

Love for the Unlovely: The Story of Grace in the Life of Jacob

The Gate of Heaven (Genesis 28:1-22)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC English Service on February 23, 2025

Introduction

- ❖ Lately we've been in a series looking at the life of Jacob. **Out of all the characters in the book of Genesis, you could argue that Jacob is the easiest to relate to.** This is especially true for all of you who grew up in a Christian family. Think about it. Jacob grows up being taught about God and all his promises. He's heard all the stories of the LORD's power at work in the lives of his parents and grandparents.
 - And you could say he believes in God. He genuinely wants his promises to be true. **But while he might believe in God – unlike his parents and grandparents – Jacob has never encountered God.** So while he professes to believe in the God of Abraham and Isaac – he's not sure if he can honestly call him the God of Jacob.
 - I can imagine Jacob thinking to himself, “Well, he's definitely the God of my parents and grandparents. But is he *my* God? I don't know. I don't know if I've ever really experienced him. Maybe that's why I struggle with selfish thoughts and behaviors. Maybe that's why I feel compelled to lie and cheat to get my way. It's probably why I have a hard time trusting my life into God's hands. Maybe he's not my God yet.” **Those aren't just thoughts running through Jacob's mind. Many of us are wondering the same things.**
- ❖ That's why I look forward to preaching this second major episode in Jacob's life. The first involved manipulation and deception on his part (and his mother's) in securing the family birthright and blessing. Wresting it from the hands of his older twin brother, Esau.
 - **The second major episode recounts the aftermath of that plotting.** We see the consequences of all his previous actions. He's now a man on the run. Running for his life. His brother hates him and wants him dead. His father has come to accept the fact that he's destined to inherit the blessing. But it's hard to say if Jacob actually has his dad's support and affirmation. If anything, it seems like a reluctant support.
 - **So Jacob is a man who got all that he ever wanted. And yet none of it turned out to be what he truly needed.** It's tragically ironic that right after he secures the blessing and inherits the Promised Land, he's immediately sent away from that land. And he won't return for a long time.
- ❖ And one night – on this long arduous journey that he's been sent on – he dreams a dream and receives a vision. **One that impresses upon him the accessibility of heaven and all its spiritual blessings. But the point is that it's not for those who work towards them.** Especially those who lie and cheat to get them. **The blessings of heaven are only available to those who receive them by faith.** That's the lesson Jacob draws from his first real encounter with God. And that's the lesson I hope all of us have learned – or will soon learn – through our own encounters with the Living God.
 - So as we walk through Genesis 28, I'd like us to consider three reactions of Jacob in his first encounter with God. First, he's faced with the consequences of his actions. Second, we see him surprised by the accessibility of heaven. Third, he's unsure how to respond to this experience of God's grace.

Faced With The Consequences Of His Actions

- ❖ Let's start with Jacob's first reaction when he's faced with the consequences of his actions. As noted, he and his mother Rebekah had been busy in previous chapters – plotting to secure for Jacob the family blessing by whatever means necessary. Even if it meant manipulating and plotting. Lying and deceiving. **They were so desperate because this particular blessing involved more than a family inheritance.**
 - This was the blessing that God had given to Jacob's grandfather Abraham back in Genesis 12 and reinforced in Genesis 15. God said to Abraham that, "I will make a promise to bless your family so that you multiply as numerous as the dust on the earth or the stars in the heavens. And I'll make sure you possess the land of Canaan as my Promised Land. And as I bless you and your family, you will be a blessing to all the families of the earth. Because through your family line, there will one day arise a Messiah, who will be the Savior of the World."
- ❖ **Both Jacob and his mother believed this Promise and wanted the Promise to flow through Jacob to the next generation.** Through *his* line. Not Esau's. Chapter 27 ended with Esau furious that Jacob stole the blessing. Rebekah hears of his plans to kill Jacob when Isaac finally passes on. And she advises Jacob to escape his brother's wrath by fleeing to the town of Haran, to live with his uncle, her brother Laban.
 - But once again, we see Rebekah trying to manipulate the situation. She doesn't want to admit her true concerns and motivation to Isaac. So, instead, she uses her frustration at Esau's choice in Hittite wives as an excuse to send off Jacob back to her home country of Paddan-aram, to secure a wife from one of Laban's daughters.
- ❖ But first, Jacob secures the blessing for good in vv3-4. His father reiterates the blessing. This time directly identifying it as "*the blessing of Abraham.*" Look at v4, "*May he give the blessing of Abraham to you and to your offspring with you, that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings that God gave to Abraham!*"
 - But notice the next verse. Look at v5, "*Thus Isaac sent Jacob away.*" That's the tragic irony. **After securing the right to inherit this land, Jacob is sent away from it.** Later on, in Genesis 31:38, we learn that his sojourn in Haran lasted twenty years. He probably left home thinking it was going to be a fairly short trip. Little did Jacob know it would span two decades. **And it's not mentioned in the text if he ever saw his parents again.** Isaac's days appeared to be numbered in the previous chapter. So I'm sure he died within that twenty year timeframe. And while there's no explicit mention of Rebekah's death (as we mentioned before), it's very likely that she never saw her favorite son again, at least in this life, after he was sent away.
- ❖ The point is that you can work yourself to the bone and claw your way into getting everything you want, but you'll have to face the consequences of your actions. **If you resort to any means necessary, after gaining everything, you might end up with nothing.** That's the basic biblical principle at play. We will reap what we sow. It's a principle being illustrated in Jacob's life at this tragic point in his story.

