V. **Stairway to Heaven**

04-Jul-04  Genesis 28:10-22  Duguid Chapter 4

**Theme:** Jesus Christ is the true Stairway to Heaven, the only Mediator between man and God.

**Key Verses:** Gen. 28:13-15  

13 And behold, the LORD stood above it and said: “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.”

**Review**

Last week we looked at the supplanter Jacob receiving the patriarchal blessing from Isaac instead of Esau. Although Isaac had plotted with Esau to bypass God’s will and bestow the blessing upon the undeserving twin, Rebekah and Jacob hatch a successful counterplot that takes advantage of Isaac’s physical and moral blindness. When Esau eventually shows up, Isaac is confronted with his sin and repents. He is unable and unwilling to take back the blessing won by Jacob’s deception; Isaac recognizes that it is God’s will that Jacob is the spiritual heir of the blessings. Instead, he confirms that stolen blessing; first with an “anti-blessing” to Esau and then later with a subsequent covenant blessing to Jacob that is freely given.

**Isaac repents of his sin and is restored.** In fact, the book of Hebrews commends Isaac for precisely the bestowing of the patriarchal blessing: “By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come” (Heb. 11:20). Notice that Isaac is said to have had faith with respect to the blessing of both Jacob and Esau. Likely, this is referring to the second blessing of Jacob instead of the first one in which he thought he was blessing Esau. But the “anti-blessing” to Esau is also said to have been done in faith. Isaac sinned mightily in trying to thwart God’s will, but once confronted with his sinfulness, he repents and acts in faith once again.

The same cannot be said for Esau. He shows outward emotion, regret, and grief, but his internal heart is not changed. **Esau is not willing to submit to God.** He harbors hatred towards his brother, whom he names as “the supplanter.” But he does not grieve the loss of the spiritual privileges, only that he has been supplanted.

Despite all of the conniving, all of the plots and counterplots, and all of the blessings and anti-blessings, it is ultimately God’s will that prevails. Isaac is unable to alter it. Esau cannot change it. And even though it appears as if Rebekah and Jacob have won, we know that God has not condoned their efforts either. Jacob may have the blessing, but he will never see his mother again and will spend the next 20 years in difficult exile. Sin has consequences. And the greatest consequence of sin was the death of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who is the only one who could truly say Rebekah’s words: “Let the curse fall on Me.” Jesus took the curse of sin upon Himself in His timing so that we might win the blessing. Nothing could alter God’s will regarding the blessing going to Jacob, and praise God that nothing can alter the blessings of Jesus Christ being distributed to His people today.
Introduction

Last week we covered a lot of ground – 57 verses. Today our passage is much shorter – only 13 verses – but I’m sure we will still have trouble fitting it all into the lesson period!

First, let’s remember where we are in the chiastic structure of the Jacob Cycle. The Jacob cycle opens in Genesis 25:19. Nested within the Jacob Cycle is the Esau Cycle, which begins in Genesis 26:34. The Laban Cycle, which begins in Genesis 29, is nested again inside the Jacob and Esau cycles. The passage before us today, Genesis 28:10-22, is the transition from the Esau to Laban cycles.

Jacob is on the run from Esau, headed towards Laban. He is leaving the land of promise. On his way out of the land, he experiences the first of two nocturnal theophanies. It is here at Bethel that Jacob sees the dream of the heavenly ladder and hears the voice of God for the first time. The second key experience in Jacob’s life occurs in Genesis 32, after Jacob has left Laban and is on his way to re-encounter Esau en route to returning to the Promised Land. Jacob’s wrestling with God at Peniel forms the book end in the chiastic structure to this scene at Bethel before us today. Thus, Jacob’s entire 20 year experience in Syria with his uncle Laban (the Laban Cycle) is deliberately bracketed by these two supernatural events.

Duguid points out that “the setting of the sun on Jacob at Bethel (28:11) vividly depicts Jacob’s situation: night had caught up with him. The sun would not rise for him, from the perspective of the narrative, until Genesis 32. At that time, on his return from exile, he would have another dramatic encounter with God, only this time while the sun was coming up at the fords of the Jabbok. In the meantime, he would have to endure the long, dark night of exile from the land. Nonetheless, these two encounters with God, which bracket his time away from the Promised Land, graciously demonstrated God’s enduring presence with him in the long night in between. Even Jacob’s sins could not separate him from the loving presence of God, nor could they prevent him ultimately from inheriting what God had promised. The grace of God would ultimately triumph in his life.”

