

Jacob Gets the Blessing, Part 2
Genesis 28

Turn to Genesis 28 please. These Genesis stories are stories of a very human family, four generations of this family, and God's blessing on that family. God's plan from the first time he spoke to Abraham was that he would eventually offer this blessing to all the nations.

And that happened through Christ and our faith in him. The NT makes clear in several places that we Gentiles who follow Christ have inherited this very blessing. So these stories are important for us. They show us in real life what kind of people God blesses, and what the blessing is, and how it works.

None of these basics have changed very much, and that's why these stories give us such a good foundation to understand our relationship with God.

Does God Care how we Live?

Karli asked me some good questions after the last sermon, things I had been thinking about. Why does God bless this family, in spite of their failures, their sins. Does God not care how we live?

First of all, faithfulness to God will bring great reward by the end, and rebellion against God will bring judgment at the end. That's clear already in the garden, when Adam and Eve had to choose between the two trees. The Bible is consistent about that.

In our Genesis stories, though, the first thing we need to grasp is how determined God is to bless his people. He wants to bless and will bless those who respond to him, even when there are also serious failures in their lives. In Genesis, God wants to bless us, that comes first.

In Exodus, God gives his people the ten commandments, and they build a tabernacle so he can live with them. That's God teaching us more about being his people and living in his blessing.

In Leviticus, we find out that God is holy, and that sinful people are not safe in his presence. They need sacrifice and atonement to be safe in his presence, and God shows them how to sacrifice to him and make atonement, so he can continue to bless them and live among them.

So God care how we live, absolutely. But in the Bible that is not the first thing God wants us to see. The first thing the Bible shows us, in these Genesis stories, is how much he wants to bless those who respond to him and worship him.

No one ever earns God's blessing. There is teaching around and books that will say if we do this or that, we will get this or that blessing from God. That never works out well, does it. God wants to bless and does so, but God cannot be managed, not at all. He can only be served.

Review of “Jacob gets the Blessing part 1”

Now to Jacob getting Abraham’s blessing. We’re picking up the story half way through. We went through Gen 25 and 27 in eight sections, and every one of those showed some failure in family life, each one demonstrated a problem in the family. The family God blessed was nothing like a perfect family.

Two key events. One, Jacob stole his brother Esau’s blessing from him. At his mother’s command, Jacob willingly lied to his father Isaac, pretended to be Esau, and ended up with his father’s blessing. Jacob got the blessing intended for Esau, by fooling his father.

Two, Esau wanted to kill Jacob in revenge, so Rebekah their mother arranged for Jacob to flee to Haran, 500 miles away. Rebekah herself told her son Jacob to flee, and Rebekah also persuaded Isaac the father to send Jacob to Haran. And that’s where we pick up the story in Genesis 28. We’ll go through Gen 28 in seven sections.

1, Isaac Blesses Jacob, This Time Knowing it is Jacob (28:1-5)

Isaac called Jacob and blessed him. And he commanded Jacob, “Don’t marry a Canaanite woman. Go to your mother’s family, and marry one of Laban’s daughters.”

And then Isaac gave Jacob, who had just recently deceived him, a great and wonderful blessing. “May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful. May he give you and your descendants the blessing of Abraham, so that you possess this land, where you now live as a foreigner.”

(People, we will get this. Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” We are foreigners now, but when the earth is renewed, it will be ours. This blessing is ours, too.)

Isaac said to his son Jacob, “May God Almighty bless you, and make you fruitful, may he give you the blessing of Abraham, so that this land will belong to your descendants.” We must give full credit to Isaac here. He wanted to bless Esau, the son he loved. Jacob lied to him and stole the blessing. But when Isaac found out, he turned around.

Isaac can see that God had something else in mind than what Isaac wanted. Perhaps Isaac remembers that God told Rebekah, “the older will serve the younger,” and Isaac can see now that this is what God is doing. He gives Jacob the full rich blessing of Abraham.

Why did he not say these things to Esau? Isaac would like to have given all this to Esau, but at no point does Esau show any interest in God, so Isaac’s hands are tied. And for all his failures, Jacob is a servant of God, and Isaac knows it, and Isaac decides that when he mistakenly blessed Jacob not Esau, that was God’s doing. And Isaac cooperates completely. He’s impressive.

2. Esau Learns about his Wives (28:6-9)

Esau heard about this, about Isaac telling Jacob not to marry a Canaanite woman, he heard that Isaac blessed Jacob, knowing it was Jacob. And Esau sees that Jacob obeyed his father and his mother and went to Haran.

