

Isaac's Descendants

Jacob's Dream at Bethel

Genesis 28:10-22

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Scripture

We are currently in a series of sermons on “Isaac’s Descendants.” After twenty years of barrenness, God gave Isaac and Rebekah twin sons, whom they named Esau and Jacob. As a young man, Esau despised his birthright and sold it to his twin brother, Jacob. Much later, Jacob deceived his father, Isaac, and received the blessing that Isaac had intended to give his older son, Esau. As a result of that double deception, Esau wanted to kill Jacob. And so, Jacob was sent away to his mother’s family in Northwest Mesopotamia to find there a wife for himself. Along the way, Jacob had an astonishing dream.

Let’s read about Jacob’s dream in Genesis 28:10-22:

**¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran.
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 to sleep. 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! ¹³ And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. ¹⁴ Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring 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 And 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.”

¹⁸ So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. ¹⁹ He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first. ²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, ²¹ so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, ²² and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you.” (Genesis 28:10-22)

Introduction

When Martin Luther was a young man, he was terrified of death. He knew that he was a sinner, and that he deserved to go to hell for his sin. When he was a twenty-one-year old law student at the University of Erfurt, he was returning back to school during a thunderstorm after visiting his parents. Roland H. Bainton writes in his marvelous biography:

Sudden lightning struck him to earth. In that single flash he saw the denouement of the drama of existence. There was God the all-terrible, Christ the inexorable, and all the leering fiends springing from their lurking places in pond and wood that with sardonic cachinnations they might seize his shock of curly hair and bolt him into hell. It was no wonder that he cried out to his father’s saint, patroness of miners, “St. Anne help me! I will become a monk.”¹

¹ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013).

Luther felt forsaken by God, and tried to connect with God by becoming a monk. Have you ever felt forsaken by God?

Isaac's son Jacob felt forsaken by God. He had deceived his brother Esau out of his birthright and his blessing. Esau was so angry he wanted to kill Jacob. But, out of deference to his father Isaac, Esau decided to wait until his father died. When Rebekah and Isaac heard about Esau's murderous desire they decided to send Jacob to Rebekah's family in Northwest Mesopotamia. And so, Jacob hastily fled from his family in Beersheba and traveled more than 400 miles to Haran.

Lesson

Jacob's dream at Bethel in Genesis 28:10-22 teaches us that God will be with his people wherever they go.

Let's use the following outline:

1. Jacob's Flight (28:10-11)
2. Jacob's Dream (28:12-15)
3. Jacob's Response (28:16-22)

I. **Jacob's Flight (28:10-11)**

First, let's look at Jacob's flight.

When Rebekah and Isaac learned about Esau's murderous threat to kill Jacob, they hastily sent Jacob to Rebekah's family in Haran, which is in Northwest Mesopotamia. So, **Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran** (28:10). Jacob was fleeing for his life. Even though his family was extremely wealthy, there is no indication that Jacob traveled with an entourage of attendants. His trip to Haran would take almost a month. It seems that he was traveling alone and on foot, constantly looking over his shoulder to see whether Esau was pursuing him to kill him.

After several days, Jacob **came to a certain place**, which

we learn from verse 19 that Jacob named “Bethel,” **and stayed there that night, because the sun had set** (28:11a).

Moses mentioned the word “**place**” three times in verse 11, underscoring that there was something special about this place. Interestingly, Jacob was traveling in the reverse direction that his grandfather Abraham traveled when God called him to go to the Promised Land. Abraham and his family lived in Ur of the Chaldeans when his father Terah took the family as far as Haran in Northwest Mesopotamia (11:27-32). After Terah died, God called Abraham to go to the Promised Land (12:1-3). When he got to Bethel, Abraham “built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord” (12:8). Later, he traveled south and settled in Hebron, which is about 20 miles north of Beersheba.

