

When God Came Down

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 November 2025

Preacher: Joe DeHaan

[0 : 00] It's a privilege to open God's word with you this morning. As Steve said, Alvin Heisen was on the schedule for today, but due to illness he wasn't able to join us.

So please keep Al in your prayers as he continues to recover. This morning I'll be preaching a sermon that was originally preached by Ed Clowney and published in his book *Preaching Christ in all of Scripture*.

I will note that I've made some adaptations to the original, and if you're not familiar with Ed Clowney, he was the professor of practical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, where he served for over 30 years, including 16 as president.

Ed had a long, successful career as a pastor and teacher starting in 1942 and spanning over 60 years until shortly before his passing in 2005.

It seems like every year Christmas stuff is out earlier and earlier in stores, and houses are decorated earlier and earlier. There are a few houses in my neighborhood that were decorated well before Halloween.

[1 : 09] We'll lean into that a little bit this morning, as this message touches on Christ's coming and his second coming. The text for today's sermon is from Genesis 28, 10-22.

You can find it in page 27 of the Maroon Pew Bible or page 21 of the Brown Pew Bibles. I'll be reading from the English Standard Version. Please rise if you're able for the reading of God's Word. Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran, and he came to a certain place and stayed there that night because the sun had set.

Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven.

And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father, and the God of Isaac.

[2 : 14] The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south.

And in you and in your offspring shall all of the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you, and I will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land.

For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised. Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.

And he was afraid and said, How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.

So early in the morning, Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on it. He called the name of the place Bethel, for the name of the city was Luz at the first.

[3 : 14] Then Jacob made a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in the way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and the stone which I have set up for a pillar shall be God's house.

And all that you give me, I will give you a full tenth. This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray. Amen. Living God, help us to hear your holy word with open hearts, so that we may truly understand, and understanding that we may believe, and believing that we may follow in all faithfulness and obedience, seeking your honor and glory in all that we do.

Lead us in your truth and teach us, for you are the God of our salvation, for you we wait all day long. Through Christ our Lord. Amen. You may be seated.

Have you heard the plaintive English carol? As Jacob with travel was weary one day, at night on a stone for a pillow he lay, he saw in a vision a ladder so high, that its foot was on earth, and its top in the sky.

Alleluia to Jesus, who died on a tree, and hath raised up a ladder of mercy. And hath raised up a ladder of mercy. In the scripture passage about Jacob's ladder found in Genesis 28, we find Jacob in flight from the murderous fury of his twin brother Esau.

[4 : 51] Esau, the first twin to fully emerge from the womb of Rebekah, was Isaac's firstborn. In spite of the prophecy that the older would serve the younger, Isaac prepared to give Esau the blessing, firstborn.

Under his mother's direction, Jacob deceived blind Isaac. Jacob tied goatskins on his arms and around his neck. He put on Esau's best clothes.

Isaac gave him the blessing. Esau vowed to kill Jacob, waiting only for his father's death. Jacob, therefore, fled to his uncle Laban's place in Haran.

In the long journey, he had to stop to sleep at a spot in the Judean hills. Using a stone to prop up his head, he was fast asleep when God appeared to him in a vision.

Jacob saw heaven opened up, and a stairway linking heaven to earth. Angels were ascending and descending the stairway. Jacob did desire to receive God's blessing.

[5 : 54] He was not, however, on a pilgrimage to seek the Lord. Rather, he was on his way to leave the land of promise. The blessing Isaac had given him spoke of rich harvests in the land, as well as rule over peoples and his brothers.

But what about the blessing if he left the land of God's promise? Most people think of religion as a quest, as man's quest for God. But in reality, religions often provide a way to escape from God. He may be promoted to a high God, so that tribal religion can worship spears of trees or of leopards. He may be screened off by ceilings of laws and ordinances, so that we might gain heaven by points.

God may be dissolved in the yin and yang of natural forces, so that we are no longer accountable to him personally. Or he may be reduced to the divine in everything, the God in us of New Age spirituality.

The God of the Bible, however, is the God who seeks us. God takes the initiative. He reveals himself to Jacob. He had called Adam and Eve in the garden, to Noah before the flood, and to Abram in the great city of Ur.

