

## Genesis (2011) 28B

- Jacob is leaving home, headed for Haran
  - It's time for Jacob to grow up spiritually, since he will become the father of a nation of God's people
    - If we knew Jacob personally and we were to list Jacob's shortcomings, we could probably find many faults
    - Scripture records at least a few of Jacob's shortcomings clearly
      - He relies on himself and his intellect rather than relying on God
      - He turns to God only after his schemes have brought him trouble
      - Like his father, he fails at times to assume the leadership role in his family
      - Generally, he tends to fight against God rather than work with God
  - As we'll see through the course of our study, Jacob's personal traits foreshadow the traits of the nation that comes from him and takes his name
- Meanwhile, God begins to instruct Jacob
  - One of the most amazing things about our relationship with the living God is the way He works in our lives to grow us spiritually
  - It's been said that God saves us as we are, but He loves us too much to leave us that way
    - And so it is with Jacob
    - And Jacob's journey to Haran and back is a 20 year boot camp in learning to trust and follow the Lord
      - Jacob's journey begins with a promise
      - And it ends with a test
  - Today we see the promise

[Gen. 28:10](#) Then Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran.

[Gen. 28:11](#) He came to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place.

[Gen. 28:12](#) He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

[Gen. 28:13](#) And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants.

[Gen. 28:14](#) "Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

[Gen. 28:15](#) "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."

- Jacob leaves his family's traditional home in the land and heads northeast to Haran
  - His route took him along a mountain range running north-south along the east side of the Jordan river
    - He would have passed through Hebron, Bethlehem, Jerusalem
    - And after about 50 miles, he reached a place called Luz
      - Luz is near the border of the land of Canaan
  - Jacob is within a day of crossing the Jordan river and walking out of the promised land
    - His father had never left this land
    - Yet here was Jacob preparing to leave it behind, perhaps never to return
- Night is upon him, so he lies down on the ground to sleep
  - We're told he took a stone and placed it "under his head"
  - There are two things about that description that tell us to take a closer look at the description
    - First, the mere fact that Moses mentions Jacob's placement of this stone should catch our attention

- Why would he include such a meaningless detail unless it was, in fact, meaningful?
- Secondly, who sleeps with a rock as their pillow?
  - That would have been no more comfortable in Jacob's day than it would be for us today
  - Simply put, it doesn't make sense, so the description must mean something else
- And in fact, the description does mean something else
  - The phrase in Hebrew literally says "at his head" not under his head
  - I don't know why many English translations, including the NASB, missed this translation, but there are numerous English versions that got the verse correct
    - The New English, Holman Christian and New King James versions all translate this verse correctly
  - So Jacob places a stone at his head before he falls asleep
    - This explains why Moses recorded the incident
    - The rock is a weapon in case Jacob should need to defend himself
    - Much like Saul slept with his spear at his head while he was pursuing David
- This also explains why Moses recorded this detail in the first place
  - The detail of the rock shows us that Jacob was in fear for his safety and felt vulnerable and alone during his travels
    - Consider his situation:
      - His father has sent him away
      - His brother is seeking to kill him
      - He is wandering through strange land by himself
      - Headed to a place and people he has never met
      - And he can't be sure what will come of him there

- His fear and uncertainty is completely understandable
- But Jacob is forgetting something very important
  - He is in a covenant with the living God
  - Jacob may not have the support and protection of his family or an army of men, but he has something much more important
    - He has the Lord of Heaven and Earth committed by His own word to protect and bless Jacob
  - And even though that promise was focused on an inheritance of a certain plot of land, God's promises and blessings weren't limited to that place alone
- As the Psalmist wrote

**Psa. 23:4** Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I fear no evil, for You are with me;  
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

- This is the most important earthly consequence of our relationship with the Lord through our faith in the New Covenant
  - We have the Lord on our side wherever we are and no matter what comes
  - We never again experience life alone
    - We are completely in His care
    - We are only as vulnerable as He allows us to be
    - We are only as afflicted as He chooses to permit
    - We only carry those burdens He permits us to carry
  - Therefore, our trials (whether the result of our sin or the sin of others) come according to the will of the Lord and for our benefit
    - When reflecting on the trials and tribulations of life, Paul asks:

**Rom. 8:31** What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?

- This is the lesson God wants to bring to Jacob as he prepares to depart the land

