

Patriarchs

THE YEAR OF THE BIBLE

Sermon 3: Jacob: Stairway to Heaven

Genesis 28:10-17

Kevin Maurice --- February 23, 2020

Good morning church! I'm excited to be here with you today because I have the privilege to teach one of my favorite passages in the entire Bible. (Thanks, Matt.) And I'm also excited to be here because the past month has been a thrilling time in the Maurice household. In January my wife, Kate, gave birth to our second daughter, so we've been navigating life with a newborn and I'm finally understanding why so many of you drive mini-vans around here. I used to be so judgmental – Oh, I'll never ...! But a door that slides open sounds incredible. Anyway, we're doing great.

For the past month, Pastor Matt has been teaching through the book of Genesis, and recently we've been studying the patriarchs. We've seen the faith of Abraham, a man who chooses to trust and to follow God, and the unbreakable, covenant vow that God makes with Abraham – promising him land, a family that's going to become a nation through a son, and, ultimately, that the entire world would be blessed through this lineage.

Abraham's son, the child of promise, was named Isaac. And Abraham again demonstrates his faith in his willingness to trust God even when asked to give up, to sacrifice his only son. God stops Abraham, He doesn't allow Abraham to give up Isaac. And what we're seeing throughout the pages of Genesis and in the lives of these patriarchs is the blueprint for what God is building toward. It's the script of God's divine story and it's rife with foreshadowing. Because God does bless the entire world through the lineage of Abraham, and God does that by not withholding His Son, but by giving Jesus for us.

And so, Abraham to Isaac -- now we're going to talk about a guy named Jacob, Isaac's son, Abraham's grandson. And today we'll focus on one episode of Jacob's life. It's Genesis chapter 28. It's another piece, it's another part of the design for the plan of what God is going to do from Genesis to the Gospel. And it reveals God's sovereignty in how He is ultimately going to rescue and redeem mankind. And in order to drop into this scene to see what God is doing, first we need a little bit of backstory.

Jacob is one of two sons, and while he and his brother were still in the womb, God gives their mother, Rebekah, this prophecy that the older son would serve the younger. God promises that the younger son is the one He has chosen to bless and to fulfill this promise through.

The two boys are born, the older son is named Esau and he's exactly what his earthly father wanted. And so, Isaac loves Esau, the older son, more. But mom loves the younger boy, Jacob, more. And already you can see the sibling rivalry that's going to take place. Because Jacob grows up coveting his father's love, just longing for his father's attention, desiring his father's blessing.

And so, one day Jacob trades a bowl of soup to Esau for the firstborn birthright. Esau just gives it away like it's nothing, Jacob takes it because he wants it. He's wanting this validation, this familial status that the older brother had. Then, later, dad is on his deathbed, he's mostly blind and it's time for Isaac to give the paternal blessing. And this is what Jacob has always wanted. And so, he dresses up as Esau. He pretends to be somebody else to step into that relational status with their father, to trick dad into giving him the blessing.

But this whole plan, this whole deceiving and taking for himself, it backfires, because Esau finds out about it. He wants to kill him. Jacob has to run for his life. His father sends him away to avoid the wrath of his brother. Jacob leaves home and family and everything he's ever had and ever known.

Jacob is a great patriarch to study because he's so easy to relate to because he's got so many problems. He has doubts and failures and struggles. The guy is a Freudian masterpiece. He's got mommy issues and daddy issues. He's got birth order stuff and sibling jealousy and he's so impeccably human in his imperfection. He's a thief, a schemer, a manipulator, a liar. And that gets us to Genesis 28. And when we find Jacob, he's in the middle of nowhere and he's all alone.

That's where we'll pick up the story. Please, go ahead and open your Bibles to Genesis chapter 28, we'll start in verse 10. And I love this passage because the author is telling a great story.

It's a fairly straightforward text but it's profound in what it teaches us about the nature of God. So, as we study together this morning ask yourself – What does this Scripture say about

who God is? And what does that say about who I am? What do we learn about God and what does that say about us?

Genesis 28, verse 10 - **10 Jacob left Beersheba, his home, and he went toward Haran. 11 And he came to a certain place, a nowhere place, and he stayed there that night, because the sun had set. And taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep.**

Jacob is isolated, he's alone, there's no family, no future, he's this hopeless wanderer in this unnamed place, and now it's dark. Two really great details in these initial verses. First, the author tells us that the sun had set. This is beautiful scene-staging because we have this external, natural, physical darkness that's emblematic of Jacob's inner darkness.