The internal structure of this Bethel experience passage is not chiastic; rather, there are two parallel panels. The first half of the story is deliberately echoed in the second half of the story. This structure serves to emphasize the importance of Bethel through repetition.

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So let’s take a look at this familiar story of “Jacob’s Ladder” and see what we can learn.
A. God’s Vision (28:10-15)

1. A Certain Place (28:10-11)

Jacob had a 500-mile journey ahead of him from Beersheba to Haran (28:10). The journey could easily take a month or more to complete. We pick up the action in verse 11 when he arrives at “a certain place.” What do we know about this “certain place”? Well, we know that there were stones “of that place,” and we know that Jacob lay down to sleep “in that place.” Whatever this “certain place” is, it certainly is an important place. The word “place” is mentioned three times here in verse 11. This emphasis is picked up in the parallel panel in 28:16-17 where the word “place” is mentioned twice.

We later learn that this place is near the city of Luz, but is renamed Bethel. Bethel is about 50 miles north of Beersheba, so Jacob is still in the Promised Land, perhaps 2-3 days into his journey. Night is falling. It is a literal darkness as well as a figurative one. From a human perspective, Jacob’s prospects look grim. By now the reality of what has happened is beginning to sink in. Jacob has left behind everything he has known for 77 years. He has left his mother behind. He has left his father behind. He has left the security of his home behind. Remember, Jacob was a homebody, not an adventurous hunter like Esau, so he has also left the comforts of home behind. He has left the wealth of home behind. Isaac was very wealthy – Jacob has left with nothing but the clothes on his back. And he is on the verge of leaving his homeland behind. True he supplanted Esau for the birthright. True he deceived Isaac for the blessing and then received it again honestly. But those things don’t seem very real right now. You can’t fill your stomach on a blessing. You can’t sleep comfortably on a birthright. It seems everything that Jacob has known and loved for 77 years is gone. He is all alone. But there is one thing that Jacob has not left behind. Jacob has not left God behind. God is still with him, and as Jacob pulls up a rock to sleep on, God proceeds to remind Jacob of this very important fact.

2. A Heavenly Ladder (28:12-13a)

The word translated “ladder” in verse 12 is better rendered as a “stairway.” For example:

There’s a lady who’s sure all that glitters is gold
And she’s buying a stairway to heaven.

And when she gets there she knows if the stores are closed
With a word she can get what she came for.

Woe oh oh oh oh
And she’s buying a stairway to heaven.

Of course, the background of this dream is not a Led Zeppelin song, but rather the Tower of Babel story earlier in Genesis chapter 9. The type of ladder or stairway envisioned here is likely that of a Babylonian pyramid-temple or ziggurat, similar to the Tower of Babel (11:4). “These had high temple towers in which the god was supposed to dwell. They had also ground-level temples where the god was believed, on occasion, to appear. In between the heavenly tower and the earthly gate there was usually a long ramp (the “ladder” in the dream). The Babylonians thought that this ramp linked heaven and earth” (Wallace). The builders of the Tower of Babel had tried to reach heaven by storm; to assault heaven from earth.

Of course, the effort at Babel was doomed to failure, because man cannot reach God by building a stairway up to heaven. In this dream, God reveals the truth of the matter: God reaches man
by building His stairway from heaven down to earth. Heavenly beings – angels – are ascending and descending the ladder. It is a heavenly staircase, connecting earth to heaven. It is not achieved through human effort.

There are three important parts of the dream. Each one is introduced to us by the word “behold”: “Behold, a ladder … and there [or ‘behold’] the angels of God … And behold, the Lord …” (28:12-13). First, our attention is drawn to the ladder – the heavenly connection between the physical realm and the spiritual realm. Jacob learns from the ladder that there is more to this world than meets the eye. The heavenly kingdom is a reality, even if it is not clearly seen.

Next, behold the angels ascending and descending between heaven and earth. God’s holy messengers are present in the spiritual realm and can interact with the physical realm. We’ve run across the Angel of the Lord and angels several times already in previous studies in the book of Genesis. Even though we can’t see them, the heavenly hosts are there to do the bidding of the Lord. This lesson was illustrated vividly to Elisha’s servant when he was afraid at the size of the Syrian army encamped against Israel:

2 Kings 6:15-17

And when the servant of the man of God arose early and went out, there was an army, surrounding the city with horses and chariots. And his servant said to him, “Alas, my master! What shall we do?”

