



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Various Scripture Passages

"Jacob's Ladder and the Son of Man"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Our subject today is "The Old Testament Anticipation of the Messiah". This is the fourth in our series of studies on this theme. And our subject for today is "Jacob's Ladder and the Son of Man" or "Grace Unsought, Unstinted, and Unforgettable". We're turning to Genesis chapter 28 and verse 10 through verse 17 and I want to read this passage. It's a passage that we will be looking at in some detail. If you have your Bibles then I hope you'll turn with me Genesis 28 and listen as I read.

"And Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Heron and he lighted upon a certain place and tarried there all night because the sun was set. And he took of the stones of that place and put them down for his pillows and lay down on that place to sleep. And he dreamed and behold a ladder set up on the earth and the top of it reached to heaven, and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And behold the Lord stood above it and said, 'I am the Lord God of Abraham, Thy Father and the God of Isaac. The land thereun thou layest, to thee will I give it and to thy seed. And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south. And in thee and in thy seed shall all the families

of the earth be blessed. And behold I am with thee and will keep thee in all places whether thou goest and will bring thee again into this land for I will not leave thee until I have done that the I have spoken to thee of.' And Jacob awaked out of his sleep and he said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place and I knew it not.' And he was afraid and said, 'How dreadful is this place. This is none other but the house of God and this is the gate of heaven.'"

Jacob's vision of the ladder is a stunning display of divine grace and it provoked in the patriarch a telling response of thanksgiving. The grace was unsought for God took the initiative and met Jacob in his loneliness at Bethel. It was unstooded for there was no reproach given Jacob for past sin. But on the contrary only a stream of divine assurances beginning with the central declaration, "I am the Lord." The divine words to him reminded him of past faithfulness to his father and gave him assurance of the fulfillment of the promises of the land in the distant future.

In fact, he was told that his windfall blessings would stretch from the very spot upon which he was then laying to the four corners of the earth and on to the universal blessing of mankind in his seed. The words of the divine companion were remarkably relevant to the condition of Jacob for the promise of the divine presence was just what this solitary lonely and now homeless sojourner to a strange land needed. And the assurance of a high place within the divine covenant was calculated to sustain him in a special way. The promise of a land as an inheritance and the promise of an omnipotent power keeping him wherever he went, and the assurance that his God was one who could not be frustrated in his purposes were encouragements that must have strengthened him immensely.

We do know from Jacob's response to the theophany that the display of grace was unforgettable for he erected a permanent reminder of the occasion at Bethel. Jacob's vow at the beginning of the experience has sometimes been called a mere bargaining. He

does vow that if God will be with him and bless him then the Lord will be his God. On the other hand his response to the experience of vision argues otherwise. He was filled with awe, which one of the commentators calls a feeling of pious stuttering. His occupation was not so much with the things promised as with God's presence, and the result was worship and the conventual pledge.

Actually it seems better to see the patriarch as taking the promise of verse 15 and applying it to his particular situation. In addition, he correctly saw his tithe not as a gift to God but as a giving back of what belonged to him. It's important for us to remember that Jacob is not yet a mature saint. The real story of God's special dealings with Jacob begins here. Up to now he has not appeared in too favorable a light and his relationship to God has not been spelled out in any details. But chapters 28 through 36 the growth of the man may be traced in a series of incidents and in them there is a fluctuation between growing spirituality and indifference to that which is right.

"We see Jacob on one hand as a man of faith and prayer," one commentator writes, "and on the other as a man of slick maneuvers and cunning ways. He was by nature strong willed, ambitious, self reliant, shrewd and at times unethical. While Jacob was a man of domestic capability and fidelity, Esau was a brave, generous, heroic and rugged hunter who broke away from the quite pastoral life of his father to enjoy a reckless self-indulgent career of pleasure.

The most important way in which Jacob differed from Esau, however, was that Jacob was heir to God's promises and a man of faith, although his faith was at times rather weak and imperfect. Jacob's sanctification now begins in earnest at Bethel and in him one will find an excellent illustration of the statement of George Swinnock. "A sanctified person is like a silver bell, the harder he is smitten the better he sounds." The road of Jacob from supplanter to prince of God is hard, difficult and rocky but the one who is set on the road by God as Jacob was is certain to reach its glorious destination.

