

How God deals with a believer's suffering.

Text: Genesis 28:10-17 for 2/25/2018 by Pastor Bolwerk

¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. ¹¹ When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. ¹² He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵ I am with you and will watch over 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 When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." ¹⁷ He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

Theme: How God deals with a believer's suffering.

This portion of scripture starts out: **"Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night"** (vs. 10, 11). On his journey to Haran Jacob stops as it gets dark, lays down in a field with a rock for his pillow, and goes to sleep. He has no protection from animals or thieves. So, what is Jacob doing laying out in a field in the middle of nowhere?

For us to answer that question we need to back up and see where Jacob has come from, not just physically, but spiritually. You see, God had a plan for Jacob. Before Jacob and his brother Esau were born God had told Isaac and Rebecca that each of their twin boys would grow into a nation. And God said the older son, Esau, would end up serving the younger Jacob. Along with receiving that blessing from God Jacob also bought Esau's birth right. Since Esau was the firstborn he was to receive a double portion of his family's inheritance. But he sold that right Jacob for a bowl of stew.

God had planned to bless Jacob. God's plan was to bring the Savior into the world through Jacob's descendants. That meant Jacob and his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan. But Isaac had different plans. Isaac loved Esau more than Jacob, so Isaac wanted to give Esau the blessing that God had planned for Jacob.

When Jacob learned Isaac was going to bless Esau, Jacob had to make a choice. He could've chosen to trust God and confronted his father about the blessing. Had to Jacob done that he may have made Isaac angry and lost his father's blessing, but he still would have had God's blessing. But instead of trusting God Jacob chose to get the blessing himself. Prompted by his mother Jacob deceived his father into giving him the blessing that Isaac wanted to give Esau. When Esau found out he was furious. He was so angry he wanted to kill his brother. Rebecca learned of Esau's plan and had Isaac sent Jacob to Haran where he would be safe from Esau. Jacob's choice caused him guilt, and fear, and suffering.

Now Jacob was lying in a field with a rock for a pillow and no protection. Jacob brought this suffering on himself because of his sin. Instead of trusting God to bring about what he had promised, Jacob trusted in himself. He was afraid that if he followed God's plan he might suffer the loss of his father's blessing. Jacob didn't want to suffer. So, he tried to do things his own way, and ended up suffering the consequences of his sinful actions.

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God could have rejected Jacob because of his sin. God could have found some other way to fulfill his promises. But God didn't abandon Jacob. Instead, he brings Jacob relief from his suffering in the form of more promises. As Jacob falls asleep God comes to him in a dream. We are told that Jacob, **saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over 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"** (vs 12-15).

What did Jacob do to deserve such incredible blessings from God? Nothing. If anything, he deserved God's punishment for his failings. Instead he receives God's mercy, God's blessing, and God's promise of salvation. Jacob could have rejected these promises and chose to continue doing things his own way. But as these words sink into his heart and mind they make a change in Jacob.

With this blessing, Jacob recognizes his lowly, sinful place before God. We are told that when Jacob woke up he was afraid, and said, **"How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God"** (v. 17). Jacob "feared" God, that is, he respected God for his power and authority. Yet, the promises God made to Jacob moved him to trust God. Throughout his life Jacob continued to trust God, and to trust God's plan for his life. He did not do that perfectly, but with God's help he did that faithfully.

Jacob followed God's plan but that doesn't mean he no longer suffered. Faithfully following God does not mean a life without suffering. There are two kinds of suffering in this world. The first kind of suffering is something all people face because there is sin in the world. Sin corrupts the world. Sin causes decay in our bodies and the things that we own. Sin also causes natural disasters and disease. Sin also corrupts every single person on this planet. Sinful people have sinful actions which cause grief and harm and suffering. This is the kind of suffering that everyone faces.

But there is another kind of suffering that is only faced by those who believe in the true God. This suffering comes on a person because of their faith. This suffering comes from three places: Sinful people cause believers suffering because they despise a believer's faith in God. Satan works to cause people suffering for their faith trying to get them to turn away from Christ. Even a person's own sinful nature causes suffering every time they deny its sinful desires. It hurts to deny ourselves the sinful things we want. This is why even believers wrestle with trying to do what is right in the face of suffering.