[7 : 04] Now he called Jacob to give him his promise. The Lord's choice of Jacob is particularly clear, since Jacob and Esau were twins, and Esau is the firstborn.

The Apostle Paul noted this as showing the pure grace of God's choosing. In Romans 9, he writes, When Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born, and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works, but because of him who calls, she was told, the older shall serve the younger.

As it is written, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated. God does not choose the influential of the aristocrats, but the lowly and despised.

Not the winners, but the losers. Isaac, the father of the twins, preferred Esau, but God chose Jacob. In the vision God gave, Jacob saw heaven itself opened up.

A stairway was set on earth, with a top reaching to heaven. The stairway was not a painter's ladder, though once, when Ed Clowney was illustrating Vacation Bible School materials, he sketched the scene, with Jacob lying in the foreground, in a long extension ladder, reaching up to heaven.

[8 : 25] What did the top rest upon? And probably, he rested the top of the ladder against a cloud. The Hebrew word used in Genesis 28-12 implies a stone structure, like an embankment of a roadway.

A stairway of that magnitude would require a huge mass of masonry to support it. It's well within the realm of possibility that the stairway resembled a ziggurat, like the great ziggurat of Ur, which archaeologists discovered and reconstructed in effect.

Of the Tower of Babel, it is also said that builders planned to reach heaven. God came down in judgment on the Tower of Man's pride, but in Jacob's dream, God came down in grace.

The angels ascending and descending on the stairway revealed open communication between heaven and earth. Looking down on Jacob, the Lord assured Jacob of his purpose, of his appearing.

He is the God of the past, the future, and the present. He is the Lord of the past, the God of the fathers, Abraham, and Isaac. He is the Lord of the future, confirming his promise.

[9 : 32] The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and they shall spread to the west and to the east, and to the north and to the south.

And in your offspring shall all of the families of the earth be blessed. He is Lord of the present, for he said, Behold, I will be with you and will keep you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land.

God's presence beside Jacob makes trenchant his words. The land on which Jacob lies, with all its stones, bumps, and hollows, is the land of God's promise.

It is the land on which God stands. We only need to look a few chapters further in Genesis to see the truth of this. In Genesis 35, Jacob returns to the land of promise.

He's reconciled with Esau, and he's bought a piece of land to pitch his tent. God has fulfilled the promise of bringing Jacob back safely to the land of promise.

[10 : 35] And it's here that God appears once more to Jacob in the same place at Bethel, the house of God. God renews his promise to Jacob to give him the land and to build a nation out of him.

But this encounter is different. Instead of speaking to Jacob from the heavens, from the top of the ladder, God comes down. We know this from Genesis 35, 13, where it says that God went up from that place where he had spoken to him.

God's promises to Jacob were sure, and God's promises to us are no less sure. His promises are in the fullness of the new covenant. The Lord Jesus will be with us in the presence of the Holy Spirit. He will give us the fellowship of the saints and bond families with his covenant love. Contrary to prosperity gospels, however, the Lord does not promise earthly wealth and extensive real estate. He teaches us to pray for our daily bread, not earthly wealth. And the blessings of Jesus include persecution for his name's sake. The house of blessing is built by God.

[11 : 44] Jacob awakens, awed by the reality of God's presence in his vision, Jacob whispers, surely the Lord is in this place and it did not know it. Fearfully, he adds, how awesome is this place.

This is none other than the house of God and the gate of heaven. Although Jacob saw God in the vision, the reality of the promise leaves him in no doubt.

It is this land on which he lay that is the land of promise. He will indeed find a wife at Laban's house and pet in Iran. Yet, historical and geographical reality of the place bursts with the heavenly glory of that promise.

Bethel, the house of God, is the gate of heaven. The stairway is not another babel, but the house and city of God. God will indeed establish Jerusalem as his dwelling among his people.

As the writer of Hebrews observed, those who, like Jacob, believed God's promise desired a better city, a heavenly one. In the morning, Jacob does not view the surrounding real estate that stands in Bethel, the house of God, the gate of heaven.

[12 : 57] Bethel stands between the curse of Babel and the blessings of Pentecost. Jacob sets up the stone that was his pillow as a memorial to God's covenant promise. He anoints the pillar and makes a vow to the Lord.

