

Special Series

the Call of God – Jacob (1)

Prayer

Jesus, we worship You. May our words honour You, and may the manner in which we speak along with our expressions and mannerisms, convey our faith to others. May we show the eternal and godly qualities of love, integrity, hope and charity by which other people recognise the Gospel of God's truth and love. Help us, we pray, and may we not let ourselves or each other down by failing to let our speech convey our faith. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Pray for your own healing, in body mind and spirit. Be careful to let the Holy Spirit guide you in these prayers

On-going prayers

- ***Pray for persecuted Christians*** *Pray today about the awful persecution faced by those who are not part of an 'official' denomination*
- *Pray for the UK after months of damaging financial revelations*
- *Give thanks to God for the assurance we may have of eternal life*

Meditation

Lord God and Father, Creator and Lover of all Creation,
Show us the truth about the troubled world in which we live:
What are its prospects? What is its future. What is its destiny?

Jesus Christ, unique and unsurpassed Saviour of the world,
Uncover the truths hidden within our minds and unlock our souls:
Why are our strengths so weak, our hearts hard, our minds fixed?

Holy Spirit, powerful fire and wind, and comforter divine,
Blow away the filth and reveal the truth to those who seek You;
Come sweep away the greed which keeps the world entrapped,
Destroy the enemy's strongholds both in us and in the church
And show the world that God is love, is peace, is joy, is power,
And is our sure and certain hope from now until eternity!

Come, Great Spirit, Come, Lord Jesus,
Come Almighty Father, Come!

Bible passage – Genesis 28:10-22

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and set out for Haran. ¹¹ He came across a place marking a boundary at the side of the road and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. He took some of the boundary stones and placed them around his head and lay down there to sleep. ¹² He had a dream in which there was a ladder standing on the earth and with the top reaching into heaven; and the angels of God were climbing up and down 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; I will give the land on which you lie to you and to your descendants. ¹⁴ Your children will be as plentiful as the dust on the ground, and you will spread out to the west and the east and the north and the south; and all the families of the earth will be blessed in you and in your

children. ¹⁵ Look, it is I who am with you and will look after 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 Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it!' ¹⁷ He was afraid, and said, 'This place is awesome! This is no less than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!' ¹⁸ So Jacob got up early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and mounted it as a pillar and poured oil over it. ¹⁹ He called that place Bethel (meaning 'house of God') but the city's name was previously Luz.

²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow and said, 'If God will be with me, and will keep watch over me wherever I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear, ²¹ so that I return to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God. ²² And this stone, which I have mounted as a pillar shall be God's house; and out of everything You give me I will certainly give one tenth to you.'

Bible Study

Review

This is a well known passage, and it is a scriptural text that is both deeply human and spiritually awesome. Jacob's vision of angels ascending and descending on a ladder between heaven and earth is unique in Scripture, and it has inspired artists for thousands of years. This event triggered Jacob's inner search for God, a search that was to last for many years and was completed only when he finally returned to the Promised Land many years later after decades of living a life of servitude. We will read about the second major spiritual event in his life, tomorrow.

To begin with, however, we must appreciate the character of the man whose life God was about to change forever. Jacob had experienced something of a troubled childhood, and he appears to have been rather independent-minded and self centred. Jacob was doubtless aware of the faith of his father Isaac and the Covenant of which he was the guardian, but his own faith was under-developed (see, for example, how he spoke to his father about 'your God' - 27:20). Although a man of nearly forty years of age, there are no signs that he had yet accepted the faith of his father and he did not appear to have a relationship with God. His father Isaac had prophesied the Lord's Covenant blessing on him (28:3,4), but Jacob had deceived his father to obtain this blessing, and he gave no indication of understanding the spiritual significance of the Covenant. After a family altercation, Jacob was dismissed from his family, but was given instructions to go and find a wife from the family of his great-grandfather Terah, by looking for the house of his mother's brother Laban (27:43; 28:2).

