

God who Meets and Keeps His People

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[0:00] I saw an article online the other day entitled on the next slide, six ways to meet God without going to church. As I say this, I realize perhaps it's not the best thing to encourage you to give you ideas about.

But the first way this guy said is to meet God in creation. So on the next slide, he says, the first time I truly met God, I was standing on the beach in Fiji with the sun beating down my back and nothing but deep blue sea on the horizon.

I think we all need to meet God in Fiji now, don't we? But is that right? Or on the next slide, he says music is a second way. He says, turn on the radio and open your mind to the voice of God speaking to you.

OK, third way is on the next slide. He says, if you really want to meet God, give, he says. That's his solution. He claims to be a church minister.

So maybe self-interest, I don't know. But every religion and every so-called minister seems to have their own ideas about how we meet God.

[1:05] But today we'll see that to start with, it's actually about God meeting us. So point one in the outlines, verse 10 in your Bibles. Here we read, Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran.

When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. And taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and laid down to sleep.

Now, before God meets Jacob, the author reminds us of the story so far. And so far, Jacob's left Beersheba.

He's on his way to Haran. Why? Well, if you were here last week, you might remember how Jacob the deceiver dressed up as Esau, his brother, and grabbed his blessing. And now Esau, the brother, is out to kill Jacob.

And so mum got dad to send Jacob away under the guise of getting a wife from their relatives in Haran. And so Jacob leaves home, presumably with a backpack of things, since we know he's got some oil, as we'll see later on.

[2:13] But despite what he had, it would have been daunting. I remember on the next slide, Jacob was a mummy's boy. You know, he was her favourite. And he liked to stay at home around the tents with mum.

And so he wasn't a hunter of the open field like Esau. I'm not even sure he would have known what to do if he saw a wild animal. And to make matters worse, Haran was a long way away.

And so on the next slide, this is where they are, there at Beersheba, down the bottom there. It's part of Canaan, which is the promised land. And Jacob's travelled as far as Bethel.

This is where he is at the moment in our passage. But he's got to go, on the next slide, all the way up there. That's where Haran is. It's over 780 kilometres on foot.

It's a long way. And it would have been dangerous, especially travelling alone. In fact, in verse 11, it says he uses a stone for a pillow, which I doubt would have been very comfortable.

[3:15] I mean, 40 winks don't sell a stone pillow range for a reason, right? But the text is literally, he placed a stone at his head. And so it's more likely the stone was going to be a weapon for protection, kind of like in those movies, you know, the spy movies, where they put a gun under their pillow so it's handy in case they need it.

Or same idea with the rock, because it's dangerous. On top of all this, he didn't even know if his uncle, Laban, whom he was going to, was even still alive.

And we know this because in the next chapter, when Jacob arrives at Haran, one of the first questions he asks, I think it's the second or third one, is Laban well? Is he alive and kicking?

So here is Jacob, all alone and uncertain of his future. And we can sometimes feel like that too, can't we? We can sometimes feel alone or uncertain about our future, particularly if something has happened to us, if we have lost a loved one, lost a job, or gotten sick, or some tragedy has happened.

We can even feel alone, even when we're surrounded with people. Well, this is the situation for Jacob. And it's into this situation that God now meets him and speaks to him.

[4:38] So verse 12, first of all, he comes up with a dream. So Jacob had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven.

And the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And there above it stood the Lord. And before we get to what God said, let's have a quick look at what Jacob saw.

And notice a number of things here. First of all, God actually takes the initiative here, doesn't he? I mean, if we were on our own outside in the dark, wild animals, we might be taking the initiative to pray to God, mightn't we?

But Jacob does none of that. It's God who takes the initiative to come and meet him. It's why point one in your outline doesn't say, Jacob met God, which is how we'd normally say it.

It says, God met Jacob. He took the initiative. Second, God meets Jacob in this place. Verse 11 on the next slide.

[5:40] Sorry, go. That's it. It literally mentions place literally three times. Our English translators thought it too repetitive. And so they kind of varied in our English Bibles.

But it's the author's way of highlighting that this place is significant. I will come back to that later. Our third thing to notice is that this dream shows a staircase from earth to God in heaven.

In other words, Jacob has access to God and God has access down to Jacob. And on the next slide, I think is an artist's impression of what that might look like, the staircase.

