

SESSION #14

Sometimes we think that going to **church** or a special religious site will answer our deep need for spiritual reality. But the *place* is not the crucial thing. What we need most is an encounter with a **Person**, the Living God. Some situations make us feel like Jacob once did and we realize – perhaps acutely – that we need a Bethel, we need to meet God.

“Meeting the Master”

- Walter Brueggemann wrote that “*There are no troubled dimensions of human interaction which are removed from the coming of the Holy God. And there are no meetings with the Holy God apart from the realities of troubled human life.*”
- ...in other words, GOD is in our TROUBLES; and in our TROUBLES we meet GOD
- the Genesis narratives of Jacob are marked by these two dimensions: **human conflict**, and **divine confrontation**
 - and these are kept *related* to each other; they come together in his stories
 - ...for example, Jacob’s dream/vision at Bethel comes in the midst of running away from Esau
 - in Gen. 35:1 we read that God said He had appeared to Jacob specifically “*when you were fleeing from your brother Esau*” – divine meeting/human conflict
 - ...his wrestling with the Angel 20 yrs later (recorded in chap. 32) comes at another time of distress when he is greatly concerned about meeting & reconciling with Esau again
- ...*God comes into our troubled times as He did into Jacob’s; and his troubled time begins with...*

A. Desperation: a Destination apart from God

Gen 28:5

So Isaac sent Jacob away, and he went to Padan Aram, to Laban the son of Bethuel the Syrian, the brother of Rebekah, the mother of Jacob and Esau.

Verses 10-11

Now Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ So he came to a certain place and stayed there all night, because the sun had set. And he took one of the stones of that place and put it at his head, and he lay down in that place to sleep.

- Jacob is the promised son, chosen to inherit the *promised land*, but in this passage he is running away from the Promised Land
- he is the one chosen to preserve the *promised seed*, in the line of faithful Abraham, but he hasn’t shown much faith yet
- as we watch this ‘home-lover’ now forced to leave his home and head north into the unknown, there are many unresolved questions left hanging on the horizon

- Jacob is suffering from fear, shame, loneliness, destitution
 - looking back later he called this “the day of my **distress**” (as Gen. 35:3 records)
- first of all, consider his **fear**
 - he’s on a very long journey on his own – Beersheba to Haran = 800 km
 - who might be lurking behind the next hill or bush was unknown
 - could be a **robber**, or Esau;
 - his destination was an unknown place to him;
 - his future was unknown, seemingly up for grabs – he is absolutely vulnerable, perhaps for first time in his life
 - on this particular night, he ends up sleeping out in the field – perhaps avoiding towns for fear of Esau
- note his **shame**
 - he is fleeing from his position in a prominent & rich local family, with word of his scandalous behavior spreading quickly
- see his **loneliness**
 - as far as we can tell this is first time this “home-body” has left home
 - he is completely on his own; not another person is with him at all ...for the first time, he has no family members, no servants, no neighbors nearby
- and picture his **destitution**
 - he was the son of one of the region’s wealthiest men, but he has nothing now except his wooden walking stick (as Gen. 32:10 tells us)
- there are thousands of fellow believers around the world today in the “**suffering church**” who are trying to cope with the fear and pain of persecution & imprisonment, the loneliness of rejection by family & friends, and the destitution of having lost all they own through vicious mob attacks on their homes
- you and I may be blessed to live in places of religious freedom, as I am here in Canada, and perhaps we have no personal experience of persecution at all;
 - but that doesn’t mean we don’t experience fear & loneliness & deep concerns
 - you may be listening to this presentation burdened by feelings or concerns similar to those which characterized Jacob on his journey to Bethel – and you too need to meet the God he met
- so let’s look at...

B. Bethel: an Encounter with God

- as Jacob settles down for the night in an open field with a stone for a pillow, God shows that he is “able and willing to communicate with his children even in desolate places and lonely times” (as Stuart Briscoe reminds us)

Gen 28:12-13

Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder *was* set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

¹³ And behold, the Lord stood above it...

