

“Jacob’s Ladder: Where Heaven Meets Earth”

Genesis 28:10-22; John 1:47-51

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January 26, 2025

Throughout the 1960’s and early 70’s, rock music played a significant role in my life. Like millions of other young people, I listened non-stop to The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Doors, The Moody Blues and a host of other groups during a period of what many consider to be THE GOLDEN AGE of rock and roll. If I was hard-pressed to name my all-time favorite rock group, it would be impossible. HOWEVER, if ever asked to choose my FAVORITE SONG, I’d probably pick one that is often heralded by musicologists as perhaps the greatest rock song of all time- Led Zeppelin’s *Stairway to Heaven*. I’ve listened to it hundreds of times over the years and to this day, I STILL don’t get it. I suppose it concerns a lady who gets everything she wants but doesn’t give back. No matter how much money she has, no matter how much she accumulates, she will not get into heaven. Whether or not that is the TRUE meaning of the opening lines of this song, what IS true is that so many of us are trying to buy “a stairway to heaven,” or to state it in other terms, we are often trying to rise up and secure our OWN salvation if it were at all possible. The truth is that no matter HOW HARD we try, such efforts INEVITABLY fail.

This morning, we’re going to look at ANOTHER “stairway to heaven,” one found in one of the patriarchal narratives in the book of Genesis. It involves a son of Isaac- Jacob, and a particular episode that profoundly changed his life. The name Jacob literally means a “trickster” or “supplanter” and he certainly LIVED UP to his name. In the previous chapter, we learn how, with a little help from his mother, Jacob stole Esau’s birthright by wearing his brother’s clothing and pretending to be him when his old and blind father wanted to bestow his blessing upon him. Now God’s covenant promise of being a “Father of many nations” with children as numerous as there are stars in the sky will come through HIS family line rather than Esau’s. When his brother discovers the ruse and what now can never be his, he becomes SO enraged that he tries to take Jacob’s life. Afraid and doubtless wondering whether God would even honor a promise secured in such an underhanded manner, feeling the weight of guilt and burden of shame for having committed such a dastardly act upon his own twin brother, Jacob becomes a fugitive and is forced to flee into the wilderness for his very life. On his way to Haran to wait until things cool off, night falls and he stops to catch some sleep, resorting to a stone for a pillow.

A century ago, a preacher began his sermon on this same text by saying, “A long journey, a hard pillow, an uneasy conscience, and a heavy heart. These are the things that make men dream.” Well, God has often used dreams to communicate with people. A few chapters later, we read how Joseph--Jacob’s son--had his future foretold to him in a dream, while in the New Testament, ANOTHER Joseph--Jesus’s father--was instructed in a dream not to put away Mary-his pregnant fiancé. Then following the birth of Jesus, Joseph received yet ANOTHER dream, THIS time instructing him to take Mary and the babe and flee to Egypt in order to save their new-born’s life. Well, in our lesson, we see that Jacob has an encounter with God and that it ALSO takes place within a dream. In what is the very FIRST dream recorded in the Bible, Jacob sees a stairway extending all the way from heaven to earth with angels ascending and descending upon it. With the Lord standing at the very top, he reaffirms to Jacob the covenant promise he

had made to Abraham and further ratified with his son, Isaac. God tells him that he—Jacob--will INDEED become the Father of many nations with numerous descendants and furthermore, that he will be WITH HIM, that he will KEEP HIM SAFE wherever he goes, and that he will RESTORE HIM to his land which will be his future inheritance.

When Jacob AWAKENS from his deep sleep, the desert he had escaped to suddenly becomes alive with new life and the world is filled with new meaning for him. Though things had not changed outwardly, he had awakened with A WHOLE NEW VISION while his soul was now filled with DEEP WONDER and SOLEMN AWE. He said to himself, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” The place he had spent the night was now a SACRED place and he takes the stone which he had used as a pillow and sets it up as a pillar, that is, as a stone memorial. After anointing it with oil, he vows that if God would accompany him and protect him on his perilous journey, then he would regard the God of his father and forefather as his OWN, as well. He also vows to pay a tenth of what he earns as an offering to God. But before he departs, he names the place “Bethel” meaning “House of God.”

