

## Grace In Genesis (vii)

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[ 0 : 00 ] I don't like Jacob. Never have. Nothing you can do is going to change my mind about Jacob. I would not like Jacob as my son, as my brother, or especially as my father.

In fact, if I was in charge, I would have made Esau the hero of Genesis and not his brother Jacob. But then sometimes, in fact always, we just have to suck up God's choice and realise that his grace alights on very strange characters.

In the cold light of day, perhaps we're matured enough to recognise that we're entirely as strange and unlikable as Jacob ever was.

And that if it wasn't for God's choice of us, we neither would ever have experienced God's grace. One of the reasons I don't like Jacob is because he stole his brother's birthright.

In a premeditated conspiracy with his mother, Jacob deceived his father Isaac into giving him the blessing of the firstborn. If I'd been Esau, I'd have loved to have wrung Jacob's scrawny little neck.

[ 1 : 17 ] But then perhaps Esau loved the taste of exotic woman just a little too much to be bothered with things as inconsequential as the blessings of God.

The thought that Jacob is the ancestor of Jesus deeply troubles us. But then again, if it wasn't for God's sovereign choice of strange and unlikable rogues like us, we neither would ever have experienced God's grace.

In fact, perhaps what's so special about the grace of God is what Jesus continually challenged his contemporaries about.

Namely, who gets to experience it? For Jesus, it wasn't those who had it all together and thought they deserved it.

Deserved it. But for Jesus, it was the strange, the unlikable, the outcast, the no-hoper. In fact, for Jesus, grace wasn't grace unless it was being shown to the undeserving.

[ 2 : 23 ] To people we don't like. And no matter how much they try to charm us, we will never like. Here in Genesis 28, Jacob has fled from the family home.

It's not so bad an idea when you have a vicious older brother trying to kill you. And we find him in verse 10 about 40 miles from Beersheba.

He's travelled a long way. Here's a man who's tired. And listen, don't go feeling any sympathy for Jacob. Jacob, he's in a mess of his own making and a stew of his own cooking. The man's so tired, he's 40 miles from home.

He throws himself on the ground and he makes a pillow of a nearby stone and he falls fast asleep. During the night, God gives him a dream. He might be able to run away from home, but he can't run away from the grace of God.

And his dream comes to be known as Jacob's ladder. Let me say it again. The grace of God alights on strange and unlikable people.

[ 3 : 33 ] People like Jacob. Actually, people like me. This story tells us three things about God's grace at work in Genesis. First, grace and stone pillows.

Second, grace and sovereign provision. And third, grace and solemn promises. The Pharisees objected to the doctrine of grace because they wanted to earn their salvation.

How blind they were. Because if anyone didn't deserve to be saved, it was their forefather, Jacob. First of all, grace and stone pillows.

Jacob left Beersheba, verse 10, and set out for Haran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep.

I wonder if any of us have ever had a stone for a pillow. I don't guess any of us have ever been so desperate. But then maybe we haven't had a murderous brother spitting threats and had to leave

home in a desperate hurry.

[ 4 : 46 ] Here's Jacob, and he has his head on a stone and he's fast asleep. Now I'd never really thought about this very much until I read the wonderful comments of the 18th century English Bible commentator Matthew Henry.

He writes of Jacob. Any Israelite would be willing to take up with Jacob's pillow, provided he might also have Jacob's dream.

God's time to visit his people with his comforts is when they are most destitute of other comforts and other comforters.

At the same time Jacob is lying with his head on a stone, Esau is lying beside his wife or wives with his head on a feather pillow. Who would you rather be?

Jacob or Esau? Let me remind you of Henry's quote again. Any Israelite would be willing to take up with Jacob's pillow, provided he might also have Jacob's dream.

[ 5 : 56 ] Would you be happy enough with a pillow of stone if you'd get a fresh vision of the grace of God along with it? Perhaps one of the reasons we get so few visions of God's extraordinary grace is that we're so unwilling to have stones for pillows.

But before we all rush out to John Lewis tomorrow and bulk buy blocks of granite, let me assure you that Matthew Henry's not being literal. He explains what he means in the next sentence.

God's time to visit his people with his comforts is when they are most destitute of other comforts and other comforters.

For Matthew Henry, Jacob's stone pillow is a picture of difficult times in our Christian lives.

