

At the Gate of Heaven

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: 15 October 2000

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on October the 15th, 2000.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled At the Gate of Heaven and is from Genesis chapter 28 verses 10 to 22.

And you may like to have open the passage from Genesis 28 on page 22 of the Black Bibles in the pews.

Remember very vividly marrying the wrong people. It was my first wedding and I married the groom and the organist.

The next day I married the mother of the bride and the groom and then I married the best man and the bride.

[1 : 02] They were dreams, thankfully. The week before my first wedding I dreamt often in fear and anxiety and terror at taking my first wedding.

There was a couple I'd never met because they lived interstate. So I kept dreaming that here was this wedding. All these people gathered around. I didn't know who the bride and the groom were despite presumably one of them wearing white and kept marrying the wrong people.

From Martin Luther King to the man of La Mancha dreams fascinate us. Are they the outworkings of our fears and our anxieties and our concerns?

Certainly those were, I think, for me. Are they, as Freud suggests, some sort of psychosexual projection? Maybe in some cases they are.

Are they just imaginative nonsense? I think sometimes they are. Or are they means of God communicating to us?

[2 : 09] Perhaps sometimes they are. I suspect it varies from dream to dream. In the Bible, from time to time, not often, but from time to time, God communicates to individuals through dreams.

And today's passage, of course, is a case in point. God communicates to Jacob through the dream that he has at this place on his journey. But I suspect that now that we have the Scriptures, the Bible, the Old and the New Testaments together, God's means of communication to us is less likely to be in a dream as it was even in the Bible times, but more often straight to us through the words of Scripture.

Nonetheless, Jacob's dream is an important dream. important for not only him, but also for us as well. At the time, Jacob was en route on a journey from Beersheba in the south of what is Israel today to a place called Haran, which is in northern Iraq today.

A journey of some several hundred kilometers. The implication, I think, is that this is the end of the first day of the journey. Perhaps some 50 or 60 kilometers has been traveled and it comes to be dark.

He's not in anywhere important. Doesn't even seem to be with any traveling companions. He doesn't seem to be in a city, though perhaps nearby one. He simply lies down in the open.

[3 : 43] The reason that he's traveling, you may remember from last week, is that firstly, his twin brother has breathed murderous threats about him because Jacob has deceived his brother and father and procured a blessing from his father that should have gone to his twin brother.

So he's fled for his life. And he's also fled for a wife because his mother has said, you should go back to my own family's area up in Haran and get for you a wife.

So for those two reasons, Jacob is traveling. And he comes to the end of his first day. He lies down. He takes a stone as his pillow or perhaps stones to surround his head by means of protection as he sleeps in the open.

And he sleeps and he dreams. And in his dream, he sees three things. He sees a ladder. Although better, it's probably a stairway.

The word suggests either of those things, but it seems to be bigger than a ladder because you've got, as the second thing that he sees, angels going up and down. A ladder normally is just too limited for just for one person.

[4 : 53] So probably it's some sort of stairway or ramp. It starts at the earth. It goes up to the heavens, to the skies. And he sees angels on it. And the third thing is that he sees the Lord.

Yahweh or Jehovah is his name here. And he sees him not at the top of the ladder in heaven. It's not that the angels are bringing messages from heaven down to earth.

But rather he sees the Lord beside him or even just over him, standing next to him, so to speak, as he lies on the ground dreaming. We're not told what the Lord looked like.

It doesn't matter. What does matter is that God speaks. What he says is always more important than what he looks like. Presumably Jacob recognised him as the Lord not because of some physical appearance but because of what he said.

Firstly, the Lord introduces himself. He does so not by words of saying I'm the God of heaven and earth, I'm the God of the world or I'm the creator of everything. But rather he says to Jacob in verse 13, I am the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac.

[6 : 07] Well actually Abraham was not his father but his grandfather. Not that God got it wrong.

The idea of being the father of somebody also is a more general term than we use it. It could mean grandfather, great-grandfather, etc.

What God is doing here is introducing himself to Jacob as a God who has revealed himself to Jacob's grandfather Abraham and to his father Isaac.

That is, God is a relational God. He's a God who's revealed himself to individuals and I think by implication of this introduction he is the God who's revealed himself by giving promises to Abraham and promises to Isaac.

And over the last several weeks in this series from the book of Genesis we have seen those promises being made and being reiterated at different points in the history of these people.

But now the second thing that God says is to do with Jacob. He transfers the promises made to Abraham and then reiterated to Isaac.

[7 : 09] He now transfers those promises to Jacob himself. See what those promises are in verses 13 and 14. God said, I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac and then the first promise at the end of verse 13, the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring.

Promise of land. Promise that God had made to Abraham many chapters before in chapter 12.