Secondly, in this nowhere place, Jacob uses a stone for a pillow. Now, why use a stone and why tell us about it? Because Jacob has nothing else. Why else would you sleep on a rock? Nobody goes camping and says, "Let's find the rockiest place to set up a tent." Nobody does that. Jacob doesn't have a pillow, or he would've used it. He doesn't have an extra set of clothes or he would bundle them up and sleep on that instead. Jacob has nothing, so he sleeps on a rock. The author is showing us how completely Jacob's life has fallen apart. And it's not just outer circumstances; this is the condition of his heart and his soul.

Because, even in this desperate position, we don't find Jacob praying. He's not asking God for help, He's not talking to God. And this is such a departure from the other patriarchs. Grandpa Abraham believed, met with and spoke to God. Even Isaac met with God. But Jacob, to this point in his life, had never met the God of his forefathers. Jacob has never had an encounter with God. And so, in his mind as his mind drifts off to sleep, he's got to be thinking, *I've got nothing, I am nothing, I'm all alone. Surely God is far away from me, because I am far away from him.*

But then... Jacob has a dream. And everything changes.

Picking up in verse 12 – **12 Jacob dreamed, and behold, there was a Stairway set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. 13 And behold, the Lord stood above him...**

Middle of nowhere, the darkest night of Jacob's life, God pursues Jacob. And it's God who begins the process of changing Jacob forever. On this night, Jacob sees three things and he hears from God. And it's this encounter with God on this night, in this dream, in a vision, where

God displays His design for rescuing and redeeming a broken person. And God is showing us how He rescues and redeems a broken world.

The first thing that Jacob sees in his dream is a **stairway**. Now, some Bible translations and a great song say that it's a ladder --- or no, it is a stairway, isn't it? -- which is fine. "Ladder" is an okay translation, but the song is actually right, because the biblical, the Hebrew word being used here signifies something more like a large ramp or a great staircase. This isn't a narrow, skinny ladder that you use to put up Christmas lights. What Jacob sees is enormous; it touches the earth and it reaches all the way to heaven.

The only other time in the book of Genesis that a building of this size is mentioned is in chapter 11, a tower that mankind was building at a place called Babel. Now, whereas that's a building of human effort and ingenuity and engineering that ultimately failed to reach heaven, what Jacob sees is a structure of divine power that succeeds in reaching and bridging heaven and earth.

The second thing Jacob sees in this vision is **angels** -- angels ascending and descending this grand stairway. Hold onto that phrase, because we're going to come back to it later -- ascending and descending this grand stairway. Brief note on angels: anytime you see an angel in Scripture, don't think a Hallmark card or a children's Bible. Because anytime an angel shows up in the Bible, the first thing they have to say to a human being is, "Don't be afraid!" Because the very sight of an angel is so overwhelming to human beings that you fall down, you hide your eyes. It's too much. Angels are messengers, they're servants of the King of all creation, and they're sent to carry out His mission and plan and proclamations. And Jacob doesn't just see one -- he sees multiple angels, traversing these steps, traveling up and down from heaven to earth. It's this overwhelming, astonishing sight.

A stairway, angels at work -- that's all incredible. But it's the third thing that Jacob sees that is absolutely astounding. Because standing over Jacob is **God, God** Himself. Verse 13 says, **"Behold, YHWH, the LORD, stood above him."** In the middle of the wilderness, as Jacob is experiencing this dark night of his soul, God Himself stoops down to stand over him in a posture of nearness and intimacy. It's this parental pose that demonstrates God's love for Jacob.

My wife and I adopted our first daughter, and when we first brought Mary home she was almost two years old. And I remember, as a new parent, we would do this thing where, after putting her down for bed, we would go to the living room to read or watch TV. And almost every

night we would turn to each other and say, “Hey, do you wanna go look at her?” And so, we would tiptoe quietly – very quietly into her room -- we found out it’s like a ticking time bomb --- you don’t want to wake up a toddler. We would tiptoe in there and we would lean over the railing of her crib and we would just look down at her. And in those quiet moments, sometime we would pray for her and sometimes we would just be there, watching over our child. With our newborn, when she’s asleep she’s helpless. We do the same because they’re our children and we love them. We stoop down to watch over them because they’re ours.

