

Intro: 500 Miles

I'm sure everyone knows the song *500 Miles* by the *Proclaimers* & its famous chorus; *"I would walk 500 miles & I would walk 500 more. Just to be the man who walks a thousand miles to fall down at your door."* Well for Jacob it was a 500 mile walk from his home in Beersheba to Haran. He of course left home to escape his brother's wrath & to find a suitable wife. This became a journey that kept him away from his family home for almost 20 years. Not only did Jacob end up walking 1000 miles to bring home the woman of his dreams, he also ended up working 14 years to have her hand in marriage. Our reading today records a defining spiritual experience Jacob had near the beginning of this journey at the place he named Bethel. I've divided the sermon under three simple headings - Jacob's Journey, Jacob's Dream & Jacob's Response – which will serve as stepping stones to bring us where I believe God's Word leads us this morning.

1. *Jacob's Journey (28:10-11)*

I've already mentioned the distance of Jacob's journey & that in this passage he is near the beginning of this journey. Jacob was not someone who was accustomed to travelling; he was the home bird. Esau on the other hand would have been better suited to his kind of long & dangerous journey. He was the hunter used to sleeping rough & defending himself in the open country. For Jacob this was way outside his comfort zone. Yet it was when Jacob was away from the comforts of home & the influence of his parents that he encountered God for himself. Up until this point in the story there is no record of Jacob having a personal encounter or relationship with God like his father Isaac or Grandfather Abraham. That all changed during his dangerous 500 mile journey to Haran, that all changed at Bethel.

Jacob had two very unusual experiences of God. The first happened here when he was fleeing from Esau on his way to Haran & the second took place when he was fleeing his uncle Laban & returning home. He gave names to both places – **'Bethel'** (The House of God) & **'Peniel'** (The Face of God). Yet between these two extraordinary encounters there were two decades in which Jacob was tested & tried which all served to mould his character. The purpose of God was as active in those two decades as it was in those two extraordinary encounters. The life of faith & pilgrimage in this world can include unusual & significant encounters with God but more often than this it will include testing & trials. This is how we grow in faith & godliness. This is how it was for Jacob & like him we are on a journey. Let's look closer at Jacob's Bethel moment as we move on the second stepping stone.

2. *Jacob's Dream (28:12-17)*

At this point let us not forget that this long & dangerous journey is necessary because of the conniving & trickery of Jacob & his mum Rebekah. Jacob is simply reaping the consequences of his actions; this included

not seeing his family for almost 20 years. There was a huge cost to receiving the blessing from his father by means of deception & as I mentioned in the previous message there is a warning in that for us.

YET – and this is a big yet – it is at this very time that the grace of God shines in this story & shines on Jacob... It shines just after he has done his worst. It shines as he is reaping the consequences for his own actions. It shines when he is way outside his comfort zone. It shines during the most dangerous journey of his life. It shines when God gets this schemer asleep. The reason I point out that this is nothing but the sheer grace of God is because it is only words of grace that he receives from God here. Did you notice that? He is promised land, offspring & God's blessing (13-14). He is promised God's presence & his safe return home (15). There are no words of rebuke & there is no demand for repentance! Only promises of grace! All Jacob got here is underserved, unearned & unexpected assurances from God. Bethel – the House of God – was a place of amazing grace!

Jacob is in a place of loneliness, isolated from his family, away from home for the first time, way outside his comfort zone, in a place of danger & uncertainty with a stone for a pillow & yet it was in the middle of all this that he had this significant & life changing spiritual experience. He wasn't looking for God, he was running from the consequences of his own actions & it is here that the grace of God found him. It was words of grace that reassured him that in spite of his conniving God was still with him & God would bring him back home.

It was the grace of God that conducted the orchestra of Jacob's slow repentance! That is the gospel!!! It is not our repentance that conducts the grace of God it is the kindness of God that leads our heart to the tune of repentance. It is the sound of grace that slowly tunes our hearts to repentance... Grace comes in surprising *moments* but it always begins a *journey* of transformation. For Jacob this grace was unsought & unexpected but it would eventually lead him to repentance. Derek Kidner comments how; *"Jacob was no pilgrim or returning prodigal, yet God came out to meet him... taking him wholly by surprise..."*

Now let's jump back onto the first stepping stone for a moment before moving onto the third: Bethel was a night of grace which evidently left a lasting impact. However Jacob still had most of the journey ahead of him & two decades before his return home (which God had now promised). Bethel was a moment when God's grace shone through clearly & I'm sure Jacob thanked God for that moment many times in the years that followed. BUT Bethel was not his everyday life experience.

