

THE STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

Genesis 28:10-22

Carrying on in Genesis - seeing and savoring the gospel
Taking several months to walk through a significant part of the OT
Really seeing that the OT isn't like a lot of us think of the OT. It's not a book like Aesop's Fables. Stories with kind of pithy moral or ethical lessons. The OT is actually filled with stories that are each scenes, chapters in this unfolding drama of God's redemptive purposes. The truth that all of history is unfolding in a way that either points forward toward or points back to God's redemption and rescue of a broken and sinful world through the life, death and resurrection of his Son Jesus. In short, the Bible is all about Jesus, and so we're looking at these stories that many of you thought were familiar through that lens.

And we're doing that b/c we believe it's really Jesus that changes and transforms us. It's not learning five ways to be a better husband that makes us a better husband, it's understanding and walking in the truths of what Jesus has done in us that is transformational.

Well last week we started looking at the life of Jacob. Jacob, of course, is third in the line of this great covenant that God has made with his people beginning with Abraham. A covenant that God would ultimately bless the nations through Abraham's seed, and he has faithfully been fulfilling that covenant in the life of Isaac, and now in the life of Jacob.

And today we come to this major episode in Jacob's life. Jacob's first encounter with God. Jacob's life is really marked by two significant encounters with God. And those encounters indelibly mark Jacob. Pastor Mike will be preaching next week from the second encounter but this week we're going to look at the first. This dream Jacob has.

And the subject of this dream, this episode in Jacob's life, this encounter with God, is a subject that is getting a lot of traction in pop culture these days, it's the subject of heaven.

But in this story you'll notice that heaven isn't treated as just some far off place up in the clouds. We don't see Jacob spending 90 minutes in heaven and discovering that heaven is for real. This story is actually about the God of heaven and about his nearness. His nearness to Jacob and by application his nearness to us.

What we're going to see in this passage the nature of this God who draws near to sinful, broken humanity. That God relentlessly pursues and draws near to sinners and sufferers. This whole story in Genesis 28 is about a God who is unwavering, and relentless and determined in pursuing and drawing near to rebels, to people that don't want anything to do with him, that are running away from him, and to people that are broken, that are hurting and suffering.

And we're going to see all of that this morning through three acts, three chapters of this story. And we'll call those three chapters the place, the dream, and the response. The place, the dream and the response.

1. The place.

Well, right away beginning in v. 10 the storyteller, in just a couple of verses, sets the scene for what's happening. He gives us a picture of where Jacob is at. And there are three things I want you to notice about the place that Jacob is at, the setting he finds himself in.

The first is this: Jacob has left Beersheba and is going toward Haran.

This simple opening paints the setting of this story with incredible significance. There is an importance to this that goes beyond just the mention of these two geographic locations. Well, what is that importance?

Well, Jacob is a fugitive. You see, he has left Beersheba because his life is in jeopardy. His brother Esau hates him for cheating him out of both his birthright and his blessing, and he's plotting to kill him. So Jacob is fleeing his home, his family, the place that he has grown up, he is leaving everything he has known. And he's on the run.

And by leaving Beersheba he's leaving the Promised Land, this place of God's blessing, and God's provision and protection, and God's covenant with his forefathers, and he's going back toward this land that his grandfather had left. And that his mother had left. And that his father had never even been allowed to journey to.

And if you remember the story of Abraham's servant who made this same journey back to Haran to find a wife for Isaac, you'll notice the gigantic contrast here. Jacob is making this trip alone. There is no caravan with Jacob. No treasures from his Father. No partners for the journey. Jacob is utterly alone. Leaving Beersheba and going to Haran is really a physical representation of Jacob turning from God and running in the opposite direction. Far from moving toward God, Jacob is moving away from him.

So that's the first thing. The second thing I want you to notice is that the text says Jacob came to a certain place... why does the storyteller call it a certain place? In fact, two more times in the next verses the narrator stresses the setting of this "place" Jacob was at. Look at verse 11: "And he came to a *certain place* and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of *the place*, he put it under his head and lay down in *that place*."

Why does the narrator make such a big deal about the place? Well, the storyteller is pointing us to something.