Times when we are, to quote Matthew Henry, destitute of other comforts and other comforters. And so once again I ask the question, have you ever had a stone for a pillow?

[ 7 : 06 ] Have you ever experienced difficult times in your life where you have nowhere to turn? Perhaps it's poor mental health.

Your mind turns in upon itself and becomes its own worst enemy. You don't know who you can trust. You're self least of all. You are destitute of other comforts and other comforters.

You have a stone for a pillow. But it's here, when we've been forced to lay our heads on Jacob's stone pillow, we often get Jacob's dream along with it.

A fresh vision of the all-sufficiency of the grace of God. Or perhaps it's a broken relationship with a close friend or a close family member.

It may or may not be your fault. At least you may not bear the full blame. But nothing you can say and nothing you can do can make it better. That safe person that you once confided in and laughed with is now unsafe.

[ 8 : 15 ] You've got nowhere else to turn. Once again, you're destitute of other comforts and other comforters. You have a stone for a pillow. But just like before, it's when we are forced to take up Jacob's stone pillow that God gives us Jacob's dream also.

It strikes me that there are at least two New Testament equivalents of Genesis 28. The first is our Lord's temptation in the wilderness.

Remember where our Lord himself had a stone for a pillow? In that situation, Jesus experienced divine provision in the midst of his own personal hardship.

He received a fresh vision of his father's grace when he had no other comforts and no other comforters. The second example of this is Paul's thorn in the flesh in 2 Corinthians 12.

Where having been taken up to the third heaven and experienced, he began to experience a painful thorn in the flesh. And he realized these two things go hand in hand. He's got a stone for a pillow.

[ 9 : 25 ] And he's pleading for God to turn it into a pillow of feathers. But it's here with his head in a stone pillow, Paul discovers that Christ's grace is sufficient for him.

So let me ask this question once again. Have you ever had a stone for a pillow? Or perhaps that's the pillow you have right now. You're not the first.

To have had a stone for a pillow. You're not the first to be destitute of other comforts and comforters. You will not be the last.

Take heart. Christ has grace for you here. And a fresh vision of his all-sufficiency. Because it's sometimes when all we have to sleep on is Jacob's pillow.

That we're in the right state of mind to deceive Jacob's dream. And a fresh assurance of the depth of God's grace for us. Grace and stone pillows.

[10:32] Grace secondly. And sovereign provisions. Grace and sovereign provisions. You wonder where Joseph got his ability to interpret dreams from.

He got it from his father, Jacob. Putting the question of whether God still speaks in dreams to one side. Jacob had a dream. And in this dream. And in this dream he saw things.

And he heard things. He saw a ladder. Resting on the earth. With its top reaching to heaven. And the angels of God were ascending and descending upon it.

There above it stood the Lord. Picture in your mind's eye what Jacob saw in his dream. A ladder upon which the angels of God were going up and coming down.

And at the top of the ladder stood God himself. There are so few words used in verses 12 and 13. And yet these are the most intricate and powerful pictures in the whole book.

[11:37] There are many interpretations offered as to the meaning and significance of Jacob's dream of a ladder. A ladder which is ultimately fulfilled of course in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Who is spoken of in John 1.51. As having the angels of God ascending and descending on him. Some have suggested that this ladder is the way to heaven.

And is therefore directly fulfilled in Jesus who is the way to God. I am not an Old Testament scholar. I don't pretend to have an exhaustive knowledge of everything that has been said or proposed on this subject.

But what I do want to suggest is that this dream of Jacob's ladder means two things. In the first instance, look at verse 12. The angels go up before they come down.

The angels go up before they come down. They ascend. Then they descend. It is as though they are climbing upwards from earth into heaven.

[12:44] To tell the Lord God. Standing at the top of the ladder. The state of affairs below. You see this dream is assuring Jacob.

That God knows all about his homelessness and his loneliness and his fear. He's run away from home because he's acted deceitfully toward his violent and unpredictable brother.

And he's tired and he's tired and he's desperate. He's got his head in a stone pillow. Here he is. The mighty Jacob. All alone in the desert.

No one else can see him. And if they could, they'd be disgusted by him and want to wring his neck. But God sees him. God knows all about him.

And that's a wonderful comfort of God's grace for us today. That there is nothing about the situations we face that God does not know. He sees what we have to endure.

