

Stairway to Heaven

Genesis 28

Through steadfast love for God and her family, Rebekah brought Isaac back to his senses. He wanted to bestow the blessing on Esau, and Esau wanted to steal it from Jacob, but she craftily exposed his own rebellion. Rather than harden his heart in bitterness against God, Isaac repented and demonstrates it by blessing and guiding Jacob (27:46-28:2). This is Jacob's sojourning story from the known to the unknown.

A Dangerous Path

Jacob is a blameless and faithful man (25:27), but he has been living at home surrounded by family. Now Esau wants to kill him and he needs to get married (27:41, 46). So he is off to uncle Laban's house, and receives the blessing and promises of God because he will need them (vv2-5). Esau is still very much in the picture and doing things to make himself look like the rightful heir, always beside the point, willing to do anything except what is necessary (vv6-9). Isaac's blessing is about things told to Abraham: from God Almighty, to be fruitful and multiply, to become a congregation of peoples, to receive Abraham's blessings upon him and his descendants in the land (vv3-4; 17:1, 16; 26:4, 24; 12:2-3; 17:8). Jacob is about 70 years old, and Abraham died before he was even born. So far his faith in God has set him at odds with his father, in danger from his brother, and now down an unknown path to deal with more problematic family members. Still, these are *his* promises. His parents' faith in the living God is efficacious, the promises are true, and his faith is about to get tested like never before. Jacob has no faithful choice but to leave the land and trust the Lord as he goes.

Grace Descending

He goes toward Haran until it gets dark, and puts a rock at his head to sleep (vv10-11). He dreams and sees a stairway (not a fireman's ladder!) "placed toward the earth", with a top that, unlike the Tower of Babel, really does reach into heaven (cf. Gen. 11:4). All of man's attempts to climb into heaven through moral effort, religion, wisdom, or technology are all expressions of pride and doomed to fail, going from Babylon ("gate of god") to Babel ("confusion"). We don't find God, but God does find us. This is not an evacuation stairway. Jacob realizes God has been there the whole time—with Abraham and Isaac, and now he and his descendants are going to spread in every direction on the earth (vv13-14). He will be with him to protect and bring him back to the land (v15). Jacob doesn't know it, but he'll be gone for twenty years, and he is the first to hear this wonderful promise—"I am with you" (cf. Ex. 3:13; Josh. 1:5; Jdgs. 6:15; Is. 7:14; Matt. 1:23). The angels ascend first and then descend because they're already there, going up to give a report and coming down again to minister: "Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation? (Heb. 1:14; cf. Ps. 104:4). Jacob takes the rock that was at his head, builds a pillar, and pours oil on it. Oil is symbolic of God's blessing, which He pours out on His people. He comes down the stairway to bless Jacob. And He sent Jesus the greater Jacob who would be blessed "with the oil of gladness more than Your companions" (Heb. 1:9). This is why Jesus quotes this passage, telling Nathanael "Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (Jn. 1:51). God coming down to bless Jacob was a picture of Him coming down in the person of Jesus to bless us, and be blessed on our behalf. Jesus rose and went back up the stairway into heaven and we are there with Him (Eph. 2:6).

Refusing to Sell Out

The pillar shows that Jacob understands what God has done for him. He also boldly renames the city from Luz to Bethel (v19). This is not a private name for a secret place. God will bring Him back and give his descendants the land, so he acts like it, and three to four centuries later, the name sticks (Jgs. 1:22-26). He also vows that if God preserves Him, he will still worship Him, and of everything God gives him, he'll tithe on it. This is not a bargain with God, but a binding of himself to the Lord, recognizing everything comes from Him. God doesn't need us or our gifts, but we do need to give to Him (Ps. 50:12-15). Jacob vows not to forget the Lord or fail to honor Him with His blessing, not to leave the stairway to Heaven for the highway to Hell when things get easy.

NOTES FOR LITTLE SAINTS

Today's Passage: Genesis 28:12-19

12 Then he dreamed, and behold, a stairway was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. 13 And behold, the Lord stood upon it and said: "I am the Lord God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. 14 Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. 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 spoken to you." 16 Then Jacob awoke 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 Then Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on top of it. 19 And he called the name of that place Bethel; but the name of that city had been Luz previously.

1. What does Jacob see in his dream, and who is moving up and down it (verse 12)?
2. Jacob just left his parents' house to travel a long way and face many dangers. What does God promise to do for him (verse 15)?
3. What does Jacob say when he wakes up from his dream (verse 16), and what should you remember when you go into an unknown or scary place?
4. Draw a picture of the Stairway to Heaven with angels going up and down. If you have room, draw Jacob's pillar of rocks and him pouring oil on top of it.

Memory Verse to Recite Next Week:

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!" —Genesis 28:17