

Foundations: Stairway to Heaven
By Jason Huff
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Matthew 25:1-13; Luke 19:41-44; Genesis 28:10-28

Our final Scripture reading today is from Genesis 28:10-28. May God bless the reading of His holy, precious, and sacred Word. “Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. 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. 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. 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.” When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” 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.” Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father’s household, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God’s house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.””

There are places that we find to be spiritually significant to us. Maybe you find yourself in the same chair each day reading your Scripture and praying, or maybe that space is on a bench on your porch or out in a park. It might be that you went on a retreat somewhere and found yourself very close to God. Maybe it’s when you come to church. I know some of you have mentioned that there’s just a different atmosphere to The Upper Room than there was at Weight Watchers – maybe because this space is often used for worship and spiritual matters and isn’t covered with pictures of fruit and vegetables and people biking. Sometimes, when we dedicate time to God away from the everyday world and are really refreshed, we call it a “mountaintop” experience, even if we were in flattest place on earth.

In Celtic Christianity, the unique form of Christian faith that developed in Ireland, there are places they call “thin spaces.” It’s the idea that in certain places, the line between heaven and earth is thinner than most. It’s places where people can go and sense the presence of God more clearly. Thin places can be churches, but they can also be unique places where the goodness of God’s creation is more evident. We can’t create thin spaces or go looking for them, but it becomes evident to us. I still remember a two-week mission trip to Mexico I took after my senior year in high school, and we were ministering in a ramshackle town literally built on an enormous garbage heap. During worship, it was clear that the presence of God was with us in a way I’d never experienced before. It was the last place you’d expect to meet God, and yet, it was real and palpable. We got the sense that this was a special place God was meeting us.

The Bible doesn't directly talk about thin places, but they show up all the time. We do see God meet Israel on mountains throughout Scripture – Moses is given the law on Mount Sinai. The city of Jerusalem was built upon such a well-known mountain that no matter where in Israel you lived, colloquially when you traveled there you would say, "I went up to Jerusalem." Jesus' most famous sermon was given on a mountainside. Jesus was crucified on a hill right outside the city. And when Jesus ascended to heaven after His resurrection, He first met His disciples on a mountainside.

But it's not just mountains. Jesus often went by Himself to "lonely places" to pray. He was seeking those places where He could get away, uninterrupted, to spend time with His Father. In the Old Testament era, God made sacred spaces in the tabernacle and later the temple so the Israelites could draw near to His presence. The true blessing for us today as believers is that we have the Holy Spirit in our hearts, guiding and directing us, making the space between us and God the Father far closer than we would expect.

And so when we come to today's story, we find another one of those sacred spaces where God is nearer than we think. Now it's been a while since we've been in Genesis, so let's recap the story where we are. Isaac, the son of the promise God made to Abraham, has two sons himself – Jacob and Esau, twins who have always been at odds. Esau has proven himself cold and indifferent to his inheritance and birthright, not a godly man at all, and despite the affections of his father, he marries local women that are a great source of anguish to Isaac and Rebekah.

Jacob, meanwhile, has the love of his mother, and he's a schemer. He knows the prophecies that say he is the one who'll be blessed, but he decides he's going to take those blessings by force. He gets Esau to sell him the birthright, worth a double portion of Isaac's property when he dies. Then Jacob and his mom scheme a way for him to get his father's blessing too. While Esau was nonchalant about the birthright, he's incensed that he's lost the blessing of Isaac; as his father's pride and joy, to lose that blessing makes him enraged enough to plan Jacob's murder as soon as Isaac dies. So at the instruction of his parents, Jacob travels far away to escape Esau's vendetta. In fact, Jacob sets out for Haran – Abraham's last stop before he traveled to Canaan.

That Jacob is headed to Haran is a sign that everything is going backwards. Abraham sent his servant to Haran to get a wife for Isaac because he had family there, but he didn't send Isaac there for fear he'd get stuck there and not live in the land of God's promise. That Jacob is going there isn't promising. And while Jacob has received both the birthright and the blessing, he goes with almost nothing, not even a pillow for his head.

