

The Stairwell to Heaven

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

Genesis chapter 28, verse 10. Jacob left Beersheba and went to Haran. And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night because the sun had set.

Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and laid 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.

[1 : 17] 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 your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

Behold, I am with you and 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 you. And Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, Surely the Lord is in this place.

And I did not know it. 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.

[2 : 24] So early in the morning, Jacob took the stone that he put under his head and set it up for a pillar. And poured oil on top. He called the name of the place Bethel.

But the name of the city was Luz at first. Then he made a vow. 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. Then the Lord shall be my God. And this stone which I have set up for a pillar.

Shall be God's house. And all that you give me. I will give a full tenth to you. May God bless hearing, preaching of his word this morning.

In August of 1966, Simon and Garfunkel, famous for their hit songs, The Sound of Silence and Bridge Over Troubled Water, and Cecilia and many others, released an unusual single.

[3 : 34] They released a version of Silent Night in August. But while they sang the angelic refrains of the old carol in two-part harmony, they also played clips from the seven o'clock news.

The carol sang, All is calm. All is bright. But the news captured the unrest and uncertainty encompassing America. Told of a drug overdose of a famous comedian.

Brutal murder of nine innocent nurses. Told of Martin Luther King marching, leading a march through Washington, D.C. for racial justice.

Told of opposition and protest to the war in Vietnam. The effect was dramatic, or is dramatic.

It's magnified with headphones. One side, if you put on your headphones, the left side is Silent Night, angelically playing along. The right side is the newsreel going, capturing this unrest and uncertainty.

[4 : 52] It seems to ask, Who can sing, All is calm, when the world is divided by a senseless war? Who can sing, All is bright, when our lives are mired in so much brokenness?

The carol may sing, All is calm, All is bright. But life in the real world is harsh and hard. In our text this morning, Jacob finds out how harsh and hard the real world is.

Jacob's on the run. As you know, if you've been with us in this series, he lied, cheated, and stole his way into the blessing of God, into Esau's blessing. But now he's on the run, because his mom found out Esau was after him.

And so he's running to her relatives to save his life. He's making the same trek that Abraham made, 125 years earlier, except going the opposite direction, and he's traveling alone.

We're meant to take that away. Jacob is a twin, born with a built-in playmate, but now for the first time in his life, he's truly alone.

[6 : 04] He's afraid. He's quite obviously afraid of Esau, but he's also afraid of the future. Does the promise truly belong to me?

If I'm to receive the inheritance, if I'm to receive this promised land, why am I on the run? Abraham didn't run.

Isaac didn't run. Is the Lord with me? Will the Lord go with me? Will the Lord bless me, as he did Abraham and Isaac? I think in so many ways, Jacob is plagued by the same questions that plague us.

We too are far from home. We're on the run, so to speak. We're strangers in a strange land. We're looking for a city that has foundations.

Out here on the run, the same questions continue to gnaw. Is the Lord still with me? Does the Lord still have a plan for my life? If he does, why does it seem like he's left me all alone?

[7 : 08] Why has he heard my prayers for the darkness to lift, for my son to come home, for a lover to sweep me away? Why am I still afraid?

I don't know anymore. Well, if that's you, I want to give you a song that's much better to sing than Simon and Garfunkel's. We sing all is calm and all is bright, but life is still harsh and hard, but that's just it.

Christmas is not for us when things are going well. It's not just for us when things are going well, when the pocketbook is full, friendships are fulfilling, when the future is clear. Christmas is for us when we don't see a way out.

It's for us when we're afraid. Wonderfully, Christmas does not say cheer up and put on a church face. It says, do not fear. God is with you.

Our text is staggering, but where it's going is, do not fear. The Lord Jesus will be with you wherever you go. Do not fear. The Lord Jesus will be with you wherever you go.

[8 : 12] We're going to break this out in three points. The first is the Lord's promise. So the first part, the Lord's promise. So the first part captures and describes the Lord's appearing and his promise to Jacob.

