

Jacob's ladder

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[0 : 00] Turn with me now to the book of Genesis, chapter 32 at verse 29. Genesis, the 32nd chapter, the 29th verse.

And the last portion of the verse, the words, and he blessed him there. The history of Jacob takes us back to times when no inspired scripture existed.

And God revealed his will to chosen men by means of dreams, visions, and angel messengers.

Before his experience at Peniel, Jacob had received several communications from God.

The earliest of these was given at Bethel, when Jacob was in flight from his brother Esau whom he had wronged.

[1 : 25] There, as Jacob lay asleep, his head pillowed on stone, God came to him in sovereign mercy and love.

He appeared to Jacob to speak with him from the top of a ladder that extended from where God was to the place where Jacob lay.

God announced himself as the God of Abraham and Isaac. And he established with Jacob the same covenant that he had already made with each of them.

Canaan was to be the possession of his descendants. They were to multiply and prosper. And in due time, all nations would be blessed through them.

As for Jacob himself, God promised to go with him. To protect him wherever he went. And in due time, to bring him back again to his father's home.

[2 : 55] Now, to this unexpected, awesome, and comforting revelation, Jacob responded by reverently anointing a stone pillar as a memorial of it.

And by vowing that if God kept his promise in watching over him, providing for him, and bringing him home safely again, he would worship and serve God.

And give him a portion of all that God gave to him. Now, let us pause here for a moment and recall that Jesus, in his conversation with Nathanael, implied that the ladder which Jacob saw, extending from where he lay to where God was, was a type of Christ himself, who is the one mediator between God and men.

Who said of himself, I am the way. No man comes unto the Father but by me. Jesus Christ, my friend, who is all the way.

From where you are and as you are this evening. To God's merciful forgiveness. God's sufficient grace. God's everlasting covenant of faithfulness.

[4 : 39] But to return to Jacob. After the dream at Bethel, there came many years of hard toil, great distress, and great prosperity.

As he served his unscrupulous uncle labor. But now all that lay behind him. And he was on his way back to Canaan at God's bidding.

But before he entered the land, which God had promised would be the possession of his descendants. The land where he had promised he would worship and serve God.

God had a further lesson. And a further blessing to give. And we find in this chapter, the method that God adopted in communicating that blessing.

and that instruction. It is in that connection that we have. He blessed him there.

[5 : 51] And there are three things to which I invite your attention in turn and briefly this evening. Three things connected with these words.

And he blessed him there. First, there is a memorable place. Never after his experience at Peniel could Jacob possibly forget that place.

But at the same time, before he had the encounter of which we read in this chapter, the region was a memorable region for him.

It was a place of humbling recollections. For one thing that came vividly to mind when he came back to this place, his poverty and loneliness when he had seen it about 20 years before.

He owned only the clothes that he wore and his only companion was his staff. But now, he had a large company and considerable possessions.

[7 : 17] And as he contrasted his previous experience with his present lot, he was filled with a humble recollection of all the undeserved kindness that he had enjoyed at God's hand during the intervening years.

And as you come to the beginning of another communion season and look back, back it may be to the last communion season, back far beyond it in the case of some of you to many communion seasons that lie behind you, have you not to acknowledge the great patience and the great kindness that notwithstanding all your personal unworthiness and two of us is worthy in God's sight.

Notwithstanding all your personal unworthiness, God has bestowed upon you. And more recently, God had delivered him from the hostile intentions of his uncle, Laban.

And God had given him a vision of angels at Mahanaim to assure him that he was not travelling alone, uncared for and without protection.

And these were humbling recollections, but there was another that was even more humbling. For he remembered not only the plight in which he was when he had last been by the brook Jabbok, but why he had been there.

[8 : 57] He had been there because he was in flight in consequence of the sin he had committed. And now that he was back at that place after so many years, he was not only confronted with the memory of that sin, but with the possible terrible consequences of that sin.

Through, we may assume that the God of Bethel had pardoned that sin when he visited Jacob at Bethel and blessed him.

But it is one thing, my friend, to have sin forgiven by God so that it will no more be mentioned by him against us and that it will not stand against us at the day of judgment.

And another thing to be rid of the consequences of sin in this life, the consequences of sin in the injury we may have done in our sinning days to our own persons and the sin, the wrong that we may have done to others that is irreparable.

