

God who Meets and Keeps His People

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Date: 28 July 2019

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[0 : 00] How about I pray for us before we begin? Let's pray. Father, thank you again for your word. And we do pray, Father, that you might help us again to understand it, to be encouraged by it, but also to live in light of it.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I saw an article online the other day entitled, on the next slide, Six Ways to Meet God Without Going to Church.

And as I say this, I now realize I perhaps shouldn't be giving you any ideas. But anyway, this guy says, the first, next slide, he says, you can meet God in creation.

So 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 suspect we all now need to meet God in Fiji, don't we?

Sounds pretty good, doesn't it? But is that right? Well, the next slide, he has another idea through music. He says, want to meet God? Turn on the radio and open your mind to the voice of God speaking to you.

[1 : 08] Right. Okay. And the third way, he says, is on the next slide, if you really want to meet God, give, he says. He's a church minister writing this, by the way. Every religion and so-called minister seems to have their own ideas about how we meet God.

But today we'll see that it actually starts with God meeting us. So at point one in your outlines, verse 10 and 11 in your Bibles. 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, our author reminds us of the story so far. Jacob has left Beersheba and he's on his way to Haran, verse 10.

Why? Well, if you're here last week, you won't remember how Jacob, the deceiver, dressed up as his brother Esau and grabbed his brother's blessing. And so now Esau is out to kill him.

[2 : 18] So mum got dad to send Jacob away under the guise of getting a wife from amongst their relatives in Haran. And so Jacob has left home, presumably with a backpack of things, because we know he's got some oil by the end of the passage.

But despite what he had, it would have been daunting. Remember, on the next slide, Jacob was mummy's boy. He was her favourite and he liked to stay at home around the tents.

He was not a hunter of the open field like Esau. And so I'm not even sure he'd know what to do if he saw a wild animal. And to make matters worse, Haran is a long way away.

So on the next slide, we see there in Beersheba, down the bottom, that's where he left. That's where they were. Bethel is where we are in today's chapter, in verse 11. This is where he stops. But Haran is right up there, over 780 kilometres by foot. It's a long way. And it would have been dangerous travelling alone.

[3 : 26] In fact, in verse 11, it says he uses a stone for a pillow, which can't have been very comfortable, could it? I mean, 40 winks don't sell a stone pillow range for a reason, do they?

But the text is literally he placed a stone at his head. And so it's more likely the stone was for protection. Kind of like in those movies where the spies kind of put a gun under their pillow so it's handy in case something happens.

So he puts a stone as one of his only weapons at his head in case he needs it, should something happen, because it's dangerous. On top of all this, he didn't even know if his uncle Laban, whom he was meeting, was even still alive.

And we know this because in the next chapter, one of the first questions he asks when he arrives at Haran is, is Laban well? I mean, is he alive and kicking?

So there is Jacob all alone, uncertain, no doubt, of his future. And we can sometimes feel like that too in life, can't we? We can sometimes feel alone or feel uncertain of our future.

[4 : 40] Whether it's because we've lost a loved one or going through some sort of suffering or difficulty at the time. We can feel alone even when we're surrounded by people.

And it's into this sort of situation that God now meets Jacob and speaks to him. Did you see verse 12? He begins with a dream.

He 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. Now, this is not your average dream, is it? But notice a few things about it. First, God takes the initiative here.

I mean, if we were traveling on our own at night, we might be the ones who are crying out to God. But here, God takes the initiative to come to Jacob, to meet Jacob.

[5 : 38] And that's why point one doesn't say Jacob met God. It's God meets Jacob. Second, God meets Jacob in this place.

So in verse 11, have we got those slides in the right order there, Barry? Verse 11, there should be a slide before that one. Anyway, here, verse 11, it literally mentions places three times.

We'll just follow along. I'll tell you when to go to the next one. So notice there, three times the word place is mentioned. Our Bible translators thought it was too repetitive, so they changed it.

But the author is highlighting the significance by the repetition. And then third, Jacob's dream involves a staircase from earth to God in heaven.