All this did not stop God working powerfully in Jacob's life, for as soon as he left his parents home, our passage today shows that God began His work of bringing Jacob to a place where he would be worthy of the Covenant blessing. As Jacob came one evening to a place where a boundary was marked by stones (a detail we will examine later on), he re-arranged the stones to protect himself. Then, as he slept, he had a vision of angels ascending and descending on a ladder. This is remarkable, for thus far in Scripture we have only ever met angels in ones or two's, acting like people and doing the Lord's work (e.g. 16:7f.; 19:1f.). In this dream, however, Jacob could see a multitude of angels moving between heaven and earth.

Clearly, Jacob was observing some mystery, but the angels did not interact with him personally. Suddenly, however, the Lord Himself spoke! God said to him, '*I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac ...*'. This awe-inspiring revelation was given only to a few people in Scriptures, such as Isaac (his father - 26:24) and Moses (3:4,16f.). God then gave Jacob his personal guarantee of the Covenant (28:13,14), but it came with a condition. Jacob was told that he would have to travel on a long journey and accept the guidance of God (28:15); the Lord's presence would guide Him on his journey.

Upon waking, Jacob was immediately aware of what had happened, and set up one of the stones he had used for protection (28:11) to mark this special experience. He made a vow that if God fulfilled his promise and gave him safety in his travels, then he would build a temple there ('*God's house*' - 28:22). This indicates something of the journey of faith Jacob would travel, he was testing the Lord's promise. He did not respond to the revelation with unreserved obedience or worship, but with a bargain. Jacob was only prepared to accept the Lord if He did what was promised, however reasonable that was!

This was the start of a long a complex relationship between the Lord and Jacob through which Jacob would have to be broken before he would truly be the Lord's servant worthy of the Covenant. It is a reminder to us

that we often treat the Lord in the same way; yet the Lord is always drawing us, like Jacob, to deeper obedience.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Setting out for Haran
- Where was the Lord's 'presence'?
- What did Jacob do upon waking?
- Jacob's vow

Going Deeper

There are plenty of details within this text which are of great interest. Going deeper we will find out about the meaning of the boundary stones and the angels going up and down the ladder; none of this was coincidence! The Covenant Promise itself was also extended by the Lord, and the bargain that Jacob asked of the Lord is very important for the future of Israel.

Setting out for Haran

The previous Scriptures in Genesis 27 and 28 explain why Jacob was on this private and lonely journey. He had been central to a deceitful incident that had torn apart his family, and both his father and mother decided that for his own good and the stability of the family unit, he should leave and go to Mesopotamia, to Haran (28:10) where he should find himself a wife from the family of his mother's brother, Laban (28:2). Now, if this was to be the way that Isaac's son would find a wife, it stood in stark contrast to what happened when Abraham sent his most senior servant to find a wife for Isaac (Gen 24). On that occasion, the heir apparent stayed with his father, and a wise and trusted servant went to Haran with a rich and glamorous camel train to negotiate for Rebekah to become the next matriarch in Abraham's family line. Now Jacob left the family home for his own safety, alone and apparently without even a tent within which to sleep at night. He was the pampered favourite son of his mother who needed to learn something of real life if he was to become a man.

Jacob travelled north from Beersheba, and his journey to Mesopotamia in the far north and the regions of Haran would have taken many days, being several hundred miles. On his way he would have travelled through large sections of Canaan, the 'Promised Land' of the Covenant God had made with his father Isaac and Grandfather Abraham (13:14-18). Our passage describes what happened on one of the nights of this journey, at a place we now know as Bethel (28:19) 50 miles north of Beersheba, in the middle of Canaanite territory. Jacob came across some stones that marked a tribal boundary, a common sight in those days, but because it is not something we are familiar with today, it is often translated as 'a certain place'.

