

Genesis 28:10-22
Psalm 73
John 1

“Jacob’s Ladder”

September 27, 2009

Genesis shows us that Jacob is more “spiritually minded” than his brother.

He is the one who values the covenant promises of God.

He thinks that the covenant promises of God are worth everything.

Esau, on the other hand, does not.

Esau is driven by his appetite – his hunger for food and for sex.

Esau does not have a vision of God’s promises –

and so he sold his birthright for a mess of stew.

Rather than wait for his parents to arrange a marriage

he married Hittite women who were under the wrath and curse of God.

Like a man who is crazed with his obsession

he only realizes the problem after it is too late.

Do not be driven by food or sex.

If you *love* food – if you are obsessed with food –

then that has become an idol – it has become your god.

If you are constantly preoccupied with sex,

if you wind up making foolish decisions because of your desires –

then you are too much like Esau.

And the day may come when it is too late.

Ed Welch, in his book on *Addictions* that the Men’s Leadership Study is reading, recounts the story of a cocaine addict who reported that his wife had said,

“that I was going to have to make a choice – either cocaine or her.

Before she finished the sentence, I knew what was coming,

so I told her to think carefully about what she was going to say.

It was clear to me that there wasn’t a choice.

I love my wife, but I’m not going to choose anything over cocaine.

It’s sick, but that’s what things have come to.

Nothing and nobody comes before my coke.” (p56)

Sin starts out as a playful kitten –

but when she is full grown, she is a tigress who will not let you go.

Psalm 73 reflects on the blinding power of sin.

Because if you look around you, it appears that the wicked are doing very well!

The ruthless, the brutal, these are making money hand over fist.

A woman who flaunts her body can become wealthy and famous –

who cares if can’t really sing – she looks hot!

Psalm 73 starts by reflecting on how the wicked prosper –
and how the righteous suffer.

If you look at the pronouns in verses 2-15
there are a lot of 'me' and 'them' – but not much 'you.'
not much thought about who *God* is.
If all you do is compare 'me' and 'them' – then what's the point?

Psalm 73 could well have been the song of Jacob as he is exiled from the land.
Jacob has been intent on getting the birthright and the blessing.
But why?
He has the blessing – but now he is being exiled!
He has been cast out of the Promised Land –
and there is no guarantee that he will ever come back.
Why has he been so zealous for the promises of God?
Esau gets everything!

So let's go ahead and sing Psalm 73:1-15

Okay – that's the problem:

But then the Psalmist comes into God's temple.
He has been preoccupied with "me" and "them" –
but now he sees *you*.
Jacob likewise has been focusing on the "me" and "them" –
but when he comes to Bethel – the House of God –
his eyes are drawn to *the point*.
The pronouns shift in verses 16-22 –
now the focus is on "me" and "you" – and "their" fate,
before turning in verses 23-28 to "me" and "you" and my hope!

God shows to the Psalmist (and to Jacob)
that the end of the story is that God will bring those who hope in him to glory.

Heaven and earth also play a major role in Psalm 73.
In verse 9 the wicked "lay claim to heaven, and their tongues the earth possess."
In verse 25, after having seen the vision of God in the temple,
the Psalmist says "I have none but you in heaven; all on earth I lay aside."

The wicked lay claim to heaven and earth.
The righteous renounce their claim on everything in heaven and earth –
except God.

All I want is you.
All I need is you.
"Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you."

The lesson of Psalm 73 is the lesson that Jacob must learn before he ready to return to the land.

It is the lesson that you must learn in your walk of discipleship.

Until you learn it, you will remain mired in verses 2-15.

Sing Psalm 73:16-28

Read John 1:29-51

So Jesus tells his disciples that they will see heaven opened,
and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

What is Jesus saying?

Jesus assumes that you know the story of Jacob's ladder.

In Jewish tradition, the simplest explanation was that there were certain angels
charged with the protection of the Promised Land,
and other angels charged with other lands.

Therefore, they suggested that as Jacob left the Promised Land,
a new set of angels was charged with protecting him –
so the "Promised Land" angels ascended the ladder,
and the "foreign land" angels descended
in order to accompany him.

But Jacob's ladder became a picture of the sufferings of the Jews.

One interpretation saw the angels as pictures of Israel's exile.

So for instance, the angel of the Babylonian exile climbed 70 rungs,
and then fell down.

Then the angel representing the exile in Persia went up and fell down,
and then the angel representing Greek oppression.

The fourth angel was the Roman exile – symbolized by Edom
(remember that the Romans used the Herods – who were Edomites –
to keep Israel under their thumb –
and one rabbi said that this angel was Esau himself!).

This angel went up and Jacob feared he would never come down,
but the angel who stood with him promised that eventually
Esau would fall down.

This is all very interesting –
but Jesus says that he *is* the ladder.