A nameless place would have been nameless because it had no importance tied to it. It would have been a place of so little significance that there was nothing to name it for. There was no river, no tree, no geological formation, nothing that stood out. The place was essentially nowhere. And so Jacob finds himself in the middle of nowhere.

Do you see these two levels the storyteller is operating on here? He is giving us the setting of where Jacob is physically, but all the while he's pointing us deeper into the state of Jacob heart. Jacob is running from the place of God's blessing and spending his first night in the middle of nowhere. The sheer desolation of this place is a physical picture of where Jacob's life is right now. Jacob's life is a wasteland. It's barren. It has completely fallen apart.

Then finally we see that Jacob stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Even heaven itself is dark to Jacob. To Jacob, God is an enigma. His ways and providences are a mystery. They're hidden behind the vast horizon of God's transcendence and invisible to him. To Jacob, this Yahweh seems remote and uncaring. Far from him.

Have you ever felt this way? That God is distant? Uncaring? Have you ever felt the numbness of being in the wasteland? Maybe there are some of you here that feel that way now. You are going through the motions of religion trying to keep up appearance, but inside you are slowly moving away from God. You're stuck in the barrenness of nowhere.

Maybe there are others of you that you look at the circumstances and trials of your life and you just wonder what kind of sick game this God is up to. His ways are a mystery that keep him far off. Maybe like Jacob you feel like you've never encountered this God before.

You see, Jacob's Grandfather Abraham had met God. His father Isaac had met God, but Jacob had never encountered this God. And this experience of God doesn't come by birth. You are not a Christian because you are born into a Christian family with Christian parents and baptized or dedicated when you were a baby and have always gone to church. There is a personal encounter with God that has to happen.

And you would think, if Jacob has never met this God of his forefathers, if he has never had a real encounter with him, then surely now, after all his lying and cheating and manipulating and self-absorption there's no way he ever will. Surely not in this place when he is on the run from God. Certainly not when he has spent his entire life up to this point unconcerned about this God and consumed with himself.

And as Jacob, exhausted from his journey, lays his head on his stone pillow you don't see Jacob pray even one sentence. You don't see him utter even one word to this God. There is no seeking of God, not initiation on Jacob's part. Jacob does absolutely nothing. But watch what is about to happen. Jacob dreams.

2. The Dream

v. 12 - "And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the Lord stood above it."

Now whenever God gives a dream it is for a purpose. God doesn't give dreams just to entertain. If you dream that you are playing on the Cleveland Cavaliers with LeBron James like may have recently, that's probably not God but the fried cheese you ate for dinner. Dreams from God are never pointless, they are meant to communicate something. So what is God trying to communicate here to Jacob?

Look at what Jacob sees first - he sees a ladder. This is why so many people know this story as Jacob's Ladder.

But this isn't just an ordinary ladder. And here's how I know. My first construction job was tar and gravel roofing and I spent my summers in high school climbing up and down a 25ft extension ladder packing 15lb rolls of tar paper. And I know for a fact that guys were never ascending and descending at the same time on this ladder. That was definitely against L&I regulations.

So actually this isn't a ladder so much as it is a gigantic staircase. And the bottom of this staircase is resting on the earth, while the top of it touches heaven.

And in the dream, as Jacob's eyes track across this amazing scene, he sees these angels ascending and descending on this staircase. And these angels aren't the rosy faced, chubby little angels from Precious Moments, these are real biblical angels, which means they are majestic creatures. Have you noticed in the Bible, whenever an angel shows up the first thing they have to do is announce "Fear Not".

And in God's created order angels herald God's royal power. They are announcers of the rule and reign of the King. Angels move between heaven and earth carrying out the King's decrees, effecting God's purposes and plans in a broken and sinful world. And so when Jacob sees this stairway, with these angels on it, what he is seeing is the activity, the action of God's kingdom of this world. He's seeing God at work.

You see, Jacob has been busy navel-gazing. His eyes have been down here, on himself. And God suddenly takes his eyes and he removes the blinders, just for a moment so that Jacob can see what is really going on.

