



**Sermon Notes: Cameron Webber,  
"Stairway to Heaven"**

**19 May 2024**

**Readings: Genesis 28:10-22, John 1:43-51**

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### **Introduction**

With that reading from Genesis, what comes to mind? Perhaps this...

*Play the introduction to 'Stairway to Heaven.'*

There's not too many opportunities that you have to play Led Zeppelin in church, so you grab them when you can. I'm sure that music was recognised by many, but just in case that was not familiar to you, it was the introduction to the quintessential Rock Song of the 1970s - Led Zeppelin's 'Stairway to Heaven'.

It has that lovely guitar intro which is forever being played by wanna-be guitarists in music shops all over the world, despite being 'banned' in many. It's been the subject of a lawsuit for plagiarism. It's in the atmosphere and recognisable to many, even those who are not fans of Led Zeppelin or into rock music. And that 'iconic' introduction is quite beautiful, leading into the opening lyrics... *There's a lady who's sure all that glitters is gold and she's buying a stairway to heaven.* And as the song goes on, the music gets a little louder (with an 'iconic' guitar solo about 6 minutes in) and the lyrics get a little weirder... *If there's a bustle in your hedgerow, don't be alarmed now, it's just a spring clean for the May queen.*

I don't think anyone actually has a clue what it means, not even Robert Plant, who says, *"just about everybody has got their own individual interpretation to it. Depending on what day it is, I still interpret the song a different way and I wrote it."*

Well that's very nice for Led Zeppelin, but today we are considering a different 'Stairway to Heaven.' We are considering Jacob's "Stairway to Heaven". As we heard read, "Jacob had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven." (Genesis 28:12)

But unlike Led Zeppelin's song, the meaning here is clear, the interpretation doesn't change every day of the week, the meaning is there in the narrative, and the fuller meaning is explained in the NT. So let's pray as we come to hear what God is saying to us through his Word.

### **Prayer**

#### **1. The Distress Jacob Is In**

And today as we look at perhaps what is one of the better known parts of the Jacob's story, we need to be mindful of the distress Jacob is in. Distress might not have been the first thing you thought of as we read it, but some 20 years later, as Jacob reflects on this time, he calls it the day of his distress (35:3). And he was in distress as he arrived at Luz because he has been living up to his name.

##### **1a. His Deceptions**

You will remember when we began the story a couple of weeks ago that Jacob was born grasping at Esau's [his older twin brother's] heel, so was named Jacob (25:26). The name Jacob literally means 'grasps' and metaphorically means 'deceiver.'

And we have seen Jacob's Deceptions. We have seen him deceive his brother Esau twice. First, he tricked Esau into selling birthright at a moment of weakness. And then, secondly, he

cheated Esau out of receiving the blessing that Isaac had planned for his oldest son. And it's that second deception that has him on the run.

Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. 'The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob.' (27:41)

Rebekah hears of it and says to Jacob, 'Your brother Esau is planning to avenge himself by killing you. Flee to Harran.' (27:42)

No wonder this is a 'day of distress.' And it all been compounded by his dependencies.

### **1b. His Dependencies**

As we've seen in the first couple of weeks, Jacob is a bit of a home-boy, 'content to stay at home among the tents.' (25:27b) Whilst Esau the hunter was his father's favourite, Jacob was his Mother's favourite son (25:28) and it seems Jacob is relying on his mother.

When he steals Esau's blessing, it is Rebekah who is the active one, telling Jacob what to do. And Jacob does what his mother wants despite his personal concerns (27:8-12).

And not only is he dependent on his mother, but the dependency displayed there also seems to extend to his relationship with God. As Jacob heads off, away from home - prior to the stairway dream - what do we know about his faith and his relationship with God? Not much! Nothing has been said at all.

Now we have to be careful drawing arguments from silence but we note that Abraham - his grandfather - had encountered God and responded to the call and the promises of God (Genesis 12:1ff). We see that Isaac - his father also responded to God (26:24-25a). Abraham and Isaac have some sort of faith relationship with the LORD God, but as Jacob heads off there is no indication that he has had any sort of encounter with God or made any response to God.

And his words to his father (whilst pretending to be Esau) are telling. When asked how he found the game so quickly, Jacob says to Isaac, 'The LORD your God gave me success.' (27:20)

Jacob knew about the LORD. He knew that He was the God his father worshiped. He had heard the stories and of course his father's God is in some sense his God, but he knew about God but without really knowing God. His 'faith' (to the extent he had any) is dependent on his father's faith.

What about you? Is God your God? Or is he just the God of your upbringing? Do you know God or just know about him ?