If ever there was one who DIDN'T deserve the favor of God, it had to have been Jacob. This son of Isaac was a devious character, a born hustler who over a pot of porridge had earlier in life cheated his brother out of his inheritance and then later stole his coveted blessing. He had earned the derision of his family and was now a hunted fugitive. Nevertheless, God STILL honors his promise, bestowing upon him the same covenantal blessing he had promised his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham before him. Furthermore, to think that such great a blessing was bestowed in such a barren and desolate place as Bethel- a locale SO harsh and austere that he must use a rock for a pillow. Thus, the Bible presents a picture of Jacob as utterly forsaken and alone, as lost in a no-man's land. Yet it ALSO shows us how the love of God is such that the most UNEXPECTED of men in the most UNEXPECTED of places receives the GREATEST promise ANYONE could have possibly received. It is for this reason that when he awakens from his sleep, he is filled with a profound sense of awe and wonder and thanksgiving at the revelation of God's mercy and love for someone so undeserving as HIMSELF.

I have to confess that I've often felt a strong affinity with Jacob- someone who has sometimes been called “the first REAL human being” in the Bible for unlike so many biblical characters who preceded him, there was nothing one-dimensional about JACOB. He demonstrated a full range of qualities and impulses, whether for good or for ill, which I think we can ALL identify with. For instance, many of you know that I had an older twin brother in much the same way Jacob had an older twin in HIS brother, Esau. Interestingly, HOWARD was the one who was always going to be the minister in the family. Where I had to be forced to attend church on Sunday mornings, he always LOOKED FORWARD to going, and where I was out playing baseball and football with my friends after school, he'd be holding Bible studies with our cat and two hamsters. Later on, he went off to a small Bible college to learn how to become a pastor while I matriculated at a large liberal university to reaffirm my proud status as an atheist and secular humanist.

Of course, life is full of irony and the REAL shock to everyone was that instead of Howard, I was the one who ended up becoming the minister. I'm being serious when I say he possessed so much more faith and love in his heart for people than I think I have EVER had, and yet for reasons known but to God, I was the brother who for the past forty years was blessed to stand in the pulpit each and every Sunday to announce, “Let's see what God has to say us this

morning!” Those who knew me growing up--those who I palled around with, who I played sports and went to school with--would probably tell you that Dave Wood and ministry are two ideas that couldn't and shouldn't exist in the same head together, that the thought of him ever becoming a minister was every bit as ridiculous as, perhaps, the notion of A POOR SHEPHERD BOY named David eventually becoming ISRAEL'S GREATEST KING- and yet BOTH became realities.

I can say from personal experience that the ways of God are INDEED inscrutable! In fact, I mentioned that I had recently attended my first high school reunion in New Jersey after having avoided such events for more than half a century. The reaction I received from most of my schoolmates that evening was practically UNANIMOUS- if I heard it once, I heard it a DOZEN times, “YOU, Dave Wood, a MINISTER! God certainly has a sense of humor, DOESN'T he!” I know that Howard, who passed away almost two years ago from cancer, loved me and was proud of my achievements. STILL, I always suspected that somewhere beneath it all, he might have been wondering to himself, “Why DAVID and not me?”; that he just might have felt the same way ESAU did towards his younger brother, JACOB- that I was a “supplanter,” a “trickster” who had unfairly stolen his birthright of becoming a clergyman straight out from under him. And if he DID, who could have BLAMED him!

The significance of the ladder or stairway in Jacob's dream is that it represents the place where heaven and earth meet, where the divine intersects with the human. Whenever and wherever God in this world encounters someone, it then becomes a hallowed memory or piece of ground, a sacred event that must be consecrated and remembered. That is why, regardless of how remote and empty that area was, he bestows upon that place the name “Bethel” or the “house of God” and then proceeds to turn it into a LASTING monument by piling stones one atop another and then anointing it with oil. He wanted whoever would come across it in the FUTURE to know that it was there in that place that God encountered his servant Jacob and renewed his covenant with him.

