

STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

Genesis 28:10-22

These opening chords may be familiar to you as the opening lines of Led Zeppelin's song "Stairway to heaven". If you're not into rock music then Rolf Harris may better spring to mind as he actually had a hit with it which is more than Led Zeppelin ever did!

If you know your Bible you'll know that a stairway to heaven is mentioned in scripture in Genesis 28. It's Jacob's ladder – let's read it.

Reading

LYRICS

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

Ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh
And she's buying a stairway to heaven

Buying a stairway? That's the view many people have of God. He's up there and we're down here and if we want to get there, we've got to buy our way on to the ladder or build our own. Here's our own JACOB'S LADDER here in Felixstowe. It's steep and gets us from the beach to the top of the cliff. There are lots of Jacob's Ladders in the world. They are all steep flights of steps. It's hard work or good exercise to climb such steps, depending on your perspective. That's how people see reaching God. It's hard work doing religious stuff if men want to reach God and unless you're fit, you don't make it. Most religion is about that – doing certain things that get us closer to God.

Abraham and his family all came from a culture where people worshipped the sun and therefore they built large towers or ziggurats that brought them closer to God.

ZIGGURAT

The Tower of Babel was probably a Ziggurat. In more mountainous areas, people put their holy places on the tops of mountains because they thought that it would bring them closer to God. That was the culture. THEY built the ziggurats, they established the high places. And they bought their stairway to heaven, or so they thought. No, but it didn't stop them trying.

Which brings us to Jacob. If you come in the evening, you'll know that we looked at the story of Jacob and his brother Esau or THE CRAMP TWINS as I call them. The Cramp Twins are cartoon characters, non-identical twins who are like chalk and cheese and neither of them particularly savoury characters. The same was true of Jacob and his elder brother Esau. Their parents weren't much better, each having a different favourite son. The story of course is that Jacob as younger brother would inherit much less than his elder brother so he engineered it so that he would get his brother's birthright and blessing. Jacob actually means "grasper or grabber" and he grasped what wasn't his by right. Esau was furious and vowed to kill him as soon as their father Isaac died.

For Jacob it was a case of exit stage left as Rebekah arranged for him to go to her brother Laban to find a wife amongst their people rather than the local Canaanites. But Jacob was effectively fleeing Esau who wanted to kill him. He wanted all the rights of an elder son and the blessings that came with it, but because he decided to obtain them by cheating, he ended up running away empty handed, rather like the bank robber who hides away, never benefiting from his ill-gotten gains.

And he arrives at this place called Luz and he pulls up a rock and goes to sleep on the ground and he has this dream of the ladder or stairway leading to heaven. The stairway was quite different to what Jacob would have imagined a stairway to heaven to be. How was it different?

◆ Divine Construction

This stairway went to the top! It reached heaven but rather than men going up it, angels were coming down and going up. Ziggurats and high places always stopped at a certain height, they never reached. It gives us a simple picture of what what has been the case since the human race disobeyed God. However much we try to build a link to God, we always fall short of His glory. That's what's said in Romans 3:23 ALL HAVE SINNED AND COME SHORT OF GOD'S GLORY. However we want to build, we always fall short.

What was so different about this stairway is that it was God's stairway and the traffic on it was all angelic. We sometimes have unfortunate pictures of angels. We imagine them as having wings and are dressed in white. Actually an angel is just a messenger from God and here we see a picture of angelic traffic. Angels coming to Earth, delivering their message and going back home.

What's significant about the ladder it tells us that even though we can't get up to heaven, we have a God who desires to reach to us across the gap we can't bridge. That's the amazing message of the Bible, God loves us and seeks us out. If you don't know God this morning and wondering how you are going to reach Him, look towards Him and you'll find that He's already come in the other direction!