God cannot yet be called the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, though that is about to change.

Despite a relatively warm send-off (28:1-5), to find a wife from amongst his relatives, Jacob must have been frightened leaving home. The quiet home-loving boy, rather dependent on his mother, is forced to flee because of his deception of his brother.

And now on his first night away from home he lies down under the stars, perhaps wondering if there was anything in his father's pious hopes for his future; if there was anything in the Abrahamic blessing he was given as he departed (28:3-4).

No wonder he calls it the day of his distress. On the run from a brother threatening murder; away from everything and everyone he has depended on.

And exhausted after his day's journey, he lies down with a stone for a pillow. And feeling a million miles away from his mother, feeling far from the God of his father, he falls asleep and begins to dream.

**2. The Dream Jacob Has**

And the dream Jacob has is no ordinary dream, not REM sleep, and although he is distressed, this is not the product of a disturbed mind. It's not so much something imagined but something real as God really speaks to him in this dream.

Dreams are used by God throughout the OT and in the NT and still, at times, today. They are not a bad way for God to get our attention, when we find it hard to sit still long enough when we are awake to let him get through.

A significant numbers of Muslim converts to Christianity report dreams of Jesus speaking to them.

And here Jacob dreams of a stairway to heaven. Sometimes it's translated as ladder, but it matters not. It's well represented in art and sculpture and it's worked its way into some hymns too.

This stairway, resting on earth, with its top reaching to heaven, is connecting heaven and earth. This connection emphasised by the angels ascending and descending on it. But the focus in the dream is not stairs or angels, but the LORD, the God of Abraham and Isaac, (28:13) there above the stairway, or possibly translated (as in the footnote), there beside Jacob.

**2a. God's Promises**

And He, the LORD, the God of Abraham and Isaac, announces to Jacob that he wants to be his God too. The promises previously given to Abraham and to Isaac now given to Jacob.

The blessing given to Jacob by Isaac as he sent him on his way (28:3-4) is now reiterated to him by the LORD himself (28:13-14).

Even though Jacob is on the run, away from the promised land, he is promised that land, he is promised numerous descendants, he is promised that through him and his offspring, all peoples will be blessed!

These are the big promises of God's plan of salvation, of his covenant made with Abraham, the promises that run right through the Old Testament, that find their fulfilment in Jesus...

**2b. Fulfilled in Jesus**

...who is the offspring – through whom blessing would come, through whom salvation comes as we place our faith in Jesus, who died in our place, taking our punishment that we may be forgiven as we repent and turn to him.

And not only does Jesus fulfil the big promises made to Jacob, he fulfils all that Jacob's encounter with God represents. Jesus himself, when Philip brings Nathanael to him as we heard in our gospel reading from John 1, picks up this account of Jacob's dream, and says, 'Very truly I tell you, you will see "heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on" the Son of Man'(John 1:51).

Jesus is saying, 'Watch my life, ministry, death, resurrection, because I, Jesus, am now the stairway.' Jesus is the connecting point between heaven and earth. He is the one who enables God to be our God.

And as Jacob dreams, the big promises of God, are also tied to the distress Jacob is in. Big promises that echo through the generations to Jesus are accompanied by a promise so pertinent to Jacob's present situation: '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.' (28:15)

That's a particular promise to a particular person at a particular stage in salvation history, but it is a promise echoed throughout the OT and into the NT, and onto us. As Jesus promised, as

we are about his work of making disciples, 'Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matt 28:20) And on this Pentecost Sunday we know Jesus is with us through the Holy Spirit who indwells all put their faith in Jesus.

### **3. The Discovery Jacob Makes**

Jacob's experience - although a dream - is tangible and real. He knows the LORD is in this place. He has encountered the living God - for himself. And so when he awakes from his sleep he doesn't say, 'That was weird. Maybe the goat meat sandwiches Mummy packed for me were off.' No! He says, 'Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.' (28:16)

What a dream! And what a discovery for Jacob! The God of his fathers can be his God too. In his grace, God has reached out to Jacob, the grasping deceiver, who is on the run. In his grace, God has called Jacob, though he clearly didn't deserve it. In his grace, God will use Jacob's offspring, the Lord Jesus, to bring about his redemptive purposes for the world. And Jacob exclaims, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.' (28:17)

The gate of heaven because the stairway reached into heaven, and the house of God, because God was there - even in this desolate place. The LORD was not some localised deity, but the God over all the earth.

And so Jacob sets up the stone, he changes the name of the place from Luz to Bethel, which means House of God. It was a place he remembered and a place to which he will later return.

#### **3a The Vow Jacob Makes**

And look at his response (28:20-21). 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.'

