

God Shows Mercy to Jacob

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[0 : 00] Verse 10. Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harem. When he reached a certain place, he 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. 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, 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. 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.

[1 : 06] When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, Surely the Lord is in this place and I was not aware of it. 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. Early the next morning, Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it.

He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am 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 have set up as a pillar will be God's house. And of all that you give me, I will give you a tenth. This is the word of the Lord.

Good evening. Thanks, Aileen, for reading. Thanks, Jack, for leading. Greg and the band for music. What a joyous evening. And I think I'm going to live with the memory of Santa Claus boxing someone for a long time.

[2 : 22] It's given me a new enthusiasm for Christmas. I won't pray. Jack's prayed for us. But just to say, my name's James. I'm on staff team here at St. Silas.

And if you're new here this evening, a really big welcome to you. It's lovely to see you. And this evening we're coming to the end in a short mini-series entitled The God of Jacob.

And Jacob's a good example for us to look at because we remember how in Psalm 146, the psalmist writes, blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord.

And so if we are to be blessed, then we are to look to Jacob as an example of how we can know God. By way of context, if you've got your Bibles open, we're right at the start of the Bible.

So we're after Adam and Eve. We're after the flood, after Noah. And we're after Father Abraham. And we're looking at Abraham's grandson, Jacob.

- [3 : 31] We remember, you might remember how God had given some very great and precious promises to Abraham. And in this evening's reading, we read really about the first of two great visions that Jacob has of God that brackets the section of Genesis that we're in.
- So let me ask you, as you're sitting here tonight, what would you do if you met God? It might be that if you were to meet God, you would be overjoyed at his coming.
- You'd be delighting. You've been waiting and praying to meet God for years and years and years. It might be that you're so busy in this life that you might try and ignore him when he comes.
- And you might pretend he's not there. Or it might be that you're sitting here this evening and you're thinking, well, quite frankly, James, that is never, ever going to happen to me.
- You see, I'm not the sort of person that God would want to meet. I'm not in his holy huddle. I'm not a God bod. I'm not a goody-two-shoes. If that last example is where you're at this evening, you're in the right place.
- [4 : 52] Because this is exactly the situation that Jacob is in in our story. You're in good company. And the story is really a story about how God breaks into Jacob's world in his mercy.
- And despite Jacob's best efforts, Jacob is changed because of this meeting with God. And so we're going to notice three things in our evening and how God interacts with Jacob.
- The first one is we're going to see how God meets Jacob in his need. And then we're going to look at how God assures Jacob of his promises. And then finally, we're going to see how the God whose promises Jacob trusts in faith.
- So the first one there, we're going to look at the God who meets Jacob in his need. And we're looking there at verses 10 and 11. And as our story starts here, we really meet Jacob at his absolute lowest ebb.
- And you may remember that God had promised that Jacob would rule over his older brother when they were born. And that he would inherit the promises that God had given Abraham, his great-grandfather.
- [6 : 07] But rather than trusting God that God would bring this about, Jacob, what did he do? He acted in trickery. And he stole those promises from his brother.
- He stole the blessing. He stole the birthright with the help of his mom. And at this point, you kind of think of Jacob as the bad guy, like that Billy Eilish song you might know.
- He's the bad guy. And the upshot of this sin is, well, that Esau wants to kill Jacob. So we read, we read, we skipped over this reading, but in verse 41 of chapter 27, Esau said to himself, the days of mourning of my father are near, and then I will kill my brother Jacob.
- And it sounds familiar, doesn't it? And so what happens is their mother, Rebecca, the mother of the twins, sends Jacob away under the pretense of going to find a bride to stay with her brother until Esau's fury calms down.
- And the result is that Rebecca will never see her beloved son again. That Jacob will end up pretty much in slavery to his father-in-law Laban.
- [7 : 24] And that Esau will remain utterly dissatisfied. You see, that's what sin does to us when we don't trust God. It ruins us and destroys our families.
- And so what do we see here? Jacob leaves. He's utterly destitute. He's got nothing to his name other than the promises of God. And so we read in verse 11 there that he set out.
- The sun sets on him. He's in an unnamed place with a rock for a pillow. Well, I don't have a family, so I thought I'd nick this illustration from Martin's family.
- I hope he doesn't mind. People like families, don't they? So it's a good thing to do. But when Martin was reading the story to his girls, the youngest exclaimed, a rock for a pillow!

And the point there is that's how bad it was. Imagine having a rock for a pillow. I wonder if you are sitting here this evening. You can identify with how things go wrong in life, how bad things can be.

[8 : 35] Obviously, I'm not really speaking to the students. You guys are in the best time of life. Life's amazing. Maybe you'll get a little older and you'll realize that sometimes life isn't brilliant, that it can be hard.