What does he mean when he says,

*You will see heaven opened,
and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man?*

In order to understand this,

we need to go back and look more carefully at what this ladder is doing in Genesis 28.

Notice that the action slows down so that we are given a lot more detail than usual.

1. The Place Where Earth and Heaven Meet (28:10-12)

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.*

It is worth pointing out that when Jacob returns to the land in chapter 32,
he will also have a nocturnal visit with the LORD!
Jacob is heading out into exile – into darkness.
And only when he returns will the day dawn again (32:26).

*Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head
and lay down in that place to sleep.*

Notice that three times we are told that he is “a certain place” or “the place”
or “that place.”

What place?

The narrator is emphasizing that the *place* is important –
even though we are not yet told what place that is!

*12 And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth,
and the top of it reached to heaven.*

Why is this place important?

Because this is the place where earth and heaven meet!

We saw in Psalm 73 about the importance of the connection between earth and heaven.
In the Tower of Babel, we saw how man sought to build a tower
from earth to heaven –
a ziggurat that would look like a ladder to the heavens.
But we also saw that God will not allow man to climb into the heavens.

In other words, there is a bridge connecting earth and heaven.
But Jacob may not climb it.

This stairway to heaven is traversed not by men – but by angels.

It is interesting to note that most Jewish and Christian commentaries on this ladder
have focused on how *we* can climb this ladder.

But never is the path to glory portrayed as a “stairway to heaven”!
Further, what sort of beings travel the “stairway to heaven”?

*And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!
13 And behold, the Lord stood above it...*

There is a famous hymn that deals with Jacob’s Ladder.

Unfortunately, it completely misses the point of the ladder!

It's hymn 245 in your hymnals.

The first problem with the hymn is that it says that we may climb Jacob's ladder.
But both in Genesis and in John the only people on the ladder are angels.

The point of the ladder is *not* so that we climb it in order to get to heaven!

The other problem is that the hymn suggests that Jesus has "raised up a ladder" for us.

But as Jesus makes clear in John 1 –
he *is* the ladder!

It is not that Jesus makes a way for *us* to get to heaven.
Rather, Jesus *is* our way to heaven!

That's why we're not singing the "Jacob's Ladder" hymn!

Rather the ladder is for angels to go up and down.

Why?

Other passages of scripture refer to angels patrolling the earth
and reporting to the LORD (1 Kings 22:19-22; Job 1-2; Zech. 1:10).

We cannot climb this ladder.

But this ladder is important for us!

Because it tells us that God has not forgotten us!

While the Garden of Eden is closed to Jacob –
and the way into the Holy of Holies is protected by the cherubim –
there *is* a place where earth and heaven meet.

And while Jacob cannot climb it,
the angels of God ascend and descend upon it.
God has not forgotten us.

And the LORD himself stands at the top of this stair –
he sees, he hears, he knows –
and he speaks...

2. The Blessing of Abraham Rests upon Jacob (28:13-15)

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.

This is the blessing of Abraham.

The *land* on which you lie I will give to you...

Your *seed* shall be like the dust of the earth...

And in you and your offspring shall *all the families of the earth be blessed.*

Isaac had said this in the previous chapter.
And in Isaac's blessing, Isaac had said that God would confirm the blessing.

And sure enough, he does!

But what is more, we are reminded again
that the Abrahamic blessing is rooted in God's presence:

*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."*

God had said to Abraham and to Isaac "I will be with you,"
but there is something here that goes a step further:

"I will keep you [or guard you] wherever you go,
and I will bring you back to this land."

Jacob is about to leave the Promised Land.
Will God be with him "out there"?
God had told Isaac not to leave the land.
If Isaac had left, God would *not* have been with him.
But now Yahweh assures Jacob
that he will be with him even in his exile –
and that he will restore him and bring him home.

Yahweh is not bound to a particular region.
He will be with Jacob no matter where he goes.

Think of how Israel would hear this?
Jacob's descendents hear this story after 400 years in Egypt.
Will God be with us?
Will God bring us back to the land?
Jacob's descendents hear this story again after 70 years in Babylon.
Will God be with us?
Will God bring us back to the land?
Indeed, Jesus reflects on this story as he begins his ministry,
as he prepares to endure the Great Exile of the Cross.

And he says to his disciples,
You will see the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

God with us – Immanuel – this is at the heart of everything else.
If God is for us and with us, who can be against us?

This is what *you* need to remember as well!

Because you now see Jesus, who himself is the place where earth and heaven meet.
And Jesus, the one who has ascended to the right hand of the Father,
has told you, “I will never leave you or forsake you.”
Jesus has sent his Holy Spirit to lead you and preserve you wherever you go,
and to bring you to himself.

“Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.”