- ❖ Notice how we're told, in v11, that the sun had set on him. *“And he came to a certain place and stayed there that 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 to sleep.”* So the setting of this scene is filled with darkness. It was at night. The sun had set.
 - Now the distance between Beer-Sheba and Haran is several hundred miles. So this journey would've taken months to complete. Jacob must have journeyed long and hard. But only the events of this one night are recorded for us.

- ❖ And though we're told later in the chapter (v19) that he stopped that night to rest in a city named Luz, its original identity doesn't matter for the storytelling. **This “certain place” is being portrayed as a random, desolate place. Jacob has hit rock bottom.**
 - Yes, he managed to secure for himself the birthright and the blessing. But now he doesn't even have a bed to sleep in or a comfy pillow to rest his head. He uses a stone, that he finds in that place, to serve as his pillow. **That picture is meant to communicate that Jacob is not in a good place right now.** In one sense, he has everything. But, in another real sense, he has nothing.

- ❖ Friends, let's take this biblical principle to heart. **We will reap what we sow. We will have to face the consequences of all our actions.** That's not to deny the reality of grace. We've seen how Jacob is an object of God's grace. Even in this chapter, God is promising him an eternal inheritance even though, up to this point, he's been nothing but a wretched sinner.
 - But it's no different for us Christians. We were nothing but wretched sinners when the grace of God found us and blessed us with an eternal inheritance in Christ. **Praise God that the eternal consequences of our sins have been sufficiently paid for by the blood of Christ.** We have no need to fear an eternal hell without God.

- ❖ **But my point is that even Christians still have to face earthly consequences for our actions.** We might gain all that we're after – whether it's academically, vocationally, relationally. **But if we had to run over others to get it or burn relationships in the process – if we adopt a “whatever means necessary” approach – just know that that comes with a cost.** You will reap what you sow. Jacob's story makes that point dramatically clear.

Surprised By The Accessibility Of Heaven

- ❖ Jacob had to face the consequences of his previous actions. And now, in the middle of the night, he has a dream. And in this dream, he receives a vision that surprises him. Jacob is surprised by the accessibility of heaven. Look at v12, *“And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! ¹³And behold, the LORD stood above it.”*
 - When we get to v12, there's a sudden shift in perspective. Before this, we've been reading from the narrator's perspective – telling us what Jacob did and said. **But now, the perspective shifts to Jacob's point of view – telling us what he saw and experienced himself.** Look! There's a ladder coming down from heaven. Look! There are angels going up and down on it. Look! The LORD is there too.

- ❖ The word “*ladder*” is not the best translation. Because ladders, as we imagine them, don’t allow for two-way traffic. For ascending and descending. **It’s more likely that Jacob saw a stairway.** Large and wide enough for free movement, up and down, by angels.
 - **Some would identify it with ancient Mesopotamian ziggurats.** Ziggurats are ancient towers with built in steps, usually with a temple situated on top. We already encounter a ziggurat in the Book of Genesis. In Genesis 11, we were introduced to the Tower of Babel. It was a ziggurat. A man-made stairway, built from the ground up, reaching up to heaven. That tower was condemned as man’s futile attempt to reach God by relying on his own ingenuity and strength. God shuts that down.

- ❖ But in Genesis 28, in this story, it’s a stairway coming from heaven down to earth. Man didn’t build it. And the LORD stood above it. A better translation is “the LORD stood above him or beside him.” Which means *it* refers to Jacob. Not the stairway. **So the LORD is the One who comes down to Jacob.** The emphasis is on God being near. On him being present “*in this place*” (v16) with Jacob. Not way up above in heaven on top of the stairway.
 - **And what’s surprising is that the LORD doesn’t speak a word of rebuke, even after all of Jacob’s bad behavior.** Instead, God reinforces the Promise Jacob already received. The absence of rebuke in the LORD’s speech resembles how he spoke the same Promise to Abraham and Isaac. They behaved badly in their own right, and yet the LORD only spoke blessing to them.
 - That stands in contrast to the way the LORD rebuked Adam and Eve, or their son Cain, or the tower builders at Babel. So God is more than willing to rebuke. **He’s willing to confront when he so wills. But here, in Jacob’s case, God withholds rebuke and just speaks blessing.** That’s grace.

