

Jacob and Joseph

The Persistent God

Scripture:

Read Genesis 28:10-17 as a group.

Introduction:

“There’s a lady who’s sure, all that glitters is gold, and she’s buying a stairway to heaven. When she gets there she knows, if the stores are all closed, with a word she can get what she came for. Oh oh oh oh and she’s buying a stairway to heaven.” Aside from Robert Plant’s amazing vocal performance, the lyrics from Led Zeppelin’s famous tune *Stairway to Heaven* are imaginative and evocative – but even more than that – they capture the human hearts’ pang for transcendence, our desire to belong, and our suspicion that this world might not be our final home.

The “stairway to heaven” motif finds a home here in Genesis 28. In the previous chapter, Jacob has deceived his father Isaac and brother Esau, stealing his father’s blessing through trickery and deceit. A boiling feud between brothers is the predictable outcome and Jacob finds himself on the run from Esau, alone in the wilderness, and searching for a potential spouse within the home of his uncle Laban. As we pick up the story, the sun is setting both literally and figuratively on Jacob. He’s left the comfort and security of family and is about to enter a long and difficult season of trial, error, searching, and failing. Yet even as his dark night of the soul begins, God meets with Jacob uniquely and personally within a dream and with a message that permanently impacts the direction of Jacob’s life.

As Jacob drifts to sleep, the Lord reveals the imagery of a ladder (or stairway) that reaches all the way into the heavens. There are angels ascending and descending upon those stairs, but the focal point of the dream is God himself who stands above the ladder. Certainly the original readers of Genesis would have been reminded of another set of stairs whose builders attempted to reach the heavens. The builders of Babel (Genesis 11) wanted significance and security apart from God, a building project that didn’t work for them, one that hasn’t worked for Jacob, and one that won’t work for us. Ian Duguid writes, *“God came to Jacob at his lowest point in order that it may be seen clearly that all is of grace – unmerited, undeserved favor – and not at all of human effort and skill.”* This is why this specific dream makes such a deep impact on Jacob. He hadn’t earned the promises of verses 13-15, in fact, just the opposite. He has seemingly disqualified himself from God’s blessing through his failure, deception, and lying. And yet God lowers himself down the ladder, reaching out to Jacob, letting him know that no matter how far Jacob falls or how far Jacob runs, he is “with him and will keep him wherever he goes.” Ultimately, we learn that Jesus is the stairway to God (see John 1:51). He’s the pathway to significance and security. He’s the one who meets us at the bottom, in the dark night of the soul, in our search for love and belonging. He doesn’t force us to climb the ladder. He comes down to us. And this is no dream, or wish, but the reality of our Savior.

Reflection: Take personal inventory of your life, heart, and spiritual journey. Use these prompts as a way to prepare for group discussions or for personal times of prayer.

1. Honestly answer the question: What’s your stairway to heaven? If you died today and were asked about why you should be welcomed through the “pearly gates,” what would you say?
2. How do failures and losses impact your sense of self and identity? How do those same losses impact your relationship with God? Do they drive you away or closer to Him?

Discuss:

1. What about the sermon stood out or impacted you the most? Do you have any follow-up questions about the sermon?
2. Think about Jacob’s background: his mess-ups, his trickery, his aloneness, even his very name. Then consider the promises of verses 13-15. The longer you consider the dark hole Jacob’s dug for himself, the more verses 13-15 will drip with grace. This certainly impacts Jacob’s response to the dream in verses 16-17. What do you see in these verses? What principles can you draw out for your own experience of God?
3. Discuss this quote by Ian Duguid: *“If Abraham is the archetypal man of faith, Jacob is surely the archetypal picture of grace. The schemer whose wonderful schemes have backfired is now a fugitive on the run for his life, stranded in the dark in the wilderness. Yet this is the one to whom God chooses to reveal himself, and his grace will not be without effect in Jacob’s life.”*
4. **Missional Living:** God, again and again, comes after his people. He’s hungry to “be with us and keep us wherever we go.” No matter the missteps we’ve taken, God’s grace overcomes them all. His pursuit of us is the ladder we need to reach him. This principle is the heartbeat of missional thinking. It softens us to want to reach others with the news of God’s grace. As a community group, how can you keep missional living out front? How can you make this a group priority?

Apply:

Notice Jacob’s vow in verses 20-22. He essentially says that since God has moved so far to be gracious to him, he can’t help but be moved to generosity too. Grace always prompts action. Read the book of James if you disagree! Stagnancy in Christianity is a misnomer. We don’t love, serve, and give *to be loved* but because we’ve been loved in Christ. Are you stagnant? If so, how come? Are you on the move? If so, how can you maintain healthy momentum?