Jacob had already shown that he was a somewhat irreligious man (see above) and his next actions typified this. Boundary stones (clearly referred to in the Hebrew of v11) were set up in honour of the gods of the tribes to whom the boundaries belonged, and were regarded as sacred. Jacob had the temerity to take them down and arrange them around his head as a form of night protection from wild animals. Old translations of the Bible such as the Authorised Version have 'under' his head – hence the wrong idea that he used the stone as a pillow! Nevertheless, the tribes-people who would have set up these stones in the first places would have said curses against whoever moved the stones (there are many ancient records of such treatise) and this may have been playing on Jacob's mind as he went to sleep.

Where was the Lord's 'presence'?

The general popular beliefs of the day were that angels protected the different tribes within their own agreed areas, and Jacob had gone to sleep on a boundary within Canaanite tribal lands after having dismantled a sacred boundary marker and (according to beliefs of the day) upset the local gods! It is in this setting that Jacob had his famous dream of angels ascending and descending to heaven on a ladder! Some believe the angelic activity represented a fearsome picture of Jacob's unsettling the local deities by his dismantling of the sacred stones. This is not in fact a negative picture, but a positive one. Unknowingly, Jacob had done something very significant; by doing this, he gave the Lord a chance to break into a small part of the Promised Land and to make an appearance to him at this very place. The angels could be the Lord's angels coming into the Promised Land from heaven and the demonic angels of the local deities departing!

In verse 13, it says 'the Lord stood beside him ...' and then spoke to him a new version of the Covenant Promise. On this occasion, God identified the Promised Land as 'the land on which you lie', He promised Jacob not just many descendants as he had done to his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham before, but more specifically, many 'children' (28:14,15). Abraham and Isaac had only passed the Covenant on to one child, and at some point, these small families had to come to an end and the inheritance pass on wholesale

to large numbers of children and their generations; this was to happen to a fearful, lonely and somewhat sceptical Jacob!

In addition, the Lord's appearance to Jacob was a powerful mystery. The Hebrew word 'beside' him (28:13) could equally mean 'above', 'alongside', 'around', or 'adjacent' or anywhere 'near' him. From the point of view of the Hebrew text, the Lord was all around him, protecting him! God's very actions were a fulfilment of his promise that he would 'be with' Jacob wherever he went, the crucial Covenant blessing that God gave to his people irrespective of their deserving!

What did Jacob do upon waking?

It was the presence of the Lord that Jacob remembered from his dream; he said, '*Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it!*' (28:16); and he seems not to have been bothered by the angels themselves, but the fact that they were ascending and descending! To him it was proof that God Almighty was with him at that time and at that place, and in response he did something that was highly provocative in his own day. He set up a cairn of stones and anointed it with oil (28:18), for this was a formal way of staking a claim to a piece of land. What Jacob did was to make a unilateral claim for this piece of the Promised land, so that it might belong to him and his descendants!

The first piece of the Promised Land owned by God's people was the field of Machpelah at Mamre, purchased by Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, from local inhabitants as a burial ground for himself and his wife Sarah (23:9; 25:9). Jacob's actions were far more rash; the Scriptures record for us that the place Jacob slept was near a city called Luz, and the boundary stones he used (28:11) would therefore have been an outlying marker for the city boundaries. Jacob called the place 'Bethel' meaning 'house of God', but as happened in many parts of the Promised Land, both names were used in future years for the same place (see Joshua 16:2, Judges 1:23,26). In later years, Bethel became very important to the religious life of Israel, because of its association with Jacob and this famous experience (see Judges 4:5, Amos 5:5). It was the first religious experience that Jacob had, and it affected him deeply.

Jacob's vow

Jacob was still not someone who was given to showing the same kind of blind faith shown by his grandfather Abraham, or the obedient faith of his father Isaac. He wanted proof that God was going to look after him well beyond the one night near Luz, and this is why he made a vow. When we read the story, we think that what he did sounds a very 'holy' thing to do sounds a very holy thing to do. To some extent it was, but it was still a contract that worked on the principle of proof; 'if You, O God, do what you have promised for me, then I will do ...'. This shows that Jacob was still unsure of the Lord's will and purpose for him. God had spoken to him directly and personally, but Jacob started from the premise that God might not yet fulfil his promise! His scepticism was not yet removed!

