



## The God Who Meets You Where You Are

### Wrestling with God: The Stories of Isaac & Jacob, Part 4

Genesis 28      David Sunday      March 5, 2017

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God has a pointed and comforting word for us in Genesis 28 today. I'm so glad God calls Himself "the God of Jacob," because Jacob is one of those characters in Scripture with whom I think all of us can identify. I felt like Jacob this week. There were times when I did not respond to stress with faith and trust in the Lord, but instead acted in ways that did not demonstrate my confidence in Him. Yet He is my God—He is your God—and He is with us.

In the beginning of Genesis 28, Jacob has been sent away by his father. His mother Rebekah is fed up with both sons. She is so frustrated with Esau's Hittite wives that she says, "I can't bear to live any longer if my son Jacob goes off and marries one of those women." Which was her way of getting Jacob away from the home, out of the Promised Land, so that Esau, Jacob's brother, cannot kill him—which he desires to do.

So Jacob is fleeing from the Promised Land with his father's blessing, but with a bitter taste in his mouth. Then he has an encounter with the God Who meets him where he is, even when he was not seeking Him, even when he was not looking for an encounter. And oh, how we need this God to be seeking us and meeting us in unexpected places—even when we're not seeking Him.

Let's read this together, beginning with verse ten:

*<sup>10</sup> Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. <sup>11</sup> And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. <sup>12</sup> And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder 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! <sup>13</sup> And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, "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. <sup>14</sup> 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 of the earth be blessed. <sup>15</sup> 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." <sup>16</sup> Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did*

*not know it.”<sup>17</sup> 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.”*

*<sup>18</sup> So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. <sup>19</sup> He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first. <sup>20</sup> Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, <sup>21</sup> so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, <sup>22</sup> and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you.”*

O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be filled with Your words and anointed by Your Spirit so that our lives would be transformed and pleasing in Your sight as a result. We ask this in Your name, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Jacob is on the run. His father has sent him away. His brother is seeking after his blood. He’s outside the Promised Land. And everything we’re reading underscores what Iain Duguid said to us last week: “Sin doesn’t pay even when it gives you what you want.” Have you ever had that experience? You’ve gotten what you wanted, but it’s so bitter. It doesn’t pay. It doesn’t satisfy. Sin doesn’t pay even when it gives you what you wanted.

I can picture Jacob out there in that howling wilderness. The sun has set; emblematic of what’s happening in his life: this dark night of the soul. In this narrative, we’re not going to read about the sun again until the end of Genesis 32, after Jacob wrestles with God, and then we’ll see the sun rising. So Jacob is going to have an encounter with God in this dark night; in this howling wilderness.

I’ve been out in the Jordan desert in the middle of the night, camping in a Bedouin tent, listening to the howling and screaming of the hyenas, hearing their footsteps right outside our tent. And I thought, “What would it be like to be Jacob, out in the open, unprotected, with a stone under his head?”

I used to think my parents were kind of goofy when I would see them packing their pillows to take on vacation. Now I don’t. That’s one of the things Kate and I like to bring with us when we travel, so we can sleep better at night. I can’t imagine a stone pillow.

But Jacob’s stone pillow is an example of how forlorn, destitute, penniless and empty Jacob’s life is at this moment. He’s in the middle of nowhere. He has nothing. There’s no one near who loves him. He’s got a pillow of stone underneath his head. He is at rock bottom. I want you to notice that Jacob is not praying when he goes to bed that night. He’s not saying, “Now I

lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep.” He is not crying out for mercy from God. He’s fleeing. He’s fending for himself.

You may be there today—emotionally spent, feeling like a failure. Maybe you’re on the run. Maybe you’re trying to hide for some reason. Maybe you are feeling very much distant from God. You are not expecting to meet Him. You’re not even really sure why you’re in church, but you’re not expecting God to encounter you in any unique or powerful way today. I want you to know, friend, that God is a God Who cannot be put in a box. God is a God whose grace surprises us. God is God Who takes the initiative. Do you know what grace is? It is always God taking the initiative to pursue us.

### **God often meets us where we least expect to find Him.**

The first lesson we can take from this narrative today is that God often meets us where we least expect to find Him. As Jacob is fleeing, somehow he manages to fall fast asleep, and there, in the middle of this desert, he has a dream in which he sees three distinct images. They’re marked off by the word, “Behold,” as if to assert how astounding this vision was.

- *“And behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth.”*
- *“Behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!”* .
- *“And behold, the Lord stood above it.”* He saw the Lord standing at the top of this ladder.