3. Bethel: the House of God and Gate of Heaven (28:16-22)

*16 Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said,
“Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.”*

Jacob has been pursuing the blessing of God for years.
He has gone to great lengths to obtain it –
even resorting to deception and subterfuge.
And while Genesis portrays Jacob as being more worthy than his brother, Esau,
Jacob is also immature
(as we saw when he feared his father’s curse more than he trusted God’s promise).
Now, Jacob is afraid – like Isaiah would be years later –
as he sees a vision of the LORD.

*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.”*

This is the place where earth and heaven meet.
There has not been such a place since God removed access to the Garden.

But also think about where Jacob is going.
He is going to Haran,
which is in the territory ruled by Babylon.

The name “Babylon” comes from *bab-ili* – “gate of God” (cf. 11:9).
It is entirely possible that Jacob has been fearful of going into Babylonian territory,
but now he realizes that the gate of heaven is not Babylon,
but Beth-El – the House of God and 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.

Only now do we learn that this place is Bethel –
where his grandfather Abraham had built an altar.

In fact, when Abraham had built the altar here,
its name was Luz.
It is only known as “Beth-El” – the house of God –
because of what Jacob does here.

But only now do we learn that the place where Abraham had built his second altar
is the place where God appeared to his grandson.

And perhaps you can understand why centuries later
Jeroboam would build a temple here for the worship of the northern kingdom.
After all, if Bethel is the house of God,
would it not be fitting for Israel to worship there?

“It seemed like a good idea at the time”
could be the epitaph written over so many foolish things!

Jacob does not want to fall prey to such folly,
and so he makes a vow.

*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.”*

Some have said that Jacob is trying to “bargain” with God.
But there is nothing of the sort happening here!

Jacob is responding to God’s promise.
God has said, “I will be with you.”
Jacob now says, “Okay, if you will be with me, then you will be my God!”

The reason why this seems strange to us is because we have forgotten what a vow is!
God has already promised to be with Jacob.
Jacob is not binding *God* with this vow –
rather, Jacob is binding himself with this vow

Jacob is obligating himself to do certain things.
When God brings him back to the land:
1) Jacob will worship Yahweh;
2) What is more Jacob will worship Yahweh *at this place*;
and 3) Jacob will offer a tenth to God in sacrifice.

You also see here how Jacob is maturing in faith.

He has been grasping – clutching the heel of his brother –
but now Jacob demonstrates that he has not sought the inheritance
simply for his own sake.

He does not seek his own advancement,
but vows to further the kingdom of God through his tithe.

And indeed, in Genesis 35 we will hear of the fulfillment of this vow
as Jacob returns to Bethel and does as he promised.

“Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.”

Conclusion

So when Jesus says that "you shall see heaven open,
and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man"
He is saying that HE is the place where earth and heaven meet.
HE is the House of God and the Gate of Heaven.
As he will say in John 2:19
"destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up"
He IS the house of God--the temple where God dwells in human form.
he IS the Word made flesh!
And he IS the Gate of Heaven,
"I am the door" Jesus says.
He is the only way to the Father.
He is the place where earth and heaven meet.

And so we come to the House of God – Beth-El –
as those who see with the eyes of faith
our Lord Jesus Christ sitting at the right hand of the Father.

We are gathered before him right now.
Do you see Jesus?
Do you see the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man?

For he is the House of God and the Gate of Heaven.

And for those whose hope is in Jesus the heavenly hosts no longer bar the way!
Jesus has opened the way to the Father through his precious blood –
that through his flesh we might have access to the Father.
You don't have to climb a ladder to get there,
but you do have to believe in Jesus!

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous,
that he might bring us to God (1 Peter 3:18).

Because Jesus has ascended to the Father,
because he has received the inheritance promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,

therefore you who believe in him have been brought to God.

And yet, while we have been brought to God,
we still walk as pilgrims in this land of exile.

Jacob must go forth as a pilgrim into exile with only a promise.

We go forth as a pilgrim in our exile with more than a promise –
we have the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ sitting at the right hand of the Father!
We have the downpayment of the Holy Spirit who has been poured out upon us!

And so we go forth into Babylon with greater confidence than Jacob!

You know that God will bring you through these trials –

because God has raised Jesus from the dead.

You may face a crazy employer whose only goal is money and power

(Jacob did);

but you can you endure that cross because your identity is not wrapped up in stuff,

but in the Immanuel – the God with us – our Lord Jesus Christ!

You may face rebellious children who make life miserable for you

(Jacob did)

but you can persevere in faith because your identity is not found in your children,

but in the Son of God who loved you and gave himself for you!

You may face the temptation to pursue the lies of the world, the flesh and the devil

but you have the truth as it is in Jesus –

the one who has received the blessing of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,

and he has promised to give you grace in the hour of temptation!

So the question for you this week is

“Whom have I in heaven but you?

And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.”

God has said,

I will be with you.

In every situation.

In every trial.

In every temptation.

I will be with you.

Do you believe it?