

THE GRAND ESCAPE.

No. 4. Stairway to Heaven.

It was a dark night. Weary and miserable, Jacob found a sheltered spot on the ground and put a stone in place for a pillow: no inner-spring mattresses in those days. He fell into an exhausted sleep. Genesis 28:10ff tells the story.

But God had not forgotten His promise. He looked down on this wayward, broken man and in love reached down to him. His message came in the form of a dream, a vivid dream that Jacob was never to forget.

Back in the city of Ur there was a great ziggurat, a pyramid with stepped sides and a shrine at the top for the worship of Ur's chief goddess. Up the side of the ziggurat there was a steep stairway, the remains of which can still be seen today. It is most probable that Abraham had recounted memories of such a place to his grandsons; the image of the stairway would have been lodged subconsciously in Jacob's mind. And that was what God used to get through to him.

Our loving God treats us as individuals, using ways that are familiar to us in order to give us His message. Like a wise father He knows His children and treats them exactly as they need in their own circumstances. We only need to ask honestly for His guidance and He will give it in a form we can understand.

On the stairway in this dream angels of God were going up and down, while above them stood God Himself, speaking directly to Jacob. But it was not a condemnation, a rebuke for the mess he had made, a stern warning to mend his ways. It was a message of love and hope and a reinforcement of His promise to Abraham. Verses 13-15 are rich with blessing – possession of the very land he was traversing, innumerable descendants, and the promise of His unfailing presence until Jacob's mission was accomplished.

Note especially verse 14 – “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.” This is the third time God had added this clause – in chapter 12:3 to Abraham, in 26:4 to Isaac and now to Jacob. It was a Divine emphasis that the Gentiles were firmly included in God's plan. His purpose in choosing Israel was that through this race the whole world would be blessed by coming to a knowledge of God for themselves. Israel failed miserably in her God-given mission: Christ alone could remedy her failure, as He gave Himself for the whole wide world.

Jacob woke up a different man. In awed reverence he realised that God was right there, with him, that the God Who had announced Himself as “the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac” was waiting to be the God of Jacob too. He had been in the presence of God, at the very gateway to heaven. As the sun rose on a new day Jacob took the stone he had used for a pillow and stood it on end to make a pillar, consecrating it by pouring oil over it. He called the place Bethel, which means “house of God”; significantly it was in the same general area as the place where Abraham had built an altar to the Lord on entering Canaan. (Chapter 12:8.)

In verse 20 Jacob gave body to his thoughts by making a solemn vow to God. “If God will be with me,” sounds like he was bargaining with God, but the word “if” can be translated “since”, which would give a different spirit to his declaration. Jacob had made his decision; this God of his father and his grandfather would now be his God, too. Granted he saw the blessing of God in material terms, he still spontaneously committed one-tenth of his wealth to God, many years before the tithe appeared in the Mosaic law; it was a proof that he was genuine.

Chapter 29:1 says “Jacob continued on his journey” but the literal translation reads, “Jacob lifted up his feet,” a phrase used only once in the Old Testament. In other words, he was “walking on air”: the God of his fathers was now *his* God, with whom he could have a personal relationship. He had been forgiven: he was set free.

This is just one instance of the love of God that shines right through the Old Testament and reaches us today with the same sense of delight and relief. How can we measure that ageless, unchanging and undeserved love? We can never repay it; all we can do is accept it with our whole lives and give it back to Him by passing it on to others.

Chapter 29 continues; Jacob reached the land of his forbears and came to a well with 3 flocks of sheep waiting there to be watered. The shepherds were from Haran and knew his uncle Laban, and even as they were speaking a pretty shepherdess -Laban’s daughter Rachel - approached with her flock of sheep. Without waiting for all the shepherds to arrive and together move the heavy stone that covered the well, the strongman Jacob moved the stone himself and watered Laban’s sheep.

In his greeting to Rachel the reality of the situation hit him; in one sense he had come home. Relief vented itself in tears. Rachel ran home with the news and Laban was quick to come to the well to extend hospitality to his nephew. God had guided Jacob safely.

