

Jacob's Ladder

Our second Scripture reading is Genesis 28:10-22. Perhaps you're familiar with the story of Abraham and Sarah's promised son Isaac, and how he married Rebecca, who gave birth to twin sons Esau and Jacob. In some ways Esau seems the most honest and likeable of the two, yet he was also more earthly minded, willing to sell his birthright to his brother to obtain immediate relief from his hunger (Gen. 25:27-34). Although Esau was technically the first born, it was Isaac, who through his and his mother's conniving, obtained Esau's blessing, an important bestowal in that time and culture (27:1-40).

Jacob had to flee from the wrath of his brother, who had determined to kill him because of the way he had cheated Esau out of his birthright. His mother, Rebecca, urged him to flee to her brother's home in Haran, about five hundred miles away. Our text for today finds Jacob en route to his uncle's home, and on the way, after about the first three days of his journey, he stops in a place called Luz, which Jacob would later rename Bethel, "the house of God."

Follow as I read **Genesis 28:10-22**:

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ He came to a certain place and stayed there for the 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. ¹² And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ And the LORD stood beside him 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 and 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 all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵ Know that 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 woke 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 Jacob rose early in the morning, and he 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 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 surely give one-tenth to you."

Jacob, on his journey to Haran, stopped in a place called Luz and there he had a life-changing dream of a ladder or stairway reaching toward heaven and God's throne, with angels ascending and descending on it (12). This dream for him was a life-changing experience and reveals what can be a life-changing experience for us.

The African-American spiritual, "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder" pictures us sinners as climbing toward God. But the vision in Jacob's dream is one of God's reaching down to us through his word and his angelic messengers. The ladder was set up to be a link of rescuing grace between heaven and earth.

If anyone was ever in need of God's gracious rescue it was Jacob. Because of his foolish and self-centered actions against his brother, he was alienated from him and his father and was in deep trouble. Not only was he running for his life from his angry brother, but he also was on a long and treacherous journey to a distant place where his future was uncertain at best. He had already traveled about 50 miles, perhaps more than three days, and yet his wearying and dangerous journey had only begun. In this state of mind, he was a prime candidate to meet God.

Esau, the elder brother, seemed to be the more likely candidate to meet God. He remained at home with his father. But although he was in physical proximity with his family's religious traditions, he, like the elder brother in Jesus' parable (Luke 15:25-32), was more spiritually distant, more complacent about his circumstances and more oblivious to his spiritual need. Somehow, Esau was a stranger to grace and thus forfeited God's love and mercy (Mal.1:2; Rom. 9:13). Both Esau and Jacob had equal responsibility before God, yet Jacob was in a position to receive God's grace that was extended to him in the context of his desperate need.

The situation of Jacob serves to remind us that apart from God's initiative and rescue, we're all hopelessly alienated from him (Eph. 2:12). Jacob was outside of God's grace, and apart from God's initiative, he would've been hopelessly lost. When I think of the personality and character of Jacob and realize how God had a special electing love for him, I am tempted to question God. Why would God especially love this seemingly spoiled, self-centered and devious character? As Old Testament scholar Joyce Baldwin writes, God's grace to sinful Jacob "strikes us as shocking" and seems almost immoral, "until we come to see that we are all in the same desperate plight, unworthy to approach God and unable to save ourselves."

A friend who, often visited our church in Brussels, believes in reincarnation and who hopes that by progressively being reincarnated into a higher and more ethical form of humanity she'll eventually reach Nirvana and spiritual perfection. For that reason she can't understand her need for God's grace, what he alone can give and what she alone could never achieve. She told me she can't accept

the fact that Jesus needed to die for our sins to make us right with God, to bridge that gap in alienation from holy God. But what she can't see is that in a million lifetimes she could never achieve the level of holiness that would qualify her for heaven. By God's grace alone, through Jesus' sacrifice for us, can we ever be made at peace with holy God.

We've seen rescues at sea and on mountaintops, with rescuers lowering ropes from helicopters to stranded sailors or mountain climbers. Such is a picture of Jacob's plight and of our dilemma as well. God came alongside Jacob in his sense of vulnerability, fear and desperate need. And his character was less than noble. But the meaning of grace is that God comes to all of all of us as unworthy sinners. God in his condescending grace met Jacob where he was. The vision that Jacob had of God's ladder or staircase was one that magnified God's awesome holiness and his own sinfulness, unworthiness and absolute helplessness. Jacob had no bargaining power with God, but could only respond to his initiative and rescuing grace by simple trust.

When God revealed to Jacob his love and purpose for his life to be a participant in the blessings of salvation, Jacob responded in faith. He confessed to the presence and reality of the living God (16 & 17). Jacob found himself alone in the presence of holy God, and he had no leverage or bargaining power, unlike the way he related to his brother and even his father. God, who spoke to Jacob from the top of this ladder, reminded Jacob that he was the God of his grandfather Abraham and Isaac. Jacob had deceived his father, and now Jacob was encountering the God he could never deceive and who knew all about his sin, sin which had deceived and broken the heart of Isaac his father, whom God loved. All Jacob could do now was in a spirit of repentance, receive God's forgiving love.