So he answered, “Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”

And Elisha prayed, and said, “LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.” Then the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

And then behold the Lord standing above the ladder and above the heavenly hosts. Our eyes go from the ladder to the angels to God. God is present, and He is near. Jacob thought that he was alone. But he wasn’t. The heavenly host was with him, but more importantly, God was with him as well. The transcendent God is also the immanent God. He is holy and far above us, but He is also close beside us. The God who directs earthly affairs by His providence from heaven was with Jacob. Jacob could be assured that his present plight was no accident. He was in the hands of God.

3. A Divine Promise (28:13b-15)

Beyond the dream of God’s presence, the spoken word of God must have brought even more comfort to Jacob. Visions are good, as far as they go, but the Word of God is even more precious. What God says is nothing less than a reiteration of the Abrahamic blessings given to Jacob’s grandfather (Gen. 12:1-7; 15:1-21; 17:1-21; 22:15-18) and also to his father Isaac (Gen. 26:2-5). In fact, this blessing echoes closely to the version given to Abraham in Genesis 13:14-16 when Abraham was also at Bethel.

28:13 “The land on which you are lying I shall give to you and your descendants”

13:15 “The whole land which you see I shall give to you and your descendants for ever”

28:14 “Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth”

13:16 “I shall make your descendants like the dust of the earth”

28:14 “Spread westward and eastward, northward and southward”

13 14 “Look … northward and southward eastward and westward”
Jacob had plotted and schemed for the blessing. He deceived Isaac to gain it. Isaac later gave it to him openly. But now here God gives the blessing directly to Jacob. **Jacob was able to supplant Esau for the blessing only because God intended it for him all along.** It would have been much better for Jacob to wait on God’s timing for it. Perhaps then he wouldn’t have been fleeing at night, sleeping on a rock. Irregardless, God gives him the full blessing. The whole enchilada: Land; family; many descendants; the promised Seed through whom all nations would be blessed.

Duguid puts it this way: “If Abraham is the archetypal man of faith, **Jacob is surely the archetypal picture of grace.** The promised blessings that Jacob sought to wangle for himself will ultimately be given to him. But they will not come through might or through power or even through his craftiness but through the spirit of God. **Ultimately grace comes to Jacob just as it comes to us, through the death of the Son of God,**” the promised Seed who brings blessings to all the families of the earth.

So Jacob at last has what he has always wanted: God’s blessing, the confirmation that he is the heir of the spiritual blessings of his grandfather and father. There’s only one little problem. He’s still fleeing the wrath of his brother, sleeping on a rock in an empty field in the middle of nowhere. What good is the blessing if you are cold, tired, hungry, lonely, and broke?

God knows that, and so beyond the blessing of verse 13-14, **God gives Jacob encouragement in verse 15.** This is the fourth “behold” of the dream, and so it should draw our attention. **Essentially Jacob “was assured of three things: 1) God’s presence; 2) God’s protection; and 3) God’s promise”** (Eveson). Jacob knows he is no longer alone. God is with Jacob and will not leave him. Moreover, God will “keep” him wherever he goes. God’s “keeping” means that He is “protecting” Jacob. This reminds me of **Psalm 121:**

1 I will lift up my eyes to the hills—
   From whence comes my help?
2 My help comes from the LORD,
   Who made heaven and earth.
3 He will not allow your foot to be moved;
   He who keeps you will not slumber.
4 Behold, He who keeps Israel
   Shall neither slumber nor sleep.

God was Jacob’s keeper; God was Israel’s keeper; and He is the keeper (protector) of all those who trust in Him.

Finally, God promises Jacob that even though he is fleeing Esau and leaving the Promised Land of the blessing, one day He will bring Jacob back into the Land. **Although Jacob doesn’t know what the future will bring, he can be confident that God is in control of it and that God will make it come to pass.** So, lonely, frightened, out-of-his-comfort-zone Jacob is given these marvelous promises of God regarding both his long-term future and his immediate needs.

