not keep His Word, then He is not God, this is not Bethel and our hope for the way to heaven is vain and false. His dream is just a nightmare.

But God will be true. God will keep His promises. He will protect and provide for Jacob. The assurance that God will keep His word anchors our hope in Christ. Listen to me - you are depending on the promise that if you will trust in Christ and bow to God, you will not die in your sins and you will be saved. If God has not kept His Word at any point, then how will you know that He will keep it for you over your salvation?

This is why Paul says that if the teaching about the resurrection is not true, then the whole thing is false, our hope is vain and our faith is empty. Jesus asserted his own death and resurrection. The apostles recorded it and taught it as the center of all redemption and history. If those sentences in this Book are not true, then we are doomed. It is all false and all folly.

But praise to God, it is all true. God kept His Word to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God's Word in all that He has said and promised is true. Thus, Jesus is the one and only stairway to heaven. We can bank on Him. He will not fail us. He will be our God and we His people. And there is no other way, no other name, no other salvation than the one by faith in Jesus Christ alone!

And happily, God is pleased to keep His Word even when we are trying to manipulate Him and grab for control. But let us be so very cautious – even when we are praying in faith, be alert to negotiating with God. May our praying not sound like this: God if you will do what you said then I will let you be my God, I will do this and that. In other words, don't pray as though what God has said is actually in question. Pray with a heart totally submitted to God. In fact, pray like this: God, do for me what you promised and if you don't now, I will trust you anyway.

Respond to God's promises with trust and faith, ever alert to tendencies to try to get our own way.

In a Commitment to Give

Here the penniless man, depending on God, commits Himself to give back to God whatever God is pleased to bless him with. Here is the first use of the word *tithe* in the Bible. It is before the Law. It is a response to the grace of God. It is an expression of dependence on God and gratitude to God. There is no law to govern this response by Jacob. He promises to give because he has been humbled by the grace of God, blessed by the promises of God and is resting in the provision from God.

And so do we. Like Abraham with Melchizedek and Jacob here, we give, not in obedience to Law but as a response of love. We are guided by this proportion. But our response to the grace of God is a heart so full of gratitude that we, like the very poor church in the New Testament, begged for opportunity to give. As kindly as I can say this, when we get hung up on whether it is 10% or not, we have already missed the point. Freedom under grace ought to motivate us, not to give less, but to give more.

But, he doesn't have it now, does he? All he has is a rock and some oil. But given the facts, believed by faith that God will protect and provide, he promises to give.

Respond to the grace of God with acts of humble worship and grateful giving.

Reflect and Respond

Remember these three important lessons for our lives.

God is always the initiator, by His grace, in engaging His people.

God's awakening our souls and becoming real to us causes us to bow in humble awe at His grace.

Respond to God's promises with trust and faith, ever alert to tendencies to try to get our own way.

Respond to the grace of God with acts of humble worship and grateful giving.

Let us thank God that He does not treat us according to our sins, but according to His grace. He has provided in Jesus the one and only way to Him. He has shown us these truths so as to awaken our souls and bring us to repentance.

Respond to the grace of God with holy awe and fear. We must both believe and bow. We must be humbled.

Respond to the grace of God with acts of God pleasing worship. Praise Him. Commit to Him. Depend on Him. Be willing to sacrifice all for the sake of His Name. In gratitude and with gladness, as you are able, give.

God is absolutely trustworthy. What He promises He will perform. What I observe is that many claim to trust Him for their salvation but do not trust Him for their daily living. This was not true for Jacob. He understood that it is all or nothing. So rest in Him. Trust Him. Believe Him. Bow to Him. And keep on till you wake in His presence.