Let's look at the occasion of division set out in Genesis 28:10 and 11. In the preceding context Rebecca, disturbed by Esau's threats against Jacob and by Esau's Hittite wives, had sent Jacob on the way to Uncle Laban in Paddan-Aram in upper Mesopotamia. All the trouble would have been averted if Isaac had believed the promises and called Jacob first for his blessing. Sent off with a blessing from God almighty, or El Shaddai, and a reminder of the covenantal promises to Abraham, especially those of the land, Jacob was to discover that the journey would lengthen to 20 years. The things he learned, however, made up for it all. His character matured, he learned to wait on God, something that this homeboy who waited on mom -- in this respect I think Jacob would have been a good NFL player shouting, "Hi, mom." It was everything that he needed.

As Stephen Charnock has said, "We often learn more of God under the rod that strikes us than under the staff that comforts us." The distance to Heron was over four hundred miles. It was therefore a lonely trying trip for someone who was a homebody. One afternoon he arrived at a place called Luz. The Authorized Version text has, "He lighted up a certain place but this was no chance logic. He may have had no particular purpose in stopping here but God did."

Spizer sees it and writes, "But in the history of the patriarchs the individual is a free agent only on the surface. Fundamentally he is part of a larger pattern over which he has no control and in which he functions as the unwitting tool of destiny. What he's trying to say is that God's providence is that which oversees all of the actions of his people. At this stage Jacob's security and future are important because both bear on the continuity of the biblical process. The time has now come for the fugitive to be given a glimpse of the deeper truth.

Look now at the contents of the vision in verses 12 and 13. And first the ladder. The occasion is memorable as being the first of seven theophanies that God gave Jacob. It's probably significant that it occurred while Jacob was alone. The common experience of the saints has been generally that we must be withdrawn from the rush of the crowd if

we are to hear his voice most clearly. The ladder, or stairway, or star like pavement as modern scholars picture it is the notable feature of the vision. Perhaps it resembled one of the Mesopotamian ziggurats, which had flights of stairs leading up to the summit. That would also account for Jacob's description of it as the gate of heaven in verse 17. It was evidently high and broad for angels were ascending and descending upon it.

The whole situation was shocking to Jacob as the threefold behold shows and the scene is obviously a symbolic one. What then is the meaning of the ladder, the angels, the Lord beside it? Perhaps Lupold is right in saying that the vision was intended to convey to Jacob a visible, that is to him, sign of what the words of Yahweh signify when he speaks. He comments, "The ladder the symbolizes the uninterrupted communion between heaven and earth mediated through God's holy angels and instituted for the caring needs of God's children on earth. The angels bear man's needs before God and God's help to man. For this reason Jesus could, alluding specifically to this passage, claim that the truth involved was most significantly displayed in his own life for in him the divine and human met in perfect union.

Well, those are Lupold's words and of course as we look at the history of the divine salvation it's obvious that the Lord Jesus is the mediator between God and me but he had not yet come to his incarnation and full revelation. When one turns to the New Testament passage in John 1:45 through 51 the use of the figure by the Lord Jesus becomes most enlightening. In fact the figure of the ladder is in the opinion of some extremely important for reading the Gospel of John.

R.H. Striken even claimed it's the key to the evangelist's whole conception of Jesus. Nathaniel had been brought by Philip to Jesus. Philip believed that the best way to propagate Christianity was to proclaim it and that the simplest and profoundest Christian apologetics is come and see. Nathaniel had evidently been meditating on the chapter in Genesis, that is chapter 28 containing the story of Jacob's vision under a fig tree. Rabbinical sources often refer to the place under the fig tree as suitable for

meditation. The subject of the mediation of Nathaniel was evidently Jacob's dream of the ladder. When Jesus saw Nathaniel approaching probably in the company of Philip he said, "Behold an Israelite indeed in whom is no guile," John 1:47.

