

Jacob's Ladder

Genesis 28

Introduction

In our last session we studied a tale of two sons. If you missed it, I would encourage you to request the tape, lest you think today, I am being too hard on poor Jacob.

We discovered, as we introduced the life of Jacob, that he had inherited his mother's ability to scheme. We saw him manipulate the birthright away from his twin brother Esau. We saw him, in one final sordid display of deceit, trick his elderly, blind father out of the blessing.

No sooner had Jacob stolen out of his father's tent, than Esau returned from the field expecting to receive the blessing himself. What would happen next was nothing less than an explosion in that family. I imagine the accusations flew about like poisoned arrows. Finally, Esau thought to himself, "My brother has tricked me for the very last time," and planned to kill him.

Rebekah, however, discovered Esau's intentions. She told Jacob, "Jacob, you need to leave because your brother's intending to kill you, perhaps in the night. We'll tell everybody that you're going to the old country to find a wife."

If you think television has great plots, you have not been reading Genesis. The plot begins to really thicken in chapter 28. In fact, let us pick up our story of Jacob in that chapter.

Jacob's Departure From Home

We will begin reading in Genesis, chapter 28, verses 5 through 9.

Then Isaac sent Jacob away, and he went to Paddan-aram to Laban, son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, the mother of Jacob and Esau.

Now Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan-aram to take to himself a wife from there, and that when he blessed him he charged him saying, "You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan,"

and that Jacob had obeyed his father and his mother and had gone to Paddan-aram.

So Esau saw that the daughters of Canaan displeased his father Isaac;

and Esau went to Ishmael, and married, besides the wives that he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham's son, the sister of Nebaioth.

Now, let me stop at this point just long enough to tell you how tragic this must of been. Here is Esau, who has discovered now that he is without the blessing. He who has been the favorite son of his father has now been, in a sense, replaced by Jacob, the supplanter; that is Jacob, who has taken the place of another. And Esau, not really having a heart for spiritual things, discovered in his brother, obedience to the patriarch father. Jacob would indeed, take a wife from among the relatives; from among the tribe of the family of Abraham. So Esau says, "Maybe if I go and get a wife, perhaps then I'll regain the favor from my father."

How sad that was. Isaac and Rebekah, as we discovered last session, were very partial parents.

One loved Esau and the other loved Jacob. Here is Esau vainly trying to win the approval of his father. We do not know that he ever did, and it is sad.

Let us leave Esau now. We will not hear from him again for nearly twenty years.

Jacob's conflict, loneliness, bankruptcy

Let us look at Jacob, beginning in verses 10 and 11 of chapter 28.

Then Jacob departed from Beersheba, and went toward Haran. 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.

Now even though Jacob is deserving of every bit of trouble that he is about to receive, let us, for a moment, try to be a little sympathetic by climbing into his sandals and looking out through his eyes. Jacob is anything but an outdoorsman. He has probably never toughed it out, under the stars, a single night of his life. In fact, chapter 25, verse 27b, tells us that,

. . . Jacob was a peaceful man, living in tents.

Jacob was a sensitive man who had learned to cook. He was his mother's favorite and had grown up tied to the apron strings of that possessive mother. He was pampered by all of the servants. His father was the wealthy patriarch. Yet, here he is now, totally alone, desolate, without anything, spending the night out in the open.

He has just embarked on a trip that will take him many days. It is a five hundred mile journey. The text indicates that when he stops to sleep, he did not choose that place as a campsite. Instead, he spent the night there because the sun had set.

Jacob is a man who had probably never camped in his life. He had probably never even hiked, yet here he is trekking five hundred miles. Finally, not wanting to stop, he has to because it is dark. We find no record of a campsite. We find no record of a campfire or a meal. All we see is Jacob coming to a point in the barren, rock filled region outside of Luz, thinking, "Oh, I can't go any further. I guess I'd better spend the night here."