When Abraham got to this land God said, look around, this is the land that I promised to give to you and to your descendants.

A promise that was reiterated later on in chapter 15, later on again and also to Isaac and now it's being transferred to the grandson, to Jacob. The second promise in verse 14, and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth and you shall spread abroad to the west, to the east, to the north and to the south.

That is a promise of descendants, many descendants, the same sort of promise that God had made to Abraham and then reiterated to Isaac as well.

Abraham, when he received such a promise, was old and his wife was barren. It was hard for God to, in a sense, or it's hard to believe that God could keep that promise.

[8 : 29] Now he makes the same promise to Abraham's grandson, Jacob. And the third promise is at the end of verse 14. And all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring.

That is a promise of world blessing that will come through this person, through Jacob. Same promise again, in effect, that was made to Abraham back in chapter 12, where God promised Abraham that those who bless you I will bless and the one who curses you I will curse.

Notice some things about these promises. Jacob at this point is fleeing the land. But God promises him that the land is what he'll give him and his offspring.

Secondly, Jacob doesn't have a wife, let alone a child, and yet God promises him numerous offspring. Thirdly, Jacob is an insignificant individual.

It seems that he's traveling alone, he doesn't have a large retinue, he doesn't have many servants, he doesn't have great wealth and cattle and flocks that he has with him, he seems to be by himself.

[9 : 40] Here is a promise of world blessing through this rather insignificant individual. So often, isn't it the case that God's promises are unlikely?

He doesn't choose a wealthy political leader to make a promise of world blessing to. He doesn't choose a person who's already got lots and lots of kids to say, I'm going to give you numerous descendants.

He doesn't promise somebody who's staying in the land that he'll give the land. At each point, the promises are unlikely. And yet, as we read on in subsequent chapters, God keeps each promise. It's easy today not to believe the promises of God. Not to believe that Jesus is returning. Not to believe that Jesus' death is sufficient for our salvation.

Not to believe that Jesus' resurrection shows that he is the only way to God. Not to believe that God is the sovereign and Lord over heaven and earth today, that all things are under his care.

[10:43] Not to believe that God will give us all we need each day, our daily food, and so on. And yet, the Bible is sufficient evidence for us, giving us stories time and time again, where God keeps each and every promise that he ever makes, faithfully, utterly faithful to every promise.

God, though, goes on to give now to Jacob three more promises. These are not promises that were given to Abraham and Isaac beforehand.

They are particular to Jacob, in one sense, unique to him. He promises him, in verse 15, firstly, his presence. Know that I am with you.

As you're about to leave the land, I am with you. I'm not a God who's confined to the land of promise. I am a God who will be with you wherever you go.

I promise you my presence is what God is saying here to Jacob. Outside of the land, for what turns out to be the next 20 years, God says, I will be with you.

[12:01] And it's a key theme in the following story and indeed beyond as well. God keeps this promise. He is with Jacob wherever he goes.

The second thing he promises him in the same verse 15 is that he will keep Jacob wherever he goes. That is, he will guard him, protect him and provide for him.

That's the sense of the word keep here. And certainly that's what happens in the chapters that follow. Jacob is being told here that he can be assured that his needs and his safety rest secure in God.

And thirdly, the end of verse 15, God promises that he will bring you back to this land. It's a promise of homecoming, if you like. God promises his presence, his protection and that he will bring Jacob home to the land that he promises to give to him.

Jacob expected to be away a short time. It turned out for various reasons to be 20 years. But more faithfully even than Qantas, God will bring him home.

[13:13] Jacob wakes up. He's not relieved that it's just a dream like I was with my weddings, but rather he realizes that there is substance to the dream.

God is here, he says. God is in this place and he hadn't realized it, he says in verse 17. And so as an act of trust to mark the occasion, Jacob does three things.

He takes the stone that he used for his pillow and he sets it upright as a little pillar, a little column, probably not all that big, but he puts it into the ground, we're told in verse 18, and he pours oil on the top of it as a means of consecrating it, as a sort of special object of worship in a sense, a sacred stone.

Interestingly, later on in the Bible, the people of God are forbidden from having such pillars or sacred stones. Here Jacob is setting one up and presumably what he's doing meets with God's approval.

Later on, as I say, when the law is given, it's forbidden God's people to do this, partly because by doing so they run the risk of entering into the pagan worship of the Canaanites.

[14:39] what I think is implied here is that what we have in Genesis is an accurate very old story that predates even the giving of the law in the Old Testament.

There are some who wish to debunk the book of Genesis and say that it's a sort of fictional myth that comes from much later on. If that were the case, I'm sure that this little incident of Jacob setting up a pillar would have been removed.