[13:45] He knows about the sins we've committed. The Lord looks straight into our hearts. He knows everything about us. And in particular, he sees our need for comfort.

Our need to be challenged to grow strong in the faith. Our need for renewal and refreshment in joy. In his grace, there is nothing about us he does not see.

Because the angels go up before they come down. Certain friend of mine was going through a very hard time in his life.

I knew nothing about it. Nothing about it. Afterwards, when he told me all about what he'd been going through, I felt extremely guilty and I said to him, I'm so sorry I wasn't there for you.

If I'd known, I would have been. If I had known, I would have done everything in my power to have helped him. But I didn't know because I couldn't know.

[14:47] None of us are all-knowing. But that can never be said of God. Because he is all-knowing. I have another friend of friends who was going through an even harder time.

And I did know about it. But in that situation, because I myself was going through a hard time, I did not get in touch with him. Because I didn't feel I could cope with the contact.

I know I should have done. I felt guilty about it afterwards. I should have sent him a card or written him a text or a letter. But I did not.

Again, that can be never said of God. Because not only is he all-knowing, he is also all-caring. He would never leave us when we are down.

And all because the angels go up before they come down. But in the second instance, the angels come down after they've been up.

[15:54] The angels come down after they've been up. They descend after they have ascended. It's as if they've, having told the Lord, standing at the top of the ladder, all about Jacob and his needs, these angels are now being sent by the Lord to minister his grace to Jacob by providing for his needs.

You see, here in Jacob's ladder, we have the assurance of God's gracious provision for all our needs. God sees Jacob's need, and he gives him this dream to assure him of his gracious provision.

Not only does Jacob see things in his dream, he hears things also. He hears the solemn promises of God being reissued.

We'll see that in a moment. Just as God promised Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob's father, now he makes promises to Jacob himself.

The point is that by the angels descending, they are assuring Jacob, this homeless, fearful refugee, that God will provide for his needs.

[17:10] Just as God provided for Abraham when he was homeless, and God provided for Isaac when he was childless, so God will provide for Isaac when he is all these things and worse.

He's running away from Esau and who knows where. If ever he needed to know that God would provide for him in the darkness of not knowing and of not having, it was now.

And so God painted him this masterpiece of divine provision. Three and a half thousand years after these events, the hymn writer Thomas Chisholm penned his song, Great is thy faithfulness in which he writes, All I have needed, thy hand hath provided.

I wonder whether you've ever experienced God's provision when your head's been resting on a stone. Perhaps your heart was broken and you felt all alone, but God assured you through his word that he had not left you, he had not left your side.

I have a friend, you know who he is, who is experiencing early onset Alzheimer's. He reminded me the other day of that wonderful verse in Isaiah 26, verse 3.

[18:36] You will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you because he trusted you. And he believes that's the Lord's provision for him.

That though he's beginning as a relatively young old man to get lost while driving, to forget his wife's name and other basic things, he knows that the Lord is with him and will never let him go.

The angels are ascending and descending on the ladder. They're going up and they're coming down. It's just this most wonderful picture of the grace of God in providing for the needs of his people.

He knows the way we take and he provides when we take that way. Here's grace and it's pictured in a dream.

But what of the grace Paul speaks of in Romans 8, 32 when he says, He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not along with him graciously give us all things?

[19:48] Grace and sovereign provision. And then lastly from this passage, grace and solemn promises. Grace and solemn promises.

Actually, this chapter is an incredibly important passage in the timeline and the history of Genesis. It represents the formal continuation of the covenant God made with Abraham, passing the blessing of that covenant down to Abraham's grandson, Jacob, just as it had been passed down to Abraham's son, Isaac.

In other words, the generations of men may change. But God's promise remains the same. I love the way in which this morning we sang in Psalm 100 from the Scottish Psalter.

We sang the last verse. For why the Lord our God is good. His mercy is forever sure. His truth at all times firmly stood and shall from age to age endure.

The mercy and truth of God remains steadfast though the season change and the millennia should tick into the millennia.

[21:09] Jacob not only sees a ladder with angels ascending and descending, he hears the voice of God saying, I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac.

God appears to Jacob but it's what Jacob hears which is altogether more important. He hears the restatement of the covenant God made with Abraham and with Isaac.

And that covenant, as you know, contains four basic promises. God's promise to be the God of Abraham and his descendants. God's promise to make the descendants of Abraham as numerous as the dust of the earth or the stars in the sky.