He's out in the middle of nowhere, in the open country, in danger from bandits, in danger from animals – and he's the guy who liked to hang around the tents, not the hunter-warrior Esau was. For a guy who schemed his way into everything he's dreamed, it's all fallen apart around him. At this point in the story, he is broken. He's not shown himself to be a morally upright sort of guy, so maybe we feel for him and maybe we don't. But even if we think it's good riddance, the danger he's in makes him vulnerable and relatable too.

Unexpectedly, Jacob has an amazing dream. He envisions a stairway from heaven with angels walking up and down it, ascending and descending. What is most astonishing is that in the dream, Jacob saw the LORD at the top of the stairway, and God repeats the promises that He made to Abraham. God also makes Jacob a personal promise – “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go. I won’t leave you until I have done what I have promised.” At his lowest point, with nothing but his knapsack and a stone for a pillow, without a single man with him to stand guard or have his back, God declares that he will be OK.

Jacob’s response is fascinating. He’s surprised and scared and awestruck. “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” He renames the place “House of God,” which is what the word Bethel means. He creates an altar out of his stone pillow. And unlike those who came before him, Jacob makes a vow to God. If God does what He has promised in taking care of him, the LORD will be Jacob’s god, and Jacob will give Him a tenth of everything he has.

We might be surprised when Jacob says, if all these things happened as I dreamed, then YHWH will be my God. Wasn’t YHWH already Jacob’s god? Here’s the difference I see...up until this point, Jacob acts like every other man, in some ways worse. There’s nothing that has reflected Jacob’s belief in anything. Jacob is also entering the land of pure paganism. No one was worshiping YHWH except the descendants of Abraham. He is staking a claim that he will not worship the gods of this foreign land but will worship the God of his grandfather.

Also, in a very real sense, this is the point at which Jacob’s faith becomes his own. We must all reach that point in our lives. My faith had seeds in my mom and dad, but my faith isn’t borrowed. None of us can live very long on a borrowed faith. If we don’t meet God and decide to worship Him on our own, we’re lost. If you come to church out of feelings of obligation or family expectations, if you don’t seek God regularly on our own, if faith doesn’t play a significant part in your decisions and how you live, you are probably living on borrowed faith. Being raised in a truly Christian home is a huge blessing, but we must watch out for the danger of borrowed faith. And in this moment, God becomes the God of Abraham, Isaac, *and Jacob*.

This passage has long fascinated people. Ancient rabbis wrote about how the ladder symbolized God’s divine providence. Early Christian scholars tried to interpret Jacob’s dream through the lens of allegory, saying that the ladder was Jesus, who connects God’s Kingdom with the world we know. While this sounds a little absurd, when Jesus called Nathaniel to be His disciple, He told Nathaniel, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”” Jacob would have had no clue about that, but he did know that this place where he lay his head was a thin place, a place where God had come near. And it’s through Jesus that God does come near to us. It’s through His salvation that we can know the realities of the spiritual world and of God’s Kingdom.

But I want us to think about some other key elements of the story and how they relate to our walk with Christ. The thing that captures me when I hear this story is just *how humbled we should be with how little we know about the whole of God’s creation*. With modern thought, we scoff at a stairway between earth and heaven. But what do we know of heaven? What do we know about the place where God dwells? How much information do we really have? Precious little.

We know that heaven is less of a physical place in our creation and more like another dimension, a place that can co-exist in our space as God wills and directs. We think of the clouds as heaven, but heaven is that place just out of reach until God condescends to us and makes a bit more of it known. We also know that God's Kingdom is not so much even a set place so much as it is where God resides. Where God is, where God's presence is, that place is in some sense where heaven and earth meet. When we become Christians, when God dwells in us, we carry a part of the Kingdom, we carry a part of heaven around with us. When we minister to others and act as Jesus' disciples, we are setting up outposts of God's Kingdom, God's outposts of heaven.

And what of these angels? We know they are spiritual beings that minister first and foremost to God, and then they carry out tasks that God assigns to them – some ministering to believers, others doing God's will in only ways God knows. While God can do everything by His own hand, just as He uses us to be His ministers in this world often, so He employs the company of angels for similar purposes. Do they come down on stairways? Do they have wings? What we know of angels so often comes in dreams that we can barely comprehend what we see, whether what we understand is literal or figurative. And yet they do serve God's purposes as He intends.

