

When Jacob met God

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[0 : 01] Well, I guess this question might be a long time ago for some of you, but for some of you probably not. But do you remember the first time in your life when you had to venture out on your own into something unknown, leaving the safety of home, leaving something familiar?

So perhaps for some of you, it might be as simple as going to school on your own, not being dropped off by mum or dad, but having to take the public transport.

Or it may be that you've been on an exchange program. That was the first time, that the first time that you had to live away from home for a lengthy period of time. No mum to wake you up, no one to cook you breakfast.

You have to pack everything by yourself. Or maybe it's when you first came here to study as an overseas student. Coming from far away from your home country.

Foreign language, foreign food, foreign way of doing everything. Now, did you remember how you felt when that happened? Perhaps there was a little excitement.

[1 : 11] You know, the unknown and an adventure. But probably also full of anxiety, I would imagine. And maybe fear of the unknown. Fear of not being able to do what you've set out to do or accomplish it.

Well, tonight, that's probably how Jacob may have felt as we see him leaving home for the first time. Now, we've been flying through big sections of Genesis up to now.

But tonight, we sort of take a bit of a breather and look at a short passage. Now, if you recall from last week, Jacob had stolen his brother's blessing, Esau. And now, his brother Esau wants to kill him.

And so, we have Jacob on the run. But we also have Jacob on the hunt. Because he's been sent by mum and dad to look for a wife in mum's home country of Paddan Aram.

And so, we read in verse 10 that Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. Now, if you want to see where these places are, I've got a map up there. If you look down, Beersheba is down in the south.

[2 : 22] Which, if you recall, that's where Isaac was digging all those wells. And then finally made that oath of peace with Abimelech. And that's where the place was called Beersheba. Haran, on the other hand, is way up north.

And quite a few days journey away. Now, by being on the run, Jacob coming up from the south, Jacob would have left a lot behind.

Not just the comfort of home and mum's cooking, but Isaac's riches as well. Those flocks and servants, if you recall, in chapter 26, which were Isaac's, were actually Jacob's as well.

And they had to be left behind. And now he's all alone, heading into the unknown. So, in those days, there would be no such thing as internet banking, where you could call mum to transfer some money, if you're finding yourself a bit short.

Instead, all he had were questions about the future. How long would he be away for? How will he find this wife of his? And when he gets there, what would he have to offer as dowry?

[3 : 38] These were not questions with easy answers. And so, figuratively, I would call this Jacob being in a hard place.

And so, Jacob was in a hard place when, verse 11, we read, he reached a certain place and stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep.

And so, point one, we have Jacob sleeping on a rock in a hard place. Now, you may not have spent a night sleeping out like this, but I'm sure you've had uncertainty in your lives as well.

For some, it may be the result of actually doing the right thing, like choosing to become a Christian and giving up a certain way of living. In return, you might have expected straight away to be blessed or to have a clear direction in life or to even find newfound joy and peace.

But then it turns out that life's not really like that. Actually, life's a bit more mundane, a bit more ho-hum, not so exciting as what you expected. Alternatively, the uncertainty in your life may be due to a poor choice of yours.

[4 : 53] Perhaps you took some risks that you shouldn't have and now you're stuck with them and you're not quite sure what to do next or how to get out of your predicament. Well, for Jacob, his thought would have centered around where God was in all of this.

He had heard his father Isaac pray for God to bless him. So if you look across back to chapter 27 and verse 27, Isaac had prayed that he was to be the field that the Lord has blessed, abundant with sort of grain and grapes for new wine.

Nations were supposed to serve and bow down to him and he was meant to be lord over his brothers. But now there doesn't seem to be any clear path towards these things for him.

Not from where he is at the moment, sleeping on a rock in a hard place. But then as he falls asleep, verse 12, it says, He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth with its top reaching to heaven and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

There above it stood the Lord and he said this, I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south.

[6 : 19] All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

Now this is the first recorded encounter between God and Jacob. And we can assume that it actually is the first encounter, not just what's recorded.

Just by the reaction. from Jacob. But again, even though it's all new for Jacob, those of us who have been reading Genesis so far, we would have seen the repeated patterns, wouldn't we, of these events.