And quite incidentally and quite trivially, tradition has it that this same stone somehow ended up in Scotland and thence to Westminster Abbey and is the stone under the throne in Westminster Abbey on which the kings and queens of England are crowned.

Well, I think that's complete nonsense. It's British imperialism probably at its worst. But anyway, there it is. The second thing that Jacob does in response to the dream is in verse 19.

He calls the place Bethel. The area or the city nearby had been called Luz to that date. Jacob renames it and the word Bethel means the house of God.

[15 : 44] Beth is a Hebrew word or Beth or Beit, a Hebrew word for house. So in the word Bethlehem, it's the house of Lehem, the house of bread. Here it's the house of El, the house of God that is.

So he names the place, especially to mark the occasion of God revealing himself in a dream. And later on in Israel's history, sadly, the place does become important but as an apostate shrine. And the third thing he does is make a vow in verse 20 and through to the end of the chapter. In making a vow he says in verse 20, if God will be with me and so on, he's not saying, look God, I doubt you to keep these promises but just if you do keep them then I'll respond.

The words are actually more full of confidence than that. Jacob is saying to God, if you surely do keep these promises as I expect and trust, then this is how I will respond.

That is, the vow is an expression of faith in the promises that God makes to Jacob. He's full of acknowledgement of God's certain word being fulfilled.

[16 : 58] So he says to him then, if God will be with me and will keep me in this 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, that is all the three promises I've mentioned all being fulfilled, the promise of presence, protection provision and the promise of homecoming, then Jacob says, the Lord shall be my God.

That is, I will continue in a relationship with God. I will serve him and I will worship him with my life. And then he says, and the stone that I've set up for a pillar shall be God's house.

It will be marked as a shrine to commemorate this act of God speaking by way of a dream. And thirdly, he says, and of all that you give me, I'll surely give one tenth to you.

Jacob's taking God seriously here. He's making a vow that he will give a tenth of everything to God because God has revealed himself and made these promises which he'll keep.

Later on in the Old Testament, a law is brought in that obliges the people of God to give a tenth of their produce to God by means of sacrifices and gifts and offerings.

[18 : 12] And though that law does not carry over explicitly into the New Testament for Christian people to give a tenth of our income and produce to God, the model of the Old Testament of such generous giving to God must surely influence the way we respond to God with our own giving of our gifts, our money and our produce.

It seems to me there is little excuse for Christians to be mean and stingy in their giving to God and the work of the gospel, given the model of the Old Testament of giving a tenth.

How much more have we received from God than Jacob did and yet how few of us give a tenth of our income, even anything like it, to God's work ministry.

God has done abundantly more for us than he did for Jacob or the people of the Old Testament in his son dying for us. We ought to be far more obligated in our giving to God, giving perhaps even over and above a tenth or a tithe than Jacob and the people of Israel were in the Old Testament times.

Notice that the vow that Jacob makes is in a sense a prayer to God and his prayer is motivated by God's promises. If you want to know what to pray for, read the Bible to find out what God promises to do and pray.

[19 : 34] Jacob's in effect praying that God keeps his promises. That ought to be a model for our own prayers. God promises to give us our daily food. He promises to take us home to heaven and so on.

This ought to be motivation for us praying. Read the Bible. To see what God is like. To see what he promises to do and pray. Well this dream for Jacob in the end is not about Jacob.

It's about God. And something very fundamental about God is being revealed in this passage. He comes here to a deceptive man.

A man who we saw last week in the preceding verses has through cunning and deceit won a blessing from his father and cheated his brother. He's a man fleeing for his life and in a sense deservedly so.

But God comes to him, comes down the stairway to him and speaks to him not words of judgment and condemnation but words of mercy, grace and promise.

[20 : 51] And God's like that. He comes down to our mixed up and fallen world, a world full of deceit and cunning and threats of murder and alienation.

And he speaks words of grace and promise. God comes down the stairway to our world to speak similar words to us.

You see the three things that God promised Jacob in verse 15 are the same promises that God makes in the end for us as well. He promised Jacob, I will be with you.

The promise of his presence. The first time in the Bible that God makes such a promise but one that's repeated several times through the pages of the Bible. Later on, God makes the same sort of promise to Moses in the next book of the Old Testament, the book of Exodus.

I will be with you. Later on again, he promises it to the next leader of the people of God, to Joshua, as they're about to enter the promised land. I will be with you.

[21 : 55] Later on again, to another leader, Gideon in the book of Judges. Later on again, to all of God's people in exile in Babylon. I am with you whatever befalls you.

Later on again in the Bible, Jesus made the same promise to his immediate followers, his disciples, after his resurrection. He said, go into the world baptizing and making disciples and I will be with you.

But it's a promise that doesn't stop there either. Because it's a promise that the pages of the New Testament tell us apply to all Christian people. To us, that is, if we trust in Jesus.