We too can thank God for Bethel moments but everyday life is not all dreaming of angels. How nice if it was. Jacob had to get up in the morning & continue his dangerous journey, he still had to face consequences for his actions, and even reaped a bit of what he sowed in the years that followed. YET he was now able to face all this with the promises of grace he received at Bethel. Every day is not a Bethel experience, but every day we do have the promises of grace & the assurance of his presence we received

at Bethel. God's presence is obvious at Bethel but God is just as much present in everyday of our journey... it is the vision & promises given at Bethel that help us in everyday life.

Let me bring this home a bit more in the words of C. S. Lewis; *"There presence of God is not the same as the sense of the presence of God. The latter may be due to imagination; the former may be attended with no "sensible consolation"... The act which engenders a child ought to be, & usually is attended by pleasure. But it is not pleasure that produces a child. Where there is pleasure there may be sterility; where there is no pleasure the act may be fertile. And in the spiritual marriage of God and the soul it is the same. It is the actual presence, not the sensation of the presence, of the Holy Ghost which begets Christ in us. The sense of the presence is a supper-added gift for which we give thanks when it comes."** The sense of God's presence at Bethel, which was real, would wear off but the promise of God's actual promise would remain & sustain him over the decades ahead. The dream which pictured a spiritual reality gave Jacob important promises that would see him through years of hardship. This is so important to grasp in the journey of faith!

Jacob's Response (28:16-22)

Jacob response was initially awe; he was more taken up with the One he encountered than with the things he was promised. His response initially flowed from a worshipping heart which was a great place to start. The pillar & the oil are regular symbols of memorial or consecration. The pillars later forbidden were tokens of Baal & objects of worship. Symbolism is not wrong unless it symbolises something contrary to God or becomes an object of worship itself.

Jacob is often criticized for appearing to bargain with God in these verses. However, imperfect as his response was it was the best response he had at the time & there is no mention of God being displeased. Notably Jacob saw his tithe as giving back a tenth of what God had given him. In Scripture tithing was voluntary before it was commanded. We also see in his response his understandable desire to be able to return home, this is what Jacob seemed to zoom in on out of all God promised. If God could do this for him then he was God's. I think it is worth pointing out that Jacob never asked this of God, he is simply repeating what God promise & holding him to it. Anyway, if truth be told none of our responses to God's grace are ever perfect or complete. Yet because grace is grace our imperfect response does not deflect what God has unconditionally promised us.

Conclusion: Jesus Our "Bethel" (John 1:51)

One thing I didn't point out when we were thinking about Jacob's dream was three 'beholds' which draw attention to three aspects of what Jacob seen. Verses 12-13 read; **"And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the**

God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac.” There may well *“be a contrast between the angels on God’s errands to the earth at large, & the Lord dealing in person with Jacob”* (Kidner). The dream shows that while heaven & earth have been ripped apart because of sin there is still overlap. God is working out his purposes on earth & Jacob was central in that purpose in spite of his conniving & circumstances.

Centuries after this story Jesus takes these very images to refer to himself when talking to Nathanael; **“Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending & descending on the Son of Man”** (John 1:51). Here the angels go from heaven to earth not on a ladder but on Jesus himself. Jesus, in others words, is the ladder! He is the place of connection between heaven & earth; he is the house of God & gate of heaven. Jesus is our “Bethel”! Jesus is God’s grace to us & he is the vision of grace to help us face everyday life. He is the mediator. He is the One who has promised to be with us until the end of the age. He is the Lord who stood at the top of Jacob’s ladder & he is the Lord who came down that stairway & stood beside us for a time bringing the kingdom of heaven everywhere he went & dying on a cross to secure a place for us in that kingdom. He is the One who will ultimately unite heaven & earth together again completely & eternally. He is the One who personally comes in grace & calls & seals us by his Spirit while his angels runs God’s other errands on earth. Jesus directly uses this story to help us understand who he is & what he came to do. For Jacob this was a significant spiritual dream, for us it is spiritual reality in Christ & encountering this reality demands some kind of response.

Jesus is the ladder, Jesus is the house of God, Jesus is the gate of heaven, Jesus is our Bethel!

Sources used for this sermon

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*C. S. Lewis quote is quoted in Rankin Wilbourne’s book *Union With Christ*, David Cook, 2016.