

The Bethel Dream

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The Patriarchs | The Gospel According to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

Genesis 28.10-22; John 1.45-51

Then Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran. 11 He came to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place. 12 He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. 13 And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. 14 "Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth 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 promised you."

16 Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." 17 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." 18 So Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on its top. 19 He called the name of that place Bethel; however, previously the name of the city had been Luz. 20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, 21 and I return to my father's house in safety, then the LORD will be my God. 22 "This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You."

John 1 *Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote-- Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." 46 Nathanael said to him, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." 47 Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" 48 Nathanael said to Him, "How do You know me?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." 49 Nathanael answered Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel." 50 Jesus answered and said to him, "Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You will see greater things than these." 51 And He said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."*

This Fall, we've been working our way through The Book of Genesis...and concentrating on the middle section that has to do with the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Patriarchs of the Jewish people and of the founding fathers of the Christian Church.

There's a lot of material on Abraham...then Isaac passes rather quickly and now we're on to Jacob, the rascal. He is running for his life after deceiving his blind father (Isaac). Jacob wanted to be blessed and he was willing to do anything to get blessed. He was even willing to use God's name in his deception and *that* is the very definition of blasphemy...not a very nice guy...at least not at the start.

And now – *running* from his *murderously angry brother*, Esau, *he's a fugitive*. He's apparently alone and away from everyone he knows. He's making a one month long journey through unfamiliar territory to get to his mother's family whom he has never met and...he must be very...afraid.

And a few days into the journey, he can go no further because it's getting dark...and he lays down next to a long rock (uses it as a pillow or better as a kind barrier) *and he has a dream*. And then he wakes up and responds to the dream. Those are the two scenes in this episode...

In one way it's really not much of an episode because there doesn't seem to be any real story...no real conflict and crisis-point and resolution...just a dream...Which, by the way, is how dreams go...is that your experience? Dreams don't always have a well-defined plotline ...dreams are ...dreamy.

But looking at the bigger picture we do find a conflict and I think its one to which we can ALL relate – Jacob feels alone and is gripped with fear and he's got to be worried that God is angry at him (he's a liar and he cheated his old, dying, BLIND father...that's pretty sick!) And even though he won the prize (by lying!) and took the blessing from Esau...the winner, Jacob, *is having to run for his life and leave everything he knows*... and Esau stays home and marries for a third time...He didn't get the blessing but he sure looks more blessed! Jacob's sleeping in the dangerous wilderness and has a rock for a pillow! Maybe Esau has won after all? "Maybe God is against me?"

Do YOU ever feel this way? Do you worry that your sins will find you out? Feeling insecure spiritually and isolated and adrift...a little guilty...a little scared?

Well let's look at #1 – The matter of spiritual insecurity #2 – The Dream that came true and #3 – How to wake up refreshed and renewed

Have you ever wondered how God might sort of *critique your life* at a particular point? What if you could just literally ask God for a kind of progress report...like the interim reports we used to get in school: "student is not working up to his potential... Jane needs some real work on her multiplication tables – her 7s, 8s and 9s are very weak...Robby's penmanship has really improved – good work!"

What do you think God would say, "Your love is very weak...you have a few habits that must change...you are not growing in generosity...your prayer-life is..."

Well if that's going on in Jacob, if he's wondering about how God would grade him, you could understand why. He has reason to wonder. God has to be very angry with him and now he is leaving the very land that is supposed to be his...and the uncertainty about the future: will he ever get back to this land...ever see his mother and father again...ever make it right with his brother? Will his brother, Esau, make good on his promise to kill Jacob...and he's alone (with lions and tigers and bears!) And will his mother's family in Haran even receive him...so much uncertainty. Maybe God has taken him into this wilderness to kill him (Ex. 17.3)! His life has taken a real turn for the worst.

That's the back-story that sets up the conflict in this episode. The reader wonders, "what WILL happen to *this grabber* /this deceiver and will God curse him?"

AND we also may feel that way about our own lives from time to time in our own journeys...do you... ever feel that way?

Mounting uncertainties about....our past ("truthfully, if God gave me what I deserve...I shudder to think...") or why did God allow this thing in my past and uncertainties about the present (a recent diagnosis or a rejection letter or a failure or a broken relationship – like the one between Jacob and Esau) and any of these things can leave us wondering about our interim report: is God telling me something here? I am in the wilderness and feeling very alone...in exile...wandering...in danger!

And I haven't even gotten to anxieties about the future! Jacob's, got to be thinking about the reception he'll receive by his Uncle Laban (and of course his fears aren't unjustified...the rascal Jacob is about to meet his match in his uncle!) And as we wander...the future is full of uncertainty: political uncertainties...and personal... health... parenting... employment... will you get into that school?... get that job?... what will become of your parents?

Life is full of uncertainties and Jacob is a picture of the insecure person. (BTW – Esau seems to have moved on. He doesn't seem insecure at all. In the verses right before this reading, Esau learns that his parents didn't like his Canaanite wives and so he marries a daughter of Ishmael... "I'm sure this will make Mom and Dad happy!" ...He doesn't get it – *he's a picture of the superficially religious person* who's sort of fat and happy AND LOST even when he's at home.)

But back to Jacob: what does God do for this insecure wanderer?

Well, God gives him a dream. A ramp or stairway that connects heaven and earth; angels ascending and descending from that world to this...and at the top of the stairs is God Himself (as if God is sending His messengers to work out His will in the

world and is receiving them). And what will God do to Jacob the deceiver...the fugitive...NOW HE WILL GET WHAT'S COMING TO HIM!...Right?

But it turns out that God does NOT punish or curse him but instead blesses him! And blesses him with these big, huge, over-the-top pronouncements.