God's promise to give the land of Canaan to Abraham's descendants. And God's promise that through one of the descendants of Abraham, the whole earth would be blessed. God makes this promise which by grace he is already beginning to keep.

After all, as we all know, Jacob has got or will have eleven sons. The descendants of Abraham are already growing in number by the time Genesis 28 is being written.

[ 22 : 26 ] And they're returning to Canaan. God's promised that he shall be Jacob's God. You see, this is incredibly important in the history and worldview of Genesis.

That the grace of God's covenant promises endure through the changing generations of men. When I was a child, we would sing the chorus, yesterday, today, forever, Jesus is the same. All may change, but Jesus never. Glory to his name. The covenant God reissues to Jacob here in Genesis 28 finds its ultimate fulfillment in the Jesus who died on the cross to take away his people's sins.

The physical descendant of Jacob in whose blood a multitude beyond numbering are washed clean and are given eternal life and an everlasting inheritance with him in heaven.

This is grace, this is pure grace, you see, that such a man as Jacob, this strange man whom decent people like myself and yourselves take exception with and rightly so, and yet he should receive such gracious promises at the hand of God.

[ 23 : 50 ] He does not deserve any such singular favor from the hand of God and yet he receives it nonetheless. And yet, don't we know that we have greater promises than Jacob could even have begun to imagine?

We have the promises of the treasure house of the grace of Christ and they're all ours for the taking. The apostle Paul speaks of us having been blessed in the heavenly places with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus.

Do you hear those words? Every spiritual blessing? We've seen things Jacob could not have dreamed of. The cross and the empty tomb.

We've seen Christ ascend into the heavens and we have the sure and certain hope of his inspired apostolic word. In and through him we have forgiveness and righteousness, peace and joy and love and hope and it's all ours for the asking and it's all ours for the taking.

Faith, that same faith by which the Jacob we don't like said in this passage, the Lord will be my God. Faith in Christ is both the asking and the taking.

[ 25 : 15 ] You know, when it comes to Jacob's ladder I can't help but feel that I'm just merely scratching the surface of everything there is to discover in this passage. But even the smallest scratch reveals more of the grace of God in Christ than we could have dreamed.

In fact, suppose we spent the next six months on a Sunday evening studying nothing other than this passage. Suppose we ascended that ladder rung by rung and heard every word the angels said to the Lord we would only discover more and more of the grace of God for us in Christ Jesus.

Because the truth is that what's true of God in this passage of scripture is true for us in the daily experience of our lives. the deeper we scratch the more grace we find.

We've sinned but when our sin abounded grace abounded much more. There's forgiveness and restoration there's transformation and joy.

There is abandonment but he showers his grace upon us even when we are far from him and brings us into his family making us his beloved sons and daughters.

[ 26 : 37 ] Scratch the Christian's life and more and more grace is to be found there and experienced. Now I don't really like Jacob.

We're going to be looking at Jacob next week as well. This is what makes God's grace so unique in that it alights and favours those whom this world rejects the outcasts and the no-hopers those who by virtue of their own poor choices in life have nothing else but stone pillows on which to rest their heads.

That grace rests on strange and unlikable people people like Jacob people like me allow yourself by faith to experience that grace for yourself that whoever you are and whatever you have done up to this point in time you hear the solemn promise of God that if anyone should confess with their mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord and believe in their heart that God raised him from the dead they shall be saved anyone.

Hear God's promise to you. see Jacob's ladder in your mind's eye before you it's time for you to take the first step on that stairway and do what Jacob did when he said the Lord will be my God.

Let us pray. Yes Lord that's true we could spend the next six months studying this passage and we could climb up that ladder rung by rung and hear every word the angels said to you about the condition Jacob found himself and we could see every little way in which you provided for Jacob's

need by sending these ministering spirits the angels from your throne room in heaven.

[ 28 : 42 ] We could study together the great covenant that you made which does not change the generations of men fold into one another yet we know it's true in our own lives also that the deeper we scratch the more grace we find for where sin abounds grace doth abound much more.

Lord in particular we pray that for those of us who rest our heads on stone pillows that you would give us a fresh vision of the all sufficiency of the grace of Christ for us in these situations.

we ask these things in Jesus name. Amen. Amen.