Now let's skip over to the New Testament, to the Book of John. One day at the Jordan River, Jesus saw a young Galilean named Nathaniel coming toward him and he said, “Here is a true Israelite in whom there is nothing false.” “How do you know me?” Nathaniel asked. Jesus's answer was, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.” Amidst his astonishment, Nathaniel declared, “Rabbi, you TRULY ARE the Son of God, you ARE the King of Israel.” Jesus replied, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree but you shall see EVEN GREATER things than that.” And then Jesus added, “I tell you the truth, I tell you and people LIKE you the truth, that you shall see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

Jesus, who certainly knew the story of Jacob and his dream, was saying here that HE is the ladder, that HE is the divine connection between heaven and earth. The ascending and descending of angels symbolized the whole power and love of God now made available in and through the SON OF MAN HIMSELF. God is not confined to heaven but he is now HERE and EVEN INSIDE of us through his Holy Spirit, or as colloquially described by one well-known Christian author, “In Jesus Christ, God now hits the street.” In other words, Jacob's dream of the ladder was a shadow of Christ to come. What Nathaniel would witness would be FAR GREATER than what Jacob saw in HIS dream- he would see the ULTIMATE connector or

stairway, the one who served as the ONLY TRUE mediator between God and man, bringing with him the promise of any TRUE AND LASTING peace to the world!

Well, there are several points about this story I would like to highlight, features I believe speak directly to our OWN situation THIS MORNING. The FIRST is that God speaks to us in many ways and often he will do this through our dreams. Recently, I read an interview that Global Christian Relief, an organization that serves as a voice for persecuted Christians, conducted with a young Egyptian man who for security purposes was referred to as Ahmed. A former Islamic extremist in his own country, Ahmed, much like the Apostle Paul, experienced a miraculous transformation- he had gone from being a violent persecutor of Christians to now a follower of Jesus. His “road to Damascus” moment came in the form of a dream in which the Son of God appeared and brought him from darkness into the light. He said in the interview:

I was raised in a culture of Islamic extremism. My father taught me that, in order for Islam to prevail in the world, we must dedicate our lives completely to serving our God. I memorized the entire Quran and applied its words faithfully. For years, I believed my purpose was to fight and persecute Christians, whom we saw as polytheists and infidels. I joined with other radicals and together we burned and ransacked Christian homes and churches in Upper Egypt. We even kidnapped Christian girls. Through all of this, I truly believed I was faithfully applying the word of God.

But despite my religious devotion, I was disturbed and unsatisfied. I never felt peace. I heard about major terrorist operations throughout the Middle East, and I started to question whether this violence could be God’s will. “How could God want people to be treated like this?” I asked myself. I began to wonder whether Islam was even TRUE. I asked God to show me the truth and guide me to what is right. That night, I dreamt I was walking in a desert, lost in darkness and afraid. Suddenly, someone appeared, illuminating the entire space. The light shone so intently that I could not see His face. “Do not be afraid,” he said in a reassuring voice. “I am the way, the truth and the life.” The figure handed me a Bible. “Read it to know the truth, and follow Me,” He said.

I woke up in disbelief but felt hopeful, nonetheless. I downloaded a Bible app to my phone and began to read. When I read the teachings of Christ, specifically his Sermon on the Mount, I felt the love of Christ through His word. Then I found the Gospel of John, where Jesus delivers the words I heard Him say in my dream: “I am the way the truth and the life.” Crying from joy and gratitude, I knew for sure I had found the TRUE way. In Matthew 9, Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” Thanks to His guidance, I left behind my violent past and continued to learn and grow, falling more in love with the Lord. God transformed me, a persecutor of Christians, into a Christian believer and I thank God that He saved me and brought me from darkness to light.