It is much like that place in 2 Kings 6, do you remember that story? Where Elisha's servant is afraid. They are in a city that is under siege by a ruthless enemy. And the servant says to Elisha, what are we going to do?? And Elisha, full of confidence in God, prays that his servant's eyes would be opened. And suddenly he sees that the mountains around them are full of horses and chariots of fire. That's what is happening here.

Jacob is getting a glimpse that God is at work. God is saying to him, you didn't know it, but I've been actively involved in your life. Even in the midst of your sin and rebellion, in the middle of all the hardship and difficulty that is going on, I've been moving and at work in your life and your situation.

That's the first thing God is saying to him, but look at the second thing. Jacob's eyes move from the staircase, to the angels, to finally God himself. v. 13, "And behold, the Lord stood above it..." In most of your Bibles, if you look at the bottom of your page here you'll see a textual note on the translation of this verse. You see, Jacob is looking at this dream that he is having and he sees the staircase and his eyes zoom in on these glorious and majestic angels carrying out the purposes of God to every corner of his life and the outermost parts of the earth, and then his vision zooms in even more to God. And some translators say that in the dream God is standing over it all, on the top of the staircase. But it seems a more accurate translation is that God stand beside Jacob. God comes down the staircase. This King of the universe who is sending his angels out to the four winds to fulfill his every decree draws near to Jacob.

And here's what this means. God is showing Jacob that he's not only in control *over* his life, but he's with him *in* his life. He showing Jacob he cares for him. God is saying, you might not know it but I care for every detail of your life. I know every sinful action and every selfish thought, I know everything about you and I'm standing over you and caring for every aspect and part of your life.

Sounds great for Jacob right, but how about for you? Can you really trust that God is at work in your life and that he cares for every detail of what you are going through? You look at the next 20 years of Jacob's life and they weren't easy. He ends up with a wife he doesn't really

love for seven years before he marries the one he wants. But God is saying here to Jacob and to us that if we had his view of things, if we saw things from the top of the staircase the way he does, we would know that everything he sends into our lives is the best possible thing for us. Can you believe that brothers and sisters?

Then God makes the same covenant with Jacob that he made with his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham. Look at this with me. v. 13-15.

This is astounding. How can God do this? Notice there is no "if" in these words. God promises here aren't contingent on a particular response from Jacob. This promise is completely one sided. God says, I am going to do this for you... full stop.

How can God do this? How can a perfectly righteous and holy God, so extravagantly bless a dirt bag like Jacob. I mean, have you stopped to think about this? God is holy and pure. Purity can't touch impurity. Righteousness can't touch unrighteousness. The Bible itself says that those who justify the wicked are an abomination. How can God do this?

The answer to that comes as we look at Jacob's response.

v. 16-17

The reason God is able to bless Jacob is the gate of heaven and the house of God. What does he mean by this. What is the gate of heaven?

The storyteller is drawing us back on purpose to an episode earlier in Genesis. In Genesis 11. Do you remember the story of Babel? What happened at Babel? A group of people had come together to build a tower and the top of it was going to reach heaven. And do you know what that word Babel means? It actually means the gate of heaven, or the gate of God. And if you remember, the tower of Babel, wasn't just a tower, it was a ziggurat. Go back to your elementary school history, do you remember what ziggurats were? They were these ancient near-eastern temples that were built as huge stone stairways. And so at Babel they weren't just building a tower, they were building a stairway to heaven. They were trying to find a way in their own power to connect earth with heaven.

And that is the way humanity and culture has always been. We are always trying to get to God in our own strength, in our own power. There is this sense that if we do this or that, that if we really exert all our energy at it, if we're a really good person, or we do the right spiritual exercises, then, maybe then God will meet us. This is true of every other religion and philosophy in the world. It is man's effort at climbing up to God.

And Jacob knows this, but he sees what God has shown him, and he hears what God has said to him, and Jacob is saying, so this is the way the gate of heaven works. Instead of man building this stairway from earth to heaven, God has set up his stairway from heaven to earth.

You know brothers and sisters, even on our best days we have a bent in our heart that if we fix things, if we change things, God will meet with us. If we read the Bible more, or we memorize some Scripture, or we share the gospel more, if we do the right things, then we will get God, God's presence. Martin Luther said that the natural response of the heart is always religion. But the Bible gives us something different. It says that we can't reach him, instead he's reached us.