Then, apparently for the first time, Esau realized that his Canaanite wives displeased his father. I do not understand how Esau could have missed this. We read in Gen 25 that his wives brought grief to both of his parents. Esau did not notice this for quite a while.

Esau realized, when Isaac sent Jacob away, that his Canaanite wives displeased his father. We know that they displease his mother at least as much as his father. But Esau does not care at all about his mother. Rebekah said, “why should I lose both my sons in one day.” She knew she’d lost Esau for good, and she was right.

So Esau took a third wife, who was not Canaanite. And as for the rest of Isaac’s blessing to Jacob, the blessing of God Almighty, and the blessing of Abraham, Esau still shows no interest.

3. Jacob Dreams, the Stairway to Heaven (28:10-12)

Let’s talk first about the stone pillow. Probably not right. What it actually says in Hebrew is that Jacob took some of the stones there, and put them at his head. It’s the same line as in 1 Sam 26, where King Saul had a spear “at his head,” and in 1 Kgs 19, where Elijah woke up and a loaf of bread was “at his head.” The Hebrew word translated “under” here can mean all kinds of things, and “under” is not the most common. (I have a very good commentary, Gordon Wenham.)

So in Hebrew it says that he took some of the stones and placed them at his head, probably around his head, a fence or barrier of sorts. After the dream, he set up one of them as a reminder.

Isaac had a dream, and in the dream he saw a ladder or stairway resting on earth near him, its top reaching right up to heaven, and the angels of God were going up and going down on it. Jacob is at the bottom, God is at the top, angels going up from Jacob, coming down from God.

This is a wonderful picture, and not hard to figure out. Angels are God’s servants. They are not going up at down for exercise. They are serving God, when they go up, and when they come down. We are at the bottom, those who inherit Abraham’s blessing are at the bottom, and God is at the top. The angels are taking messages, or carrying stuff, the specifics there are not the point.

God’s heavenly servants are going up from us and coming down from him, all the time. That’s what it means to be blessed by God, to inherit his blessing.

Jacob’s life did *not* suddenly get easy, his troubles did *not* end, not even close to that. Nevertheless, God’s heavenly servants were going up to God and coming down from him, continually. I love this. Imagine the bottom of these ladder where you sleep!

4, God Blesses Jacob (28:13-15)

And God spoke. “I am Yahweh, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants this land. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, will spread out everywhere. All the peoples of earth will be blessed through you.”

“And, Jacob, 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 promised.”

Verse 15 begins with the Hebrew “behold,” which the NIV ignores. *Behold, I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go.* Jacob, I really am with you and will watch over you.

Get this straight, Jacob, and don’t forget it: I am with you and will watch over you. *Behold, I am with you, and will watch over you wherever you go.* God says this repeatedly to every follower of Christ, it’s common in the NT, and God means it every bit as much to us as he did with Jacob.

“I will not leave you until ...” does not mean God will ever leave Jacob. God means that his protection and help will outlast all Jacob’s travels. God is saying, “I will see this all done.”

When Jacob was very old, he moved to Egypt, and this God said to that old Jacob, “Don’t worry, Jacob, I’ll go with you to Egypt, and take care of you.” God does not leave us.

Just about everything in this blessing we have heard before in Genesis. God said these things directly to Abraham, and then he said them directly to his son Isaac, and now, in the dream with the angels on the stairs, God is saying this for the first time to Isaac’s son Jacob.

Jacob’s blessing came in three parts. First, Jacob stole Isaac’s blessing from Esau, and Isaac blessed Jacob when he thought he was blessing Esau. That was a good blessing, but limited.

Second, Isaac blessed Jacob when he knew he was blessing Jacob. That was a greater blessing, direct about God Almighty, and including the blessing God gave Abraham. And lastly, out in some lonely place, leaving home frightened on a long journey, God himself blessed Jacob directly. God confirmed what Isaac had already said, and God added more to it.

5, Jacob’s Response in the Night (28:16-17)

After the dream, Isaac woke, still in the night, and said to himself, “Yahweh himself is for sure in this place, and I did not know. This is not an ordinary place.” He was afraid, and said, “this is a God place. This can only be the house of God, the gate of heaven.”

Jacob assumes that there are certain places on earth, which, from that place, there is a gate into heaven, a gateway to God. The stairway showed him this, the stairway from his place right up to God, angels going up and down. That’s what the house of God is, the gate of heaven.