- Though Jacob is leaving behind his family and the land, he isn't leaving behind God and His promises
- So as Jacob sleeps, God brings him a vision in a dream
  - This is the first recorded vision given to the family of Abraham through a dream
  - Jacob sees a stairway set upon the ground but reaching into heaven
    - My translation use the term "ladder" to describe the structure, which is where we get the term Jacob's ladder
    - But the word in Hebrew (*sullam*) literally means stairwell
- On this staircase Jacob sees angels moving, ascending and descending
  - Jacob sees angels leaving the heavenly realm and walking down the stairs to earth, while others are leaving earth and walking up the stairs to heaven
  - Then above the staircase, Jacob recognizes the Lord from where He speaks to Jacob in the dream
- Before we look at the Lord's words, let's consider the symbolism in the scene itself
  - First, a stairway into Heaven makes a clear statement by itself that there is a pathway open to reach God
    - In fact, the genesis behind the Tower of Babel, which probably resembled a large pyramid with stairs along each side, was to "reach Heaven"
    - God is communicating that He is accessible to Jacob
    - And that accessibility was made possible by God's covenant promises to Jacob by His word
  - Secondly, the angels ascending and descending the staircase communicate that an exchange is taking place between Heaven and earth
    - The word angel in Hebrew is the word messenger, so for Jacob these angels were messengers between Heaven and Earth

- The writer to the Hebrews in the New Testament taught the specific function of angels:

**Heb. 1:13** But to which of the angels has He ever said,  
 “SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND,  
 UNTIL I MAKE YOUR ENEMIES  
 A FOOTSTOOL FOR YOUR FEET”?

**Heb. 1:14** Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?

- Angels minister to (or serve) the people of God, and Jacob is seeing a visible reminder that God is working through His angels to bridge the gap between heaven and earth
- It’s also important to note two other details in the description of the angels
  - First, this is one of only two times that the angelic realm is mentioned in Genesis
    - The second time occurs in Genesis 32 when Jacob is returning to the land after a 20 year absence
  - Secondly, it’s noteworthy that the angels are described first as ascending and then descending
    - It suggests that the angels are carrying news to Heaven followed by Heaven responding to meet the needs on Earth
- Finally, we see the Lord at the top of this vision
  - Clearly, the messengers are seen providing intercession between Jacob on earth and the Lord in Heaven
- Putting the vision together, Jacob sees a powerful statement in the symbology of the dream
  - Jacob is not alone
    - He has the Lord ministering to Him by the agency of angels
    - And the angels are constantly moving between earth and Heaven, bringing the Lord word of the needs of Jacob
    - And returning to minister with the grace and wisdom and protection and provision of the Lord

- And if the vision itself were not clear enough, the Lord standing at the top of the staircase speaks reassuring words to Jacob
  - He begins with a restatement of the covenant first given to Abraham and later Isaac
    - Now it is spoken by God to Jacob for the first time
    - Jacob will have the land and descendants and they will become a source of blessing for the Gentiles
  - Reminding Jacob of the covenant is of utmost importance, because the covenant is Jacob's best reason for confidence that he can trust in God
    - God can't do better than to give us His word
    - We remember that God gave Abraham an oath that the Lord bore by Himself so that Abraham would have confidence and hope
  - Remember what the writer of Hebrews told us:

[Heb. 6:13](#) For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself,

[Heb. 6:14](#) saying, "I WILL SURELY BLESS YOU AND I WILL SURELY MULTIPLY YOU."

[Heb. 6:15](#) And so, having patiently waited, he obtained the promise.

[Heb. 6:16](#) For men swear by one greater than themselves, and with them an oath given as confirmation is an end of every dispute.

[Heb. 6:17](#) In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath,

[Heb. 6:18](#) so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us.

- But then in Genesis 28:15 the Lord turns from the promises of the covenant to make a specific application for Jacob's benefit
  - The Lord says I am with you everywhere you go, I will bring you back to this land, and I will accomplish everything I have promised to do for you
    - If the imagery of the dream weren't enough and the reiteration of God's covenant with Jacob didn't suffice, the Lord goes the extra step of personally guaranteeing Jacob's safety as he prepares to leave the land

- The promises of God are not focused on the land, they are focused on the person of Jacob and his descendants
  - And Jacob will never be out of God's reach or away from God's protection and faithfulness no matter where God takes him
- What a reassuring message, especially in light of Jacob's state of mind
  - Naturally we should expect that Jacob hears and understands this message fully
    - And by that understanding, Jacob rests in God's promises and begins to trust in God instead of in other things
    - Unfortunately, spiritual growth and maturity doesn't come that easily, not for Jacob or for us
      - Hearing God clearly, understanding Him plainly and following Him obediently requires practice, diligence and experience
      - Jacob has none of those qualities at this point, so instead of understanding God's word properly, Jacob runs off to make the wrong conclusion