God says, for example, at the end of the letter to the Hebrews, I am with you wherever you go. God says, for good or ill, God is with us.

But it doesn't stop there. Because God promised Jacob that he would protect him and provide for him and guard him and keep him. Again, the first such promise in the Bible. But throughout the Old Testament we see that it's a promise that's reiterated to the people of God of the Old Testament.

[23 : 14] For example, in the Psalms, they sing that God is their strength and refuge, their very present help in trouble, the one who protects them, the one who provides for them. part of the early blessing of the priests in the Old Testament.

The Lord bless you and keep you. That is, the Lord bless you and protect you and provide for you. The same idea is being expressed in that early blessing of the Old Testament in the book of Numbers.

And when we get to the New Testament, the same sort of thing. Jesus says to his followers, in effect, I will protect you. I'm the good shepherd who lays down his life to protect you and guard you and provide for you.

And similar other instances he gives to his immediate disciples. But it doesn't stop with them either. Because the same sort of promise is applied to Christian people generally. Where we get an Old Testament blessing, the Lord bless you and keep you, so we read in the New Testament a blessing at the end of the letter of Jude.

To God who is able to keep you. To guard you and protect you from falling. At the beginning of Peter's first letter in the New Testament, for all Christian people, God is protecting us and guarding us for our heavenly inheritance.

[24 : 26] Isn't that wonderful reassurance also? God's not only with us, but he's protecting us, guarding us and providing for us. Whatever happens to us in life, for good or ill, wherever we are in life, whatever threats we face, whatever difficulties we face, God promises to keep us and guard us, to provide for our needs.

But the third thing he promised in verse 15 to Jacob, also in the end applies to us as well. He said to Jacob, I will bring you back to this land. And he did. Later on in the Old Testament, God reiterates that promise to Moses and the Israelite slaves in Egypt.

I will bring you home to the promised land. And he did. And then later on again in Old Testament history, when the people of God have been defeated and carted off into exile in Babylon, the same promises made in the prophets like Isaiah.

I will bring you home to the land, God says to them in reassurance. And the same sort of thing Jesus says in the New Testament to his immediate disciples.

I will take you home to be with me where I am going, he says in John 14. To the heavenly mansion, he promises Thomas and the other disciples who were with him in the room before he died the next day.

[25 : 46] But it doesn't stop with them. Because the pages of the New Testament ooze with the reassurance that God will take each one of his people home to be with him in heaven when Jesus returns.

It's a promise that is abundantly found in the pages of the New Testament. Isn't that glorious comfort for us? Not only does God promise us now in this life to be with us, now in this life to provide for us, to guard us, protect us and keep us.

But he also promises that he will take us home to be with him in heaven forever. Perhaps the most famous passage of scripture brings all these three promises together as well.

Psalm 23 begins, the Lord is my shepherd, therefore I shall not want in anything. Then it goes on to promise us protection and provision. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul, he leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

Then it promises God's presence. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

[27 : 07] Then it goes back to God providing and protecting. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows and it finishes with the promise of homecoming to be with God.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long. See how often these three promises keep recurring in scripture. The promise of God's presence, his protection and homecoming. And that psalm I've just quoted so well known to all of us I'm sure, points to how God does it for us.

Through the Lord, our shepherd, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, our shepherd. Jesus Christ who is in effect the ladder or the stairway connecting heaven and earth.

When Jesus was calling his disciples together, he said to one of them, a man by the name of Nathaniel, truly I tell you, you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending not on a ladder or a stairway but on me, Jesus Christ, the son of man, he says.

[28 : 19] I'm the ladder of the stairway. I'm the one through which or how God comes down to earth to give you these promises. In effect, we come to realize that Jesus himself is the Lord who does come down to stand on earth to make these promises to us.

God is present with us in Jesus. God does guard and keep us and protect us and provide for us by the power of Jesus' death. And God will take us to his heavenly home in Jesus and by the power of his resurrection.

We don't need a dream to tell us that. God gave us, God gave Jacob a dream to tell him that. But God gave us Jesus Christ to tell us that.

He's present with us always, everywhere. He'll guard, keep and protect us always, everywhere. And he will bring us home to his heavenly promised land.

We can be sure of that. God will bring us home to his heavenly derive here. Gujarum, we don't need a little destroyer. We can dream a little more lives him past and make it happen with us. Love him and I will help him want his brother in my house.

[29 : 33] I felt that. Our professors as well told us, trip and ■■■■■■■■ will be now to the room perché. He'll be here. All right. We can do that. He'll be with us. Look at that. We will see that.

He'll be right back up across and be there. What's a podem one else now? Look at guys' say, what hark