- ❖ All of this was grace at work. Think about it. Jacob wasn’t seeking God. **He was running away from the mess he made. He wasn’t expecting to find grace.** He wasn’t expecting to hear a word of Promise and Blessing. But here it is. Listen to what the LORD says to Jacob in v13, “*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. ¹⁴Your 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 in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.*”
 - So the LORD reinforces the blessings (a) of land, (b) of offspring, numerous and scattered worldwide, and (c) of spiritual blessings to all, through Jacob and his offspring. “*In you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.*” **Up to this point in the story, Jacob had been so focused on *getting* the blessing. Now the LORD is shifting his focus on *being* the blessing.** My blessing is meant to flow through you to bless all the families of the earth.
 - Which prompts the LORD to make a bold promise in v15. Promising to protect him, guide him, and ultimately be with him. “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 promised you.*”

- ❖ **So even though he lost the Promised Land – he’s been sent away – the LORD promises to be with him as he leaves Canaan and will make sure to bring him back to this land.** Now that mention of “not leaving you until I have done what I have promised,” is not meant to suggest that God plans on eventually abandoning Jacob once he’s done with him. That’s just an expression of assurance to never leave him nor forsake him.
- ❖ Now notice Jacob’s surprise when he awakes from this dream. “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 [or dreadful] is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”*”
 - **Jacob admits his ignorance of the LORD’s presence in that place.** Really in *every* place. And v17 says he was afraid. Probably because when the LORD said, “I am . . . the God of Isaac,” he heard, “I am the God of the father whom you deceived, whom you manipulated.” **So even though he heard no word of condemnation from the LORD, Jacob’s own conscience was condemning him.** And he was afraid.
 - What’s notable is that, when the LORD appeared to his father and grandfather, neither Abraham nor Isaac reacted in fear. Only Jacob reacted in that way. **It’s probably because he lacked a proper fear of the LORD.**
- ❖ That’s an important nuance to make. **Those who are afraid of God – scared of him – lack a proper fear of him.** Because fear of the Lord and knowledge of the Lord are closely intertwined. **Those who have had a real encounter with God and know him – know that he’s awesome and dreadful – but he’s also good and gracious.** That’s why they’re not afraid of God, but they do have a reverent, proper fear of jGod. There’s a difference.
 - **But for Jacob, at the moment, he was just afraid.** Again, the LORD didn’t rebuke him, but his presence alone was terrifying for Jacob. How *dreadful* is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.
 - That’s why he renames the city Bethel, which means “*house of God*.” Now by identifying it as “*the gate of heaven*,” **Jacob is harkening back to the Tower of Babel, which, in the Hebrew, is associated with the name Babylon.** And Babylon literally translates into “the gate of god.” Another gate of heaven.
- ❖ **My point is that there’s a parallel being drawn between Babel and Bethel.** Genesis 11 shows you what man will come up with on his own. He develops a stairway to heaven. **Every human religion, every human philosophy or construct, is ultimately a stairway to heaven.** It starts on earth and you have to step up. You have to ascend. God is up there and waiting for you – if you’re good enough to make it to the top. That’s how it works. That’s what the Tower of Babel represented. Man’s best effort to reach the gates of heaven.
 - **But what God reveals to us at Bethel is a stairway *from* heaven.** It’s not something we construct, something we make up. That’s what’s unique about biblical faith. It’s a revealed religion. Revealed in God’s chosen way, in God’s chosen place. **And it’s a stairway of grace.** Where God comes down to stand over us. To stand beside us.

- ❖ Biblical faith reveals a stairway *from* heaven. Not a way for you to ascend up to God. It's not about you proving yourself worthy. It's not about accomplishing some amazing feat. **No, what God reveals is a stairway from heaven upon which he comes down into the messiness of our lives.** Into our brokenness. Into the mire and muck of our sin and rebellion. You don't go up to him. He comes down to you. And he stands right over you, and he extends his arms of grace. He blesses you even though you don't deserve it.
 - That's how this stairway works. We couldn't have made it up. Because, left to ourselves, we always try to find our own way up to God. **We assume that heaven will only open its gates to those who are good and worthy.** That's what other religions boil down to. And that's probably why Jacob reacted the way he did. **He was afraid because, when he first saw that stairway, he probably thought he had to climb it.** And he knew he wasn't good enough to do.

