

Gen. 28:10-22

November 7, 2010

Our passage for today has another one of those Biblical scenes where we read it, and appreciate it, but still scratch our head for a moment and think, “What was really going on there?” Genesis 28 includes an event that has been known for thousands of years as Jacob’s Ladder, though it’s more accurate to think of it as God’s stairway to Jacob.

Across centuries of Jewish scholarship, rabbis have speculated about the meaning of this staircase. Around the world artists have depicted it and musicians have sung about it, including the likes of Arlo Guthrie, Bruce Hornsby, Huey Lewis and the News, and Rush. When you watch a movie about a mad scientist, and see that arc of electricity that skips through the air between rods, that’s called a “Jacob’s Ladder.” If you see a defined beam of light thrust itself through dark clouds, that’s also a “Jacob’s Ladder.” There are also rope steps, toys, knives, movies, cuts of meat, and a mathematical term all called “Jacob’s Ladder.” But according to the Lord, what could it really mean? Let’s turn to Genesis 28:10-22 (p. 30) to look more closely.

¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. ¹¹ When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. ¹² He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ There above it stood the LORD, and he said: “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵ I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

¹⁶ When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” ¹⁷ He was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is

none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”¹⁸ Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head, and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it.¹⁹ He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz.

²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and will watch over me on this journey I am taking, and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father’s household, then the LORD will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God’s house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.” This is the Word of the Lord.

Before we consider the mysterious staircase, we need to start with verse 10 and a little background. Even though Jacob was now the privileged firstborn son, he left his parents Isaac and Rebekah, and went off alone on a journey that would cover over 450 miles. *Why?* The first reason is that his brother Esau was furious with him for finagling his birthright and the blessings that come with being the firstborn son. Jacob feared for his life, and with good reason. The other purpose Jacob had in leaving Beersheba and going to Haran was to find a godly wife. His father Isaac had commanded him to find a woman who was faithful to the Lord by going to Rebekah’s brother Laban. Jacob obeys his father and sets off on a monthlong, perilous trek to find the wife God had chosen for him. [As an aside, Esau heard his father’s command for Jacob to marry a godly woman, and in spite did exactly the opposite, by marrying a pagan woman from the Canaanites.]

So Jacob sets off, partly in fear of his brother, partly in the hope of finding the Lord’s plans for his life. The lessons the Lord teaches him in this chapter are ones we can learn from today, even though 4,000 years and 6,000 miles separate us from the scene of Jacob’s amazing encounter with the Lord and His staircase.

We’re told that after traveling for a while, Jacob needed to rest for the evening, so he set up camp in a "certain place." This place was not especially noteworthy or holy. It is just a place of dirt and stones, so Jacob has no reason to expect anything unusual. Jacob goes to sleep with his head on or near a rock, which was common for people in ancient times. Though this does not come through well in our English translation, sleeping with a rock would have served to protect him against bandits and animals, which was especially

important since he was alone. Or, he thought he was alone. Then, God comes to him in a dream.

This leads us to our first lesson. God is unpredictable. He sometimes shows up at unexpected times and places. It may be in the shower, during the drive to work, or when you're cooking dinner. The well-known worship song titled "More Precious than Silver" was received by a woman who was cooking French fries at McDonald's. God is not limited to revealing Himself at a church building, or during typically spiritual times, like during worship. In fact, many times He prefers to reach us when our guard is down. When our preconceived ideas about who He is or what He is capable of get in the way, He touches us to take us out of our comfort zone, and back into His holy, awesome presence.

So here, God visits Jacob while he is vulnerable: he's asleep, alone, in the middle of nowhere. In this dream, Jacob understood the stairway to mean that rather than man reaching up to God through structures like the tower of Babel, God reaches down to us and meets us where we are. Jacob sees that the Lord and his angels were present and active with him, even though he'd been completely unaware of them. The same is true for us. God is present and active even when, and sometimes especially when, we are not paying attention. God is always living, and active, and involved in the lives of His children, no matter what circumstances may tell us to the contrary.

So the first lesson is that God sometimes shows up in unexpected ways. Second, God is present and active even when we are unaware of him. Third, the greatest comfort and guidance God gives Jacob is to remind him of God's promises to him and all believers. He basically says, "I made a promise to your father Isaac and your grandfather Abraham to give you the very land where you are now asleep as a stranger. I promised then, and still promise, to bless the whole world through your offspring." When you consider that Jacob didn't have even one descendant at this time, and hadn't even met his wife, and lived in fear for his life because of Esau, this is an amazing and reassuring promise.

The same principle is true for us. When we are facing hard or uncertain times, we need to open up our Bibles and let the Holy Spirit remind us of what God has promised. You can pace back and forth, worry, focus on the problem, and tie your intestines in a

knot — which is the complete opposite of what Jesus teaches us about trusting Him. Or, you can be strengthened by meditating on the Word of Christ, focusing on His promises, and allowing the Holy Spirit to give you His peace and rest. This doesn't mean the struggles you face will vanish, though the Lord may bless you that way. It does mean that He will give you the strength and wisdom to face any challenge, and in the process you will grow closer to Him. This is a choice we believers make every day: focus on the Lord and rest in Him, or try to go it alone. We only truly succeed when God alone is our strength and our song.

Now when God reminded Jacob of these promises, He also reminded him of His abiding presence and protection on the journey. This fact has been a source of encouragement for saints throughout the ages. King David said in Psalm 23, "I will fear no evil because you are with me; your rod and your staff comfort me." Jesus encouraged his disciples in Matthew 28 by assuring them, "Surely, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Hebrews 13:5 states that "God will never leave us, nor forsake us." God's word to us is the same as his word to Jacob: "I am with you." This does not mean we will escape the storms of life, but when we rest in Him, His presence in those storms gives us peace and confidence.