But that still doesn't answer this question, does it? There is still an issue here, and that is how could a holy God do this? How could a holy God encounter such an underserving individual, who is running away from him. Who hasn't sought him at all, hasn't even asked him for this?

Well, the answer comes as we turn to the New Testament, to the first chapter of John. John begins his gospel talking about the *logos*, the Word. And he says this: v. 1-2

Who is the Word? This Word is Jesus. And in v. 14 he says this: And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory. He's saying that Jesus became flesh and dwelt among us, and that word dwelt literally means that Jesus *tabernacled* among us. Jesus came into the world and became the new tabernacle, the new temple.

Jacob has this encounter with a holy God, God draws near to him, and he renames this place, this middle of nowhere wasteland, Beth-el, the house of God. What was the house of God? It was the place God met with his people. The place heaven and earth joined. The place a holy and perfect God connected to an imperfect creation.

In the Old Testament the first house of God, the first temple, was the garden of Eden. God dwelled with his people in nearness and intimacy. But when sin came into the world that changed, and eventually we see that God's nearness to his people depended on sacrifice. And so for Israel, the tabernacle and then the temple became the place of connection between God and his people. The temple became the place where God made his presence known to his people.

John is saying is that Jesus is the true house of God. He is the true and better temple that the OT temple only points to. Jesus become the place that heaven and earth meet, the place a perfect God connects to an imperfect creation, the place God dwells with his people, the place God's presence is made known.

Then, as you go on in John chapter 1, there's this interesting little scene. Jesus is calling his disciples, and there's a guy named Phillip. And after meeting Jesus Phillip goes and grabs his friend Nathaniel as quick as he can telling him that they've found the Messiah! And when he comes to Jesus, as he's walking toward Jesus, Jesus says these words to him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed in whom there is no deceit!" And Nathaniel's response is - "How do you know me?" And Jesus says, "I saw you under the fig tree." Now Nathaniel is flabbergasted. Who knows what secret thoughts were going on in his head under the fig tree, but Jesus knew. And so Nathaniel declares - "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

And here is Jesus response - He says to Nathaniel, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree do you believe? You will see greater things than these.' Truly I say to you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

Doesn't that give you goosebumps? Jesus is saying, "I am the stairway Jacob saw. I am the place heaven and earth meet. I am the way that a perfect God is able to not only connect with, but come and dwell with an imperfect creation. I am the stairway to heaven."

Jesus is the gate of heaven, he is the house of God, he is the stairway. You see, like Jacob Jesus left his own Father house. Like Jacob he went alone. The Bible says the Son of Man had no place to lay his head. Jesus went into exile in the middle of nowhere. In that same story

in John, Nathaniel is astounded that the Messiah would come out of Nazareth! Jesus entered into our nameless places. But unlike Jacob his life wasn't just threatened, his life wasn't just in jeopardy, it was taken. At the cross Jesus experienced the darkness of heaven, not because of his own sin - you see for Jacob, so much of his experience was the inevitable result of his own disobedience, his own selfishness, his own sin - but Jesus suffered at the cross not for his own sin, but for ours.

Well, how should we respond to this? That in Jesus God has drawn here. That God has unequivocally given us these one sided promises through the gospel that aren't dependent in any way on us. God has done everything to redeem us. When we were running away.

Well, Jacob doesn't quite get it yet. Look at Jacob's vow. v. 20-22. Jacob hasn't yet been transformed by his encounter with God. In fact, it isn't until the brook Jabbok that we'll see next week that Jacob is fully changed. God came to Jacob and made these unequivocal promises that required nothing on Jacob's part. And what does Jacob respond. God if... if you do these things. If you do your part God, I'll do mine. And God, by the way, I'll tithe too. I'll give you your ten percent tip.

Brother and sisters, because God has offered his free grace in Jesus, the Bible says he has bought us with a price, he owns us. There can be no if in our response. Our response must be - God you rescued me from death, you drew near when I was running away, you did everything to purchase me - I willingly give you my all.