It may confront us and hinder us years afterwards. One has written of his own experience and how that happened to him in these words.

[10 : 13] He talks of places and persons that he had sinned and he goes on to write thus, And the ghosts of forgotten actions were passing before my sight and the sins I thought were dead sins were alive with terrible might.

Well, here was Jacob in panic because he heard at that place that the brother whom he had wronged was coming to meet him with 400 men and he dreaded the destruction of his company and his inheritance.

And so we find that next it became for him a place of anxious preparation. Anxious preparation.

Now, in the preparation, he prayed and he planned. But I want to think for the sake of convenience of the planning first and then look at the prayers afterwards although the prayers were interspersed.

Jacob, having heard of the threatening danger as he took it to be, divided his company and his possessions into two and separated them by some distance in the hope that if Iso came with his 400 men and attacked one company the other might perhaps escape.

[11 : 46] He then prepared a very large gift to be sent on a head to his brother Iso. And the measure of his anxiety may be seen in the greatness of the gift he provided.

Perhaps we get the impression about Jacob that he had been up till now a man who would not readily have parted with anything that belonged to him if he could hold on to it.

But here was a gift of 580 animals sent on in front of him to his brother Iso. And a succession of men in charge of each group of animals with a considerable space between them and each one commanded to speak in most respectful and humble terms to Iso to assure him that this was a present from Jacob and that he was following after.

And then after all that was done he was uneasy in the course of the night and he rose up and he sent the whole company over the ford Jabbok.

He was on the boards of Canaan. and he himself remained alone. Now there are some commentators who take it that all this anxious preparation and precaution on the part of Jacob is an evidence that he placed more trust in his own planning and scheming than he did in God's protection.

[13 : 38] Now the impression that we gather from scripture of Jacob's behaviour in Syria serving his uncle is that he depended a very great deal on his own scheming.

And it may well be that at this time he was more self-centred than God-centred in his attitude to life. and we are all apt to be that.

We may pray but perhaps we pray after we have done something and ask God's blessing upon what we have done rather than praying for guidance before we do it as to what we should do.

However we must not overstress that interpretation of Jacob's conduct. there was nothing wrong in his taking the necessary precautions to protect his possessions and his family.

There was nothing wrong in doing his best to appease his brother's anger. And I was interested to see that Thomas Chalmers takes a very strong line in one of his daily readings on this point.

[15 : 00] He says prayer and prudence may go well together. He goes the length of saying that it would have been presumption on Jacob's part in the circumstances to go on to meet his brother without having done something the best that was in his power to appease him.

And so we recall also that he was acting in line with a saying of Jesus Christ. We readily remember no doubt what Jesus said about forgiving those who have wronged us.

We have it in the Lord's prayer forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And he emphasizes the importance of forgiving others as we continually depend ourselves upon the forgiveness of a merciful God.

But there is another saying of Jesus which we probably do not remember so well and it is this making use of the imagery derived from the religious practices current in his time Jesus said if thou bring thy gift to the altar and there remember that thy brother has ought against thee leave there thy gift upon the altar and go be reconciled to thy brother and afterwards come and offer thy gift.

If said the psalmist if in my heart I sin regard the Lord he will not hear. then we come to the earnest prayers for this memorable place became a place of earnest prayers now the prayers are to a number we have something of the content of the first prayer we read very little of the second prayer but the circumstances in which it was offered but the first prayer that Jacob offered may be an example to us in several respects he addressed God as the God of his father the God of Abraham and Isaac now in those days and for many a day to come

[17 : 36] God in his merciful condescension chose to be known as the God of Abraham Isaac and later on of Jacob himself he associated himself with these three men with the promises he gave them with the lives he enabled them to lead in so far as these lives were led in accordance to God's will and Jacob came and prayed to the God of his father well it is a good thing if we can pray to the God of our father it means that we have had the privilege behind us of fathers who feared God but it was a much better thing that Jacob could go on and claim him as his own God it will not contribute to your salvation as meritorious in itself that you were brought up in a godly home friend that you were prayed for that you were set a godly example unless and until by the grace of

God you make their savior and their God your savior and their God committing yourself to him for salvation and for service now Jacob could do that but you can do something more than Jacob could do in claiming God as the God of his God for you can pray to him as the God and father of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ who spared not his own son but gave him up the just for the unjust to provide a way for sinners like you and me to come to God and be reconciled to him be reconciled to God rings out the voice of the gospel for he made him to be sin for us who knew no sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in him and then Jacob pled God's promise for God had commanded him to return to the land of Canaan and promise to deal well with him but on the back of that he immediately acknowledges