The description calls us to the desperation of his situation. Look back in verse 10. Jacob left Beersheba and was going to Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night because the sun had set.

Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. We're meant to notice that it's night now. Jacob no longer has the security of the sun and without the aid of lanterns and headlamps, he's surrounded by darkness and in the darkness, danger always lurks.

He's in the wilderness. Jacob is not picking a good place to camp. He's not taking in the sights. Jacob is trying to get to the wilderness as fast as he can so he only rests where he rests because the sun had set.

It was no more random than that. It was where he could roll out his bag, so to speak, because the sun had set and now it's hard. Jacob no longer has the comfort of his parents' tent, perhaps his mother's tent.

[9 : 32] even more so, he's all alone and all he has is a hard rock on which to lay his head and to draw that out.

Jacob lays his head on the stone, falls asleep and dreams a dream. Many times in Scripture, the Lord appears, he speaks through a dream.

Now don't go home and start interpreting all your dreams tonight, but he uses dreams to prophetically to lead his people and so the Lord appears to him in a dream.

Now we have to just pause for a moment. This is, so Jacob's making this several hundred mile journey and the only glimpse into what happened on that journey is right here. God wants to draw our attention to something incredible about the living God and his dealings with Jacob.

Jacob thought he was on the run from Esau. Jacob thought he was on the run running to his relative's home, but as is often the case, the Lord has called him out into the wilderness alone to meet with him.

[10 : 40] Now wonderfully, while the early years of Jacob's life, and we are retelling this or rehashing it this morning around the kitchen table, the early years of Jacob's life detail his willingness to do whatever it takes to get the blessing of God.

This story is not about his striving and scheming. It's not about what he is doing. One scholar says, it's not Jacob who turns to God.

It's God who turns to Jacob. God's called him out in the wilderness to see that his life hangs not on what he can grasp, but on what God gives.

It's incredible. First, he sees a vision. Look at verse 12. And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set upon the earth, and the top of it reached the heavens.

Behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. You notice a repetition of behold. There, twice in verse 12 and in 13, and even further down in 15.

[11 : 51] So he's saying, look, you know, behold, the dream is about what he saw. Most folks agree, or all the scholars, I think, tend to agree we're not to envision a ladder that we might throw up on the side of our house to climb up on the roof one person at a time.

We're meant to envision something bigger, something grander. More like the Biltmore house or something like that. That grand staircase like that, in many ways, in those old days, the ancient people would have a temple with huge staircases that would go up, and the idea was you would ascend up and God would ascend down so that you could meet with him.

So there's something like this that Jacob is envisioning, not a puny step ladder, a puny A-frame ladder. He's envisioning a grand staircase in which angels are coming up and down, and indeed, he anticipates the Lord coming up and down, and this tower, this staircase tower reaches all the way up to heaven from earth.

It's the answer to the Tower of Babel. What man could not do, God can. God alone closes the distance to reveal himself.

Immediately sees the angels ascending into see me. I find this very fascinating. Notice he mentions that they are ascending first. The angels weren't arriving. They were already there.

[13 : 22] Just like Psalm 91 says, always watching over his beloved people. The Lord descends as well. Look in verse 13.

And behold, the Lord stood above it. Most likely, your Bible like mine has a little footnote there. Mine says, the Lord stood above it or beside it.

So it could be translated, the Lord stood above it or the Lord stood beside it. Which one is it? I think if we were thinking in the way ancient people might think that you're kind of ascending up a grand staircase up to the Lord, you would think he stood above it because you're ascending up there to him.

But I actually think the best translation is that he stood beside it. That aligns with verse 15 when he says, I am with you.

It wouldn't make sense if the Lord said, I am with you, but I'm up above on top of this ladder all the way up in heaven. It wouldn't make sense for the Lord to say, I am with you. Also look in verse 16.