And Jacob now believes that he happened to lie down and sleep at just such a place, which is why he had this dream. Now remember, God just told him, “I will be with you and watch over you *wherever you go*,” not just with you in that place. Still, for Jacob, that is a special place, a God place, the gate of heaven opens at that place. That’s Jacob’s response in the night.

6, Jacob’s Response in the Morning (28:18-19)

Early in the morning, which seems to be a bit later, Jacob took a stone. “Stones” in v11 is plural, and here it is singular, so we assume he took one of the stones that he had put by his head, and he set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on it. Perhaps Jacob set the stone on end, or maybe put it on another stone, and poured oil on it. Do you have a place where you have often met God?

Jacob could not leave that place without somehow acknowledging the place. And he named it Bethel, which means “house of God,” even though the place already had another name. House of God, Gate of Heaven.

7, Jacob’s Vow (28:20-22)

In the OT, people made vows to God. “God, if you will do this for me, I will do that for you.” I don’t recommend the kind of thing I talked about a couple of weeks ago, the kind of vow where we will do something for a long time. I’ve made others like that and broken them. I kept that one only because the Lord decided to box me in and give me no choice on it.

The normal OT vow is to say, “If you get me through this trouble, if you get me through this day, I will praise you in the congregation for helping me.” God considers that a fair exchange. Sometimes they added a gift, a one time thank offering of some kind. If we will praise God openly and thank him, God considers that a fair exchange.

Jacob said, “IF God will be with me, and will watch over me on this journey, give me food and clothes, so that I come safely back home, THEN Yahweh alone will be my God, and this stone pillar will be God’s house, and God, I will give you a tenth of all that you give me.”

We think tithing began with the Law, but it began before that. Both Abraham and Jacob gave God a tenth of what God gave them. But the important line here is, “of all that you give me.”

We have nothing of ourselves. We come into the world naked. Everything we have after that we have only because God gave it. Maybe we work hard, but God gives that, too, and not to everyone, and he can take it away, and sometimes he does. Giving is one of our responses to his being with us and watching over us and taking care of us, everywhere we go.

God did what he promised. Twenty years later, Jacob and his wives were coming back from Harran to Bethel, and Jacob told his family, “We’re going back to Bethel, where God answered me in the day of my distress, and who has been with me wherever I have gone.”

That night, where Jacob set rocks around his head and he dreamed about the stairway leading to heaven with angels going up and down, and God at the top, Jacob called that “the day of my distress.” He was scared of Esau behind him, and scared of who knows what up ahead, and he was alone. But God answered him in his distress, God kept his promise. Jacob went back and kept his vow.

Let’s summarize. This two part sermon shows how God’s blessing moved from Isaac to Jacob. First, Jacob stole Esau’s blessing, he lied to his father, and received Esau’s blessing deceitfully.

Second, soon after that, Isaac blessed Jacob again, when he knew it was Jacob, and it was a richer blessing, a blessing for a servant of God.

And third, fleeing after that to Haran, to escape Esau, who had every right to be furious with Jacob, God came to Jacob and gave him the richest blessing of all.

None of this is tidy. There is family mess in all of this. But God had decided to start blessing with that family, and through that family to offer that blessing to all nations. The stories show us that people have never deserved it, or earned it. Blessing, at the center, is never God’s reward.

The reason for God’s blessing is within God himself, his great urge to bless people. He wants to and he shall. These people’s failures all brought consequences on themselves and on each other, painful consequences. But God still said, “Don’t be afraid, I will bless you, I will be with you wherever you go, I will take care of you, and I will bring you to a good place of your own.”

This is our God. We come to this God, we trust in this God. We worship this God. From the first time God spoke to Abraham, God said he wanted this blessing to go to all the nations. That was his plan, from the very start. And he did so through Christ, and so we are blessed now. Amen.

PRAYER: God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, you are kinder than we thought. You are more generous than we thought. You gave us these early stories so we would understand you. Thank you for not ever leaving these people, for always being with them, and taking care of them in their troubles. And thank you for the stairway, and the angels, always going up from us to you, always coming down from you to us. O God, we are no more deserving than Jacob. I am certainly not. But if you will be with us, and take care of us, you will be our only God, and we will praise and thank you, and give our offering of all you have given us. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord bless us and keep us. May the Lord make his face shine on us, and be gracious to us. May the Lord turn his face toward us, and give us peace. Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.