God's goodness to him and is utter unworthiness of it I he says I'm not worthy of the least of all the mercies bestowed upon him and then he comes to the point at issue at the moment and appeals for deliverance from Egypt from Esau and joins with that a further promise of God taking hold of the God of his father and his own God he pleads his promises he acknowledges his unworthiness he has no merit to plead it was of God's great sovereign love and mercy that he bestowed all these blessings upon him but he appeals unworthy as he is for God's help in the difficult situation in which he finds himself it is good to be mindful of God's mercies it is good to be humble with a sense of unworthiness of God's mercies it is good to seek the grace of the

Holy Spirit for that through humility which is not natural to the sinful man or woman but we may come before him and plead no merit of our own that his great provision through Jesus Christ his son and if we are his the exceeding great and precious promises which are yea and amen in Jesus Christ relating particular promises to our own need as we may be directed by the Holy Spirit but the second prayer carries us to my second main point and that is a mysterious encounter I said at the beginning or near the beginning that God had a further instruction and a further blessing to bestow upon Jacob before he entered the land of Canaan now God had his own chosen could have come to

Jacob as he came at Bethel and spoken directly to him given him the necessary instruction and bestowed upon him the blessing the same blessing as he mentioned at the end of as we find at the end of this chapter but God didn't choose to do that and he had a wise purpose in not doing it it is not easy for us to see into the profound depths of God's purpose at this time but we can gather something of it instead God confronted Jacob with an encounter on the part of an unknown person the person is variously described in scripture we are told here that there wrestled a man with him that was how it appeared to

[23 : 00] Jacob at the beginning but at the end we find that Jacob said he had been face to face with God the prophet Hosea describes the person who wrestled with Jacob or with whom Jacob wrestled as an angel but he also mentions God in connection with the encounter so that we are left with the impression that we are here a commissioned angel representative of God encountering Jacob I do not know that scripture permits us to go further at any rate this was the method that God chose he permitted Jacob to suppose that in the darkness some unknown man perhaps Jacob may have thought it was someone sent by Esau to assassinate him some unknown man had gripped him and seemed determined to overthrow him and get the mastery of him and believing this to be an unknown enemy determined perhaps to kill him

Jacob threw all his strength into the struggle with this unknown adversary and the unknown adversary permitted Jacob for a considerable time to suppose that he was prevailing against him so that Jacob may have thought that it was only a matter of wearing down the strength of his adversary or watching for an opportune moment when he might get the better of him and overthrow him and rid himself of him but then suddenly at a touch Jacob had a painful incapacity inflicted upon him that prevented him from wrestling anymore with vigor that left him helpless in the hands of his adversary and then it was permitted to him that he should get some light on the meaning of the conflict here was a person who evidently had been patient with him had him in his power all the time had reserves of power and in whose hands he was helpless and the light broke and he realized that this must be a supernatural being and then he realized that he must be a representative and messenger of

God and then we have the request of his adversary that he might let him go well such an adversary didn't need to appeal to Jacob who clung to him to let him go he could have broken free but obviously he had a purpose in saying let me go for the day breaks and Jacob now fully persuaded that he was in contact with an angel of God and clinging to him earnestly besought him to bless him said he would not let him go unless he blessed him and we are told by the prophet that he wept so earnest was he that he wept in craving the blessing there as he was helpless in the hands of this supernatural being he pled with this being as God's messenger and representative to bless him now it was at that point that

God was prepared to give the blessing to Jacob he had brought him to a point where it was impressed upon him that he was entirely dependent upon God's mercy upon God's patience upon God's goodness and so God sometimes allows us to pray on helps us to pray on you see the psalmist in that psalm we were singing part of which we sung psalm 63 said this my soul thee follows hard why because thy right hand sustains me it was God that was helping him to follow hard after God it was God's messenger that allowed Jacob to prevail so far to appear to prevail so far that dealt patiently with him and was at this point ready to bless and Jacob once he had realized this grasped the opportunity he was near to