[14 : 30] Afterwards, he says, the Lord is in this place. So he's not on top of the ladder. He's right here. The emphasis is not that God is up there and Jacob must ascend the ladder up to him.

The emphasis is that God has come down to him in this place. And he's doing that to show us something very incredible. But there's more.

The Lord speaks to him and promises to be with him wherever he goes. Look in verse 13. He says, I am the Lord, the God of Abraham, your father, and the God of Isaac.

As if to say, I know how you got the blessing and yet, I'm still blessing you. The land on which you lie, I'll give to you and your offspring.

Your offspring be like the dust of the earth. You'll spread abroad to the west and the east and north and south. All the families of the earth will be blessed.

[15 : 29] What's he doing here? He's repeating the same promise he gave to Abraham. Same promise he gave to Isaac.

I'll give you land. I'll give you the land of Canaan. I'll give you offspring. You're, you know, as numerous as the stars of the heaven and numerous as the dust of the earth here.

I'll give you blessing. But he continues. Look in verse 15, interrupted again by this behold, this call attention. Take this in.

He says, I am with you and 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 you.

Now, the Lord promised to be with Isaac in Genesis 26, but the Lord is underlining this in his promise to Jacob in a unique way to be with him.

[16 : 35] He begins with the behold, like I pointed out. He says, I promise to go with you. I'll be with you wherever you go. I will keep you. I'll protect you.

I'll keep you. That's what that means. I'll keep you. I'll protect you. I'll keep you wherever you go. He says, I'll bring you home. You don't know where you're going.

I mean, Jacob's running from Esau. He should be running from Laban as we're about to see. And God said, I'll keep you all the way. Bring you all the way home. Then he concludes, I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised.

I love this promise in verse 16 and 17 or 15. He encapsulates positively. He says, I'll be with you. I'll keep you. I'll bring you back.

Negatively, I will not leave you. Now, it could be tempting to conclude that this vision foreshadows God's commitment to draw near to his people in certain places.

[17 : 40] Now, this place, Bethel, will become a temple of God in the Old Testament. It is a sacred place if we could put it that way. But this vision is not primarily about God being with his people in one place.

Wonderfully, that's not what this promise is about. This vision is for a man on the run. This vision is for strangers. This vision is for people in a foreign land longing and trying to get home.

This vision is about God being with his people wherever they go. This vision is for us. He's saying, I will be with you. I will not leave you. Now, this little word with can mean so much.

Oftentimes, it's the connecting words in Scripture that deliver so much theological content to us. There are a few more powerful things a friend can say than to say, I'm with you.

Or a father says, son, I'm with you. Or a lover who says, I'll never leave. We'll do anything for that.

[18 : 52] You know, we'll do anything for a friend or a father or a lover like that. Drew Holcomb captures it playfully when he says, if I had a great big mansion, I'd rather live in a shotgun shack with you.

If I drove a red Ferrari, I'd rather drive an Oldsmobile with you. And he might be stretching the truth on that one. If I won a million dollars, I'd give it away to spend time with you.

With you, I can be myself. With you, I don't have to be somebody else. It's like putting on my favorite pair of shoes. I like to be with me when I'm with you.

I can totally relate to that. I don't like being with me, but when I'm with Kim, I like to be with me because she's there. But how much more does this word with mean when the Lord says, I'm with you?

This little word connects us to the living God. This little word uncovers the most important discovery any man or woman can make for in making this discovery, life is forever changed.

[20 : 01] You know, this came into our language. You know, the Lord be with you became the standard greeting in Israel. It is all you would ever want for somebody else. The Lord be with you.

It's the greatest thing you could say to someone, but it's not just in our greeting. Most of us don't realize that goodbye just is a abbreviated form of God be with you.

This is the best thing we can hope for somebody. One day, your mother will no longer be with you. Your father will no longer be with you. Your brother and sister will no longer be with you.

Your children will no longer be with you. Your spouse will no longer be with you. Near the end, you may no longer be with yourself because of Alzheimer's and dementia, but the Lord will be with you.

