

SESSION #15

In the last session we examined Jacob's encounter with the Lord at Bethel. Now we turn to Jacob's response to God's revelation:

C. Bethel: a Response to God

- Daniel Baumann, remembering Jacob's ladder, defined worship as: "*a stairway on which there is movement in two directions: **God** comes to man, and **man** goes to God.*"
- God has come to Jacob; now it's time for Jacob to go to God

Gen 28:16

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know *it*."

- Stuart Briscoe said, "few people ever needed to wake up to [God] more than Jacob!"

Verse 17

And 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!"

- "*How awesome is this place!*"
 - an **awareness** of God should lead to a sense of His **awesomeness**
...but too often this is not the case – generally we see God as "a means to self-improvement" in some felt-need area of life (as our prayers too often indicate)
- the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning – thinking of Moses & the burning bush – wrote:
"Earth's crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God; But only he who sees takes off his shoes, The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries."
- in this unusual dream Jacob truly SAW; and the recognition of God's presence was a heart-pounding wake-up call for Jacob

A woman entered a Haagen-Dasz store in the Kansas City Plaza for an ice-cream cone. After making her selection, she turned and suddenly found herself face to face with Paul Newman, in town filming a movie (in case you're not familiar with him, Paul was the heart-throb of my wife's generation). Newman smiled and said hello. His famous blue eyes caused her knees to shake. She managed to pay for her cone, then left the shop, heart pounding. When she regained her composure, she realized she didn't have her ice cream cone. She started back into the store to get it and met Newman at the door. "Are you looking for your ice cream?" he asked. She nodded, unable to speak.

"You put it in your purse with your change."

...being in the presence of Paul Newman was a heart-pounding experience for this lady!

- she may well have described it later to her friends as "*awesome*"
- "*awesome*" is a much over-used word in our day
- but Jacob used it rightly when he realized he had been in the presence of **God** Himself and could only exclaim "*awesome!*"
- a "**non-place**" (just an empty field near Luz) is here transformed into a very significant place (Beth-el, later to become Israel's 2nd most important city) because Jehovah God appeared here

- and a “**non-person**” (Jacob the deceiver) is transformed by the coming of God into a person crucial for the promise [Brueggemann]
 - he could no longer live on the faith of his father Isaac nor of his grandfather Abraham; he could no longer refer to God as “their” God as he did in 27:20 when speaking to his father Isaac (“the LORD your God gave me success”)
 - ...the God of his fathers must now become the God of **Jacob** too
- this is a **decisive** turning point in Jacob’s life – some have called it his “conversion”
 - because here at Bethel his secondhand, third generation faith became **personal**
- we too must come to *personal* grips with God and his claims & promises
 - the faith of our friends or parents will not help us; we must step out in faith personally and make our own commitment
 - ... “God has no grandchildren!”
- God’s appearance with His word of promise **demand a decision**
 - and Jacob responds with decisive genuine faith, even if phrased somewhat in terms a bargain-hunter might use (Jacob is still Jacob!)

Gen 28:20-22

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, ²¹ so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God. ²² And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You."

- this is the **first vow** recorded in Scripture, and in it Jacob does 3 things:
 - ...he **trusts** this promise-making God – “the LORD will be my God”
 - ...he establishes **worship** of this God – “this...will be God’s house”
 - ...he recognizes his **stewardship** under this God – “I will give you a tenth”
 - M.S. Mills wrote that... “In those days, the customary income tax was 10% of the subjects’ crops and increase, so Jacob was effectively recognizing God as his king, and declaring himself a subject of Almighty God by undertaking to pay the usual ‘income tax’ to God.”
- like Jacob, our appropriate response to meeting God should be similar: [Richards]
 - we honor the Lord as **God**
 - we set aside times and places to **worship** Him
 - we express our commitment by **giving**, willingly & cheerfully; a practical expression that we are subjects of the King of kings

- now we jump ahead a few years later in Jacob’s story and find that he has another memorable meeting with God, at a place called Penuel...

D. Penuel: A *Wrestling* with God

Gen 32:24-32

Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. ²⁵ Now when He saw that He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. ²⁶ And He said, "Let Me go, for the day breaks."

But he said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me!"

²⁷ So He said to him, "What *is* your name?"

He said, "Jacob."

²⁸ And He said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob [that "scheming heel-grabber"], but Israel [literally: Prince with God]; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed."

²⁹ Then Jacob asked, saying, "Tell *me* Your name, I pray."

And He said, "Why *is* it *that* you ask about My name?" And He blessed him there.

³⁰ So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel:* "For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved." ³¹ Just as he crossed over Penuel* the sun rose on him, and he limped on his hip.