**B. Jacob’s Vow (28:16-22)**

1. **A Holy Place (28:16-17)**

How does Jacob respond to this dream of the Stairway to Heaven? **First, he responds in holy fear (28:17).** This is the appropriate response of the one who comes close to the presence of God.
Exodus 3:6 Moreover He said, “I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God.

Isaiah 6:5 So I said: “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.”

Revelation 1:17-18a And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, “Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore. Amen.”

Jacob recognizes that he has been in the presence of God and responds like Moses, like Isaiah, like John – in holy fear. Jacob also makes an important declaration. When he says that “this place” (there is that emphasis on this place again) is “the house of God” he is calling it “Beth-el.” In fact, we will see in just a moment that he names the place Bethel, which means house of God. But beyond that, he also declares that Beth-el is the true gate of heaven. This declaration ties us back to the Tower of Babel. To the Hebrew, the name Babel signifies “confusion,” for that is where God confused the plans of sinful man and scattered them. However, Babylonians use the name Babel to mean “the gate of God.” The builders of the Tower of Babel had tried to build a gateway to reach God. Here, Jacob is confirming that “this place, Bethel, is the true gate of heaven, not Babel (28:17). Here it becomes clear that God will reveal Himself to men, on His timetable, through His chosen line” (Duguid).

2. A Stone Pillar (28:18-19)

Jacob’s first response to the dream was holy fear. His second response was – worship. He takes his stone pillow and erects it into a memorial pillar and anoints it with oil to consecrate it. Duguid points out, “In a significant way, the standing stone depicts the dream. The top of the staircase was in the heavens, while it is the top of the standing stone that Jacob anoints with oil, symbolizing the source of his blessing. As we shall see, stones became something of a theme in the life of Jacob, and this one was to be a perpetual reminder of his encounter with the grace of God. To this miniature depiction of the vision, Jacob would return to worship God (Gen. 35) when the promises made in the vision were finished.”

As I already mentioned, in verse 19 Jacob renames the place as Bethel, the “house of God.” Now we have already come across Bethel in our study of Abraham. Abraham pitched his tent at Bethel, built and altar, and worshiped God at Bethel. If Bethel was already a known place, how come Jacob is naming it here? Well, perhaps the place was already known as Bethel and Jacob is reconfirming it. Or more likely, it is Jacob that first names this place Bethel, the house of God. Abraham had worshiped God earlier in this same area, and Moses as the author of Genesis used the current name of the place, Bethel, to describe the place where Abraham journeyed. Notice that the place had been called Luz. So it did have another name, but it is the new name – the house of God – which lasts.

3. A Human Vow (28:20-22)

So, Jacob responds in holy fear, then in worship, and then in self-dedication by making a vow that echoes the promises of God. This vow has commentators all over the map, so I would consider this the third controversial moment in our study of the Jacob Cycle. The essential controversy is in the answer to this question: How sincere and genuine is Jacob’s vow?
Eveson writes, “Some commentators suggest that his vow was selfish and manipulative. Others see it as a right response to God’s promises.” Let me give a few examples:

**Negative:**

*Baldwin: The terms of his vow sound calculating;* indeed, in view of the fact that he had received the express promise of the Lord that he would return to Canaan, **Jacob was dull and unresponsive** to the loving reassurance of God. Before he would commit himself completely Jacob wanted the circumstantial evidence of the outworking of God’s promises in his life.

*Boice: [A] positive thing to be said of Jacob’s vow is that he at least recognized the need for a proper response to God. We may question whether his vow is that proper response. I believe—and I hope to show—that it was not. Still, it was a response, and it at least shows that Jacob knew that God has a purpose for revealing himself to men and women and that, when he does, our lives must be altered in significant ways acceptable to him. **Having said what we can on behalf of Jacob and his vow, we must nevertheless also speak of its shortcomings. These are serious and many.**

**Positive:**

*Wenham: 28:20-22. Some have questioned Jacob’s faith in making a vow contingent on his safe return to his homeland, when this had just been promised by God. But real experience of God must always result in heartfelt worship; here he gave all he had, the stone and the oil, and promised to give a tenth of all his future income when his affairs improved. To pray for a safe return showed faith, not unbelief.*

