

A Ladder to Heaven

Genesis 28:10-22

This morning we hit one of those glorious peaks that comes every so often in the Old Testament. It's one of those thrilling mountain tops that soars above everything that surrounds it. Jacob's ladder comes unexpectedly, quite suddenly. There is nothing to prepare you for the splendor of this event. Jacob had been sent off by his father and mother, to find a wife and to escape the fury of his brother Esau, fury which Jacob surely provoked by his own deceitfulness. We've struggled through these accounts in recent weeks, too often having to draw attention to the faults of God's people, even these great patriarchs. Things just weren't the way they were supposed to be. And Jacob's life was hardly an example of spiritual strength and maturity.

Likely he's somewhat bewildered and confused about his being sent away. Maybe he's a bit frightened. We don't know, but we do know that he's been immersed in the normal course of daily life and hasn't been too focused on God. Until now. It's just another night on the journey, maybe the second or third night since he left home. He's gone about 70 miles, and he lays down to go to sleep, after the sun went down. And he can't be very comfortable, sleeping on the ground with a stone for a pillow.

But then it happened. He had a dream. And what a dream it was, one of the most remarkable dreams a man has ever had. In that dream,

I. GOD REVEALS A LADDER CONNECTING HEAVEN AND EARTH.

v.10-12

Just to make myself clear, this was a divine appearance, a theophany, as theologians call it. God was revealing himself to Jacob through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. For the first time in his life, he receives a direct revelation from God. He sees an appearance of God, a personal appearance. An appearance to him, and to him alone.

This was an inspired revelation, an actual appearance of God to a man. Rest assured that this was not simply a creation of Jacob's mind. This was not merely the result of human brain energy expended during a time of unconscious sleep. This was a vision of God. God himself was speaking. "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac."

And does God have to say? He shows Jacob a ladder. Perhaps a stairway. The difference between the two is not particularly important. There were steps, or stairs. They began on earth. And they ascended into heaven. The ladder, therefore, symbolizes the uninterrupted communion between heaven and earth. The ladder was wide as well as high, allowing for streams of heavenly angels to be seen going both up and down the ladder simultaneously.

The point is, God had provided the connection between heaven and earth. For he alone had separated the two. In a real sense, heaven and earth were separated when Adam and Eve sinned, for before then, heaven, which can be defined as the presence of God, was with man. God was with man. He walked with him in the garden. But sin changed all of that. And, in fact, Adam and Eve were driven out of the Garden. That Garden continued to represent heaven, and man could not re-enter. Not sinful man.

Remember also that sinful man attempted to build his own ladder to

heaven, in the foolish plans of the Tower of Babel. God, as you remember, put an end to that foolish pride.

Gen. 11:5 “But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. 6 And the LORD said, “Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. 7 Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.”

Gen. 11:8 “So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city. 9 Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.”

But now, the Lord builds the connection between his presence in heaven and the presence of sinful men on earth. It was a ladder. Two things dominate the vision of this ladder. First, the angels going up and down the ladder. And the Lord standing at the top of the ladder.

The angels which were on that ladder are the means by which God accomplishes that constant communion between heaven and earth.

v.12

A. God sends his messenger angels to communicate his help to man.

Angel is a Hebrew word meaning “messenger.” Specifically, God’s messenger. We read in,

Hebr. 1:14 “Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?”

Angels are ministering spirits, God’s helpers. And whenever Scripture describes the angels, there is always the picture of lots of angels. For example,

Hebr. 12:22 “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels.”

So, there are lots of angels on this ladder, or stairway. Lots of angels ascending the ladder to bear man’s needs before God. And lots of angels descending the ladder bringing God’s help to man. Through the angels, then and now, God maintains a constant communion between himself and his people on earth.

Then notice the emphasis upon God’s presence. God stands at the top of the ladder, towering over it with the majesty of his presence.

v.13a

And he repeats the great and glorious covenant promises which we have been studying throughout Genesis.

v.13-15

Here,

B. God declares his own perfect faithfulness to bless his covenant people.

It is the blessing given to Abraham. Renewed to Isaac. Passed along to Jacob, with all its fullness. Notice how incredibly encouraging this promise is.

First, God’s full identity.

v.13a :And behold, the LORD stood above it and said: “I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac...”

“I am Yahweh.” “I am Jehovah.” Remember that that is God’s

most personal name, his most personal self-identification. The name means, “I am,” or more fully, “I am who I am.” Jacob has seen God, and he knows it. Surely, this event was the making of a man, for before this, Jacob could best be called a rascal. Afterward, he becomes a great man of faith.

Then the specific promises come. The land.
v.13b “...the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants.”

And uncountable descendants.
v.14 “Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth.”

And back to a description of the land, it is immeasurable. It will be the whole earth.
v.14b “...you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south.”