So, after Jacob fled from Beersheba, he came to Bethel in a few days. Jacob was fleeing from the land God had promised to his grandfather Abraham. He was fleeing from the promises that had been given to him. It is clear that at this point Jacob did not know God as his own God. A few days earlier, during his deception of his father Isaac, when asked how he had found the game so quickly, Jacob said, “Because the Lord *your God* granted me success” (27:20, emphasis added). It was not until Jacob returned from Haran that he called God his own God. Jacob had heard his grandparents and his parents talk about God, and the astonishing promises God had made to them. And yet, Jacob had not yet personally come to know God as his own God.

It is possible to grow up in a home where God is Lord and Savior to Mom and Dad, but know him personally and savingly. Young person, just because your Mom and Dad are going to heaven does not mean that you are going to heaven too. You must *personally* believe in Jesus, and you must *personally* repent of your sin. Be sure that yours is a *personal* faith!

So, **taking one of the stones of the place, Jacob put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep** (28:11b).

It may not have been in exactly the same spot that his grandfather Abraham built an altar to the Lord, but it was surely in the same **place**. Jacob was about to encounter God personally!

II. Jacob's Dream (28:12-15)

Second, let's examine Jacob's dream.

While he was sleeping, Jacob **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** (28:12)! When we see the word "**ladder**" we think of a step-ladder. However, this was clearly more than a step-ladder because **the angels of God**—plural!—**were ascending and descending on it!** The note in *The ESV Study Bible* says, "The Hebrew term translated 'ladder' could possibly denote a stairway...similar to those found on ancient ziggurats." So, the **ladder** that Jacob saw in his dream was really a very large stairway. However, the note continues, "What matters most is not the precise shape of this structure but its purpose; it provides a bridge between heaven and earth, revealing that God is still committed to making the earth his dwelling place.... While human beings want to ascend to heaven (as reflected in the Tower of Babel story, Genesis 11), God is interested in making the earth his temple-city."²

And behold, the Lord stood above it (28:13a). Some Bible translations say that "the Lord stood beside him." However, as commentator Gordon Wenham says, "The image of Yahweh at the top of the ladder forms a fitting climax to the whole and fits in with the idea that angels report back to him after patrolling the earth (1 Kgs 22:19–22; Job 1:6–8; 2:1–3; Zech 1:10)."³

² Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 99.

³ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 222.

We come now to the focal point of the narrative. While Jacob was dreaming, God said, **“I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed”** (28:13b-14). Astonishingly, God promised to Jacob what he had previously promised to Abraham and to Isaac! Jacob was a deceiver. At this point in his life, he did not know God personally and savingly—even though he had heard about God all his life. Commentator Sidney Greidanus writes:

This is astounding. Almighty God seeks out this fleeing scoundrel Jacob and tells him that all these rich promises given to Abraham and Isaac are now for him. He receives the blessings God bestowed on the Patriarchs. And it is completely God’s initiative. Jacob has done absolutely nothing to deserve God’s covenant promises. In fact, he had messed up badly. He had tried so hard to grasp God’s blessings with his own cunning, and look where it got him: a fugitive running away from the Promised Land. One cannot grasp and take God’s blessings. One can only receive them gratefully. God is the Giver. It is God’s initiative. It is all God’s grace!⁴

But, as astonishing as God’s promise to Jacob was, God was not finished yet. He had a special promise for Jacob, who was fleeing *away* from the Promised Land. God said in verse 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**

⁴ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 291.

until I have done what I have promised you.”

Greidanus states, “God’s promises are pure grace. Jacob has messed up his life with his ambition, callousness, deceit, lying, and using the Lord’s name to cover his deceit. Jacob deserves God’s curse. But instead God comes to him with wonderful promises. And there are no conditions. It is pure grace.”⁵

We tend to think that God blessed people in the Bible because they were good. I hope you see that they were *not* good. They were sinners who deserved nothing but God’s wrath and condemnation. And yet, God acted graciously toward them. Sinners in the Bible were all the recipients of God’s grace. And that means that no matter how sinful you are, no matter what you have done, you are a candidate for God’s amazing grace. Just ask him to be gracious to you.