*Duguid: After he recovered from his surprise and initial fear, however, Jacob went on to respond with total self-commitment. His vow in 28:20 echoed exactly God’s promise to him in 28:15. God demands of those who would be his people nothing less than total self-commitment. For Jacob, **tangible expression of that self-commitment took the form of a voluntary vow to tithe.** This was not natural for Jacob. By nature, he was a go-getter, someone who though that it is more blessed to get than to give. But now he was being transformed by grace from a go-getter into a go-giver. And there is even a vote for this experience as **Jacob’s moment of conversion!**

*Ross: Before this experience Jacob was a fugitive from the results of his sin, a troubled son in search of his place in life, a shrewd shepherd setting out to find a wife. After this encounter, however, he was a partner with God as a recipient of his covenant promises and a true worshiper. The transformation was due to God’s intrusion into the course of his life.*

So which is it: 1) a calculating vow, testing God to see if He was really trustworthy?; 2) the heartfelt worship of a true child of God?; or 3) the moment of conversion of this conniving, supplanting deceiver? Of course, the whole interpretation controversy regarding Jacob’s vow hangs on the first word of it – “if.” If. Does the “if” imply doubt? Is Jacob testing God by seeming to doubt if God can deliver? Or does the “if” imply the sense of “since”? As in, “If God is able to do what he has promised, (and I really believe he can) – since this is true, I had better respond positively.” Is Jacob turning God’s unconditional promises into a conditional bargain, or is Jacob affirming the unconditional promises of God? It’s an interesting dilemma. **It all depends on what the meaning of the word “if” is.**
In addition, your interpretation of Jacob’s vow is colored by your interpretation of his spiritual status at this moment. If you believe he is converted later (say at Peniel), then you have to go with view 1). If you believe he was converted earlier, even at birth, then you go with view 2). And of course there is the ever-popular view 3) which sees this as the moment of conversion. The choice is up to you. Personally, I concur with Duguid and believe that this is a true self-commitment, a holy and righteous vow. Why? Because 1) I believe Jacob is converted early, even before birth; and 2) I believe his godly responses of holy fear and worship are a reflection of his converted state, and his vow is consistent with these actions.

Jacob takes the Word of God spoken to him and applies it to himself. Since God has promised to be with him and protect him and return him to the land, the Lord will do those things. He will be with Jacob. He will keep Jacob in the way that he is going. He will provide Jacob with food and clothing and return him to his father’s house. This God is Jacob’s God and a God worth worshiping. In addition to applying God’s Word to himself, Jacob shows that he is also familiar with family history when he promises the tithe. The tithe was nothing new; Abraham had tithed a tenth of the spoils to Melchizedek in Genesis 14:20. Jacob’s response to God’s Word – his godly fear, his worship, and his holy vow – all seem to me, at least, to be proper manifestations of a true child of the Lord.

**Conclusion**

What is the application of Jacob’s ladder, of the Stairway to Heaven? If we are thinking like whole-Bible Christians, if we are thinking christologically, then we should see in this passage a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ. **Jesus unlocks the meaning of this passage for us in John chapter 1.**

John 1:45-51  
45Philip 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.”  
46And Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, ”Come and see.”  
47Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward Him, and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!”  
48Nathanael 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.”  
49Nathanael answered and said to Him, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”  
50Jesus answered and said to him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.”  
51And He said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Jesus teaches us here that He is Jacob’s ladder; He is the true Stairway to Heaven; He is the only way to God. Jesus is the Mediator who bridges the gap between heaven and earth. Sin has broken fellowship between God and man. All human efforts to overcome our sin and ascend to heaven are destined to fail, like the Tower of Babel. Our attempts to reach heaven only end in confusion. **We need to approach through Jesus Christ, the true gate of heaven, if we are to ascend into the heavenly throne room.**

Let me close with this exhortation from James Boice: “Jesus is the bridge that came from heaven to earth, the only bridge by which it is possible for men and women to pass from earth to heaven. So, in the final analysis, when reading the account of Jacob’s vision at Bethel, we should think of Jesus, just as we should with all the great Old Testament events. And the concluding question is this: Have you seen Jesus? **Have you come to know that One who alone has bridged the gap**
between a holy heaven and a sinful world and who has promised to be all things to those who trust and love him?”

You can’t buy a stairway to heaven, but praise God, Jesus Christ gave His life freely to become one for you if you trust in Him.

Close in Prayer.

Next week: Lesson 6 – Two Sisters – Gen. 29:1-30 (Duguid chapter 5)