And in Jacob’s dream, he’s asleep, he’s alone, he’s vulnerable. And before he hears from God, Jacob looks up and he sees God. And for someone who must’ve always longed for his dad’s attention, for someone who must have grown up us thinking, *I wish Dad would just look my way once in a while* --- Jacob looks up and he sees his Heavenly Father bending down, watching him as he sleeps.

Isn’t that incredible? Having made a mess of his life, on what is easily the worst night of his life, in a place where he’s alone and sinful and helpless, God appears in such a way to Jacob to show that He is with him and that He loves him.

And Jacob sees that and then he hears this.

God speaks to Jacob and He says, **“I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. 14 Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families on earth be blessed. 15 Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised to you.”**

God tells Jacob who He is. And then God renews His covenant promise. This is the covenant that was given to Abraham and to Isaac – land, offspring, a nation that would be a blessing to the entire world through his lineage. And God makes Jacob a promise – *I am with you, I will be with you and I will not leave you.*

Jacob wasn’t pursuing God but God has chased Jacob down. And he wakes up from this vision and says to himself, **16 “Surely the Lord is in this place and I, I did not know it.” 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 or how dreadful is this place!

This encounter has chilled his blood, the hairs on the back of his neck are standing up, because Jacob is understanding, maybe for the first time in his life, that God is not far away, God is not distant or unloving. God is here.

He said, “God was in this place and I did not know it!”

“God was HERE and I didn’t realize it!”

“God was near to me -- I just didn’t get it.

And what we see in Genesis 28 on this night in Jacob’s life is another example, another piece of the Gospel being set in place. Because we’re seeing who God is and how God works.

Because Jacob is in the worst state of his life. He has made no move towards God, but God makes him an unconditional promise of love. I mean, that’s pretty weird, isn’t it? It seems strange. Jacob isn’t seeking God; he’s running from God, he’s running from everything in his life. And yet, God comes to Jacob. God is revealing how He will restore the relationship between Himself and all of broken and fallen humanity. God is showing how He is going to bridge this expanse between a holy God in heaven and sinful man on earth. Now, how can that be?

And the answer is going to come centuries later in a passage from the New Testament that doesn’t quite make sense until you see the connection back to Genesis 28. Because Jesus says something in the book of John, and when you read it in context with the rest of the story that God has been telling, it unfolds the power of God, and the magnitude of grace and the plan of salvation. You can turn there and join me if you’d like. It’s John 1:43-51.

Jesus has begun his ministry and he finds a young man named Phillip, and He chooses Phillip to be a disciple. And he says, “Follow me.” Phillip runs to his friend, a guy named Nathanael and says – “We’ve found him. This is the guy that Moses and the law and the prophets spoke of, this is THE guy the Bible has been telling us about. His name’s Jesus, and he’s from Nazareth.”

And Nathanael, he brushes this off and says, “Nazareth? That nowhere place? Can anything good from there?” It’s almost as bad as Oklahoma. Yikes! “Could God come from a place like that?” And Philip just says, “Come and see.” So, they go to meet Jesus and as they’re approaching, Jesus sees Nathanael and says, “Here is a true Israelite.” And Nathanael’s taken aback, so he asks, “How do you know me?”

And Jesus says, **“Before Philip even came to get you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.”** *I saw you.* And this unravels Nathanael. He goes from a doubter to a true believer in two seconds. He calls Jesus, “Rabbi, Son of God, King of Israel.” All because of what Jesus said. Now, we have no idea what Nathanael was doing under that fig tree. It’s this private moment, maybe it was his dark night in the middle of nowhere. But what’s clear is that, to Nathanael, it was absolutely significant. Because no one else could’ve known or should’ve known what he was doing under that tree. And the mere mention of it and Nathanael is all in. He says, “Yes, this guy is the Son of God.”

And Jesus’ response is this. Here it is: **“Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ you believe. You will see greater things than these.” And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you – you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”**

Do you see what God was doing in Genesis and now here? Jesus is saying– I AM the stairway. I AM the way between heaven and earth. I AM how a holy, sovereign, just God will re-establish a relationship with sinful mankind. Jesus is the ladder, He’s the stairway, connecting a perfect God with imperfect man.