God's messenger the one who represented God he was in touch with a blessing he didn't want to let the opportunity pass one is reminded of the unknown saviour outside the door of the disciples house at Emmaus making us though he would go further waiting for the petition abide with us and he went in and they got the greater blessing because they asked it because they seized the opportunity because they were unwilling to let him go and my friend if in the hearing of the word in these days you feel that Christ is near at hand you feel moved to seek a blessing from plead with all your heart for the blessing say I will not let it go except thou bless me let it come from that by the spirit self from the depth of your being not necessarily the first blessing of forgiveness but a blessing such as Jacob got for an enrichment of character a transformation of life a blessing that grew until

[28 : 43] Jacob was a totally different person from the person he had been before for this was a what was said in his spiritual experience and then we pass in the last place to the manifold blessing we do not know what all was in Jacob's mind when he pled so earnestly for the blessing doubtless at such a time he sought mercy and grace from God that would make him a man different from what he was and what he had been but it could not be in the particular circumstances in which he found himself it could not be that there was far from his thought what had been so much in his mind during the day the desire that he should have an unhindered entrance to the land of Canaan and that he should be safe and protected in serving and worshipping God there and it may be that the question put to him what is thy name whereas it had other references that it had something to do with that the last time he had been in this place or shortly before it he had sought through

Isaac his father the blessing that would put him in possession as he thought of the land of Canaan and all the promised blessings of God in connection with it that he had said his name was Jesus he thought to obtain it by deception here he is seeking this among other blessings but he is compelled to say that he is in the power of God in the presence of God whose power he is he was compelled to acknowledge his name was Jacob the man who was the supplanter the man who had been the deceiver and in his own name he must plead for the blessing but the blessing that he got was far more probably than he ever imagined for there was an enrichment of character the reply to his confession that his name was Jacob was that he would no more be known as Jacob but as a man who had prevailed in prayer with God and through prayer would prevail with men he did it only because God permitted him to do it but God wanted to impress upon this man

I believe that it was of God's free unmerited grace and mercy that he would have blessing if he had it all along the line and it was for no other reason than his sovereign will and mercy that God was prepared to give him unhindered entrance to Canaan and Canaan for the possession of himself and his family now if we study the life of Jacob before and after his experience at Peniel I think we will notice gradual progress towards the manhood that God wished him to have he is more concerned to do God's will he is more concerned that so far as it is in his power his family will be rid of idolatry and will worship God as their God he is more concerned to have God's guidance on to the end of the way and he became a man of great influence a man who at the last could in dignity bless Pharaoh king of Egypt in God's name now then friend there are two prayers that I think are appropriate to us severally at the beginning of this communion season on a day that traditionally is a day of confession recollection and confession of sin in connection with communion when we think of the experience of Jacob here is one what the psalmist said to God after he had been thinking of God's knowing all his thoughts before they were uttered search me and try me and see if there be any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting but if you are still a stranger to grace and to God

I would direct your attention as I close to the passage we read in Hosea the prophet where he rebuked Jacob's descendants for conduct that resembled their ancestors earlier life rather than his later life and he said this to them and I am giving another translation of the passage than what occurs in an authorized person but a translation which I believe the Hebrew bears out by the help of your God return observe mercy and justice and wait on your God continually this is the call of God to you at the beginning of a communion season if you are yet without Christ if you are seeking him repent to every man and woman comes this call in the scriptures repent and we must go on repenting all our lives so long as we are having our sins discovered by the word of God and illumined by the spirit repent and believe on the name of the Lord

Jesus Christ two commands have you ever thought that it is a command of God this is his commandment that we believe on the name of his son Jesus Christ and love one another as he commanded may he grant us his spirit according to our several needs that we will turn to him with repentance of all known sin that we will seek a blessing that will spiritually enrich uplift us and make us more faithful and fruitful in his service while we continue here and if we are outside the kingdom that the good shepherd who came to seek and to save the lost may gather us into his fold at this season let us pray our blessed Lord we thank thee for the instruction of thy word forgive all amiss in our waiting upon thee bless the truth unto us help us seek the living God with our whole heart and mind grant unto us to be remembered with the love that thou bearest to thine own and visited with thy salvation that we may see the good of thy chosen and rejoice in their joy take us in safety to our respective homes lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil bless us throughout the approaching night bring us to the light of the morning if it be thy will fit and well and grant that the subsequent services of the communion may have thine own presence and blessing may speakers and hearers be blessed alike and the glory shall be thine through Christ

[36 : 33] Amen