Friends, Christianity is all about grace, about unmerited or undeserved love and favor from a God who only knows but ONE WAY to love and that is to accept us “GRACIOUSLY.” You see, we NEVER find God but rather, God is always in the business of finding US; God is the one who seeks US out EVEN when we are running or hiding from him, EVEN when our hearts remain far off from him and our lives remain filled with all sorts of hardness and rejection. This is the story the Bible presents to us- a God who never gives up on us even after we’ve given up on HIM. The 19th century English poet Francis Thompson expressed this thought most powerfully and eloquently in his great poem, “The Hound of Heaven.” In it, he portrays God as a large dog who never stops chasing us, one who refuses to give up on us REGARDLESS of

how far or fast we may run, SUCH is his love for us. Thompson could write so compellingly about it because he knew it from PERSONAL EXPERIENCE. Having failed his final exams in medicine three times, he ran away to London where he became addicted to opium. He survived by selling newspapers and matches and slept on the street each night. He considered killing himself, but then God sent him a friend who helped him recover. Thompson wrote:

“But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)
Cry; - then upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob’s ladder
Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.”

(Charing Cross considered the geographical center of London.) In other words, when we get to the point we despair of self and can’t sink ANY FURTHER, often it is THEN that God reveals to us angels ascending and descending a stairway leading directly from Heaven straight to ourselves with the ladder being none other than Jesus Christ HIMSELF.

Earlier in Genesis, we are told about a people who tried to make their own connection to God by building a tower SO TALL that it would extend all the way into heaven, a construction project intended to unify them and demonstrate to the rest of the world just how GREAT a people they ACTUALLY were. We preachers simply refer to it as “the Tower of Babel.” In fact, the very same phrase used to describe that tower as “reaching to heaven” is ALSO used to portray the LADDER that Jacob saw in his dream. But where in the Babel story, men were building from earth UP to the heavenlies, in JACOB’S dream, it began just the OPPOSITE- descending from heaven DOWN to earth. In a bit of ridicule, the Bible tells us that the tower in Babel was in fact SO small that God had to “COME DOWN” to see what it was the people were even building. The bottom line was that the breach between men and God could never be overcome by ANYTHING constructed through human endeavor- that would have to come only in God’s own time and in God’s own way- FROM HEAVEN DIRECTLY TO YOU AND TO ME!

You see, all TRUE religion is never about “MAN’S search for God” but always about “God’s search for MAN.” It is God who always seeks and finds US, as undeserving as JACOB was and as unworthy as WE may be. It is GOD who always takes the initiative and who refuses to quit on us even when we have strayed from or deliberately and callously rejected HIM. Christ knew everything there was to know about Nathaniel and he loved him ALL THE SAME. He saw him and called him long before Nathaniel even knew he HAD a call on his life, long before he even knew who this Jesus WAS. And when Nathaniel discovers this, when he learns how inexorable and unyielding this love for him truly is, he can do nothing else BUT fall down before him and exclaim, “Rabbi, truly you ARE the Son of God, the King of Israel!”

My friends, I am convinced that at strategic junctures in our lives, EVERY ONE of us HAS had and CONTINUES to receive such moments, that they’re not coincidences but a GENUINE ENCOUNTER WITH GOD where a ladder is let down from heaven to earth and God descends to meet us in a very personal and powerful way. Well, we are to REMEMBER such monuments which God has erected in OUR lives and we are to CHERISH them. God has built them into our past for a PURPOSE- that we might NEVER FORGET his many moments of faithfulness to us. We are not to HOARD such moments for ourselves but to SHARE them and by doing so, help BOLSTER the faith of our brothers and sisters who need to be reminded THEMSELVES of such moments in their OWN lives. And as we DO, we will discover them to

be A CONSTANT SOURCE OF FAITH to help carry us through whatever crisis or period of spiritual barrenness WE may be experiencing. Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, we can never praise you enough for your faithfulness. You are present to us in the valleys as well as on the mountaintops, in the dark of night as well as the sunshine of day. We can never escape your presence or your love. Help us to remember that truth which will give us the power to overcome every discouragement, every lapse of faith. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.