And this is completely antithetical to every world religion or system or moralistic belief. Because every sort of religion says that I – me – I need to do things right and follow these certain steps in such a way in order that I can ascend these steps to God or to heaven or enlightenment or whatever it may be. Every religious system says, “Here are the steps. Now start climbing.”

But what God shows Jacob and what Jesus tells us is that those steps serve a different purpose. Jesus doesn’t say, “Here are the steps, start ascending.” Jesus says, “I AM the steps. I have descended. I’m the One who lays down my perfect life to come to you – to bring salvation to you.” And so, the stairway, the steps, they’re not a what, they’re a who. And they’re not the way that a person gets to God. They are God with us.

And that is why God pursues Jacob in the wilderness, and it’s why Jesus calls Nathanael. Because the truth of salvation, the story of the Bible from Genesis to the Gospels is God saying, “I have come to you, I am connected to you, I love you, I am with you – not because of you -- but because of my grace toward you.” And that’s the gospel.

So, how do we live with the truth of the gospel in our souls? How do we live in light of God's plan for redemption and salvation? Where can we apply this truth in our lives? And how can we respond to the love of a Father who has bent low to earth to bring us to Him? I want to encourage two different things, two different ways that we can live in response to this truth:

Learning from Genesis 28, the first thing we can take away from Jacob's encounter with God is to ask ourselves, **Have you encountered God?** Have you encountered God? Maybe you haven't or maybe it's been a long time since you actually spent time with God, and like Jacob, you're running – you're running from something, from brokenness, from failure, from a past. And you've hit this place and it feels like you've got nothing else and you feel all alone.

Or maybe you know and believe all about God. But it's all this knowledge, it's just answers and facts, but it's not a relationship and you've never encountered His overwhelming Grace. Or you're living with this mindset that, *Yeah, here are the steps and I just have to keep climbing and eventually I'll get there.*

Listen, Jacob probably heard and knew every story about God from Isaac and Abraham. And he probably believed them, but he hadn't encountered God yet. And so, if you're running or you're climbing, today, would you stop? Because God is in this place, He's in this moment, He's wanting to be a part of your life, even when you did not know it.

And so, if you've never trusted in Christ to rescue and redeem and restore your relationship with God, you can do that, even today. And if you don't know how to do that, you can pray with me afterwards or come talk to me at the end, or ask that friend who invited you today. Or ask someone you know who follows Jesus. Ask them, "How do I have an encounter with this God of grace?" Or, if faith has just become that religious thing that you do and there's no thought of grace anywhere, you can quit running, you can quit climbing.

Because God is here. That's the gospel – God is here, especially when we are alone and weak and broken.

2 Corinthians 12:9 tells us that weak and broken is actually the state of our souls that God does the best work. He says, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness."** God works in our souls when we're weak and broken. In fact, that's the only way we can come to Christ! You cannot show up to Jesus with your chest out and your chin held high and your hair combed and say, "Here I am. Where are the steps? I'm going to start climbing." Because that's not what they're for. Because to think that we can get to God displays

an utter lack of understanding of the truth of who God is and where He is and what He has done to be with us. Ask yourself – have you had an encounter with God? That’s first.

The second way to live into your salvation, into the gospel, is to **practice God’s presence**. Because it’s so easy to do the opposite; to believe the lie that God is remote, that God is out there, and we come to and interact with Him occasionally – on Sunday mornings at church or in these monumental events in life, or in crisis moments when we really need Him --- that’s when we go to Him. But otherwise He’s mostly uncaring, He’s somewhat unfeeling, and He’s just unaware of my little life. Because over here, my day to day, at work or at home stuff -- that’s “real life”. And we can fall into this trap where we dichotomize our existence into these times and areas and places that are sacred and times that are just “normal”.

But the truth of Scripture is that God is here. God is working anywhere and everywhere and He is in this place even when I, I did not know it. I love that Jacob uses that phrase. Because the beginning of encountering God is simply paying attention. Being present where you are, waking up to the reality of what we are a part of. Because too often we are oblivious to the miraculous, the significance that God’s presence is with us through Christ. It’s incredible.