A month went by, doubtless with Jacob helping out on the land, and Laban realised he had to offer his nephew some pay. But Jacob wanted only one thing: he had fallen deeply in love with Rachel and was willing to work for 7 years to win her as his bride. Laban agreed and the time seemed to fly as Jacob filled his part of the bargain. But here the one-time deceiver was to taste the bitterness of being deceived himself. On the wedding night brides wore a veil so that it was not until morning that Jacob saw he had been duped: his bride was not Rachel but the older, less attractive Leah. Laban excused the deception under cover of their custom being for the oldest child in a family to be married first. After a honeymoon of a week for Leah, Jacob could have Rachel too – and then work for another 7 years!

It was not a happy situation, particularly for Leah! Jacob’s love was for Rachel alone, any attention to Leah being simply a matter of convenience. And God understood her woman’s heart, as we see in verse 31. In quick succession Leah bore 4 sons, her naming of them reflecting her agony and eventual acceptance of her role before God: Reuben - “He has seen my misery”; Simeon – “one who hears”; Levi – “attached”; and Judah – “I will praise the Lord.”

Rachel was still childless and her jealousy prompted her to give her handmaid Bilhah to Jacob to bear surrogate children for her; the result was Dan and then Naphtali. But Leah had stopped bearing and didn’t want Rachel to catch up, so she gave her handmaid Zilpah to Jacob, resulting in 2 more sons, Gad and Asher. With a bit of connivance Leah manoeuvred Jacob into giving her 2 more sons, Issachar and Zebulun, and at last a daughter, Dinah.

It seemed like a recipe for disaster! Ten sons with 3 different mothers, growing up in an atmosphere of bitter rivalry. Was this to be the nation God had promised to Abraham? But God’s plan had not failed. The unloved Leah was given an amazing privilege: she was the mother of Levi, from whose children arose the God-ordained order of priests, and the mother of Judah, from whose descendants came the kings of Israel. In Jeremiah chapter 33 the Lord promises that there would always be kings, and always be priests, to stand before the Lord. In Revelation 5:10 the angels refer to the saints as they sing, “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God.” And of course the ultimate fulfilment is in Jesus Christ – in Hebrews 7:21, “the Lord has sworn, ‘You are a priest forever,’” and verse 25, “He always lives to intercede for them.” And Revelation 11:15 speaks of “the kingdom of our Lord and of his

Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.” I think that for Leah in Heaven, her heartache is forgotten.

Chapter 30:22 sets a whole new direction to the story. “God remembered Rachel” and gave her at last the blessing of a son; she named him Joseph. For Jacob, his life took on new meaning. Here was his beloved Rachel reflected at last in the tiny features of her very own infant. From the outset the other sons took second place: this was his genuine love-child.

Maybe now Jacob was stirred to think seriously of the future. It was time to make his own fortune, not add to one whose fortune he had helped to make. He spoke with Laban, reminding him of the years he had spent in Laban’s service, and asking that now he might take his family and return to his inherited homeland. Laban demurred: Jacob had been an asset he did not want to lose. They bargained on terms, each trying to outsmart the other: there arose an uneasy hostility between the two families.

In Chapter 31:2 Jacob received instructions and a word of encouragement from God, “Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you.” Jacob was glad to obey, and relieved to find that his wives were just as disillusioned with their father, and willing to leave. The old “deceiver” in Jacob came to the fore as, in fear, he left secretly without any word of farewell, with his cavalcade of wives, children, and livestock.

When Laban found out he set off in hot pursuit, caught up and aired his grievance to Jacob, who hotly returned his own grievance at the treatment he had received in return for super-conscientious service. Words might have come to blows but for the fact that Laban had received a message from God (verse 29), “Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.” But he did accuse Jacob of stealing the family gods and Jacob, unaware that Rachel was the culprit, hotly denied the claim. Grudgingly the two came to an agreement, setting up a heap of stones as a memorial and each vowing not to pass in enmity beyond the heap. “May the Lord keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other,” (verse 49) is filled with misgivings about any mutual honesty!