Jacob made it clear that he would only accept the Lord as his God if he kept His side of the bargain, and added a number of items to the agreement. He wanted '*bread to eat and clothes to wear ...*' (28:20) while he was on his journey, as well as the promise of a safe return. Again, this is proof to us that at this point in time; Jacob still held back from total commitment to the Lord God. Jacob also promised that he would build a temple of some kind to the Lord at Bethel, and would '*give one tenth to you*' (28:22) the same principle of the tithe offering exemplified by his grandfather Abraham (14:20).

The physical journey that Jacob was about to embark upon was far more extensive and challenging than he could possibly know, but so was the spiritual journey that lay ahead. He had begun a path of faith, but it would be a long time before he was in a position to say his vow had been completed and accept the Lord as His God, formally. However, through God's providence, he would.

Application

Jacob's dream is a fascinating story, and one that reminds us in a graphic way of God's desire to break into our world in order to achieve His purposes. In Old Testament times, this happened only occasionally as God appeared to great people; forefathers, kings and prophets, and led them through their lives. He did this most frequently to those who were of His chosen people, but not always. In New Testament times, God broke into the world through His son Jesus Christ, and then more extensively by His Holy Spirit through the Christian church which now extends the realm of the Kingdom that Jesus has begun on earth, as a foretaste of the glory of Heaven. However, in the Old Testament, Jacob's vision of angels ascending and descending between earth and heaven is an Old Testament foretaste of the connection between heaven and earth that exists for us now in Jesus Christ. Jacob could not possibly have known that, but God used this vision of a time in the distant future to catch Jacob's attention and lead him on his journey of faith.

It is important that we read this passage with spiritual discernment and observe that Jacob was only just beginning to learn to trust God. Some people are like Abraham, and find blind faith easy or natural. Some

are like Isaac, and exercise faith quite happily through being faithful and obedient. Yet others are like Jacob; they need to test God out and travel an extensive road of spiritual experience before coming to the place where they will accept God's call. Initially it seems as if like Jacob, such people are asking for God's attention on their own terms. However, as we shall find out, God accepts this as a starting point for life's spiritual journey, but he never accepts a relationship with anyone on this basis. Jacob would have to discover more about God and learn to trust Him, just as people have to do this today, and we should remember that Jacob was the man God eventually chose to be called 'Israel', the man whose children truly became the 'children of Israel'.. Jacob's life story is one that has much to teach us today.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What did the vision of the angels ascending and descending mean to Jacob? What do you believe it means now?
2. If you have access to a Bible Dictionary or Concordance, look up the town Bethel, and try to find out some more about its history in the life of Israel.
3. What does 'making a vow' mean to people today, and how might this be used to help people on their journey of faith?

Topics covered by this text

- Visions
- The 'marking' of spiritual events in specific ways
- The journey of faith
- Trusting God and making vows

Personal comments by author

I have spoken to many people today who have struggled with their journey of faith, and I suspect that if the story of Jacob was better known or understood, then it could be used to help people understand how their relationship with God develops over time. We need to make sure that people know Jacob's story has an end in which he is completely at one with his God, he does not remain in doubt or in any state of detachment from God. He may have been cautious and bargained with God, but the Lord accepted this and it did not compromise the end results of his faith.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- Measure yourself against the categories of faith that have been identified in the Bible study as belonging to Abraham (blind faith) Isaac (faithful obedience) and Jacob (sceptical faith which needs proof).
- Is there any prejudice against anyone those with different experiences of faith within the church today? This can be very damaging, yet it seems that God worked differently through the three forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to bring His people into existence! What does this mean.

Final Prayer

In the midst of all that happens to us each day, may we stop and give thanks to You, Lord God, for your sustenance and power. May we thank You for Your spiritual and physical sustenance, and for the heavenly power by which everything we hold dear is embraced by Your love and care. We praise You, Lord God: AMEN.