And you can also see the fourth thing to notice that there are angels on that staircase. The word angel means messenger and they would carry God's word or message. But the thing is, God often rules or he does rule by his word.

And so the picture here of angels descending is one of carrying out God's rule and word over the world. And then us sending back to report to God.

[6:44] And for Jacob, it suggests that he will be under God's rule, God's protection even. Of course, like most images, you can read almost anything you like into an image, can't you?

I mean, we can read all sorts of things into stuff we see in life. In fact, back in 2011, in Brisbane on the next slide, some people claimed to see Jesus's face in a pizza.

But no one knows what Jesus's face looked like. So that could be someone's neighbor. Who knows? You see, we can read all sorts of things into what we see. And so we really need to go back to God's word to make sure we interpret it rightly.

For us, it's God's word in the Bible. But for Jacob, it was God's word in his dream. So have a look at the rest of verse 13 to 14. So there's the Lord. And he said, Now, God has more to say, which will help us understand the images in a moment.

But first, he affirms those lob promises. Those ones that Isaac blessed Jacob with last week. The ones that God originally gave Abraham, as Naomi mentioned at the start of the service.

[8:14] They're on the next slide. Land, you know, for people. O is offspring. Sorry, land is place. O is offspring for people or a nation. And B, for blessing.

You see, this was God's plan to fix the curse of sin. I remember Adam and Eve were living in God's place, Eden, as God's people and enjoying God's blessing, weren't they?

But then sin entered the world and everything went pear-shaped. Adam and Eve had to leave God's place of Eden. Their relationship with God went south as God's people.

And now they were suffering God's curse or judgment instead of blessing. And these promises that God made to Abraham were all about reversing that.

And it's these promises God now affirms to Jacob. You see, God is determined to reverse the curse. To have a people living in his place, enjoying his blessing.

[9:16] This is why he meets Jacob here and gives him this promise. It's also why he then gives another promise in verse 15. Have a look there.

I am with you and will watch or literally keep you wherever you go. I will bring you back to this land and I will not leave you until I have done what I've promised you.

And he, God promises to be with Jacob, doesn't he? And this helps explain, I think, this stairway image that connects earth to heaven and heaven to earth.

And so just as Jacob has access to God in prayer, so God has access to Jacob to be with him in life. And then the promise also says that God will watch or literally keep Jacob, which I think helps explains the angel image.

For, again, angels carried out God's word and rule, which I take it included Jacob's protection, keeping him. In fact, on the next slide in Hebrews chapter 1, we read that, That is God's people.

[10:35] So as Jacob is alone and no doubt uncertain of his future, God graciously takes the initiative to meet him in this place and promises to keep him until he brings him back home to the promised land.

That's pretty comforting promises, aren't they? I remember leaving home for my first day of school. My parents took a photo of me on the next slide. I was smiling on the outside, but on the inside I felt alone and uncertain of my future.

Would there be bullies out there to get me? Would I make any friends? Would I be able to come back home in one piece? I could have done with this verse 15 promise.

I think that's enough, thanks, Tina. I think my mum could have done with this verse 15 promise. But the good news is we can have that verse 15 promise.

You see, God graciously took the initiative to meet with us in the person of Jesus. Just as he did for Jacob in the place of Bethel. Our passage mentions the word place six times in 12 verses.

[11:45] That's a lot. And God did go on to tell Israel on the next slide that they are to seek the place that the Lord God would choose. And to that place they are to go to meet God.

That's, of course, the temple in Jerusalem. But after it was destroyed because of Israel's sin, God again graciously took the initiative to come and meet us.

This time, not at a place, but in the person of Jesus. So on the next slide, we read that Jesus speaks about his own body as the new temple. And that he is the one who makes God known to us such that we can meet him.

You see, like Jacob, before we even cried out to God, God took the initiative to come to earth in his son and reveal himself to us, meet us.

How gracious is that? And it means we don't meet God in Fiji, as nice as that might be, nor in holy places like the holy land of Israel.

[12:55] People do pilgrimages to Israel all the time, thinking that they might meet God or get closer to God. In fact, there was one last year and one of the leaders in our diocese went there and they were up near the Sea of Galilee.