- the scene which Jacob witnessed is described in three clauses in the Hebrew which indicate a lifted arm and an open mouth: “*There, a ladder! Oh, angels! and look, the Lord himself*”

- notice 3 aspects of this vision:
- first, the ‘**ladder**’ seems to indicate that heaven has something to do with earth; and earth has access to the resources of heaven
- secondly, God’s messengers, the **angels**, are active in their work of encouraging, helping & protecting God’s people as they move back & forth (up & down on this escalator stairway) between the two realms
- and lastly – and most importantly – **God** Himself (at top of ladder) is in control of everything; He is able to work things out well
- what Jacob *sees* is fascinating; but **God’s speech** (His word) is the truly important thing here, not the visual aspect of the dream; it is His word to Jacob which changes things for him
 - Brueggemann writes: *“He came to this deserted place, fleeing for his life, undoubtedly without promise. He departs from this encounter changed by the only thing that can change, a **word** which makes available an alternative future.”*
- God spoke to Jacob, confirming the promise made to **Abraham** & Isaac, and affirming that He would fulfill His word in Jacob’s life too
 - Jacob had stolen the birthright & deceived his father to get the blessing; but *God* now pronounces the real blessing in all its aspects

Gen 28:13-15

“I *am* the Lord God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. ¹⁴ Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. 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 spoken to you.”

...the promised **land**, the promised **seed**, and the promises of God’s **presence, protection, preservation, and promise** are all here

- “*The LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac*” assures Jacob that the same God of his father & grandfather is the One making these promises to him now
- God’s promise to Jacob has strong similarities to His promise given to Abraham, concerning the land, when Abraham was in the same area (as we saw back in chap. 13)
 - but there is one major difference:
 - the promises to Abraham were made while he was *settling* into the land
 - these promises are repeated now to Jacob while he is *fleeing* from the land!
- perhaps that’s one reason for the unique promises God adds here specifically for Jacob (vs. **15 again...**)
 - “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 spoken to you.”
- there are **4 things** we need to note about what God specifically promised Jacob here:
 - * God’s **PRESENCE**: “*I am with you*”
 - the first person God said this to in the Bible record is Jacob’s father Isaac (Gen. 26:24)
 - now He repeats it to Jacob, who desperately needed to hear it

- much later, the Psalmist David took comfort from this same assurance in Psalm 23:

“I will fear no evil for *you are with me*”

- Fenelon, the 17th C. French theologian said, “You think it is spiritually important to have free time to be alone with God; but I tell you, you will really get closer to him by embracing the Cross in your life, and not always seeking to experience tender moments in the presence of God. When the torrential floods of daily business sweep you away, just let yourself be carried off with no regret. Don't you know you will find God in this torrent, too?”

...this doesn't mean we don't need a regular Quiet Time; but it does mean His presence will always be with us

... “*I will fear no evil for you are with me*”

* secondly, there is the promise of God's **PROTECTION**: “*I will watch over you*”

- God is like a good shepherd who takes care of his sheep, even the wayward ones, the ‘Jacobs’

- again, compare Psalm 23 – “*your rod and your staff they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*”

* thirdly, we see the promise of God's **PRESERVATION**: “*I will bring you back*”

- God will persist in caring for him through the years until he returns him once more to the Promised Land

- Psalm 23 once again – “*I shall not be in want... He leads me in the paths of righteousness... Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life*”

* and lastly, there is God's persevering **PROMISE**: “I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you”

- God will fulfill his promises to Jacob right through to the end

- as David recorded in Psalm 23 – “*I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever*”

...Jacob has personally encountered the God of the promises and received from Him a truly wonderful set of assurances

- as *you* encounter the God of Jacob, you can be sure of His presence, protection, preservation and persevering promise of good for you too!