**Gen. 28:16** Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it."

**Gen. 28:17** 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."

**Gen. 28:18** So Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on its top.

**Gen. 28:19** He called the name of that place Bethel; however, previously the name of the city had been Luz.

**Gen. 28:20** Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear,

**Gen. 28:21** and I return to my father's house in safety, then the LORD will be my God.

**Gen. 28:22** "This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You."

- Upon awakening, Jacob's first conclusion is, "The Lord is in this place."
  - Jacob concludes that the Lord has marked this particular spot as important
    - God can be found in Luz

- He says this is an awesome place, the house of God, the gate to Heaven
- The place was special because God had appeared to him here
- Jacob makes an age old mistake that men are still making today: we confuse the spiritual with the physical, and in so doing we limit God
  - Jacob completely misses the main point of God's message, that God is not limited to the land but will be with Jacob anywhere he goes
  - In its place, Jacob declares that this is the place to find God
- In fact, Jacob memorializes the place in God's honor
  - He changes the name to Bethel, which means the house of God
    - Bethel does become an important place in the history of Israel
    - Only Jerusalem is mentioned more in the Old Testament than Bethel
  - Then Jacob makes a vow as a result of what he has seen
    - He begins his vow with "if"
    - If God will be with me while I'm outside the land, then when I return the Lord will be my God
    - And the stone I intended to use in my own defense, I dedicate this stone to God today in this place
    - And should I return, I will give you a tenth
- There is a hint of a Jacob bargaining with God
  - But God has already promised that He will remain with Jacob
    - Jacob doesn't need to bargain or wonder if God will remain with him
    - Jacob has become excited and encouraged over God's revelation, yet he is leaving half cocked and uninformed about the nature of that revelation
- It reminds me of the story of the young boy who encounters God for the first time, but doesn't understand what he's seen

A ten-year-old boy was failing math. His parents, who were not religious people, tried everything from tutors to hypnosis; but to no avail. Finally, at the suggestion of a family friend, they decided to enroll their son in a private Christian school. They were nervous at the thought of their child being exposed to religion for the first time, but they felt that they had no other alternatives.

After the first day of school, the boy's parents were surprised when their son walked in after school with a stern, focused and very determined expression on his face. He went straight past them, right to his room and quietly closed the door. For nearly two hours he toiled away in his room - with math books strewn about his desk and the surrounding floor. He emerged just long enough to eat, and after quickly cleaning his plate, went straight back to his room, closed the door and worked feverishly at his studies until bedtime.

This pattern of behavior continued until it was time for the first quarter's report card. The boy walked in with it unopened - laid it on the dinner table and went straight to his room. Cautiously, his mother opened it and, to her amazement, she saw a large red 'A' under the subject of Math.

Overjoyed, she and her husband rushed into their son's room, thrilled at his remarkable progress. "Was it the teachers who helped you?" the father asked. The boy shook his head and said "No."

"Was it the strict classroom environment? The high academic standards?"  
"No."

"The textbooks? The computers in the classroom? The curriculum?"  
"No," said the son.

"On that first day, when I walked in the front door and looked up, I saw that guy nailed to the plus sign, I KNEW they meant business!"

- Like that boy, sometimes we see God's signs clearly, but we completely misunderstand the meaning
- This kind of mistake is a mark of immaturity in our faith and in our walk
  - We get a piece of the message but we miss the main point
  - Jacob thought God was sanctifying the place, but the message was actually the opposite
    - God wanted Jacob to know it wasn't about a place, but a relationship

- Today Christians commonly think that God meets them in a place on Sunday rather than remembering that He lives in us everywhere we go
- Or like the person who wrote to our ministry asking about the Rapture
  - They wanted to know what happens if a Christian donates an organ before dying, will that Christian's organ be taken out of the recipient's body at the Rapture
  - Clearly, they are missing some pieces of understanding in their theology
- These moments are not moments of shame for us, but they do highlight our immaturity and our need to continue growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ
  - Jacob is our example of an immature man spiritually, but despite his immaturity, God remained faithful
    - Not only is God faithful to keep His promises, but God is faithful to grow us up in our understanding of Him and His word
    - Praise be to our Lord!