Since Jacob's name was supplanter and since he had characterized to this point in his life as something of a deceiver, especially in his contacts with Esau, our Lord's words may be broadly paraphrased as suggesting, "Behold an Israelite indeed in whom is no Jacob." Nathaniel, when he hears the Lord mention the lack of deceit, may have been convinced at this moment of Lord's insight into the unclenching of his soul. Jesus knew of his lack of deceit before God. That is, Nathaniel was guileless not sinless of course. But if not then certainly when the Lord mentioned the exact place of his meditation.

Nathaniel, I saw you under the fig tree. Nathaniel becomes a captured soul. The Israelite acknowledges his king of Israel. His faith will never possess more than it possessed at that moment although it may possess him better later.

When Philip told Nathaniel that they had found the Messiah and that he was from Nazareth Nathaniel had retorted, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" But now with his great confession, "Rabbi you are the Son of God. You are the king of Israel." The future apostle guilelessly declares that after all from Nazareth comes the supreme good. A promise is then given to Nathaniel. The previous display of clairvoyance on the part of our Lord is only trivial. Nathaniel will see greater things. He shall see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the son of man. Jesus says that in verse 51 of John 1.

What Nathaniel understood concerning our Lord's words is not explicitly stated, but from our vantage point a great deal of the significance of what our Lord meant we know if we pay attention to one part of his words. The important thing to note is the remarkable substitution that the Lord makes for the ladder of Jacob's vision upon which the angels ascended and descended, he has substituted the son of man. Listen to that part of his words again, "And Nathaniel hereafter you shall see heaven open and the angels of

God ascending and descending upon (not the ladder but) the son of man." Thus as the Lord Jesus understands and interprets Jacob's vision the son of man, our Lord, is the ladder. And the opened heaven points to the now available access into heaven through him who is the way and the door to heaven according to his own later preaching.

Just after his dream and vision Jacob said, "How awesome or dreadful is this place. This is none other than the house of God. This is the gate of heaven." Lupold then is not far from the meaning of the passage. The ladder is the son of man and the angels ascending and descending upon him point to the establishment of an enduring communion between heaven and earth through the mediation of the son of man. Kidner too is near the point for he writes, "Jesus took this figure of a means of access between heaven and earth as a vivid foretaste of himself as the way."

Now, the next thing we notice is the reference to the Lord in verse 13. Moses turns to the Lord writing, "And behold the Lord stood above it." The margin's probably better having "beside him" for otherwise how could he say what is said in verse 16? This was no minor occasion for God and all heaven are involved in what is going on with Jacob. And then the promises follow. The promises are outlined in verses 13 through 15. The first of them pertains to the land, the very land upon which Jacob is then standing, which may be important for aspects of some of the controversies over the millennial questions. In the 14th verse the Lord reminds Jacob that a universal seed will be his spreading out to the four points of the compass.

And then in the 15th verse is the final great climactic promise. "And 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." The promise of his presence with Jacob was remarkably relevant to the patriarch's present experiences. One of the commentators F.B. Myer has put it quite well, God answered his thoughts. He felt lonesome but God said, "I will keep thee. Appearances seem to contradict the divine promise but God said, "I will do that which I have spoken to thee of." And then he adds

this very important limiting series of words. These are precious words but they only belong to those who lay at foot of the wondrous cross which unites with heaven. If your place is there you may freely claim all the comfort that they contain. That's word for all of us. For me and for you who are listening.

The great promise I am with you would have had a special meaning to Jacob beyond that suggested just above. The people among whom Jacob lived had the notion that their gods possessed only a kind of local authority. For example, the god of Ashkelon was not the god of Beersheba. But Yahweh is different and the promise distinguishes him from the heathen deities. When Jacob left his father's house for Paddan-aram, he did not leave Yahweh. He is the god of Ashkelon, the god of Beersheba, the god of Bethel and all the other places upon the face of the whole earth. Not like the baals who were local deities. This promise is the Old Testament foreshadowing of the great one given by our Lord to the disciples. "Lo, I am with you always even to the end of the age." And it means several important things to us also.

