

“Jacob’s Ladder”

Genesis 28:10-17 ¹

At about this time forty-five years ago I was about to begin the second semester of my sophomore year at Georgetown College in Kentucky. I’d spent my freshman year as a music major, and, while I passed freshman theory by the skin of my teeth and the professor’s kindness, it was quite clear that I didn’t have what it takes to be a music major.

I’d been active in church during my freshman year, as I’d always been growing up, and at the end of that year my home church in Atlanta had licensed me to ministry upon my testimony that God had called me to vocational Christian work. During my sophomore year, though, I’d begun a journey much like Jonah’s, running away from God.

I had decided to major in psychology, which is a worthwhile endeavor to which I’ve given much of the rest of my life, but in true sophomoreic fashion I’d begun to take some wrong turns that novices in psychological studies often take. I hadn’t become an outright pagan, but I had pretty much stopped going to church while I was at school.

God was still at work, of course, as God always is, and the Spirit’s stirrings caused me to apply for appointment as a summer missionary through the Baptist Student Union on campus even though I wasn’t active in the BSU. My fellow students, aware of some of my recent life, declined to recommend me for BSU appointment. The Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, as we called it then, didn’t have the advantage of knowing me personally, and they appointed me to northern California to serve during the summer of 1970.

When summer came, I spent about half the summer working at Cazadero Baptist Camp, situated alongside Austin Creek, a couple of hours north of San Francisco. One afternoon after work in the kitchen was over, I went to sit on a stump by the large creek, pondering my responses toward God’s purposes in my life. I don’t know whether anyone else would have heard anything or not, but seemingly out of nowhere, I heard a Voice speak very clearly, “*It’s hard for you to kick against the pricks, isn’t it?*”— which is the King James rendering of Saul’s encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:5).

I was so shocked and startled that I nearly fell off the stump into the creek! Like Jonah, I had run several thousand miles “to get away from God,” only to find myself “*at the very gateway to heaven*” (Genesis 28:17). That experience didn’t end my running away from God, but it did become an important turning point as I began to make my way back by stages from the far country of the spirit.

In this morning’s text, Jacob was running away, too. Having betrayed both his brother and his father, he was running for his life to escape his brother’s murderous revenge. His mother, Rebekah, complicit in the worst of the betrayals, had sent him for safety back to her own father’s house, some 500 miles to the northeast, in what today is eastern Turkey.

As our story opens, Jacob has traveled about sixty miles north from his home in Beersheba and is about ten miles north of Jerusalem. He’s alone, knows no one, has no place to sleep, and no protection from beasts or bandits. I can imagine his feeling pretty sorry for himself as he finds nothing better than a rock to use as a pillow for a forlorn effort at camping. He may not even have made a fire for warmth, not wishing to attract attention to himself.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on January 3, 2016.

During the night, God appeared to Jacob in a dream, a dream in which Jacob saw a stairway that reached from earth to heaven. Angels were going up and down on this stairway, and God appeared at its top. In the dream, God promised to be with Jacob until he returned safely home again, and when Jacob woke up, he said to himself, “*Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it. This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven*” (Genesis 28:16-17).

As I’ve thought about Jacob’s experience and remembered my own experience by Austin Creek, several things have become more clear to me. I don’t usually preach using “points,” but ten things fairly jumped out at me as I pondered. Let’s look at each briefly.

1. **There are many ways to run away from God** (Genesis 28:10). I ran to California. Jacob ran to Haran. Jonah ran to sea. But do you know what? *You can never run far enough or fast enough to get away from God* (cp. Psalm 139:7-12). Nor does the running have to involve great distances. It’s possible to be in the “far country” whether near or far from home. To tell the truth, many times that’s how we do it, casting off our previous moral and spiritual moorings and trying to “float a different boat.” But it doesn’t work.

Sometimes we run to the military, or even into mission work, as I did, but we’re still running away from God. Sometimes we run to work, or busyness, or sports, or drugs, or alcohol, or sex, but in the end, we always discover what David and Jacob and Jonah discovered, that . . .

2. **God is always near us, whether we perceive God’s Presence or not** (Genesis 28:16). That discovery is quite often a surprise, as it was to David, to Jacob, to Jonah . . . and to me. We run so far and so fast that we believe we’ve shaken God off our trail . . . and then the Voice speaks: “*It’s hard for you to kick against the pricks, isn’t it?*”²

Not only is God always near us, but sometimes, like Jacob, we become aware of the fact that there are other unseen presences near us as well. I very much doubt that the connections between the seen and the unseen worlds actually look anything like a staircase, but by the image of a great staircase, Jacob was allowed to see that God’s angels are always involved in commerce between the worlds, delivering God’s messages, protecting the faithful, and carrying out God’s purposes (Matthew 4:6, 18:10).