We would have known that just as God had done with Abraham and Isaac, God was now doing a similar thing to Jacob. First, see how God reminds Jacob who he is.

He says, I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and Isaac. God had appeared to Abraham in a dream too and made the same promises, not only to him, but afterwards also to Isaac to have descendants like the dust of the earth, possessing the land to the north, south, east and west.

[7 : 32] And so for Jacob, he would have been thinking, wow, to think that this hard and barren place was actually the promised land.

This was not just a piece of hard, a rock in a hard place, but this is actually the land on which God has promised to bless my fathers.

Further, God promised to be with Jacob as well, just like with Abraham and Isaac. And this promise was to hold good even as Jacob was about to leave the promised land for a time.

Because God says, I will bring you back to the land and I will not leave you until I've done what I promised. And so even though we remember last week that Jacob had stolen the blessing deceitfully, God graciously affirms Isaac's blessing over him.

Because after all, it was actually God's idea in the first place. He was the one who had predestined for the younger to be the chosen one and through him for his offspring to be a blessing to many nations.

[8 : 43] And so for Jacob, this was an unexpected but needed encouragement. And it was amazing that Jacob not only heard God's voice, he was also given a vision of God's presence.

For in verse 12, we see that in the dream, Jacob sees the angels of God ascending and descending along a stairway or ladder between heaven and earth.

Now, this is a picture of God ruling the world, ordering his affairs, and then using his angels as messengers to bring about his plans in this world. And in particular, God also had plans for Jacob.

It's no wonder that when Jacob awoke from his sleep, he answers the words of verse 16, Surely the Lord is in this place and I was not aware of it. What an amazing statement, isn't it?

God was here and I didn't know about it. God has been with him after all, and this was not a random accidental spot. But God had brought him to this place to meet him, to assure him of his presence and to reveal to him his promises.

[9 : 51] Next in verse 17 though, we read this. He was afraid and said, How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God. This is the gate of heaven.

Now, Jacob doesn't use the word awesome the way we do nowadays. It's not like when you see your friend coming to church wearing a new puffy jacket and you're so impressed you say, Awesome!

No, rather this is a response of reverence and fear. And that's what normally happens, isn't it? When someone sees God's display of power and majesty.

And so struck by this was Jacob that in verse 18 and 19, he starts to build a pillar or monument with the rocks that he was sleeping on. And even though the place already had a name, we read of Lutz or Lutz, he renames it Bethel, which means house of God.

Now, why is this place a house of God? Particularly when, you know, there's no physical structures or buildings to justify it. Well, I think he calls this the house of God because this is where Jacob met God.

[11 : 01] Or rather, where God came and met him. And although God now promises that, you know, he'll be with Jacob wherever he goes, this encounter here, this meeting between Jacob and God is a special one because it's in this place, at this place, that God has given Jacob a special revelation of himself and of his plans for him.

It is here that God not only reveals himself to Jacob, but he lays out his plans for the world, which he's going to fulfill through Jacob. Here, Jacob has a glimpse of God's activity in this world, how God is actively ruling and making history.

It's as though in his dream, sort of a spiritual portal has been opened and Jacob is able to peer through it to God's throne room. And that's why I think he calls it the gate of heaven.

He's standing there looking into heaven. And so vivid is this vision that I believe it is what now guides Jacob as he continues on his life or journey.

God has given him direction and purpose. Now, of course, this idea of house of God is something that's developed throughout the Bible. The idea of God meeting with his people at a place.

[12 : 28] And so later on with Israel, the temple of Jerusalem becomes the house of God. It's where God appears to his people. And more importantly, it's where God speaks to them and reveals himself and his will to them.

And then as we get into the New Testament, we discover that the ultimate house of God is none other than the person of Jesus, which is why we had our New Testament reading in John tonight.

When Jesus spoke with Nathanael, he said that Nathanael will see angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man, that is, on himself.

Now, when Jesus said this, it was a clear reference to this passage tonight, to this incident with Jacob. And Nathanael, who was a true Israelite, would have understood that. And by saying this, Jesus was making an extraordinary claim.

He was claiming to be the one from now on through whom God will reveal his will and his plans. He was also saying that it was through him now that God will accomplish all his purposes for this world.