Jacob's reaction is one we would be wise to share. When we really embrace Jesus, when we know Him truly as Savior and Lord, we are not just happy to be saved; we're awestruck with the wonder of Him, we're amazed at what He did for us; we become enamored with who He is. We become humbled as we realize we can't fully understand the calculus of the crucifixion and the resurrection, how Jesus' sacrifice once and for all deals with all our sin through all generations for all who come to Him. We only accept it with bowed heads and grateful hearts. And we recognize that for all the Bible tells us, there is much about God He has hidden from us. The mystery is not why God remains so hidden; the mystery is why God would reveal Himself to creatures that constantly disobey and disbelieve. And yet He has, and He does. We rejoice in what we know of Him, and we long to know more. As Jesus said in the sermon on the mount, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied."

There's something else I want to explore, and that's the message God has for Jacob. God promises Jacob that His descendants will inherit the land he now sleeps on. His people will receive all the covenants made to Abraham. But God also promises to be with Jacob. "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go." I believe that is one of the most profound promises in all of Scripture. Jacob is not a good man by any normal sense of the word, certainly not a holy man, certainly not righteous, but because God is true to His word, because God loves His people, God will be with him and watch over Him. It is not a promise for his progeny. It is a promise to him personally. He can rest in the knowledge that God will stay near to him.

If Jesus had not come, we might have to write this off as a promise made only to Jacob, a very special individual that God chose out of Abraham's descendants. *But because of Jesus, this promise is true for all believers.* God makes this promise to the Israelites twice in Deuteronomy 31 – "never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." In chapter 13 of Hebrews, speaking to Christians about how to live their lives, the author tells us we can be content with whatever we have because this promise is also for us – "never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

Even greater than this is the promise of the Holy Spirit. When talking with His disciples on the night He was betrayed, Jesus told them that He would ask the Father, and the Father would send the Holy Spirit to be with us forever. He taught them that He would come to them, not leaving them as orphans. Moreover, not only does the Holy Spirit teach us and remind us of God's ways, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus and the Father will come to make their home in those of us who believe. God is with us and will be with us everywhere we go. Friends, when we believe, we always have God right alongside, closer to us than any other friend could possibly be. He will not abandon us because He has made us His new home.

I know a lot of us have fought sickness and ill health the last couple of years. Others long for healed friendships and relationships or new relationships to come along. The struggles of life are very real. We don't deny them at all. The one thing we do know is not that God will fix them all, not the way that we want necessarily, but that God is with us. God is there for us. We can turn to Him in every struggle. And I know this – every relationship I have where God is not a central factor, I wish it was because He is so important. I would rather have the struggling with God by my side than an easy life with Him far away.

Last thing I want us to look at today: Jacob's response. When Jacob comes face-to-face with God and hears the promises and knows He is not the imaginings of his grandfather but the Lord of the universe, *Jacob responds with worship and a heart to give*. He makes a makeshift altar and anoints it. He makes a vow to give God a tenth of all God bestows upon him. He doesn't have any law that tells him this is what he should do; he has no examples to follow. He instinctually worships and explicitly ties his fortunes to God.

Was this just a thing for Jacob? Absolutely not. Look at the early church after Jesus was raised from the dead. Acts 2:42-47. When the first believers come to faith, they are characterized by what? Devotion to the teaching of the apostles, fellowship, prayer, and the praise of God, whether in their homes or at the temple. And what else? No one has any needs because they freely gave what they had to help one another. Because of the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, they took the model we see in Jacob and ran with it fully and devotedly.

The sign that we have truly met God is a desire for worship and devotion to the cause of Christ through giving and service. I believe sincerely that CrossWay's future depends on those of us who have encountered God to live out the same pattern. Without worship that extends into our everyday lives and a giving of ourselves for our neighbors, we are nothing. Believers do these things. If we've grown cold to them, we pray that God might light His fire in our hearts again. But the early church grew exponentially because everyone around the new believers could see that God had changed and redeemed them. Oh, that we would be that kind of church! Will we be?

Next week, we will see Jacob's change of fortunes as he reaches his extended family's homestead. It's got romance and treachery – good stuff! But for now, may we humble ourselves before the LORD, who alone knows the mysteries of His universe. May we trust that God is always with us, that because of Jesus, we don't need to find a thin space – because with the Holy Spirit, God is always near. And may we live lives characterized by worship and service in God's name that the world might know that He is the Lord. Amen.