Maybe you've been through some really tough times and you're wondering if there's any hope for life, any hope for family, any hope for college, for uni, for your course.

And Jacob here is wondering perhaps if he can really trust the promises of God or has his sin and grasping and reaching out after things wrecked everything, wrecked all the good that he could have had.

And so Jacob may be wondering, what does God think of this? Does God even care? Is God even there? And so we move on to our second point of how God breaks in and assures Jacob of his promises.

And we're looking there at verses 12 to 15. And it's at this point that God breaks in. And what it really is, it's God's mercy being shown to Jacob as God meets Jacob in this dream.

[9 : 53] And in the dream there, we see God standing at the top of a ladder and he's standing in heaven and he's sending his angels down to earth to do his bidding. And it's a picture of God being absolutely in charge of creation.

And it's a picture of God's care for Jacob. And as the ladder touches the earth, it represents the place where the heavenly realm touches the earthly realm.

And so Jacob will later call that place the gate of heaven. He goes on to call it Bethel, the house of God. And he's using it there, not speaking of a particular place, but of how we might talk about somewhere that's particularly special.

How we might use the phrase hallowed ground. It's not a particular point, but a type of place that he's speaking about. And so the emphasis that Moses places here as he writes this is not on the exact location, but on the person, Jacob, who holds the promises.

You see, God tells Jacob who he is, that he is the God of his fathers, Abraham and Isaac, in verse 13 there.

[11 : 14] And I guess, I suppose he's saying there who he is. He's telling Jacob who he is. And then notice the phrase that God uses to announce himself.

I am the Lord. And that's the relational, the intimate, personal, promise-making name for God. You see, up until this point, Jacob hasn't known the Lord.

And so God is announcing himself and revealing himself to Jacob. And then notice if Jacob, at this point, had any doubt as to whether the promises made to his grandfather, Abraham, were still valid, what does God do?

He reaffirms those promises when he speaks to him and he makes them again to Jacob. And so what is he says? He promised Jacob a land in verse 13.

I will give you and your descendants the land on which you're lying. And then he says, you have so many descendants that they will fill the earth at the start of verse 14 there.

[12 : 20] Your descendants will be like the dust from the north to the south, to the east, to the west. And then he goes on to say that all the families on the earth will be blessed at the end of verse 14.

And considering Jacob's situation, these are really quite extraordinary promises, aren't they? Remember where Jacob is, where he was.

Never mention a land, he's completely homeless. He's got nothing to his name here. As for descendants, he's not even married at this point.

Everything seems so far off. As for being a blessing to all families on the earth, as our passage says, Jacob thus far, through his trickery, well, what has he done?

He's wrecked his own family and managed to tear them apart. But I want you to notice just how much further God's mercy goes in this passage.

[13 : 19] Look what he says in verse 15. He says, I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go. And it's literally there in verse 15.

It says, look, behold, see, I am with you if there's any doubt. And then he goes, God says, I will bring you back to this land.

And then God says, I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised to you. And the heart of it, really, is that God is a God who makes promises and keeps them no matter what.

And they're really extraordinary assurances of God's comfort for Jacob. You see, Jacob here is leaving behind him everything that he knows and loves.

Maybe you felt a bit like that when you're coming to university in Glasgow. I think I certainly felt a bit when I was coming out to Glasgow. But the promise of God and the blessing of God is that God is so great in his mercy that he says he will go with Jacob wherever Jacob goes.

[14 : 29] He will be with Jacob. And I wonder what it must have felt like for Moses' first year. It's all those years ago. They've left the safety of Egypt.

They're coming up. They're heading towards the promised land. And what's between them and the promised land? Fearsome enemies. What it might have felt like for them to hear these words.

Surely these words would have been enormously encouraging to them. God promises to go with them, to be with them, and to bring them home. He's promised them that to their great-grandfather despite all the hardships.

And I wonder what it might feel like for us tonight as we hear these words. Things might be really tough at the moment. Our worlds might be falling apart.

we might be feeling, thinking, well, it doesn't feel like God is with me. We might be wondering, how can I get through any of these great problems that I've got going on at the moment?

[15 : 32] And some of those problems you might have made yourself. Some of them might be there through no fault of your own. But God promises to go with you.

It's enormously encouraging. And the promise passage that God gives Jacob in this passage in his great mercy was true for Jacob then. And it was true for God's people as they're heading towards the promised land through the Egypt, through the wilderness.

And it's true for us tonight as we sit here at St. Silas. That God will go with us. That he'll bring us not into an earthly land, but into a heavenly land as we trust Jesus.

and that God will not leave us until he has done what he has promised. And the reason that God can be so confident in these promises is that he's entirely in control.

Just look down at verses 13 to 15 there. And I wonder if you might count how many times that little pronoun I comes up there. I will. I. I.