3. **We are just as likely—maybe more likely—to encounter God in wilderness times as we are in mountaintop times** (Genesis 28:10-12). I suspect that many—maybe most—of us have had what we sometimes call “mountaintop” experiences with God here and there along the journey. Sometimes such epiphanies come on youth retreats or on mission trips. Sometimes they come to us on literal mountaintops or in other places where God’s creative extravagance is displayed. Sometimes they come in times of personal worship, and sometimes they surprise us in church, of all places!

And when these times come, you and I tend to respond as Peter, James, and John did on the Mount of Transfiguration—wanting to camp out and never leave the spot where such experiences have taken place! (Matthew 17:1-13; Mark 9:1-10; Luke 9:28-36). We can’t do this, of course.

Dave Dravecky, whose baseball career was ended by cancer, has written that he and his wife, Jan, “have learned that the wilderness is part of the landscape of faith, and every bit as essential as the mountaintop. On the mountaintop we are overwhelmed by God’s presence. In

² See also Francis Thompson’s poem, *The Hound of Heaven*. www2.bc.edu/~anderso/sr/ft.html

the wilderness we are overwhelmed by God's absence. Both places should bring us to our knees; the one, in utter awe; the other, in utter dependence."³ It is so with us as well.

4. **The spiritual life is like a ladder on which we can move up or down** (Genesis 28:12). In the New Testament, Jesus, Paul, James, and Peter all explicitly state that it is God's purpose for us to grow in our faith, in our understanding, in our obedience, in our sacrifice, in our love—in short, that we should grow "*into a full experience of salvation*" (1 Peter 2:2).^{4 5}

It is God's purpose to so shape your character and mine that we are willing, ready, and eager to spend eternity with Him, and the fact of the matter is that every choice you and I make every single day moves us either closer to the full experience of salvation God intends for us, or else it moves us farther away from it.

There are no small choices. Which way are you moving at the moment? Up or down? How fast are you moving? What do you need to change?

5. **Our present understanding of things is always partial.** You probably remember the last verse of 1 Corinthians 13: "*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love*" (v. 13). And you may remember the preceding verse: "*For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*"

Paul's point is that it doesn't matter what we think we know about God—or about anything else, really. It doesn't matter how sure we are that we're right. It's fine to strive for clarity of thought and conviction, and we need to do that . . . but we also need to bear in mind that "*we see things imperfectly*" and that "*all that I know now is partial and incomplete.*" Humility is always in order on the journey, whatever the subject, and following such a course results in far fewer experiences of "eating crow."

6. **Making deals with God is not a good idea, even though God doesn't always reject them** (Genesis 28:20-21). After his vision, Jacob didn't immediately understand that every location is "*none other than the house of God, the very gateway to heaven,*" but he did realize that where he was at the moment was such a location. And as he tried to make sense of it all, the next morning he made a vow: "**IF** *God will indeed be with me and protect me on this journey, and IF he will provide me with food and clothing, and IF I return safely to my father's house, THEN the Lord will certainly be my God.*"

Ever the deal maker, Jacob acted as though he had some standing from which to make a deal with God, completely failing to understand that we don't get to make the rules by which our lives operate. *This is God's universe*, and we either cooperate with God or we battle against God. There aren't any other choices.

Notice that God did not agree to Jacob's terms. God didn't even deign to respond to Jacob's preposterous proposal. Fortunately for Jacob, God's purposes for his life didn't rest on

³ Dave Dravecky, "When You Can't Come Back," *Christianity Today*, vol. 38, no. 2.

⁴ See also Luke 8:14; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Ephesians 1:17, 4:16; Colossians 1:10, 2:7; 1 Thessalonians 3:12; James 1:3; 2 Peter 1:2.

⁵ While Jesus clearly taught us the ultimate security of salvation once a person has truly been born again (John 6:39, 10:28-30), it's also true that "believers may fall into sin through neglect and temptation, whereby they grieve the Spirit, impair their graces and comforts, bring reproach on the cause of Christ, and temporal judgments on themselves, [though] they shall [yet] be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation (1963 *Baptist Faith & Message*, Article 5).