These three visions in Jacob’s dream are communicating to him that there is communication between heaven and earth. Heaven is not closed off from the earth, but there is a way for sinful people to have fellowship with a holy God.

The ladder is the first thing he sees. It might also be translated “a staircase.” We might better envision it as a vast ramp, staircase or pathway reaching from earth to heaven. As we read about this towering structure that connects heaven to earth, we think back to Genesis 11 and the Tower of Babel where man was trying to build his way into the presence of God. That tower might have been like an old ziggurat, a pyramid-like temple made in an attempt to reach the heavens. Often on the side of those ziggurats would be a staircase up which people would climb with their sacrifices and prayers to try to make themselves worthy to ascend into the presence of God.

But here is a ladder which God has constructed, a staircase that reaches from earth to heaven. And what do we see on that staircase? We see the angels of God—awesome royal messengers of His majesty. Do not think of Precious Moments figurines here. Do not think of

“Touched by an Angel” on the Hallmark channel. Think of something awesome in appearance, something that makes you fall on your face and tremble in fear. Only when these angels say to you, “Fear not,” can you stand in the presence of one of God’s holy angels. On this staircase, these awesome royal messengers—signifying the royal power and holy majesty of God—are on the move. God is at work. Heaven is coming down to earth. God is ministering to people on the face of this earth.

Above this towering structure, with the angels of God ascending and descending, stands none other than the Lord Himself. The Lord is near, O Jacob. God is not remote. He is not aloof. He is not distant. And Jacob, you do not have to climb the staircase to reach Him—He is a God Who comes down to earth to find you.

Someone has written, “The symbolism of the ladder is intended to teach Jacob that there is open communication between earth and heaven, between man and God, and that this is a communication God initiates, not man. It is God Who is reaching down to man, not man who is reaching up to find God.” God wants Jacob to know that He is active and involved in his life, that He is initiating a relationship with him, that He is reaching down to him. It’s not up to Jacob to find God. God has found him. Heaven has come down to earth to lift us up to heaven.

There’s a remarkable passage in John’s Gospel, chapter one, where Philip—who’s from Bethsaida—finds a man named Nathaniel. Philip says to him, “We have found Him of Whom Moses and the law and the prophets wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Nathaniel replies, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” It was an out-of-the-way, nowhere type of place; just like where Jacob is right now. And Philip said to him, “Come and see. Come and see Jesus.” We read in John 1:47:

*Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.”*

We have no idea what Nathaniel was doing under the fig tree. We don’t know anything more about that fig tree. But we know that when Nathaniel realized that Jesus—before He had ever even met him—knew what was happening under the fig tree, he instantly recognized, “This is the Messiah.” Verse 49:

*Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do 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.”*

Jesus is taking him back to Jacob’s dream, to that stairway reaching from earth to heaven, with the angels of God ascending and descending. Except where are the angels of God ascending and descending in John 1:51? The angels of God are ascending and descending on the Son of Man. And Jesus is saying, “I am Jacob’s ladder. I am the stairway to heaven. I am the way for sinful men to have access into the presence of a holy God. I am the One Who opens heaven’s gate and welcomes sinful people. I am Jacob’s ladder.”

I love how Tim Keller comments on this: “Heaven and earth intersect over Jesus’ dead and resurrected body.” This is our Savior—the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6). Listen to what God says to Jacob in Genesis 28 and realize that through Jesus, God is saying the same things to you and to me in the 21st century. What God promised to Jacob, God promises to all who are in Christ.

In Genesis 28:13, He reaffirms the promises He made to Abraham and to Jacob’s father, Isaac. God is confirming that the blessing Isaac gave to him in the previous chapter has His seal of approval on it. He is saying that the blessing will come from Him and that He will fulfill the Abrahamic promises of the land and the offspring, *“like the dust of the earth”* (verse 14). He says they will *“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 of the earth be blessed.”* God is saying, “Those promises will find their fulfillment in you, Jacob. You are the one who is carrying the Messianic seed.”

He is a God Who makes and keeps His promise and He says three things to Jacob—and to those who trust in Him: “I am with you, I will watch over you, and I will bring you home.” How precious, believer in Jesus, to know that God says that to you personally. “Child of God, I am with you.” God wants you to know that. He wants you to take that to heart today. “I am with you, just as I was with Abraham and Isaac.”