I think it was. And they prayed for a special blessing because they were in this sacred place. Now, I know the person, they're a really nice person, but they've misunderstood that there are now no more sacred places.

There's just the person, Jesus. We meet God in Christ. This building here is not technically the house of God. It's a building.

Jesus is the house, the temple of God, and we connected with him are God's house. No more sacred places. What's more, Jesus not only reveals God to us, he also gives access to God for us.

He's not only the new place to meet God, he's the new staircase to God. And we heard this in our second reading. So on the next slide, notice the angels and no longer ascending and descending on a staircase, but on who?

[14:11] The son of man, Jesus. Jesus is the new staircase. You know, he is now the bridge between God in heaven and people on earth. For by his death and resurrection, Jesus pays for our sins so that we can be forgiven and given access to God in heaven.

We can pray to God now and we have life eternal with God later. But it's not just access to God through Christ.

It's also God having access to us through Christ. You know, to be with us by his spirit such that we are never alone, as we'll sing in a little while.

Instead, he will be with us to keep us as his people until he brings us home to our promised land, the new creation. As we read on the next slide from 1 Corinthians 1, God will also keep you firm to the end so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Is that not good news? This means that we when we feel alone, we're actually not. God is always with us to strengthen us through life's ups and downs.

[15:31] Now, I realize that in the midst of difficult times, it's really hard to feel like God is with us. Often, it's not only it's only when you look back after you've gone through it that you can see he was with you, strengthening you.

I was speaking with someone a little while ago who was going through cancer related issues. They were in and out of hospital, feeling down and dejected. And when I called them on a Friday afternoon, we got chatting, obviously, and he was looking back over the week.

And he realized as we were talking that someone had phoned him every single day. And on one occasion, right at the moment that he was feeling really down. Christian friends from this church and his old church to encourage him and strengthen him in the faith.

And as he looked back, he recognized it was too coincidental to be anything other than God with him, strengthening him through those people.

It's just one example, a little example, perhaps. It looked different for each of us, different ways. But the point is, we are never alone. God is with us to sustain us and keep us until he brings us home.

[16:47] And so our future is certain. And no other religion can give us this kind of assurance. And it gives us hope for those of our family who have walked away from the faith they once professed.

That if they are gods, then God will keep them and bring them back. In fact, after the service just before this one, so about 40 minutes ago, 45 minutes ago, I was talking with a man just outside in that room.

And he said to me, I can attest to the truth of what you said this morning. And then his eyes welled up with tears as he told me how he walked away from Christ.

And then after 50 years, came back. Came back here and he's been here regularly here for a couple of years, I think. And he can't work out why.

He just said something in me just brought me back. Now I don't want to ever leave. God keeps us. And it gives us confidence that whatever uncertainties we face in life, that we have the absolute certainty of eternal life.

[17:53] For God will keep us. It's what God offers us through Christ. He graciously takes the initiative to meet us in the person of Christ, the new place. And through Christ, the new staircase, he graciously gives us access to him and him to us.

Such that we are never alone, but will be kept until he brings us home. If we believe in Jesus. So do you. Do you trust in Jesus and his death to pay for your sins?

Have you accepted him as your loving king? Because it's only him who is the new place where we can meet God. It's only him who is the new staircase to God.

And so it's only him we are to trust in. And for us who do, then how will we respond to what God gives us in Christ?

How will Jacob respond to these promises God is giving him here? Well, we're at point two, verse 16, and this will be a much shorter point. So verse 16. When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, surely the Lord is in this place.

[19:06] And I was not aware of it. He was afraid and said, how awesome is this place? This is none other than the house of God. This is the gate of heaven.

So early the next morning, Jacob took the stone he had placed at his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. And he called that place Bethel, which means house of God, though the city used to be called Luz.

I notice the word place is again mentioned, isn't it, a few times. But Jacob's response here is firstly one of reverent fear, really, isn't it? He says, this place is awesome. Not as kids and we use the word awesome, but full of awe.

So much so it's overwhelming, a bit scary. And he therefore is, has a reverent fear of this place because of God. That's not a bad first response, is it?

I think it's a response that the modern church could possibly learn from because we have perhaps lost our sense of reverent fear for God. We rightly rejoice in his love and grace.