There’s a book called *The Practice of the Presence of God* written in the 17th century by a French monk named Brother Lawrence. And it details this monk’s desire, his quest, to be in God’s presence continually – which he found pretty difficult to do, even in a monastery in the French countryside in the seventeenth century. So how do we have any hope? But, living in a monastery, he found himself going back and forth between the things he thought were “religious” – the prayer times in the chapel, the meditation in the garden, reflecting on the Scriptures and on his soul – yeah, that’s the religious stuff. AND then the times that were, in his early opinion, irreligious – cleaning the monastery bathrooms, cooking dinner, making his bed. But as he grew and he matured in faith, he began to realize that each moment of every single day presented him with the opportunity to practice the presence of God.

To pray, in times when he would not otherwise be praying. To reflect on God and his relationship with Him, outside of those expected times. To remember and think on God’s grace, even when he was peeling potatoes or scrubbing a latrine. Lawrence writes, in a letter to a friend, how he’s encouraging his friend to practice God’s presence. And he says, “**Lift up your heart to God --- lift up your heart to Him during your meals or in company with others; even the**

least little remembrance will always be the most pleasing to our heavenly Father. And one need not cry out very loudly; because He is nearer to us than we think.”

He is nearer to us than we think. God is in this place even when I, I did not know it.

So, this week, I want to encourage us to practice God’s presence. And a profound and really simple way to do that is to **PRAY**. Pray -- communicate with the Creator of the universe. Reflect on God’s great love for you and His grace toward you, and the relationship that He desires with you.

Pray. Practice Prayer this week. Alone. With a friend, with your spouse. With your kids, in the car, in the office, in the gym, on your walk to the mailbox. Pray – at times when you’re used to praying too, but also when you’re not accustomed to it. If you or your family routinely prays before a meal, then perhaps alter the routine in a way to broaden your perception of God’s presence. You can open your Bible to a Psalm and pray the Psalm before eating. You could think of one person that you could pray for, that they might encounter God’s presence and God’s grace. You could thank God, not just for the food on the plate, but for His overwhelming love toward us. If you don’t typically pray before a meal, try it this week. This week say, *You know what? I’m going to commit. I’m going to practice this.* And just pray.

And I know, a new practice, a new habit, it can feel difficult. Maybe it’s a little awkward. But, hey, that’s great. Because as we already discussed, awkwardness, weakness, *uhh ... I don’t know how to do this* --- that’s just the kind of place where God likes to work. So, give it a try. Set an alarm on your phone. I did that this morning. I picked a time – 12:22 every day I’m going to have an alarm, I’m going to take that moment out of my day when I hear that tone to just pray and to remind myself, *Yeah. God is here too. He’s always been here.* Find a time to pray.

Pray unexpectedly. Sanctify the little moments of your day by reminding yourself that God is there too. I have had the opportunity to practice God’s presence this week in moments where it feels pretty far from God in changing diapers. Because if there is a time in my day that feels like there is nothing spiritual – in fact, it’s pretty sinful --- it’s changing a newborn’s diaper. And there’s a lot of it to change. But I tell you, in those moments that could be just throwaway moments, literally, just praying over my daughter, knowing that our heavenly Father is there too, just practicing God’s presence in our lives in my life – in that moment, it becomes significant. And it’s changing it. It’s not just a throwaway moment. It’s a time with our Father.

And so, what can that moment be for you? The part of your day where it feels like God has no part of? Is it your commute? The Monday morning meeting? Running from errand to errand? The school drop-off line or the pick-up line? Whatever it is for you, maybe it's a part of your day that you're saying, "No, this is just for me." Let me tell you, it's not. It's not. God is waiting for you to look up and realize that He is there too. So, let's practice God's presence this week and pray.

Jacob was far from God. But God was never far from Him. And we were far from God but God drew near to us through Christ. And that is the story of the Bible. That is God's story of redemption. And I pray that it becomes your story as well. Would you please pray with me?

Father, we come before You and we are humbled because of who You are. God, we come before You and we know that there's nothing within us that we can offer, that we can give, God, that would be accepted as holy. But God, You have come to us. God, You sent Your Son for us to live the life that we couldn't live and die a death for us, and to come back, to rise again, to bridge this relationship between heaven and earth. God, we thank You for Your Son. And we pray and we trust in His love and in His life and in His sacrifice for others; that we would be made whole, that we would be restored to You. God, we pray that and we believe that. And we pray that this week we would practice Your presence in our lives, that we would know that You are there, even we don't feel it or even when we don't think it. God, help us to believe and know that truth, that You are there; that You're with us and You'll never leave us, God, because you love us. Father, we love You and we praise You. And it's in Your name that we pray. Amen.