How desperately Jacob needed to hear this, because he does not have a friend in the world right now. The person he loved the most and who loved him the most—his mother Rebekah—he will never see again, and she will never see his face again. But God says, “I am with you.” His brother hates him and wants to kill him, but God says, “I am with you. Fear not. I am with you. Oh, be not dismayed, for I am your God, and I will still give you aid. I will strengthen you. I’ll help you. I’ll cause you to stand; upheld by My righteous, omnipotent hand.” [Adapted from “How Firm a Foundation” by John Rippon.]

When we hear “I am with you,” we can go forth with confidence, saying, “*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever*” (Psalm 23:6). “I am with you,” God says, “and I will watch over you.” Genesis 28:15: “*I...will keep you wherever you go.*” Jacob is utterly defenseless in this wilderness, but he’s not alone. God is telling him, “You’re a pilgrim on a journey, and you’re being guided by a strong, wise and kind Providence. I will be with you wherever you go, and I will watch over you.” “*The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life*” (Psalm 121:6-7). “*The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?*” (Hebrews 13:6).

Then God says in verse 15, “I will bring you back to this land. I’m going to bring you home again, Jacob, for I will not leave you until I’ve done what I’ve promised you.” God is not saying, “Once I fulfill My promise, then I’m going to leave you,” because His promise was, “I’m going to be with you always.” What He’s saying is, “I’m never going to stop doing what I’ve promised you. I’m going to bring you safely home. I Who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6).

Friends, these are promises God wants you and me to take to heart. He wants us to take comfort from these promises. We don’t deserve this, but God draws near to us where we least expect to find Him. And He says, “If you will put your trust in Me and My Son Jesus, I will be with you. I will never leave you nor forsake you. I will watch over you wherever you go and I will bring you safely home.”

When you hear these promises, you may be in the middle of your Christian journey. You might be feeling like, “Oh, it’s a long, hard race.” Or maybe you’re feeling distant from God right now. God is calling you to recognize afresh that He is just as much with you today as He was the day you first met Him. He is sustaining you today with the same grace that first called you to Him. And though you’ve already come through many dangers, toils and snares, His grace is going to lead you safely home. He is with you, and He wants you to trust Him.

That’s the first lesson: God often meets us where we least expect to find Him, and He says these things to all who trust in His Son.

## **We are always in God’s presence, though we are often not aware of it.**

When Jacob awakes from his sleep, he says, “*Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it*” (verse 16). The New Living Translation says, “*Surely the Lord is in this place—I wasn’t even aware of it.*” Jacob didn’t even realize God was there. Friends, we are always in God’s presence, though we are often not aware of it. We don’t see Him. We don’t realize it.

This has been true of Jacob all the days of his life. He was in the Lord's presence when he was in his mother's womb, wrestling with his brother Esau. The Lord was with him there, and the Lord was with you in the womb of your mother, knitting you together in her womb (Psalm 139:13-16). The Lord was with Jacob in all the steps of his journey. Jacob was always in the Lord's presence, even when he was not aware of it. And depending on your relationship to God—depending on whether you trust Him or you're running from Him—this is either very comforting or terrifying to you.

What do we do when we want to do something sinful? We try to find a place where no one's watching. Maybe we go into our house, then into our room and then we lock the door. Even there we go into the innermost parts of our minds and hearts, thinking somehow we can hide. But God is there and sees all our ways. He knows all our thoughts. Nothing is hidden from His sight (Hebrews 4:12-13). We cannot flee from His presence (Psalm 139:7-12). So why not flee to Him, where we find mercy in Him?

God fills heaven and earth with His presence. If you take a bucket and submerge it in the ocean a mile beneath the surface, that bucket is full of the ocean—but the bucket cannot contain the ocean. The ocean surrounds the bucket in every direction. Likewise, God fills heaven and earth. The heavens and the earth are submerged in God like a bucket submerged under the surface of the ocean. The entire universe is submerged in God. God fills the universe, but the universe cannot contain God. He is everywhere at all times.

A.W. Tozer wrote, "God is not contained; He contains... He surrounds the finite creation and contains it. There is no place beyond Him for anything to be. God is our environment as the sea is to the fish and the air to the bird." *"In Him we live and move and have our being"* (Acts 17:28). So are you aware of the presence of God in your life? This is true whether you're aware of it or not. He is everywhere present. But are you aware of His nearness to you?

This afternoon, wherever you go, whatever you're saying, whatever you're thinking, you can be sure of this: "Surely the Lord is in this place." He is with you. If you face great danger this week, and you're in fear and terror at what has come into your life, you can be sure of this: "Surely the Lord is in this place." On the beach in Indonesia, where Josh and Natalie held their child, rescued from the sea, knowing that it cost a young man his life: "Surely the Lord is in this place." He is near.