Jacob probably takes his cloak off, wads it up, finds a little rock, puts it on the rock, puts his head down, and hopes the night will pass quickly. I would

imagine, as he lay there, thoughts were racing through his mind; such as, "Will I ever see my father and mother again? Will I ever return to my homeland? Will my brother Esau, catch up with me and kill me? Was it really worth stealing the birthright and deceiving my way into the blessing?"

Ladies and gentlemen, God was bringing Jacob to a point of teachability. To do that, God had to bring Jacob to a very lonely, desolate place where all of the props had been knocked out that had once muffled the voice of God. Now Jacob was all alone. There in that lonely place; there in that barren, rocky region of loneliness, God would speak.

Have you ever been there? Have you ever pillowed your head on some tragedy, some trial, a difficulty, a financial loss, some pain? Perhaps there has been a time in your life when all of the props were smashed and you discovered that they had been muffling God's voice. There in that barren region, God speaks to Jacob, and He will speak to you.

Jacob's Dream Near Haran

God approaches Jacob by way of a dream. Notice that with me in verse 12a.

He [Jacob] had a dream . . .

Three elements in Jacob's dream

There are three elements in this dream. Let us look at each one.

Ladder

1. The first element of Jacob's dream is a ladder. Look at the next phrase in verse 12,

. . . and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven . . .

"Ladder" could be translated "ramp" or "stairway". This was literally a smooth, as it were, ramp, a "çullam" that reached from the gate of heaven right down to where Jacob was sleeping, or dreaming.

Angels

2. The second element is the angels of God. This is given in the last part of verse 12.

. . . and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

The second element is the angels who are symbolizing the servants doing the bidding of God.

Voice of God

3. The third element is the voice of or the very presence of God.

Look at verses 13 and 14.

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. Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you shall 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 of the families of the earth be blessed."

It is interesting to understand that Jacob had deceived his father into giving him the covenant blessing. So, there is a good chance, in that lonely place, that Jacob would think, "Am I really God's choice?"

What God is doing is letting Jacob in on the fact that, had he just waited, God would have given him the blessing anyway. Jacob had always been God's elect; he had been the selected one to carry on the messianic line. So, in this wilderness place, God does nothing more than confirm, "Yes, you are the one. You are indeed, the next patriarch in line. You are the chosen one."

Four promises in God's blessing to Jacob

In this blessing, there are four promises from God to Jacob. Let me give them to you.

Presence – "I am with you"

1. First, in a compassionate way, God promises His presence.

Look at the first part of verse 15.

Behold, I am with you . . .

God is promising His presence or His companionship. God says, "Behold," or "Look, I am with you. You are not alone."

I would imagine that Jacob, never having been out on his own; never having been alone, was probably scared to death. This was a howling wasteland; a

place of snakes; a place of perhaps wild animals, and all we really know is that Jacob just took what he had on his back and took off from his home for Haran. So, God comes along and says, "Jacob, you can't see Me, but I want you to know that I am with you."

Protection – "I will keep you"

2. Secondly, God promises His protection.

Look at the next phrase in verse 15.

. . . and will keep you wherever you go, . . .

The word "keep" could be translated "guard". This is a promise of God's protection or guardianship.

Guidance – "I will bring you"

3. The third promise is of God's guidance.

Look at the next part of verse 15.

. . . and will bring you back to this land; . . .

Jacob was perhaps wondering, "Will I ever return? Will I come back home?."

God says, "You will."

Assurance – "I will not leave you"

4. Fourthly, God promises His assurance.

The last part of verse 15 gives us this fourth promise of assurance. God says,

. . . for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

In other words, "I will accomplish what I've promised you."

Jacob's Response to God

Now the response of Jacob is twofold. Let us look at these.

Initial response – Discerning

1. Jacob's initial response to God's blessing is discerning.

Notice his first response in verse 16.

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

This first response is one of discernment or insight. Jacob said, in effect, “I would have never believed that God was here, but in fact, He is.”