In other words, Jacob has access to God and God to Jacob. And so now on the next slide is an artist's impression of that staircase. As you can see on this picture here, there's fourthly also angels.

[6 : 44] Not just a staircase, but angels as well. The word angel means messenger to carry God's word or message. But God rules by his word.

And so the picture here is really of angels descending to carry out God's rule over the world. And ascending back to report to God. And for Jacob, it suggests that he will be under God's rule and as his person, God's protection.

But like most images, you can read almost anything into them, can't you? And we read all sorts of things into stuff we see in life. Back in 2011 in Brisbane, on the next slide, people claimed to see the face of Jesus in a pizza.

Now, no one knows what Jesus really looks like. So how do they even know it's Jesus? It could be their next door neighbor. And so you can read all sorts of things into images, can't we?

And so we need God's word to help us rightly interpret them. For us, it's God's word in the Bible. But for Jacob, who didn't have the Bible, it's God's word in his dream.

[7 : 54] That's what we see next. So verse 13, he says to Jacob, Now, this first promise to Jacob really reaffirms those old promises to Abraham.

Do you remember on the next slide? We've seen this a number of times. God promised Abraham a great name, which he's already kept. So these are the remaining three. Land, which is a place. Offspring, which is people. And blessing for all nations. This is God's plan to fix the curse of sin. Remember, Adam and Eve were living in God's place of Eden as God's people enjoying God's blessing.

But then they sinned and they had to leave God's place of Eden, you remember. And they were no longer in a right relationship with God as his people. And instead of blessing, they suffered curse. These promises to Abraham were to reverse the effects of the curse. To create a new people for him in his place under his blessing.

[9 : 26] And it's these promises God now affirms to Jacob. Because you see, God is determined to reverse the curse. He's determined to have a people living in his place, enjoying his blessings.

This is why he meets Jacob here and gives him these promises. That's why he also adds another promise in verse 15, which is what helps us, I think, to understand these images.

Verse 15, he says, I am with you and will watch or literally keep you wherever you go. And I will bring you back to this land.

I will not leave you until I've done what I've promised you. God promises firstly to be with Jacob.

And I think this helps us to understand the staircase image that connects earth to heaven, to God.

Just as Jacob has access to God in prayer, well, it's a two-way staircase, wasn't it? So God also has access to be with Jacob in life. And God's promise to keep, watch or literally keep Jacob, I think helps to explain the angels.

[10:36] For angels, again, carry out God's rule, including God's protection to keep Jacob. In fact, in Hebrews chapter 1, verse 14, on the next slide, we read, Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?

And so as Jacob is alone and no doubt uncertain, God graciously takes the initiative to meet him in this place and to promise to keep him until he brings him back home to this promised land.

They ought to have been pretty comforting promises, wouldn't they? I remember leaving home for my first day of school. My parents took a photo on the next slide. This is me. I was smiling on the outside, but on the inside, I felt alone and very uncertain of my future.

Would there be bullies out there to get me? Would I have any friends? Would I make it back home in one piece? I think that's enough. Thanks, Barry. I could have done with the verse 15 promise. In fact, my mum could have done with verse 15 promise too. But the good news is we do have those verse 15 promises. You see, God graciously took the initiative to meet us in the person of Christ.

[11:58] Just as he did for Jacob in the place of Bethel. Our passage mentions this place six times. Three times in verse 11 and three times later in verses 16 and 17.

That's a lot. Six times in 12 verses. God did tell Israel to go to a place on the next slide. He says, you are to seek a place the Lord your God will choose from among all your tribes.

And you have to go to that place to meet God. That's the temple in Jerusalem. That's where Israel was to meet God. But then it was destroyed because of their sin. And so God again graciously took the initiative to come to meet us.

But this time, not in a place, but in the person of Jesus. And so on the next slide, we read that Jesus talks about the temple as being his body.

Now, he is the one we go to meet God. In fact, it says that no one has ever seen God, but the one and only son has made the father known to us.