We may be able to deceive others (even as Jacob did his father) and fool even ourselves, but we're totally exposed before God, who sees us as we are. We're at the bottom of the ladder. Saving faith is directed toward the Christ of the cross. Just as Jacob saw a saving God at the apex of the ladder, so faith that brings salvation sees Christ on the cross. Just as Jacob saw the living God at the top of the ladder, so we are saved by looking with the eyes of faith at the crucified Son of God on the cross. God reaches down to us with the cross of his Son and by faith in Jesus he becomes our Mediator, our bridge to holy God.

Jacob couldn't bargain with God. All he could do was respond to God with surrender and evidence that he had, by God's grace and presence, become a new creation. From our test we see that Jacob becomes a worshipper. His pillow becomes a pillar, marking the very house of God, Bethel. And he declares his covenant with and commitment to God. Conversion for Jacob and for us is a life-long process. In his response to God, there may well have been some bargaining and presumption. And Jacob still needed his broken-ness experience of wrestling with God (Gen. 32). But in any case, Jacob came into an

experience of God's love that would forever change his life. Jacob by God's grace became a God worshiper (Heb.11:21).

We use the term "fox-hole conversion," borrowing the imagery of a man in desperate danger in a combat foxhole, promising God his life will change if God will get him out of the foxhole alive. I've known people with such stories of "conversion." Sadly, their so-called faith continues to be conditional. After their lives get out of immediate danger, some never fulfill the vows they made while in the "foxhole" of trouble. They continue to expect God to "do" for them before they fulfill any vows to him. This is "salvation" by works. God keeps his part of the "bargain," while they conveniently forget their part. In contrast, Jacob's spirit was one of sincere commitment, leading him to say that since God had come to deliver him, he would trust that God would continue to be with him and care for him as he sought to fulfill his vows.

Because Jacob was reached by God's ladder and was taken up into his presence, he was transformed from a frightened fugitive to a worshiping pilgrim, confident of the faithful presence and provision of God in his life. God promised he would take care of him, and bring him back safely from his thousand-mile round trip (15). And we have the same confidence. God is immediately our provider, and the ground we step on becomes holy ground because wherever we go, God is with us. The crucified, risen Christ is as real and present as he was to Jacob by his ladder to heaven.

Brennan Manning told this anecdote about the famous British journalist, GK Chesterton, who had recently converted from atheism to faith in Christ:
"Standing on a London street corner, Chesterton was approached by a newspaper reporter. 'Sir, I understand that you recently became a Christian. May I ask you one question?'

'Certainly,' replied Chesterton.

'If the risen Christ suddenly appeared at this very moment and stood behind you, what would you do?'

Chesterton looked the reporter squarely in the eye and said, 'He is.'"

We live even now in the kingdom of the heavens, and ought to be aware, wherever we go, that Christ Jesus is with us. And because he's with us, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven" (17).

The presence of Christ can transform the most mundane and spiritually dark places into sanctuaries, even Most Holy Places. There have been times when I have entered hospital rooms, where patients lay deathly ill, and all earthly hope was gone. After a time of prayer, and as I walked from that hospital room the holy awesome presence of Jesus was so real it was as though I could reach out and physically touch him. Exceptional experiences are God's gifts to remind us

of the reality of his presence and the vitality of his involvement in our lives. The Ladder comes down, as it were, and Jesus stands with us.

This year is the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, when we remember the leadership of Martin Luther, when he bravely led the way for the church to return from dead tradition and religious corruption to a new discovery of the gospel of salvation by grace. Young Luther was terrified in a lightning storm into becoming a monk. Although a serious devotee to the teachings of the church, he was still unconverted and had no peace with God. In 1510 Luther journeyed to Rome with the purpose of "saving his soul" (R Bainton). Yet Luther met with disillusionment the scandals of the church that he found there. He climbed the steps of St Peter's repeating an "Our Father" for each one and kissing each step for good measure. He hoped that by these stringent measures he was delivering some lost soul from purgatory. After this exercise in futility, when Luther reached the top he exclaimed, "Who knows whether it is so?" It was not until much later, when translating the Book of Romans, that he believed the Scriptural promise that the just shall live by faith (Rom.1:17). Grace reached down to Luther that day and convinced him that the only way to God is through simple faith in Christ, who was for him Jacob's ladder.

God's Ladder of grace reached down to me by placing me in a home where the Bible was taught and where I learned early the Gospel of Jesus Christ, whom I began to trust as a child. That Ladder has been with me ever since, and God has through the years confirmed his call, reassuring me of his presence and guiding me through life's journey. As we realized the presence of the crucified and risen Lord, may we say with Jacob, "Surely the Lord is in this place! How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven" (16-17).