So Laban returned to his home in the north and Jacob was free to continue south to the land promised to Abraham. In Chapter 32:1 he received a divine encouragement - “the angels of God met him”, and Jacob responded by acknowledging God was right there with him. But the message didn’t really sink in. They were approaching dangerous country, the homeland of Esau, and Jacob sent a conciliatory message via his servants, who came back with the news that Esau was on his way to meet his recalcitrant brother, and 400 men with him.

Jacob panicked, quickly organising his household into 2 groups in the hope that at least one half of them would be saved. Then he prayed, verses 9-12, reminding God of His promise, humbly admitting he wasn’t worthy of any of the favours God had given him, yet pleading for rescue so that God’s promise could still be fulfilled. Overnight he selected a huge gift of livestock for Esau, 550 head in all, and sent them off in stages to placate his brother. Then he sent his own family and all his possessions across the stream of Jabbok and he remained alone.

Verses 24-32 tell of a further encounter Jacob had with God. But he had to learn that the only way to win a battle with God was to surrender, and Jacob limped through the rest of his life with the realisation that he had seen God face to face, yet graciously his life had been spared. More, God had given him a new name, Israel, “because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.”

What do we do first in an emergency – panic or pray? Jacob could have saved himself a lot of worry and work if he had trusted God to deal with the meeting with Esau!

Chapter 33 is a relief, and here Esau shows himself in a better light than the manipulative Jacob, with a generous forgiveness and desire to remain friends. Jacob however could not bring himself to trust his brother, and even now, deceived Esau in parting company with him again. Instead of returning to Bethel and “the land of your fathers” as God had instructed, Jacob settled in Shechem. It was a great pity he did, according to the unsavoury story in Chapter 34, where immorality led to ugly deceitful vengeance with Jacob complaining to his sons, “You have brought trouble on me by making me a stench to the people living in this land.” The only glimmer of light in this sad story is the fact that Jacob’s family were prevented from intermarriage with the Godless people of the land.

In Chapter 35:1 God called Jacob back from his transgression. “Go up to Bethel and settle there, and build an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau.” Was this God’s subtle reminder that Jacob had pledged to build a house for God at Bethel so many years ago? Humbly repenting, Jacob purged his household of the foreign gods that had been secreted there by his family, and urged them, “Come, let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress.”

Saying goodbye forever to the old life, Jacob buried the gods and pagan jewellery at Shechem, and as the company set out for Bethel, “the terror of God fell upon the towns all around them so that no one pursued them.” (verses 4,5,) Back at Bethel he built the promised altar, and once again God encouraged him by reminding him of his changed name and the promise that would still be fulfilled. (Verses 6-15.)

But once again, the restless Jacob moved on, in spite of God’s command to settle in Bethel. Sorrow struck severely, as his beloved Rachel died in delivering her second son, and it seems that Jacob, changed in name but not very much in nature, continued to move camp until he arrived at his father’s home. He had a few years of his father’s company until Isaac died at the age of 180.

The 2 sons united again briefly as they buried their father, but then Esau, realising the land could not support their combined livestock, and wanting to avoid awakening any unpleasantness, moved all his family and possessions “to a land some distance from his brother Jacob.” Chapter 36 sets out the story of his family.

It seems a pity that Esau, mellowed by time, should not reap the benefits of living in the promised land of Canaan, and should instead be the progenitor of Edom, a nation that was to be in constant conflict with Israel. The prophet Malachi makes the comment in 1:2, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated,” and Paul in Romans chapter 9 is at pains to explain this in light of the sovereign will of God. The verse is more correctly translated as “To Esau have I given second place in My purposes.” God’s will is in accordance with God’s foreknowledge ; He knows the path each individual will take, and whom He can trust with the execution of His mission. There was nothing to prevent Esau trusting Him as his brother had learned to do.

It is intriguing to note that each of the 3 great patriarchs was manipulated by his women! The mothers of Jacob’s children were the ones to name their sons; even Jacob did not change Ben-Oni to Benjamin until Rachel had died! The subjugation of women under the authority of men was never in the purposes of God. Take heart, ladies, and be prepared to fulfil your responsibility!