When you're going home to a great trial—your child is rebelling, you're afraid, your spouse is hardening his heart, your marriage is in danger—"Surely the Lord is in this place." He is near. We're not even aware of it, but He is near. He is with you as you travel. He is with you on your job. He is with you as you care for your aging parents. He is with you as you struggle

through your difficult marriage. He is with you as you weep over your wayward child, as you long for your grandchildren to be saved.

He is with you as you struggle to pay your bills. He is with you when you are plummeted by the fiery darts of temptation. He is with you when you fail. He is with you when you reach out to your neighbors. He is with you when you go forth in mission and try to make disciples of all the nations. Jesus says, “*Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:20). “Surely the Lord is in this place.” There is no dark place in your life; there is no distant place in your life where the Lord is not there. He is near. He is with you always. We are always in His presence, though we’re often not aware of it.

### **God meets you where you are—He turns your stone pillow into an altar of remembrance.**

The last thing we see is that He meets you where you are, where you least expect to find Him, and He turns your stone pillow—that place of pain, that place of hardship, that place of distress—into an altar of remembrance. Look at how Jacob responds: “*So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it*” (28:18). This stone pillow becomes a memorial place where he will remember, “God met me here. God’s presence was here.”

God says to us in Christ what He said to Jacob: “I am with you, I will watch over you, and I will bring you home.” If those gospel promises are true for us, as they are, and we welcome them into our lives, then we will respond to God the way Jacob responded to God.

First, we will respond with fear, awe and adoration. Jacob says in verse 17, “*How awesome is this place!*” The King James Version says, “*How dreadful is this place.*” Jacob is terrified in the presence of a holy God. He trembles in the presence of a holy God. If we trust in Jacob’s God, that fear and trembling mixed with trust and adoration will be characteristic of our lives as well. We’ve been redeemed with precious blood, so we serve the Lord with fear and trembling.

If we respond to Jacob’s God as he did, every place we go we will realize we are in Bethel. We are in the house of God. We don’t have to come to a building like this to be in God’s house. This building is not God’s house. We, God’s people, are God’s house, because we’re connected to Jesus, Who is the living presence of God. No wherever we go as believers, we are in Bethel. We are in God’s presence. And wherever we go, we will worship Him. We will recognize His presence. We will look to Him and lift our hearts to Him. We will vow to give our lives to Him.

We see in verse 20 that Jacob made a vow. Notice there’s an “if” and a “then” in his vow. Some people think, “What a scoundrel. God has already promised all this stuff to him, and Jacob

is still conditionally giving his life to the Lord. ‘If God will do this and do this in my life, then I’ll give myself to Him.’” There may be an element of truth in that view. Jacob’s just a beginner in the life of faith.

But it could be that Jacob is saying, “In light of what God has just promised, since God has said these things will be true, then the Lord shall be my God. He’s not just going to be my father’s God. He’s going to be my God and I’m going to give a tenth of all that I have to Him—the tithe of all that I have.” Which Jesus, by the way, never overturned. In the Gospels, Jesus never said we should oo’t tithe. He said it’s a good thing to give a tenth of all you have. And that’s just the beginning in the life of faith. As someone has said, that’s just the training wheels for giving. Because what does God really demand of us? *“Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship”* (Romans 12:1).

God does all that He promised and more. All of Jacob’s conditions are met. Listen to how D.A. Carson beautifully summarizes this narrative: “One of the great themes of Scripture is how God meets us where we are: in our insecurities, in our conditional obedience, in our mixture of faith and doubt, in our fusion of awe and self-interest, in our understanding and foolishness. He meets us where we are. God does not disclose Himself only to the greatest and most stalwart, but to us,” to people like Jacob, “at our Bethel, the house of God.” He says to people like us, “I am with you, I will watch over you, and I will bring you safely home.” Let us say to Him, “I will present myself to You as a living sacrifice.”

Let’s pray.

O Lord, in view of Your mercies—so rich, so tender, so free and so generous—we would withhold nothing of all You’ve given us. You are everywhere present, even when we’re not aware of it. You are with us wherever we go. You will never leave us nor forsake us. So we thank You, Lord. You deserve all that we have and all that we are, and we do give ourselves to You. But we thank You that even though we’re so fickle and so up and down, like Jacob was, You will hold us fast. You will complete the good work You’ve begun in us. We rejoice in this. Amen.

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