◆ Divine Visitation

There's more to this passage than just God reaching out. The Hebrew is a bit vague here. Most translations put God at the top of the stairway, speaking down to Jacob. The Good News has God at the bottom of the stairway beside Jacob. The Greek translation of the Hebrew, the Septuagint, puts God at the bottom of the stairway. It may well be nearer to the mark than other translations. There were angels coming up and down, but God decided to communicate with Jacob personally. He came down the steps and dealt with Jacob personally.

What a wonderful picture of Jesus this gives us. God Himself so desired to bless us, He came to us. God visited this earth as a human being – Jesus. He desires to know men and women personally and not only has He dropped his ladder He's come down Himself to give us a leg up!

◆ Divine blessing

God has come down to bless us. He became human to open that way for us to reach His glory. We may have sinned, disobeyed God, ignored Him, dismissed Him in our lives. We may realise that and our guilt has made us give up bothering about Him. Many people do that.

Yet Jesus came to use, became one of us, died as one of us – and suffered so that we may find God's forgiveness and find a way to God. This picture of Jacob's ladder is a picture of God's grace. His unmerited favour for human beings. We can't reach Him but He has reached out to us.

This story is truly a picture of God's grace. You see God had already purposed to make Jacob, the crook the channel by which the promises to Abraham and Isaac were going to be achieved. Jacob had certainly not earned those blessings and definitely didn't deserve any sympathy. He had cheated his own brother and he had to go away. God met him in his failure.

It reminds me that God seeks to bring blessing to human beings, not in their success, but in their failure. If you've never trusted Jesus before, God reaches His hand across the divide to you again this morning and asks you to take it, find forgiveness, and find life.

RESPONDING TO GOD'S GRACE

Our God is gracious. None of us has deserved His attention, love and care. Yet in Christ we get all of these and find ourselves being recipients of some amazing promises.

How did Jacob respond to God's grace? Let's look. VERSE

Then Jacob made a vow to the LORD: "If you will be with me and protect me on the journey I am making and give me food and clothing, and if I return safely to my father's home, then you will be my God."

Jacob had the most amazing dream and the promises of Abraham and Isaac repeated to him. He was clearly taken aback by the vision he had. He had been in a holy place and he had understood that God had made a covenant with him. So he makes a covenant with God. Great - not! Because his covenant has a proviso. His vow was what we just read. If this happens .. then I'll God's promise was unconditional, Jacob's was conditional.

You've heard the message this morning. You know God is calling you. It may be to trust Jesus for the first time. God's promise to you is completely unconditional but are you making excuses. "It's inconvenient at the moment". "I'll put it off until later". "I'll believe if God does this that or other in my life". How do you know even if you'll see tomorrow. God's hand is stretched out to you now, take the opportunity – it might be the last one.

Maybe you are following Jesus but you've been running away from God in some way or other. Perhaps He's calling you to make a big change in your life. You've not been honouring Him and you're saying "I will put it right but.." Jesus says "Follow me". Perhaps God has been calling you to serve Him in a different way and you've been making excuses. God offers us the blessing. He offers to pour His Spirit out on us. He offers us a closer relationship with Him. But we put it off.

Jacob put it off. He decided to follow God only if he returned. He did return but in the meantime he spent many years in Haran unchanged, being cheated by his family and he cheating them – business as usual. It took a much more dramatic encounter with God to bring him to his senses. Of course, that's when he found himself running away again.

If you have received God's blessings through trusting Jesus, but then like Jacob just do you own thing, the consequences can be painful. And it is all avoidable if only we are prepared to walk with a God who has come to us and desires to bring His blessings to us.

One thing clear from the New Testament is that God makes his promises unconditionally to us, yet to be healthy and grow as followers of Jesus, we must be prepared to trust and follow Him unconditionally. Unfortunately we tend to be like Jacob and make conditions. Praise God, we might be conditional but He remains unconditional and continues to seek us out. We'll discover more about that next week, but the message this week is: don't run from God – just take His hand, find forgiveness, follow Him, trust Him.

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