This doesn't strike me as a conditional / sceptical response, 'Well let's see if this happens, and if it does then the LORD will be my God.' Rather I think it is a response of faith. The footnote suggests an alternate rendering of the more positive, 'since' rather than a conditional 'if'. It's more like, 'Well since that's what is going to happen, the LORD will be my God.'

#### **3b The Worship He Offers**

And I think that's the best understanding when you what he does. He makes a positive response of worship in the best way he knows how. '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.'

He has encountered God, or perhaps rather God has encountered him, and now we can say, "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." He is not perfect, the journey ahead – physically and spiritually – is long. God hasn't finished with him yet, but now he has met God personally and now his journey really begins.

### **4. The Declaration We Must Make**

So what about us? God came to Jacob, not when Jacob was seeking him, but when Jacob was far from Him. And we don't deserve God's gracious intervention any more than Jacob, but as we read in Romans; 'God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.' (Romans 5:8)

And just as God encountered Jacob on that stairway at Luz, he comes to encounter us in Jesus Christ, because Jesus is the stairway. He is the one connecting point between heaven and earth. He is the one who enables God to be our God. Jesus is the one in whom we encounter God. Jesus is Bethel - the place, the House of God. It's the way the temple was later referred to. The temple was the particular place of the presence of the God who is everywhere, and now for us as the New Covenant people of God, we are the place of God's presence and as we

respond to him he 'will be with us and will watch over us wherever we go.' We are Bethel, the dwelling place of God - by his Spirit. And that's true for us as Christians individually (1 Corinthians 6:19) and also as church, as God's gathered people. (1 Corinthians 3:16).

And just as Jacob had to come to that place where the LORD ceased to only be someone else's God, and become his God, so we too, have to encounter God personally. And just as Jacob had to respond to revelation he received, we too have to respond to the Word of God as the Good News of Jesus is proclaimed.

For me, that first time of a conscious, personal response was when I was about 10 years old at the Christian Endeavour group of the local Anglican Church I attended with my family. And that has been a 'place' I have had to return to, particularly on several specific occasions of recommitment, such as when I left home to go to Uni and when I really had to decide afresh, 'Is this my faith, or just the faith of my family?'

And the question before all of us is, Have you personally responded to what God has done in Christ? Is God your God, or is he just the God of someone else, the God of your upbringing and parents, the God of your spouse, the God of your social setting, the God of your religious practices? Do you know God or just know about him?

In *Stairway to Heaven*, that song that no one understands, with its *bustles in hedgerows*, there is one bit I think I understand. Robert Plant sings, *Yes, there are two paths you can go by, But in the long run there's still time to change the road you're on.* And in one live recording you can hear him add a bit more as almost despairingly he says, *I sure hope so!*

He's right; there are two paths you can go by but in the long run; is there time to change the road you're on? The longer we trundle down the wrong path, keeping God at arm's length, the harder it can be to change the road you're on. And since we are talking rock songs, it has been well observed that there is a 'Highway to Hell' but only a 'Stairway to Heaven' and that might say something about the expected traffic numbers.

There comes a point when we need to respond and know the Lord is my God and I am going to journey with him, and to respond with all that we are, not just playing at religion but moving from 'the Lord your God' to 'the Lord my God.' And there are times when we need return again to that place in recommitment and re-affirm 'the Lord is my God.'

There is a danger for those of us who grow up in the church that we never actually respond personally to God. Children and young people may have a second-hand faith that can wither when they leave home and church.

Or we can stay in the church because that's the 'club' to which we belong, without personally knowing God.

But don't wait for a dream of stairways. This is Bethel - the House of God - right here, right now, not because it's a special building but because God's people are gathered in Jesus' name and God is present by His Holy Spirit. This is Bethel because this is the place of God's presence and revelation as he speaks to us through his Word as it is read and proclaimed, and by His Holy Spirit – who takes that Word and drives it into our hearts.

### **Conclusion**

This morning/evening if you are aware that God is in this place, if you are aware that God is calling you or calling you back then respond, accept his offer to be your God.

If you want to talk with someone or pray with someone then head over to the prayer corner as we finish our service, or seek me or Steve or someone outside to talk further.

And if like perhaps most of us, you have made that response to the grace of God, then commit afresh to live in the light of your vow that the Lord is your God. Live a life of worship - not so much putting up a stone and pouring oil on it (though concrete expressions and actions are

helpful) but particularly as we, as Paul tells us (Romans 12:1-2) 'in view of God's mercy, to offer ourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God which is our true and proper and reasonable worship, not being conformed to the pattern of this world, but being transformed by the renewing of our minds.

### Prayer