It would be demeaning to Jacob to give the vow a commercial twist. Indeed, Jacob only requests for what God had promised to him, only adding the request for bread to eat and clothing to wear.

The Psalms are full of thanksgiving and praises associated with God's hearing of his people's in distress. Jacob recounts the promise in his prayer and makes his vow to give a tithe as a thank God.

Jesus illumined the significance of this passage for us when he alluded to it in his calling of Nathanael. John records Jesus' call to his first disciples. He found Philip and said, Philip, follow me. Philip was from Bethsaida, a town on the Sea of Galilee. Philip followed Jesus and found Nathanael also of Bethsaida. Philip's words poured out, We have found him of whom Moses and the law and the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.

[14:17] Nathanael wasn't impressed. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? He snorted. Philip's reply has helped generations of evangelists. Come and see.

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming, he said, Behold, an Israelite indeed in whom is no deceit. Jesus recognized that Jacob had practiced deceit. The name Jacob, drawn from the word heel in Hebrew, describes Jacob as a heel grabber trying to supplant Esau even from birth. God had given the name Israel to Jacob. Here was an offspring of Jacob more worthy of that name. Nathanael was surprised. How do you know me? He asked Jesus. The answer Jesus gave me some ordinary. Poor Philip called you when you were under the fig tree. I saw you. But Nathanael's reaction was extraordinary. Rabbi, you are the son of God. You are the king of Israel. We can only conclude that Nathanael's experience under the fig tree was of the sort not only to the Lord he worshipped. Jesus addressed his new disciple.

[15:27] You will see greater things than this. Truly, truly, I say to you, you shall see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending in the son of man.

The reference Jesus made to Jacob's dream at Bethel is clear. But in what sense does Jesus apply the going and the coming of the angels to himself? Some preachers and commentators have said that Jesus is a ladder, the stairway of Jacob's vision.

It's true enough that Jesus spoke of his own descending to earth and of his ascending to heaven again. But to Nathanael he spoke of the angels ascending and descending. The interpretation is not difficult in the light of what we have learned about Bethel.

The Lord came down at Bethel. Since the Lord who came down as the second person of the Trinity, the person who reveals the Father, it is natural that Jesus would speak about these angels ascending from him and descending to him.

They did not ascend and descend in relation to Jacob but in relation to Jesus. Jesus here speaks of the second coming when he will return in glory attended by his angels of heaven.

[16:38] The Lord who came down the stairway of Jacob's dream is the Lord who came down to be born. Here on earth he could tell Nathanael that he knew him and had seen him under the fig tree.

He could also tell of the glory of his second coming. The angels of Jacob's dream will come with him then. They had come to the shepherds to announce his birth. They will come again when he comes in glory.

The clear teaching of Paul in his second letter to the Thessalonians shows us what our hope is. Christ's second coming will bring relief to troubled Christians. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven and blazing fire with his powerful angels.

It is the coming that Jesus refers to in his words to Nathanael. Jesus reminds Nathanael and us that marvelous as it was that the Lord sees us in our times of devotion and fellowship with him the second coming will be vastly more marvelous.

Precious are our times under the fig tree when we experience the presence of the Lord when we are aware that he sees us. Blessed is the assurance of faith as the spirit applies that very word of Christ to our hearts.

[17:50] Yet, we believe in hope looking for the appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. As we wait for the Lord look now to him. Jacob found a dream to be Bethel the house of God the gate of heaven.

You have not a dream to cherish but a living Savior who speaks to us through the word and through the preaching of it. He owns you by name and the water of baptism and gives you the bread and wine the sign and seal of his passion.

You need not anoint the stone as Jacob did. You may in your devotion anoint the Lord anointed as Mary of Bethany did. Repeat the gospel promise in your vow of faith.

You will see Jesus when he comes with his angels but he sees you now and comes to you. The Lord is in this place and you did not know it. This is Bethel the house of God.

Come home. Let's pray. Lord, God Almighty, as we approach the season of Advent we give you unending thanks for the gift of your Son.

[18:59] We praise you for the working of a mighty salvation through him and we wait patiently for his return. Lord, work in our hearts write your word on them so that we might be obedient to them.

Inform us more and more to the image of your Son through the working of your Spirit. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be with us we pray. Amen. Please stand here.

Thank you.