[20:12] We appropriately pray with boldness to our loving father. Yes. But we can take his grace for granted and not treating with the respect he deserves.

I find myself doing this, even saying grace at dinnertime. You know, the kids are fighting. Everyone's starving. So you kind of just ramble through it quickly. Tick the box. Done. Dig in.

Two, four, six, eight. Bogging. Don't wait. And then you just let I just realize that I've forgotten who it is I'm praying to. We ought to enjoy our freedom in Christ.

Absolutely. But we ought to show God reverence, too. Wouldn't we? And Jacob's reverent fear leads him to rename and mark this place as special.

Verse 19, he renames it Bethel, house of God. And inside this house, there was that giant staircase up to heaven. You know, giving him access. So he also calls it the gate of heaven.

[21:07] And then he marks it off by this stone, which was at his head and builds a pillar out of it, pours all over the top of it to consecrate it as a special place. It's all a pretty good first response.

But what do you make of his vow? Next. Verse 20. Then Jacob made a vow to God saying, If God will be with me and will watch or keep me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's household, then the Lord will be my God.

And this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house. And of all that you give me, I will give back a tenth, he says. Now, this vow is conditional, isn't it?

If God does that, then Jacob will do this. There are a number of conditional vows in the Old Testament. Some of them are good, like Hannah's prayer for a kid.

If you give me a kid, Samuel, I will give him back to you to serve God. But there are some that are really bad. And I think Jacob's is dodgy. His wily and bargaining nature seems to be at work again.

[22:24] And in those other vows in the Old Testament, there's no great big promises like Jacob's just received. But he's just given them. And now he just quite bring himself to trust them completely, can he?

I mean, he knows it's a special place. He's been filled with reverent awe. But he can't quite trust the promises completely, nor commit himself to God fully. Ian said he firstly clarifies God's promise of keeping him.

In verse 20, he adds the words, if you give me food and clothes, just so God knows what Jacob expects from him in this promise. In fact, Jacob over-clarifies.

He says, if you give me food to eat and clothes to wear. What do you think God's going to give him? You know, food to wear and clothes to eat? It's over-clarification, isn't it?

It's not an act of faith. It's what you do when you're bargaining to make sure you get the best deal possible. He doesn't seem to trust God's promises completely. And what's more, he'll only commit himself to God, being his God, after he comes back home.

[23:31] So verse 21, he says, if you bring me back home safely, then you'll be my God. He doesn't commit himself to God fully either, does he? In fact, it's not until chapter 32 that we see a real change in Jacob.

And not until chapter 33 that he finally declares God is his God. You see, while God has begun a work in Jacob, Jacob is still very much a work in progress.

As one Bible scholar put it, he is still more scoundrel than saint. You see, God, though, will still be with him and keep him, even despite him.

Which, again, just highlights God's grace, doesn't it? But it's a grace that ought to move us to do a better job than Jacob. To trust God's promises completely, to commit ourselves to God fully.

Even to give to God. Not as part of a bargain like Jacob was going to give a tenth here. Or not to meet God like that guy was going to do at the start.

[24:34] No, because God has already graciously met us in Christ. And he's already graciously demonstrated he will keep us. He's already done everything it takes to keep us.

He's already done the hardest thing of giving his son to pay for our sins so that our life eternal might be secured. Guaranteed. So will he not also do the easier thing of giving us whatever help we need to make it home to heaven?

Of course he will. I mean, imagine for a moment that you are shouting your extended family, an overseas trip. Just imagine, okay? Now you've already done the hardest thing of paying for all their flights, connections, transfers, accommodation.

Would you not then do the easier thing of driving them to the airport? Of course you would, wouldn't you? You're not going to let all that money go to waste. Well, God's not going to let his son's blood go to waste either.

He's already done the hardest thing. So of course he'll do the easiest thing of keeping us, bringing us home. And so because God has already graciously done everything we need to meet us and keep us, then we have every reason to do better than Jacob.

[25:51] To trust God's promises completely and to commit our lives to him fully. Let's pray we would. Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you so much for this reminder of what we have in Christ.

that you've graciously taken the initiative to meet us in your son, and that you've graciously opened up access to you through your son and you to us, that you might always be with us and keep us.

And so in response to your grace, we pray, help us to trust your promises completely and to commit our lives to you fully. We ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.