[16 : 38] I'll do this. God's speaking of himself. And I think I've got seven there. And who's he doing it for? I wonder if you noticed. Well, what's the repeated word? He's doing it for you.

Everything that will happen to Jacob depends on God. Jacob gives nothing. He offers nothing. He contributes nothing. He can do nothing. It is all on God and on his mercy.

Well, in the words of Kanye West in that song, it's on God, isn't it? Everything is dependent. On God. And in the one sense, the entire Jacob story is about Jacob learning this one idea, this one point, that it all depends on God and not his own efforts.

And in a sense, the story of our lives is all about us learning this one point, that it's all dependent on God's mercy and kindness and nothing, utterly nothing, we can contribute to that, to our salvation and to our ongoing dependence on God.

See, this is how one commentator put it. He says, the history of salvation does away with personal glory. It's all about God. Nothing you can give.

[17 : 58] So how will you respond? How does Jacob respond to this amazing mercy and kindness? Well, that's our third point there. The God whose promises Jacob trusts in faith.

And we're looking there at verses 16 to 22. What happens is, well, Jacob wakes up and he is immediately emphatic in his newfound faith and trust and belief in God.

Look what he says in verse 16. He says, surely the Lord, surely. It's emphatic. And notice here, Moses, he knows every detail about the dream.

He keeps the place of where this happens deliberately vague. We know it's near Luz, but it's not exactly at Luz because he wants us to understand that the place, wherever that is, is where Jacob is because God is with Jacob.

And so, what we see here is God's mercy erupts into Jacob's life like a hurricane. And look how Jacob responds. It's a model of response.

[19 : 06] So Jacob acknowledges God's reality. Look at verse 16 there. Surely the Lord is in this place and what? I was unaware of it. God is real. He is here. And then he becomes awestruck and aware of his inadequacy before Creator God in reverential fear.

Look at verse 17 at the start there. He goes, he was afraid, Moses writes, he was afraid and said, and then, look, as his grandfather, the great example of faith, Abraham, had built an altar to God's faithfulness and protection at a different Bethel in chapter 12.

And you might remember looking at that in our root studies before leaving the land and going down into Egypt and then coming back and building it out. So here, in verse 18, what happens?

Jacob builds, sets up a pillar and names it Bethel, the house of God. And then finally there, we have Jacob's vow of faith and gratitude towards God.

I wonder if we might just take a look at it for a moment. So we remember that Moses is writing to encourage his first hearers in faith and dependence on God.

[20 : 19] They're going to the promised land. And that the great strapline for Genesis, no matter how bad things get, God is still in charge. And so Moses is urging his first hearers to take God at his word.

The word given to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob, and to Moses. To take hold of those promises by faith. And so Moses records his vow here because it is an example of faith and not an attempt to manipulate God.

It's an example of trusting God that he is in charge when everything else has gone wrong in his life. Here's how one commentator puts it. He says, Jacob made this vow on what God had guaranteed to do.

And so he was taking God at his word and binding himself to reciprocate with his own dedication. And so the great grasp of Jacob, well, he becomes the great giver, Jacob.

God's mercy has broken into his life. And the great blessings that Jacob has and recognizes here is not, and the great blessings that Jacob has and recognizes here are not actually the blessings themselves, but what they represent.

[21 : 41] that God has given them to him in his mercy and that God has called Jacob into relationship with him.

That's the great blessing here. So, finally, just heading into conclusion, as we come to land, we too, like Jacob, can know this blessing.

Listen to how Paul puts this in his letter to Titus, chapter 3, verses 4 and 5. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done.

Why? But because of his mercy. And the question, then, is when did God appear? When do we meet God? In a sense, we meet God when we come together on Sundays and we see Christians loving one another in kindness.

When we live God's way, day by day, as we see others around us living God's way, we see God then. And that's why it's so important that we keep on coming to church, that we keep on meeting together, that we are united, that we keep on loving one another more and more.

[22 : 56] But we also meet God clearly when we read about him and what he has done through his son, Jesus, in the Bible. And as the Holy Spirit makes the scriptures live to us, that God has spoken fully and finally through his son, that Jesus died in our place on our behalf for our sins when we were still hopeless and helpless in our sin.

And in Jesus we are given life. And the great truth of the gospel is that Bethel is not a place but a person, Jesus. And that when Jesus was on earth, God sent his ministering angels in the words of the apostle writer John that they were ascending and descending not on a place but on the Son of Man, Jesus.

And then we remember Jesus' words to his disciples right at the very end of Matthew's gospel. Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.

And if all this is true, then the only question that remains for us that having met God, what shall we do? Let me close for us in prayer.

So Father, we thank you that we can grasp those very great promises by faith that we are heading to a country, to a land, a heavenly land and we pray that we would grasp them more firmly day by day, trusting in the death of your son, Jesus.

[24 : 38] Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.