Jacob's own fickle fantasies; but notice how Jacob ended his vow: "Then the Lord will certainly be ***my*** God."

7. **There is a great deal of difference between "my father's God" and "my God"** (Genesis 27:20, 28:21; Matthew 3:9; Luke 3:8). When Jacob was deceiving his father and stealing his brother's blessing, Isaac asked him "*How did you find [the game] so quickly, my son?*" And Jacob replied, "*The Lord your God put it in my path!*"

That wasn't so, of course. In the deception, Rebekah had simply killed an animal from their flocks. But notice Jacob's statement about "the Lord your God." After his vision, and after his deal-making attempt, Jacob spoke about the possibility of his father's God becoming his own God. That isn't double-talk. It describes how things really are.

It's been said that "God has no grandchildren," and it seems to me that this is absolutely true. Our parents' faith is of no good to us in our own relationship with God, except as their faith provides evidence of faith's transforming power. Every one of us must come to personal faith in God on our own.

For children who grow up in faith-filled homes, our first expressions of faith—even those after which we are received into the church—are really expressions of faith in our parents' God and in our parents' faith, far more than they are expressions of faith that has truly become our own. For most people who've grown up in the church, there is a necessary recommitment for which we're seldom ready until our late teen or early adult years. This recommitment represents the real point at which our parents' God becomes our own.⁶

For Jacob, this transformation happened at the Jabbok River, where he famously wrestled with God, and it was separated from his first vision by some twenty years. After Jacob's symbolic struggle with God in the solitary darkness by the river, he moved forward into the remainder of his life with new power, and in recognition of this transformation, God changed his name from "Jacob" to "Israel" (Genesis 32:22-32). Such defining moments often happen during our young adult years, but they can happen at any time, and it may be that some of us in this room are wrestling with God at this very moment.

8. **Places that have become holy for us may or may not become "port keys"** (Genesis 35:7). If you know any of the *Harry Potter* stories,⁷ you recognize "port keys" as objects that have been invested with the power to transport persons between locations, perhaps even between worlds. In *Harry Potter's* world, port keys maintain this ability over time.

When you and I have experienced God's power in unusual ways in some particular place, we sometimes invest that place with the expectation that God will continue to be unusually present to us there. That's how holy places begin to be venerated, after all.

That's what Jacob was expecting as he approached Bethel on his return home decades later, and God did, in fact, speak to him there a second time (Genesis 35:9-13). It is not always so, however, and it's dangerous to begin to limit God to particular times and places, failing to realize that we are *always* in God's Presence.⁸ Still, there is value in making note of places where God has revealed new things to us, in being grateful for them, and in returning to them from time to time.

⁶ See James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

⁷ J.K. Rowling, http://smile.amazon.com/Harry-Potter-Paperback-Box-Books/dp/0545162076/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1450537368&sr=1-1&keywords=harry+potter

⁸ This is what is meant by the divine character quality known as "omnipresence."

9. **If not guarded, holy places can become sinful places** (1 Kings 12:28-30). The downside of all this is that, once they become venerated, “holy places” begin to take on a life of their own that easily becomes twisted toward our unredeemed human tendencies. In later years, that same Bethel became a center of idol worship in Israel, and that idol worship led the nation descended from Jacob away from God and into bondage (1 Kings 12:29-32). We do well to keep watch against such dangers. And finally

10. **We are subject to the allure of many kinds of idols that take us away from God** (Genesis 35:2). It’s interesting to see Jacob telling his family and the members of his household to “*Get rid of all your pagan idols*” as they approached Bethel that second time. Although his father’s God had now become his own God, though he had wrestled with God and recommitted himself to God, Jacob and his family were still allowing things to inhabit their lives that stood over against God.

Are you and I really very different? One of the quickest and truest tests for discerning idolatry in our lives is to ask ourselves what we’re doing with our time and with our money. Would an objective observer who examined your calendar and your checkbook agree that God’s person and God’s purposes are the very highest priority in your life? Would they *really*? And if not, what are you allowing in your life that is standing over against your complete devotion to God?

Let me add to that question a few more as we come to a time for commitment and recommitment:

- Where are the holy places in your life?
- Do you need to return to any of them?
- Is there any sense in which you are running away from God?
- Are you trying to make any deals with God?
- Is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, your God?
- And are there any idols of any sort that you need to get rid of this morning?

**My friends, the Lord is in this place, and this is the very gateway to heaven.
What business do you have with God this morning?**