- Jacob is on his way to meet his brother Esau for the first time since Jacob was forced to flee from his home under death threats from Esau
- he makes elaborate preparations for this meeting about which he is very nervous
- but there is another meeting which Jacob doesn't know about in advance and can make *no* preparations for it: a **meeting with God** – called here a "Man", a very mysterious stranger; but Hosea identifies this wrestling stranger as "God" Himself (Hosea 12:3)
- after wrestling with God all night, with neither prevailing, the turning point comes at dawn when Jacob refuses to let go until the Wrestler blesses him
- but instead of blessing him, God asks a strange question: "*What is your name?*"
 - ...it cuts straight to the core of who Jacob is: "the tricky deceiver" – and he is forced to admit his true identity
 - with this confession, God is able then to do something very significant for Jacob – He gives him a new identity: Israel ("Prince with God" or "God rules")
 - ...as with other Bible characters, a midlife name change represents a change of **character** (as Bill Arnold observes)
- it is followed up by divine **blessing** – something he has been striving for all his life; now it is simply given by God in response to Jacob's facing the truth about himself, and submitting to God...
- Brueggemann writes: "When daylight comes, the stranger is gone. And so is Jacob. There remains only **Israel**..." – **crippled**, but having prevailed – an encounter Frederick Buechner called "The Magnificent Defeat" (or with a different emphasis, "The Crippling Victory" [as Brueggemann prefers])
- Jacob learned three things at Penuel: (as summarized by Bill Arnold)
 - 1) he had been struggling with **God**, not primarily with other people, all his life
 - 2) the true and best blessing results from **submission** to God's will
 - 3) in God's economy strength comes through **weakness**
- watching Jacob we learn the meaning of one of God's names...

E. Emmanuel: Our God is with us and for us

- Jacob's dream at Bethel, back in chap. 28, revealed two important truths:
 - (1) there is a huge gap between heaven & earth, between God and man

(2) but there is a way which bridges this gap, because of God's initiative

- Jesus is the **way**: John 14:6 Jesus said, "I am the WAY..."

- with specific ref. to Jacob's dream we can also say that Jesus is the **ladder**

- in John 1:51 Jesus told Nathaniel: "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." (a biblical title for Jesus)

- Jacob's dream and Bethel experience point us onward to **Christ** who alone spans the gulf, bringing God to us and taking us to God

...He is God's **WORD to us**; He is our **WAY to God**

- and He meets us wherever we are on life's journey and assures us of the same promises God gave to Jacob

- let me remind you of some of these by reviewing a few familiar Scriptures within the framework of the same 4 promises given to Jacob:

- **God's Presence**

- as Matt. 1:23 tells us, Jesus is – "Emmanuel, God *with us*"

- in *Matt. 28:20* He said, "I am with you always"; in *Heb. 13:5* He said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you"

- Nancy Groom put this truth into useful perspective in the realism of life:

"God is enough, but that doesn't alleviate the pain; He doesn't *feel* like enough. Yet sometimes in bright snatches of intimacy with Him (though more often in a quiet and unobtrusive way), a certain knowledge is beginning to grow, a sureness that whether I feel like He's enough or not, He has become my sufficiency. It's not perceived directly, but in side glances, or reflected in a mirror out of the corner of the eye – the inner knowledge that life without Him is unthinkable, that having Him *plus* the pain is infinitely better than being *without both*. His presence doesn't undo nor even diminish the pain. It is more like the **framework** for it, the backdrop against which it's possible to let myself feel the hurt and sadness."

...you can claim God's *presence*

- **God's Protection**

1 Pet 1:3-5 "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth ... who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time."

Heb. 13:6 "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

...you can claim God's *protection*

- **God's Preservation**

Romans 8:35-39 in the Message translation reads like this: "Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture [here Paul quotes *Psa. 44:22*]:

"They kill us in cold blood because they hate you.

We're sitting ducks; they pick us off one by one."

[Paul goes on to say: “None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I’m absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely *nothing* can get between us and God’s love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.”

...*you can claim God’s preservation*

- **God’s Promise** of fulfillment

- *Phil. 1:6* “being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

- *Matt 24:35* “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

- *Jude 1:24* “To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy”

...*you can claim God’s promise to fulfill His purposes for you*

- if you are preoccupied these days with troubles & struggles in the ‘horizontal’ dimension of life, pause today to remember there is a ‘vertical’ dimension as well

- “*there are no troubled dimensions of human interaction which are removed from the coming of the Holy God*” in the person of our Good Shepherd & Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ – He meets us in our troubles

...there is a “Bethel” – and there is a GOD of Bethel, the God of Jacob...of all the “Jacobs” – and He waits for *our response* to Him today