Jacob had localized God at Isaac’s altar. However, before we are too hard on him, we need to realize that we do the very same thing. We localize God in church. He is with me when I am in church. He is with me when I am praying. He is with me when I open and read the Bible. That is where God is. But is God with me at 6:30 on Monday morning when I am on my way to work? Is God with me in the shop or in the kitchen? Is God with me in the emergency room of the hospital or at the funeral home? *Yes*, God is there. Although we tend to localize God in, what we call, spiritual things, God is everywhere. Because we are believers, God is, in effect, in us.

Verse 17 is a great response, Jacob was filled with trusting fear. Note that verse.

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.”

In other words, “Out here, can you believe that? Here among the rocks and the loneliness, *this* is the place of God; *this* is in fact, the gate of heaven!

This is a wonderful place to stop because Jacob has been so discerning, and it is as if he worships God. But he goes back to sleep, evidently, and we have to continue, although I would rather not.

Verses 18 and 19 begin to give us a totally different response. It is as if Jacob went back to sleep, but then he gets up very early in the morning.

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on its top. He called the name of the place Bethel; however, previously the name of the city had been Luz.

The name “Luz” means, “the place of light,” and is perhaps, translated “separation”. In these verses, “Bethel” means, “the house of God”. He is, in effect, saying that this is the place of God.

Final response – Foolish

2. Now, in his final response, Jacob will do something foolish – he will make a vow. This is the first vow of the Old Testament, and I

want to give three things that were wrong with this vow.

Self-serving

- First, Jacob’s vow was totally self-serving or self-centered.

Get your pencil ready and I want you to underline every time he says, “I,” “me,” and “my.” You will find it nine times. Look at Jacob’s vow in verses 20 and 21.

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, and I return to my father’s house in safety, then the Lord will be my God.”

That is terrific. Jacob says, in effect, “God, if you really come through with what you have just promised me in this vision, then I will do some things.”

Note that Jacob is totally self-serving in this vow.

Doubting

- Secondly, this vow implied doubt in God.

Verse 21a says,

and I return to my father’s house in safety . .

.

In other words, Jacob is saying, “If You can really do what You’ve said You’ll do, and I’m not really sure You can, and I don’t know of anything I can do except trust You, then I guess I will trust You. And at the end of the journey, if I am safely back in the tents of my mother and father, then I’ll give You the benefit of the doubt.”

Bargaining with God

- The third element of this vow that I think is wrong, is that it attempts to bargain with God.

There are three things in this bargain. Note them carefully.

- First, Jacob promises to let God be his God.

Look again at the last part of verse 21.

. . . then the Lord will be my God.

Jacob promises to acknowledge God as his God.

Now, before we are too hard on him, I think we often do this as well. We say, “Lord, if You do so and so, I’ll *really* serve You. If You help me out with this, will I ever be loyal to You. I’ll even acknowledge You at the job; I might even witness for You. If You make my life fall right into place; if You smooth out the path; if You fill every need that I have; if You take care of all of my problems, *then*, God, I’ll give You the benefit of the doubt that You exist, and You will be my God.”

That is real faith? Jacob had to learn. God would put him in school to learn, over the next twenty years, that faith is living without scheming. Christianity is living without scheming; without manipulating; without controlling. Jacob seeks to control God.

- Secondly, Jacob offers to make a memorial to God.

Look at verse 22a.

This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God’s house . . .

As if God’s going to be impressed. Can you see God in heaven calling the angels over, “Look Jacob’s made a memorial!”

“Oh, really? Out of gold?”

“No, it’s a pile of rocks.”

That is really impressive. Why, when God would set down the details to build His house, you may remember that the beautiful temple of Solomon was to be bedecked with jewelry and gold and silver. And here is Jacob with a little pile of rocks, saying, “God, this will be my memorial to You, if You pull all of this off.”

I would imagine that God was thrilled.

- Thirdly, Jacob offers a tenth of his substance.

In verse 22b, Jacob says,

. . . and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.

This is classic Christianity of today. In other words, “God, if You bless me with wealth, I’ll give some of it back to You. If You give me all of this, Lord, guess what – the more You give me, the more I’ll give back to You, as if You need it.”