Then the promise of universal blessing to all the nations.
v.14c “...and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

And the most precious promise of all.
v.15

This is so incredibly gracious. So glorious in its mercy. This promise is so simple, so plain, and so encouraging, that it needs absolutely no further comment. It is a promise that is still in force today, for we are God’s covenant people. We are the children of Abraham. We are the descendants of Jacob. We are the Israel of God. And so, just as announced this promise to Jacob, he announces it to us today,
v.15

That’s one of those promises you can just freely embrace with all your mind. It’s a promise that you need to hang on to, when difficulties arise, when troubles overshadow you, when discouragement threatens.

This is God’s covenant promise. “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.”

This is the central theme of the whole OT. God says to his people, “I will be with you.” The theme is, God with us. The Hebrew word for “God with us” is used to identify the primary object of everything in the OT, for the Hebrew for “God with us” is, Immanuel.

And so the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham, Isaac, and now Jacob, is not merely that the nation of Israel would successfully conquer the land of Canaan, with the aid of God’s presence. No, the ultimate fulfillment of that promise is that God’s presence would actually come in the flesh, in the form of a man. “God with us” would be the name of the one whom God would send to be born of a virgin, that is, the one who would be conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and therefore fully God and fully man.

His name would be Immanuel. As Isaiah so clearly prophesies,

Is.7:14 “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”

Guess what? Jacob’s ladder is also a prophecy of Immanuel. The ladder which is built between heaven and earth is actually a man, Jesus Christ. John writes this about Nathanael,

John 1:47 Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward Him, and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!” 48 Nathanael said to Him, “How do You know me?” Jesus answered and said to him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” 49 Nathanael answered and said to Him, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” 50 Jesus answered and said to 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, “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.”

Did you catch that last reference. It’s an obvious reference to Jacob’s ladder. But the ladder is identified. “The angels of God [are] ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” So the ladder is the Son of Man. The ladder is Jesus. He claims that himself. And thus, in Jacob’s dream,

II. GOD REVEALS A LADDER WHICH SYMBOLIZES JESUS CHRIST.

Think about it. It is such a perfect illustration. Consider, 1 Tim.2:5. “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.”

A mediator represents two parties, and an effective mediator, therefore, must be able to effectively reach and identify with both parties. So, the only possible mediator between God and man is one who is both God and man. His name is Jesus. So, with this image of a ladder clearly in your minds, let me emphasize that,

A. Jesus is the only connection between heaven and earth.

Jesus is the only thing that this ladder could possibly represent. He is the only bridge which spans the great gulf

separation a just and holy God from a sinful and fallen people.

Let me give you a couple cross references. First,

John 14:6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

That is as perfectly clear as it could possibly be. Equally clear is,

John 3:13 “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.”

And this also gives us an understanding of,

Eph. 4:8 “Therefore He says: “When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, And gave gifts to men.” 9 (Now this, “He ascended”—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? 10 He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)”

So Jesus himself descended to earth, for him, the lower, earthly regions. That happened when he was born, at the incarnation. God came to earth. We read in,

John 1:14 “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

God descended to earth, in the person of Jesus Christ. But he also ascended into heaven after the resurrection from the dead. He ascended into heaven, poured out his Holy Spirit upon the church, and gave gifts to men. Jesus personally ascended and descended between heaven and earth. And because he did so, he is capable now of being the ladder by which his angels continue to ascend and descend between God in heaven and man on earth.

So it is that Jesus is the only connection between heaven and earth. Very much related to that,

B. Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of all God's blessings to his covenant people.

In the OT, God spoke those blessings "through the prophets at many times and in various ways," as we read in Hebrews 1. "But," that passage continues, "in these last days [he has] spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds."

So it was that God spoke the promises of the covenant to Jacob in this dream, promises we looked at in,
v.13-15

Those promises are still being fulfilled, perfectly. By Jesus. For example, the promise of the great commission, so directly connected to this promise to Jacob,

Mat.28:18 "And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

There it is. The promise of the covenant. "Lo, I am with you always." Jacob's ladder is a picture of that promise. Surely, Jesus is with us always. And that is what gives you encouragement and help in time of trouble!

Hebr. 13:5 "Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." 6 So we may boldly say: "The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?"

Our story of Jacob's ladder doesn't end there, however. We get to see Jacob's response, and a very appropriate one it was. Jacob's response gives us an example to follow. His actions become an exhortation for us. Particularly, an exhortation to worship. Everything that Jacob does in response to this dream can properly be called worship. As God, no doubt, intended. Indeed,

III. GOD REVEALS A LADDER WHICH PROMPTS HIS COVENANT PEOPLE TO WORSHIP.

Let me read what Jacob did in response to the dream, and then we'll look at it more closely.

v.16-22

The first thing that Jacob notices is the first thing that he should have noticed. The reality of God's presence.

v.16

And his first response to the recognition of God's presence is the first response that he should have had.

v.17

"He was afraid." He was filled with fear. It wasn't so much the fear of terror, after all, there was nothing in the ladder that would provoke terror! There was nothing dangerous or harmful. Nothing to be terrified of. But it is the fear of reverence. The fear of deepest honor and respect, deepest devotion and true humility at the awesome presence of the glory of God Almighty.