When I was a child, we always knew a bad thunderstorm was coming because our beagle Snoopy would hide under the sofa long before we heard a crack of thunder. When the storm came, my brother and I could be assured that Mom would be there to hold us close. And if the power went out, her first words to us were, "Don't worry, I'm right here with you." We could not see her until the candles were lit, but we knew she was there and could hear her voice. We knew she'd be with us until the winds rested and the power came back on. We knew we were safe, no matter what else might happen. This is how our Heavenly Father cares for us, no matter what the storm may be, and even when there is no storm.

As adults, we can still be frightened during bad storms, but other things tend to strike greater fear in us. Today we hear about terror plots, economic woes, disease, desperate loneliness, and senseless violence. We face tragedies not just when we watch the news, but in our own families. No matter what comes our way, God has promised to watch over us, and be with us. Absolutely nothing can ever separate us from His love,

and He is far more powerful than any struggle we may encounter. As with Jacob, the Lord has not promised us a quiet journey, only a safe arrival.

When God reminded Jacob that He would be present and protect Him on his journey, the Lord included with that a promise to care for him. Notice, the focus is not on Jacob's wants, but His needs. In verse 15, when God promises to watch over Jacob wherever he goes, there is a dual meaning. The Hebrew word for "watch" means first to protect, and second, to provide for or take care of. It is first used in Genesis 2:15, where God instructed Adam to "take care" of the garden and provide for its needs. So here God promises to provide for Jacob's needs and to protect him from harm. Jacob clearly understood this, because in verse 20 he declares that he expects God to watch over him on his journey, and provide food and clothing for him.

God has promised to provide for the needs of His people. Jesus reminds us not to worry about what we will eat or wear, because the Father knows we need these things. Since He clearly provides for the birds of the air, He will certainly provide for us because we are much more valuable. In fact, we are so valuable to Him that He provided His only Son to die for our sins, so we might be reborn to forgiveness and eternal life. Sometimes it's hard for Christians in America to remember the difference between needs and luxuries. We are so materially blessed that the lines can blur, and we deceive ourselves into thinking that we deserve this or that comfort. Really, we don't deserve any of God's blessings. But when He does provide us with luxuries beyond what we need, we rightly bow down and give thanks for His generosity, and then share those blessings with others.

And we see in verse 22 that that is exactly how Jacob responds to the Lord's encounter. Jacob recognizes that God has intervened in his life in a very special way. He sets up a stone pillar as a memorial of worship. We also need to spend time worshipping God every day, but especially when He reveals Himself in powerful ways. Then, in verses 20-22, Jacob makes a vow to commit himself to the Lord and give him a tenth of all God has blessed him with. This vow could be read two different ways. It might be conditional: "If God does what He promised, I will follow Him." But it could also be translated to mean, "Because God has promised these things, I will follow Him." Either way, Jacob's response is to serve Yahweh as his God and King, to worship Him, and to

give back to the Lord a tenth of what God blesses him with. This is how we also should respond to the Lord.

Of all of God's promises and blessings in His encounter with Jacob, I have saved the best for last. We still have not explored why God would reveal Himself to Jacob through the use of a mystical staircase with angels going up and down on it. What are we to take from this incredible scene?

The most important explanation comes from Jesus Himself in John 1. In that chapter, Jesus is calling His disciples for the first time. Jesus called Philip to follow him, and Philip ran to his brother Nathanael to tell him that the promised Messiah has come. Philip says that the Messiah's name is Jesus of Nazareth, and Nathanael replies, "Nazareth? Can anything good come from there?" But when Nathanael meets Jesus, he immediately sees Jesus' wisdom and declares, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel."

Jesus' answer is crucial. Jesus says, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that." He then added, "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man."

There is universal agreement that Jesus is referring to Jacob's dream in these words, but notice one thing. Jesus doesn't say that Nathanael will see angels ascending and descending on a staircase. He says the angels will ascend and descend on Him. Jesus Himself is the staircase. ////

Why would Jesus refer to Himself this way? Just as God reached down to Jacob, a wily guy alone and vulnerable in the desert, God the Father reaches down to us through Jesus. Our Lord Jesus brings heaven's blessings to earth, not only during His earthly ministry, but still today through the work of the Holy Spirit. Through the dream of the staircase, God reminded Jacob of His promises, His presence, and His power to protect and care for him. Jesus is more than just a dream; Jesus fulfills Jacob's dream. In Him all of God's promises are fulfilled, and through Him we have access to the eternal Promised Land. Jesus Himself, and Jesus alone, is our stairway to heaven. Through the dream of the staircase, God revealed Himself to one patriarch. But through Jesus, God is perfectly

revealed to all people, so all who trust in Him through faith can experience the presence of God today, and for all time.

And last but not least, God reached out to Jacob despite his cunning and trickery, regardless of any good Jacob had done or might ever do. Through Jesus Christ, we receive the gift of forgiveness, not because of our worth or our deeds, but only because of God's incredible mercy and love. Through our great High Priest, the veil in the temple was torn in two, and heaven's gates are opened wide for those who receive the gift of faith in the Messiah.

In God's wisdom, He knew that I would be preaching on this topic today as we prepare to meet with the Lord at His table. We can have holy communion with our Savior only because He did die for our sins, and was raised to life by His Heavenly Father. We gather at the table to be reminded that through our Savior, the gate to heaven is open wide. He is with us at the table, and every day, and in Him, all of God's promises are Yes, and Amen. So let us come to the table with the awe, reverence, and thanksgiving that Jacob showed, and recommit ourselves to serve and obey Him. This table is proof that we are not forgotten: the Lord is with us always, even to the end of the age.

Let us pray.