From the beginning God had a plan for us. God reveals his plan for us in his word. Through his Commandments God shows us our sinfulness. They reveal to us our deep need for a Savior. Then, through his gospel God reveals to us that Savior. He shows us all the Messiah did to save us from our sins. Then, God connects promises to both his law and his gospel. God promises that anyone who keeps his law perfectly will gain eternal life. The problem is no mere human being has ever done that since every person comes into this world with a human nature that is

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already corrupted by sin. This is why God also connects promises to his gospel. The gospel shows us how the Savior perfectly keeping the law for us. Our Lord then connects this promise to his gospel message: anyone who trusts in the work of God's saving Son will have forgiveness and eternal life.

The problem that we have trying to follow God's plan is that it still involves suffering. We heard Jesus say in the gospel reading for today, **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"** (Mark 8:34). A cross means suffering! We struggle with that because we don't want to suffer. Too often we think that if we follow God's plan we are going to suffer, so we try to get what we want by following our own plan. The problem is that does not eliminate suffering. When we try to follow our own sinful path, we suffer because we are doing things contrary to God's good plan. Like Jacob we end up suffering guilt and fear.

When we break God's commandments, or when we try to find forgiveness for our sins other than in Christ, we sin. Then we suffer the consequences of our sin. Broken relationships, fear, frustration, guilt. We suffer physically, mentally, and emotionally all because we chose to do things our own way instead of following God's plan.

Thankfully, God doesn't abandon us because of our sin. Instead, God keeps setting before us his promises. Those promises bring blessings, but they do not come with a promise that we will never suffer. Connected to God through Christ we will always be faced with the suffering that Satan, and the world, and our own sinful flesh continually throw at us.

While this is not pleasant, it is still something through which God brings about blessing. Suffering for our faith drives us back to the only one who can help us with the suffering we face. It forces us to rely all the more on God and to trust all the more in his promises. It forces us to rely on God to carry us through the lowest and most difficult times of our lives, especially those times when suffering comes because of our faith.

When we suffer for our faith what does God do? He keeps pointing us back to his promises to get us through that time of suffering. He promised: He is always with us. He will never leave us or forsake us. We never have to worry about suffering eternally for our sins because of what Jesus did for us. For all the times we shunned suffering for our faith, Christ went to the cross and died for those sins. For all the times we chose not to carry our cross while following Jesus he washed us clean in the blood he shed on the cross he carried to Golgotha. Jesus did not back down from suffering hell for us, so we can look forward to a life in heaven that is completely free from suffering.

Hearing what Jesus did for us, and the promises God connects to Christ's work, that word strengthens our faith and helps us when we are faced with suffering. Through that almighty Word of God, the Holy Spirit empowers us to trust God, and to trust the path he's leading us on. The Spirit uses those words and promises of God to remove our guilt, to calm our fears, and to strengthen us to face whatever may come on our path through life. God's gracious promises gives us the strength to face the good and the bad; to face suffering or joy, happiness or sadness.

Jacob eventually made it to Haran, and he spent the next two decades of his life there. Jacob certainly faced his share of hardships in Haran, yet God continued keeping his promises to him. God continued to be with Jacob. The Lord blessed him with a family, and with flocks and

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herds. After twenty years God fulfilled his promise to Jacob and brought him back to the land of Canaan. The Almighty even gave to Jacob the blessing of being reconciled with his brother Esau. While it wasn't easy, through it all Jacob continued to trust in God's promises and plan for his life.

Where is God leading you in life? Trust in God's promises and plans for your life because your Almighty Lord is always working bring about good in your life. Just like Jacob, God has promised you that he will always be with you; he will never leave you or forsake you. With the power of God's promises you can endure any suffering that comes into your life, because by the power of your God given faith you can be certain that your Lord has eternal life waiting for you. Amen.