First, it guarantees an infinite love for us for he does not dwell with those he hates. And second, it means a very practical help is available for us at all times. Whatever we undertake to do he is there to undertake it with us. We do not have to shout and cry aloud to attract his attention like the priests of Baal must do to attract him. He even hears our sighs for he is with us. This promise is too magnificent for any Bible expositor to fully explain it. We simply marvel at it. We cannot leave the 15th verse without a comment on the final words of that great text, "For I will not leave thee until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of." That promise, belonging I belonging reiterate, to those whose only hope is in the cross is the Old Testament equivalent of Paul's great word to the Philippians being confident of this very thing, "That he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ," Philippians 1:6.

He is the great unfrustratable God who performs all his purposes. What confidence we have when resting in him. Well, finally we look at Jacob's response. It's given in verses 16 through 22 of Genesis 28. The immediate response of Jacob to the startling experience is the striking comment, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it." It's important to note that he used the word Lord or Yahweh. He didn't say, "God is in this place and I did not know it." Yahweh, the God of his fathers is at Luz or Bethel too. He is no local deity like those of the pagans. His comfort quotient, I'm referring to Jacob, is rising by of all things so shallow evangelicalism of today would blurt out "systematic theology". That's the source of Jacob's comfort in this situation and of ours in every situation of or lives.

The thought of the nearness of God induced fear and he said, "How awesome is this place? This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven." He has met God in this place and therefore the place has become the gate of heaven. That is, both a way to heaven through the Lord and a way from heaven when it please Yahweh to open it up by his divine revelation.

The next morning Jacob arose and took the stone used for his head place and set up a memorial pillar in remembrance of the great event. He was not, as some have contended, setting up a fetish stone. Nor was the anointing identified with the stone worship of that day. It was a reminder of a great spiritual experience with Yahweh, the anointing of the stone with oil may have contained the idea of sacrifice. The chapter concludes with Jacob's quite appropriate vow and entering into the glorious promises made to him.

Well, let me conclude. It was a magnificent, dazzling display of the grace of God to a man whose past life stands in stark contrast to it. And yet the entire account is so characteristic of our great God of mercy and grace, Yahweh or Jehovah, the God of Abraham, and the patriarchs and the church. "Behold I am with you," reverberates from

the day of Jacob at Bethel through the centuries in the experiences of the saints of God blessing them and magnifying him.

Jacob understood it and all when he later blessed Joseph saying, "Behold I die but God shall be with you." Emmanuel is there always. God's ladder to heaven is Christ, the divine mediator. And it's high enough to reach heaven.

Harold Barker, a Bible teacher of a generation ago, has told the story of a church officer who dreamed he saw a ladder, began to ascend its steps, which were composed of all the good works he had done. Thinking of them he ascended the ladder rapidly on the strength of monies contributed and other favors that he had rendered to the church and others of his fellow men. He felt he was getting near heaven in his vision until he noticed the ladder was swaying a bit. He climbed on, however, thinking of his good moral life and gifts to the poor and needy. The ladder swayed even more and seemed top heavy. By and by as he continued to climb, the ladder toppled over and fell with a thunderous crash to the ground. And the dreamer awoke with a cry on his lips, "My God, it was not hooked on at the top." So all find who seek to come to God, as the Lord Jesus Christ warned them, some other way. His word for them is that they are thieves and robbers.

He whom Jacob saw as the ladder and gate of heaven denied that in tones of utter finality. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the light. No man cometh unto the Father but by me." My dear friend, the Lord Jesus is the ladder to heaven. He's the good shepherd who giveth his life for the sheep. He's the door by which one may enter into the possession of eternal life. And as Peter the apostle said, "There is none other name unto heaven given among men whereby we must be saved."

Come to Christ right now. Turn to him in your heart, confessing your sin and leaning upon the blood that was shed for sinners. Flee to him. Believe in him. Receive the gift of eternal life. Our next study is a continuation of this series and our theme will be...

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