[13:03] You see, like Jacob, we before we even cried out to God, God took the initiative to come to earth in his son to reveal himself to us, to meet us.

I mean, that's pretty gracious of him, actually. And it means we don't meet God in Fiji, as nice as that might sound, nor in holy places like the Holy Land of Israel.

People do pilgrimages to Israel thinking they can meet God or get closer to God. I mean, it's great to do and you can learn lots. But we meet God in the person of Christ.

And so last year, I heard of one, our diocese run to Israel. And there was someone high up in the diocese who, I think they were at the Sea of Galilee.

And they prayed and asked God for a special blessing because they were in this sacred place. Now, I know this person. They're a really nice person. I'm being deliberately vague because it's being recorded.

[14:03] But they've misunderstood that there are no more sacred places. God meets us now in the person of Christ. In fact, this building is not the house of God.

Jesus is the house of God and us with him, the house of God, not the building. There are no more sacred places for we meet God in the person of Christ. What's more, Jesus not only reveals God to us, he also gives us access to God.

He's not only the new place to meet God, he's also the new staircase to God. We heard this in our second reading, didn't we? So on the next slide, this is the last verse of our reading.

And notice the angels are no longer descending and ascending on a staircase, but on the Son of Man, Jesus. Jesus is the new staircase to God.

He is now the bridge between God in heaven and people on earth. For by his death and resurrection, he pays for our sins so that we can be forgiven and given access to God.

[15:08] Access now in prayer and life eternal with him later. And again, it's two way. You know, it's not just access to God through Christ, but God also has access to us through Christ.

And to be with us by his spirit. Such that we are never alone. And said, he'll 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, it says, God will also keep you firm to the end.

So that you'll be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. Or as we'll sing in a little while, No power of hell, no scheme of man can ever pluck us from his hand.

He will keep us. Which means when we do feel alone, we're actually not. God is always with us to strengthen us through life's ups and downs.

[16:15] Now, I realize, though, in the midst of suffering and difficulty, it's very hard to feel like he is with us. But it's often when you look back that you can see he has been with us, isn't it?

I was speaking with someone a little while ago who was going through some cancer-related issues. They were in and out of hospital, feeling rather down and dejected about it.

I called them on the Friday. And as we were talking, they were reflecting over the past week. And said to me, or realized that every day, as it turns out, someone had called them.

And on one occasion, even right at the moment when they were feeling down, to talk with them and encourage them in the faith. And as they look back over their week, they recognize this was too coincidental to be anything other than God with them, strengthening them through other people.

It will look different, of course, for each of us, depending on our situations and so on. But the point is, we are never alone. God is with us to sustain us and to keep us, bring us home.

[17:24] And so our future is certain. No other religion offers this kind of assurance. None. And it gives us hope for those of our family who have walked away from the faith they once professed.

That if they are God's, then he will keep them and bring them back. And it gives us confidence that whatever uncertainties we face in life, we have the absolute certainty of eternal life.

Where all our sufferings will pale into insignificance. For God will keep us. It's what God offers us through Christ. It's incredible, isn't it?

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 he to us.

Such that he's with us and will keep us. If we believe in Jesus. And so can I ask you this morning, do you trust in Jesus? Do you believe that his death paid for your sin so that you could be brought to God, given access to God and he to you?

[18:33] For Jesus is the only one who is the place, the person where we meet God. The only one who is the bridge, the staircase to God. And so he's the only one we must believe in to come to God.

For us who do believe, then how are we to respond? How does Jacob respond? Does he believe these promises? Well, let's have a look. Point two, which will be much shorter, in verse 16. When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, surely the Lord is in this place.

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. I noticed the word place is again repeated here. But Jacob's firstly responds with reverent fear for this place, doesn't he? He says this place is awesome. Not how kids say it, you know, cool, rad, awesome.

Awesome in the traditional way that it's full of awe. Scary even. In other words, he has a reverent fear of this place because God is here. And that's a pretty good first response, isn't it?