I think this is the attitude that most of us have when it comes to giving. We think, “Lord, now wait a second, my giving is dependent upon You giving to

me. You give me a lot, and I’ll give You a little more.”

The sad thing is that Jacob thought he could bribe God with a dime.

God’s Response to Jacob

By now, I am looking for a flash of lightning and a simmering little pile of ashes where Jacob once stood bargaining with an almighty God. However, God responds to Jacob in two ways. These are implied.

Silence

1. The first way God responds is by silence.

Now silence is good because there is no flash of lightning; there is no powder puff on the ground where Jacob once stood. That is good.

However, silence is bad because Jacob will go for twenty years without ever hearing the voice of God. Jacob will go without direction.

Patience

2. The second response is, I think, even more beautiful; that is, a response of patience.

God says, in effect, as He chuckles under His breath, “Oh you little bargainer; you little barterer, I’m going to send you to school. Your teacher is going to be Laban, and he’s a master at bargaining. He’ll change your wages ten times. He’ll trick you into marrying his older daughter when you thought you were getting the younger daughter. He’s going to take care of you, and there you will learn that faith in Me comes without the scheming; without the manipulating; without the bargaining. It is simply a matter of trust in My sovereignty.”

Would Jacob ever learn that God wanted to be part of his every day life! God wants to be the priority. God will not settle for anything less than commitment to Him apart from bargaining.

You might say, “Well, ah, it would be wonderful if God would give me a ladder. If God would give me something like that, I would never respond like Jacob. If I had seen God and the angels descending and ascending on that ladder, that ramp, that ‘cullam,’ I’d never be the same.”

I want to point out a beautiful picture in John, chapter 1. John has given you a ladder. Look at John,

chapter 1, verses 48 through 50. Nathanael is contemplating concerning the Messiah under a fig tree. He is then brought to Jesus.

Nathanael said to Him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered and said to 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 and said to him, "Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You shall see greater things than these."

Now, in verse 51, Jesus will quote from Genesis, chapter 28, verse 12.

And He said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you shall see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on . . .

(what?),

. . . the Son of Man."

Jesus Christ, in effect, said, "I am the Ladder. I am the Revelation between God and man. I am the One that is giving you access to the very throne of God."

Now, you and I, living in this century, after the cross, have so much more than Jacob ever had. He had a passing dream. We have an indwelling Christ; we have the Ladder living with us day to day. Yet, we still bargain; we still scheme; we still barter; we still bribe; we still say, "God, my relationship with You is dependent upon what You do for me."

God wants us to live the kind of life that treats Christ as if He is living every day of the week.

Conclusion

Several American ministers were visiting a collective farm in Siberia. The local commissar, not knowing they were ministers, told them that the people

were very proud of their church and that he wanted to take them to see the church. The ministers followed him down a path through the village way. Soon, to their surprise, they noticed a beautiful white building with onion shaped turrets.

As these ministers drew closer to the building, they noticed that on the walls of the church, communistic slogans had been painted. They also noticed that the yard was fairly well kept. It appeared to be a place of worship. Perhaps people even went here, who knew?

As the ministers walked in through the front doors, they were surprised to find the vestibule much like an ordinary church. However, when they stepped through the doors leading into the auditorium, their mouths dropped open. It no longer had any semblance of a church sanctuary. It was covered, from floor to ceiling, with chicken coops filled with cackling hens. The commissar gestured proudly and said, "Our church is a chicken hatchery. It's the finest one in Siberia."

The commissar then announced to these ministers, "Chickens are real, God isn't."

I fear that we live with that attitude. We say that this pain, this sickness, this difficulty, this problem, this financial loss – these things are real – and we ask, "God where are You?"

There in the rocky region of Luz, God came to Jacob and said, "I am here. I designed the pillow that you laid your head upon. I planned for your path, though trembling and frightening as it was, to come by this way. And when you came, you discovered that I was here waiting for you."

Jesus Christ is there for you too. He said, in Hebrews, chapter 13, verse 5b,

. . . "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you."

Whether it is in the sanctuary of a church or the barren region of loneliness and isolation, God is there.

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