And as readers we think, where's the justice? Why is this guy GOLDEN? He's like God's pet! Why does this sneaky cheater keep getting words of blessing and promise from God? AND he does nothing to get it!!

He's not seeking God...He's asleep (Ps 127.2)! You can't be more passive than that! He gets the interim report and it's straight "A's" but we, the readers know that he's failing out in every course? (Do we see what God doesn't?) And if he's insecure... well...he should be!

But God blesses and promises Jacob...as he is leaving the Land: *"the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants"*.

And as he is cut off from his family and alone, God says, *"Your descendants will also be as numerous as grains of sand"*

And as he's forced to go where he doesn't want to go, God says, *"and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south"*

And when he feels cursed and exiled and no good to any one, God says, *"and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed"*.

And when he may feel, "this is my father's God...and grandfather's God ...but I don't know Him and if I ever meet Him, He will surely reject me", God says, *"Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go,"*

And when the future looks so bleak, God says, *"and I will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."*

This is the way of grace. The cycle of karma is interrupted. The report card of another Student is given to the rascal...the flunky is considered the Valedictorian. Jesus Christ will come into the world and live the life that Jacob failed to live. All of Jesus Christ's integrity and honesty and obedience and worthiness is being attributed to Jacob...even while Jacob is asleep.

This is the meaning of the Gospel. The life of Jesus Christ is credited to Jacob before Jesus actually lived that perfect life. And all of Jacob's failing grades are charged to Jesus Christ. He takes the fall for all the people of grace and He trades, as it

were, report cards with everyone who believes. And believing is almost like sleeping – it's resting on and receiving what someone else has done.

Now, back to our own insecurities for a moment: you may be thinking, "T.J., that's just it – if I could just have this surprise encounter like Jacob had, I'd be good to go! When I consider my own past (my mistakes and hurts) and when I think of where I am right now (I had hoped to be so much further along by now...and all I see is obstacles) and the future (yee-e-sh!!). So, if God could give me a sign or a dream...or a little miracle (I don't need those huge over-the-top promises Jacob got [I'm not a Patriarch!] ...just a bonus check at work...or a call from an old friend...something).

Well, what if you could have Jacob's dream...the stairway to heaven...but not just as a dream but as a reality...what if the dream could come true?

When Jesus Christ was calling His first disciples, a few of them had a friend named Nathanael and this man was a very earnest, open, honest kind of person. They brought him to see Jesus Christ and said that they believed HE might be the Messiah foretold by Moses and the Prophets. The man came, somewhat reluctantly and when Jesus saw him Jesus said, "Here's an Israelite without deceit!" (i.e. better than that old Jacob who was full of deceit!) and Nathanael said, "How do you know about me? We've never even met!"

Then Jesus gives him the little miracle (like the one you're looking for...that sign...that dream) and Jesus says, "I saw you sitting under that fig tree." And Nathanael says, "You couldn't possibly have seen me – it's a miracle – you must be the Messiah!"

And Jesus says, "Wow! You are way too easily satisfied! You should've held out for more...but stick around and you'll see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man...on ME!"

It's a direct quote from Jacob's dream. Jesus is saying, "I am heaven's gate. I am the link from heaven to earth. I am the ladder, the stairway, the mediator. This is not a parlor trick or a little miracle or even a dream – in Me the dream has materialized!"

I don't need to find a parking space at Publix to know that God loves me. I can be secure with or without the bonus check...or the healing...or the call from a friend (as nice as those things ARE!) but I have something better than a dream or a sign – the very door to heaven has opened to me. I didn't do it. I didn't seek God – HE came seeking for me in Jesus Christ. God has proven Himself to us *in this historical happening*, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The dream has materialized.

And, in Jesus Christ, we do get all the assurances that Jacob and the Patriarch's were given. In fact, all the promises of God are "yes and amen" in Jesus Christ (2 Cor 1.20) To the degree that I am looking at Him, resting on and receiving Him, to that degree I am assured.

And that means that life will be happy and carefree from here on out...right T.J.? Yes! Because that's exactly how Jacob's life went! ...Hardly! *One writer put it:*

"... from here on, his life will be a cycle of disasters—conflict with his father-in-law, a beloved wife who is barren, one son who consorts with prostitutes, another who is incestuous, a daughter who is raped, a son reported dead but sold into slavery... It is an incredible litany of disasters..." (James Arne Nestingen)

So the life of grace isn't a carefree life. But it rests and receives...and it comes again and again to God's promise and hope...insecurities melt into assurance.

Now, Jacob awakes from this dream refreshed and renewed and here's how you can too: three ways.

Once again, see the nature of faith. It's not something we initiate or work...it is essentially passive, like sleep – resting and receiving. It is often born in an environment of despair or abandonment or isolation or INSECURITY. Again, Esau is safe and secure at home and faith is not born in him....So, your present insecurities and anxieties may be the incubator where faith will be born...or grow.

#2 Rest and receive what? Well, all the promises of God IN Jesus Christ. He is the dream appeared and materialized. He is the gateway to heaven and the mediator from God to us. Our battles with insecurity are not fixed by dreams but by receiving what Jesus Christ IS and has accomplished...He is the fountain of grace...surveying the wondrous cross.

#3 Grace received by faith (and faith is being born in our friend, slippery Jacob) grace received by faith leads to worship and change. Jacob says, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven"

He says "If God intends to do this for me, then God now owns me! The LORD will be my God!"

He sets up a marker to commemorate – *"This is when and where my father's God became my God...AND he begins a journey toward generosity (last words – "I will give You a tenth of all I have")* The grabber is becoming the giver.

So, look for that to happen as you continue to believe. As you receive grace by faith expect to undergo these changes...your obligations become your delight.