[13 : 35] And of course, we know that that's ultimately fulfilled by his death on the cross, where God, through his Son, reconciles himself to humanity.

Friends, if you're new to church today, tonight, and the Christian faith, then I want to make this bold assertion for you tonight. And it's this, that if you want to understand what's going on in this world, confusing as it is, if you want to know what God is up to, then the place you need to look is with Jesus.

And in particular, to understand the significance of the cross. And this is true even for your own life. If you are trying to work out your purpose in life, what life's meaning is, then all is actually revealed in Jesus.

And it's particularly revealed in what he has done on the cross. If you understand Jesus' death, then you'll be able to see yourself as you truly are, created by God, deeply loved by him, and yet on the other hand, deeply flawed and rebelling against him.

And you'll be able to see that the only satisfaction, the only lasting satisfaction in life, comes by turning to Jesus, by believing in him, and then receiving the forgiveness for all the wrong you've done.

[15 : 02] And once you've done that, you also begin to understand the world around you, where history is heading, and what God's up to with this world.

I don't mean, of course, that, you know, all of a sudden you understand every detail of every event in history. No, but you start to get the big picture, the necessary worldview, is how we call it, so that you'll be able to interpret events, so that you begin not to be confused or afraid of what is happening.

You begin, for example, to understand and make sense of suffering. You understand both the good and the bad of human relationships, and you appreciate what life's all about and how to live your lives accordingly.

So, if today you still have these questions in your mind and in your life, then let me encourage you to come to Jesus, understand who he is, and make sense of what's happening in this world.

But let's come back to Genesis 28, because when Jacob awakes, as I said, he makes a pillar anointed with oil, and then he makes this vow to the Lord, verse 20. So, look with me.

[16 : 14] He says, if God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey, I'm taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's household, then the Lord will be my God, and this stone that I've set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me, I will give you a tenth.

Now, when I was growing up, it took me a while, probably because I was rather self-centered, but it took me a while to appreciate that God's many blessings to me actually came because of my parents' faithfulness.

In other words, I had my parents to thank for the blessings in my life. Now, for us, we're parents, that's pretty obvious, isn't it? But for the best part of my 20 years, my first 20 years, I sort of didn't get that.

But the truth is, for that part of my life, for that part of most of your lives, it is our parents that make most of the major choices for us.

They are the ones that provide us with opportunities, they impart us with wisdom and knowledge, and to the extent that parents make godly choices and God blesses and rewards them, then actually the children share in that blessing too.

[17 : 33] And in fact, that's normally how God blesses children, through their parents. Now, I know some of you may feel like you've missed out because you didn't think your parents were too good, but whether that's true or not, there also comes a time when everyone, even if they had great parents, need to start making choices for themselves.

And this is true with faith as well. Whether your parents were Christians or not, once you're able, then the time comes for you to decide if you too will follow Jesus.

Even if your parents are committed Christians, you need to decide for yourself if you will own the faith for yourself. And so I think for Jacob, this moment, this chapter tonight, represents that point in his life.

You see, up to now, God has blessed him through Isaac, I've said before. His knowledge of God's promise to him, well, he actually heard it from mom, right? And it was through dad's prayer of blessing for him that he's received God's blessing.

But now, Jacob has heard from God directly, hasn't he? For the very first time. And so, he needs to respond. And as I read his words, I have to say, if I was God, I probably wouldn't be too impressed.

[19 : 02] God, after all, had graciously appeared to him overnight, promised to bless him, to be with him every step of the way. And look now, how does Jacob actually respond?

What does he say? He says, if, if God will be with me and watch me, if he'll give me food to eat, clothes to wear, and if he returns me safely to my house, my father's house, then, the Lord will be my God.

And this pillar will be God's house. And I will worship him and give a tithe to him. Not very impressive, is it? At one level, you know, we can understand Jacob's response.

You know, he's got nothing at the moment. His future is uncertain. He's still at this sort of rock in a hard place. But still, that doesn't come as a, as a great response of faith, does it?

Because even if he's believed God's promises, what he's saying here is that actually, God, I want you to prove it first. Then, I will follow you. So I have to say, this is probably not a good example for us to follow.