Jacob speaks appropriately. "How awesome is this place." The older word "dreadful" is very appropriate. Again, the context of reverential fear. It's the same impression that God gave to Moses, when Moses entered his presence.

Exod. 3:5 Then He said, "Do not draw near this place. Take

your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.” 6 Moreover He said, “I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God.”

In our text in Genesis 28, Jacob replied, “This is none other than the house of God.” That’s what you should come away with when you worship as a congregation! “This is none other than the house of God.” “This is the gate of heaven.” This is where you experience a foretaste of heaven, this is where heaven and earth meet. This is the very entrance to heaven, for here, we enter God’s presence.

That’s how we should respond to the presence of God. Always. From Jacob’s worthy example,

A. The context for worship is the reverential fear brought about by the knowledge of God’s presence.

That’s the context for worship! That should be the focus of our minds in public worship. The awesome, awe-inspiring reverential fear brought about by the overwhelming awareness of the presence of God.

To this day, our focus ought not to be our own pleasure or enjoyment. The context for worship ought not to be merely that which makes us comfortable, though that is precisely what many churches work very hard to do. Indeed, the awesome, awe-inspiring reverential fear brought about by the overwhelming awareness of the presence of God might make you very uncomfortable, especially if there is unconfessed sin in your life.

The ultimate goal of any worship service is to create the awareness of the presence of God. That awareness will quite naturally provoke the proper reverential fear. But then notice

what Jacob does. His heart is right. His attitude is right. And therefore, so are his actions.

v.18-22

Jacob is not bargaining with God. He is not following any sort of legalistic or self-righteous human commands. Everything here is pure worship, and perfectly acceptable as the spiritual sacrifices of a man offered to God by faith. All these actions can be summarized by the word “commitment.” Everything Jacob does is an expression of personal commitment. And that’s such a good lesson for worship.

B. The outward expressions of worship are appropriate symbols of personal commitment.

First, the pillar, anointed with oil.

v.18-19

Pillars were frequent set up to mark a holy experience, even as we might set up things such as “historical markers” to mark very important sites in our own history. So this place was an important place. This was the place where Jacob met God. Placing a marker was an appropriate, natural reaction.

But Jacob also anointed that marker, likely denoting that this pillar was for Jacob a form of a sacrifice. He didn’t have an animal with him to sacrifice, so he anointed the pillar, dedicating it to the truth of God’s promises. It was an act of worship. It was an act of commitment, of consecration.

Something that was anointed was declared to be holy, set apart to God. Consecrated for his use and for his glory. So Jacob named this place, “Bethel,” which means, the house of God.

But his worship service was over yet.

v.20a “Then Jacob made a vow.”

Vows are appropriate acts of worship. Vows are personal commitments, made voluntarily to God. They are an expression of devotion, of trust, of commitment, of faith. Jacob makes a solemn vow, he promising that he would remain faithful to God. You can seldom tell in the OT exactly at what point God’s people are saved, or regenerated, but it certainly appears that this could be that time for Jacob.

v.20-22a

This is such an appropriate vow, similar to the one which we ask people to take as a part of their public profession of faith in joining the church. “The Lord shall be my God.”

And then Jacob did something quite amazing. He demonstrated the sincerity of his commitment. He would back up his words with his actions. He would give a tithe.

v.22b

The tithe is such a practical way to express faith, given freely and cheerfully. It’s not even yet incorporated in God’s written law, but with this and Abraham’s example, it must be part of that law that was written upon the hearts of God’s people even before Moses. It is such an appropriate outward expression of worship. Such an appropriate symbol of personal commitment.

Now, I should say, all outward expressions of worship can be perverted, if they are offered from wrong motives. No outward expression of worship should ever be seen as in any way providing any atonement for your sin. This is not penance, but the genuine commitment of a man worshipping the God who has saved him from his sins.

So for us, in order to make good application to our lives of this great Old Testament, let all your outward expressions of worship be just that. Let everything that you do here this morning, and what you do every time you enter this building or any other church, let your outward action's express the personal commitment of your soul. And do it with the overriding sense of the God’s presence.

Even as you go through the familiar elements of our worship each week, let your mind to focus upon the glory of God’s presence, which is proclaimed to us and demonstrated even as I read from his word and proclaim it to you, even as we sing to him and pray to him in response to that word.

“How awesome is this place.” “This is none other than the house of God.” “This is the gate of heaven.”