[19:43] I think it's something that the modern church could probably learn from, actually. Because perhaps we're starting to lose our sense of reverent fear. I mean, we rightly rejoice at his love and grace.

We appropriately pray to him boldly as our father. But then we can sometimes take his grace for granted and not treating with the respect he deserves.

I find I sometimes do that even when I say grace at dinner time. You know, the kids are, you know, kind of fighting with each other. Everyone's starving. And so you kind of just go through the motions, tick the box and forget who I'm praying to.

We need to enjoy our freedom in Christ, yes. But we still need to show a reverent respect for God, don't we? And Jacob's reverent fear leads him to rename and mark this place as special.

He renames in verse 19 this place Bethel, which means house of God. And inside this house of God, because he's seen this big staircase upstairs to God in heaven, he also calls it the gate of heaven.

[20:48] He marks it with a stone that was at his head, anoints it with oil to consecrate it and mark it out as special. This is also a pretty good response. But then comes his vow in verse 20.

See what you make of this. Then Jacob made a vow to God, we later read, saying, If God will be with me and will watch over 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 all that you give me, I will give a tenth back. Now, do you notice this vow is conditional? If God does that, then Jacob will do this. Now, a lot of vows are conditional, I need to say, and some of them are done in a good way. Hannah makes a vow for a son, Samuel, in a good way. But there are other vows that are bad. And I think Jacob's is dodgy. His wily and bargaining nature seems to be coming out again. [22 : 01] I mean, in the other vows, God hasn't just given the person great promises, but he has given them to Jacob. And he knows it's a big deal. He knows it's real because he's filled with reverend awe.

And yet he can't quite trust the promises completely, can he? He doesn't quite commit himself to God fully, does he? Instead, he kind of clarifies the promises, like keeping him. In verse 20, he adds, if you give me food and clothes, just to make sure God knows what he expects. In fact, Jacob actually over-clarifies. He says, if you give me food to eat and clothes to wear.

What else do you do with food? What else do you do with clothes? He doesn't need to say that. This is not an act of faith. It's what you do when you're bargaining to make sure you don't miss out on anything.

See, he doesn't seem to trust God's promises completely, does he? And what's more, he says he'll only commit to God after God brings him home safely. Verse 21, if you bring me back home safely, then you'll be my God.

[23 : 10] He doesn't commit himself fully to God yet, does he? In fact, it's not until chapter 32 that we see a real change in Jacob. It's not until chapter 33 that he finally declares God as his God.

You see, while God has begun to work in Jacob, Jacob is still very much a work in progress. As one Bible commentator put it, he's still more scoundrel than saint.

Yet God will be with him and keep him, even despite him. Again, a great sign of grace, isn't it? And it's this grace that ought to move us to do better than Jacob.

To trust God's promises completely. And to commit ourselves to God fully. Even to give to God. Not as part of a bargain like Jacob here.

Or not in order to meet God like that guy at the start. But because God has already graciously met us in Christ. And he's already graciously demonstrated that he will keep us in Christ.

[24 : 18] For he's already done the hardest thing of giving his son to pay for our sins. And secure our eternal life. So will he not also then do the easier thing of keeping us through life?

Of course he will. I mean, imagine for a moment you are shouting your wife at your extended family a trip overseas. I said, imagine. Okay. You've paid for all their flights and accommodation.

You've done the hardest thing already financially. Would you not then do the easier thing of just driving them to the airport? Of course you would. Otherwise you'd waste your money. We wouldn't do that.

We wouldn't waste our money like that. Well, God is not going to waste Christ's death either. If he's done the hardest thing already, then we can be certain he'll do the easier thing of bringing us home to heaven.

And so we have every reason to do better than Jacob. We have every reason to trust God's promises completely and to commit our lives fully.

[25 : 22] So let's pray we would. Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly father, we do thank you for these promises to your people. We thank you that you graciously met us in your son and that you graciously gave us access to you through him.

But also you to us, that you are with us and will keep us. And so, Father, we pray that in light of your grace towards us, please help us to trust your promises completely and to give ourselves to you fully.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.