[20 : 10] It's not in the Bible here as a, something that we should do like Jacob. And yet, God, being gracious as he is, he actually does not reject Jacob's vow.

Nor does he retract his promises of blessing. Rather, as we'll see in the coming weeks, God will still bless Jacob as he begins to train him in faith.

And as a result of which, God, Jacob's faith in God's promises, of confidence in God's promises will grow. And we think about it, that's probably how we are too, aren't we?

When we first begin, our faith in God is probably not very great, rather tentative. But remember, I've said probably before on other occasions, I've said that it's not the amount of faith that we have that's important.

Rather, it's the object of our faith that matters. Who we put our trust in is more important than how much faith we have. But as we take our first steps of faith, then God works by growing us in that faith.

[21 : 22] As we learn that God is trustworthy, our faith in him grows. So that more and more we'll be able to take God as his word and not put conditions on our faith just as Jacob did.

But the fact is that in order for our faith to grow, we need to actually take those small steps. We can't actually wait for God to reveal everything and then we take that one giant step. As God reveals those small steps of faith we are to take, as we read his promises in God's word, then we are to put our next step forward, one in front of the other, and put our trust in God.

So for example, you may not fully understand everything the Bible teaches or why God commands us to do certain things. But if for instance you realize now your need for Jesus and know that you need to turn away from your life of rebellion against him, then that's the small step of faith that you need to take now to believe in Jesus.

Likewise, you may not know God's entire plan for your life, but if you know that there are certain things that are pulling you away from God, perhaps it's a relationship that God doesn't approve of or the type of work that you're doing that's not good for you, then the small step of faith that's required is to start bringing these things to an end.

Even if you think, for example, it will jeopardize your dream to get married or your chosen career path, you may not know what will happen afterwards if you take this step of faith, but let this be my encouragement to you.

[22 : 59] Entrust even those fears and doubts to God as you step out in faith, but take those small steps of faith because you know that is what God requires of you. But of course, the best way to build our faith is to actually come back to God's word and to the promises that he's revealed in us, in his word, because as our knowledge and love of his son grows as we read the word, so will our faith.

And like Jacob, we too have a promise that God will be with us. Remember, I think it was two weeks ago, that verse, or those couple of verses in Matthew, at the end of Matthew chapter 28, which I've got on the slide.

God has promised to be with us until the end of the age. We can hang on to that promise just as Jacob had his promise. But unlike Jacob, God isn't promising to return us to the land of Canaan, but rather to a new heavens and a new earth.

And unlike Jacob, God's already done all that's necessary to fulfill this promise. Why? Because Jesus has already come and died and risen again.

So unlike Jacob, we're not looking forward to what God will do, but actually we're looking back to what God has already done, what he's achieved in Jesus. And everything that he says will happen as a result of that will happen.

[24 : 23] It's literally a matter of time. But of course, like Jacob, we don't have all the details of this time, like whether we'll live to a ripe old age of 100 or be married or single or will we be spending our life here in Melbourne or somewhere else or will we always be healthy.

These things God will reveal to us in due course. But as I said before, if we have that big picture of what God is doing in this world and what he's trying to accomplish in Jesus and gathering his people, his church, the body of Christ until the end of time, then we'll be able to trust God with the details and walk by faith, become a member of that body of Christ and then take those steps of faith as God presents them to us.

But as I said again, Jesus is the key to all we need in life and God has revealed him to us in his word. So let's keep coming back to his word.

Let's keep coming back to Jesus as we try and make sense of what's happening in this world and let's remember that God will be with us until the end of age. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you that you are patient and gracious God that even as you call us to put our trust in you and in your son, Jesus, you understand our weakness, and yet you keep calling us towards you to trust in you and as we do that, grow us in faith, grow us in certainty and confidence in your promises.

[26 : 10] So help us to keep our eyes on Jesus as you reveal yourself to us in your word and through Jesus. Help us then to be able to look on the events of this world, look on the events in our own lives and begin to understand what you're doing and therefore not be fearful or anxious but to know that you are guiding us every step of the way.

We pray this and ask this because of the name of Jesus. Amen.