III. Jacob’s Response (28:16-22)

And third, let’s look at Jacob’s response.

As soon as God had spoken to him in his dream, **Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.” And 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” (28:16-17).** It is not surprising that Jacob was afraid. He had just had a vision of God! When Isaiah had a vision of God, he said, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” (Isaiah 6:5). When people saw God, they were afraid and terrified.

So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured

⁵ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons*, 292.

oil on the top of it. He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first (28:18-19). This would seem to be an act of worship by Jacob. Pouring oil on the stone was a consecration of that spot to God (cf. Leviticus 8:10, 11). And by calling that place **“Bethel,”** which means “house of God,” Jacob gave it a name that acknowledged God’s presence, and it superseded the city’s ancient name of **Luz.**

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you” (28:20-22). Commentator Kent Hughes writes, “Jacob’s amazement, fear, declarations, and worship were all so exemplary and make good models for us to imitate. But not so with his vow, because ‘if’ and ‘then’ are not the language of faith. Faith does not bargain with God, saying that ‘*If* God will do thus and so, *then* I will make him my God.’”⁶ But that is exactly what Jacob did with God. Hughes continues, “Jacob is a piece of work, a work in progress who has a long way to go. Jacob’s amazed declaration remains immortal. His designations ‘house of God’ and ‘gate of heaven’ are laudable. His anointing of the stone pillow was a true act of worship. But his vow is vintage, conniving Jacob. Jacob is still more scoundrel than saint.”⁷

That is what makes God’s grace so amazing! Grace was Jacob’s only hope. Jacob was going through the worst time of his life. He was fleeing a murderous brother. He was a two-timing deceiver, having taken his brother’s birthright and blessing. And yet, God extended grace to Jacob. Even then, he bargained

⁶ R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 361.

⁷ R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*, 361.

with God with “ifs” and “thens.” Our “ifs” and “thens” may not be quite as blatant as Jacob’s, and we may not even have articulated them, but we do place conditions on our relationship with God. But, in his great mercy, God extends grace to us as well.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with two lessons from Jacob’s dream in Genesis 28:10-22.

First, God promises to be with us wherever we go. In verse 15, God promised Jacob, **“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.”** Twenty years later, God fulfilled his promise to Jacob when he returned to the Promised Land.

But the promise was also fulfilled in the nation of Israel when they returned from slavery in Egypt.

It was fulfilled later when a remnant of the nation of Israel returned from their exile in Babylon.

However, the ultimate fulfillment of this promise is found in what we commemorate during Advent. An angel appeared to Joseph, the husband of Mary, and said to him prior to the birth of Jesus, **“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us)”** (Matthew 1:23). God’s promise to be with us finds its ultimate fulfillment in the birth of Jesus Christ.

Moreover, after Jesus arose back to life again, and before he ascended into heaven, he said to his followers, **“And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”** (Matthew 28:20).

When Jesus ascended into heaven, he poured out his Holy Spirit to dwell in God’s people (Acts 2:33).

Finally, on the last day, when Jesus comes again—his Second Advent—God will dwell with his people, **“and they will be**

his people, and God himself will be with them as their God” (Revelation 21:3).

And second, Jesus is the ladder to heaven. Did you know that Jesus referred to this dream of Jacob? When Philip brought Nathaniel to Jesus, Jesus said to him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” (John 1:47-51).

Here is Jacob’s dream of heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending. But notice, the ladder is missing! The angels are ascending and descending on the Son of Man, that is, on Jesus. Jesus is saying that he himself is the ladder. He is the link between heaven and earth. As Jesus will later claim, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Jesus is the way to God. Jesus is the mediator (1 Timothy 2:5). No one comes to the Father except through Jesus. Jesus connects heaven and earth. Jesus is the ladder to heaven.⁸

So, let us believe that the only way to God is through Jesus.

This Advent, let us trust in Jesus, and we will discover that he will be with us wherever we go. Amen.

⁸ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons*, 290.

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The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
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*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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