- ❖ **But the gates of heaven are far more open and accessible than Jacob could've imagined.** You see, there's this moment in John's Gospel where Jesus calls Philip and Nathanael to follow him. And Jesus befuddles Nathanael by offering him a glimpse of his supernatural knowledge and power. Leading Nathanael to profess Jesus to be the Son of God. To which the Lord responds, in **John 1:50**, "⁵⁰*Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these."* ⁵¹*And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."*"
 - Notice his allusion to Jacob's vision, and notice how the angels are ascending and descending *on* the Son of Man. They're going up and down on Jesus. **In other words, Jesus is claiming to be the Stairway in Jacob's vision.** He's the nexus, the bridge, the link. Between heaven and earth. Between God and man.

- ❖ **Jesus is the reason why Jacob didn't see a stairway to heaven.** Because Jesus operates differently than every other religious leader or spiritual guru, in any other world religion. They're all pointing you to the steps they took – the steps you need to take – in order to ascend to heaven. **But in the gospel, Jesus does something different. He doesn't offer steps to take. He just offers himself.** He's the Stairway. And he's come from heaven. He's come down to live the life we should've lived. To take the steps we couldn't take in our sinful brokenness. And the biggest step involved dying a death for the atonement of our sins.
 - And all he asks is for you to trust him. To put your life in his hands. **Jesus has made heaven accessible to you. If you stop trying to climb your own way up and start trusting in him.** Jacob didn't have the privilege of knowing that the stairway he saw would be ultimately fulfilled in Christ. **But even without that vantage point, Jacob could see that this stairway wasn't built from the ground up to heaven.** That means you can't work your way up to heaven. Heaven has to come down to you, and you have to receive it by faith.
 - Perhaps this is the day that some of you begin your walk with God. Not by starting to climb a stairway to heaven. But by receiving into your life the Stairway from heaven. Trusting Jesus as the Way to the Father.

Unsure How To Respond To Grace

- ❖ That's the proper response to the grace of God. Faith. Trust. And commitment, or you can call it allegiance. Jacob, as we'll see in vv18-22, is still a work-in-progress. He's not there yet. He's still unsure how to respond to grace. Let's start back in v18, *"¹⁸So early in the morning Jacob 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. ¹⁹He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first."*
 - **So once he realizes he had an encounter with the awesome and dreadful presence of the LORD, Jacob takes the stone he had been using as a pillow and stands it up straight to serve as a pillar.** It's not meant to be an altar. He doesn't offer a sacrifice. He's not yet ready to worship the LORD. But he does want to erect a stone of remembrance. He pours oil on it to consecrate it and names the place Bethel. This place is the house of God. There is where I saw the stairway from heaven.

- ❖ Now what comes next is a bit awkward. He makes a vow. And I don't question its genuineness – his commitment to keep it. **But the conditional nature of the vow itself is problematic.** Listen to v20, *"²⁰Then 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, ²¹so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, ²²and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you."*
 - So Jacob vows to follow the LORD as his God, to establish a house of worship one day where he set up this pillar, and to give a tithe to the LORD, a full tenth. Those are all good and proper ways to respond to the grace of God.
 - **But notice how the one thing Jacob's vow lacks is faith.** His vow is heavily conditional. There are a lot of ifs. If God will be with me. If he keeps me. If he returns me to my father's house in peace. Then the LORD shall be my God. God has to meet these conditions first, and then I'll be his follower.

- ❖ **That's a vow. But not a vow based on faith. A vow based on faith will leave out the conditions.** It'll promise to follow God even if the blessings don't arrive. Even if your desires go unmet. A vow based on faith is going to say, *"¹⁷Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, ¹⁸yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation."* (Hab 3:17-18) **That's a vow based on faith. Not on conditions.**
 - But considering where Jacob started, his vow is at least a step in the right direction. **He still needs to be broken. He needs to completely surrender to God.** So even though he finally does have an encounter with God, it's not enough to transform him into a man of faith. That'll have to wait a few chapters later, in Genesis 32, and a much more intimate encounter – a wrestling match with God.

- ❖ Now for those who call themselves followers of Jesus, it's important to ask: **Was my vow to follow Jesus based on faith? Or, like Jacob, was it based on conditions?** Is Jesus my God no matter what happens? If the fig tree should blossom or not? If fruit be on the vine or not? If I get into that prestigious school or not? If I get married by my thirties or not? If I'm blessed with children or not? If my children are healthy and succeeding in life or not? If my life ambitions were achieved or not?
 - **Are you committed to Jesus even if he hasn't met all your expectations?** Even if following him has cost you more than you've seemingly gained? That's how you know your vow is based on faith in Jesus for *who he is*. And not just based on what you hoped he could do for you.

- ❖ **Too many people commit to following Jesus because he seems useful to help them get what they want in life.** But the Christian is the person who follows Jesus as a response to a profound experience of his grace and would be satisfied with him even if all else fails. That's what a vow based on faith looks like.