It's incredible. Second, Jacob's vow. Jacob's vow. The second part of our text details Jacob's response to the promise.

[21 : 12] Look in verse 16. And 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. This is the gate of heaven. On the one hand, Jacob wakes up and he's floored.

Surely God is in this place. How awesome is this place. But he's also afraid. Verse 17, And he was afraid.

How awesome is this place. I think he was running from Esau but the real truth now he realizes all his life he's been running from the Lord. But God intervenes.

God calls him alone in the wilderness. God turns to him to blessing. And after realizing what God is doing, Jacob humbles himself and turns to the Lord.

[22 : 18] Look in verse 18. So early in the morning, Jacob took the stone that he'd put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called the name of that place Bethel but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

So Jacob takes the stone that had been the pillow. He sets it up, stands it upright like a staircase, like a ladder with its top pointing to the heavens.

He's making a memorial. He's making a monument, so to speak. Notice there's three references. Look back in verse 10, or 11.

There's three references to place before he sees this vision. Look in verse 11. It says he came to a certain place, taking one of the stones of that place.

He lay down in that place to sleep. After he wakes up, he repeats place again three times. Verse 16, surely the Lord is in this place. How awesome is this place?

[23 : 25] Verse 19, he named the, he called the name of that place Bethel. So he's commemorating what God has done.

God has taken this random place where he laid down to sleep and God has revealed himself to him. God has come to him. This insignificant place where he laid down, God has come to him and blessed him.

So he sets up the stone to commemorate it and remember what God's done. He doesn't want to forget it. You know, we have the same kind of, we do the same type of thing.

I was driving, almost every time I drive through the fort of Knoxville right outside UT, I'll go to the place where I was living when the Lord intervened in my life. I've been down that road so many times.

We were pulling down it a couple weeks ago and Kim said, are you going down Laurel Avenue? I said, yes, 1407. It's burned down. But, you know, but I imagine it there and tell the kids about it.

[24 : 30] This is where the Lord intervened. The point is not that the place is sacred, but the moment was. Transformed his life. He pours oil onto, what's the oil meant to be?

The oil is his devotion, his commitment, his amazement, and his clinging to the Lord by faith. Then he makes a vow.

Look in verse 19. He says, if the Lord, or verse 20 rather, 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, then the Lord shall be my God.

And this stone that I've set up for a pillar shall be God's house. Now, what's going on here? Yeah, it kind of sounds like the bargain Jacob made with Esau.

If you give me the blessed birthright, I'll give you this red stew. You know, it kind of sounds like a deal, a little if-then deal. Is this, is Jacob still this bargaining scoundrel?

[25 : 36] I can't say that's thoroughly rid out of his, rid out of him. I don't think that's what's going on here. I don't think he's making a bargain.

Jacob's alone. Jacob's desperate. I think what this is, is Jacob's, he's a man in crisis. He's doing what we all do. We all say this. Lord, if you'll get me through this, I'll give you everything.

Lord, if you just get me through this horrible thunderstorm, you get me home safely, I'll give you, that's what I think he's saying. He's actually not bargaining with the Lord.

He's clinging to all that the Lord has said. So he repeats the promise one by one. If you'll be with me, if you'll keep me, if you'll supply my need, if you bring me back, if you'll be my God, I'll give you everything.

Jacob's not bargaining with the Lord for mercy. Jacob is falling on the Lord for mercy. Vows like these run through the scriptures.

[26 : 35] They're prayers of commitment. Notice that Jacob says nothing about the land, nothing about the blessing, nothing about the offspring. He says nothing about what he's wanted his whole life. He's not after what he can get any longer.

He repeats the promise. He's after what God can give. He says, will you go with me? Will you keep me? Will you bring me back? Will you not forsake me? I need you.

I think he's claiming and clinging to the promise. There's a famous story about a young boy who grew up in the highlands of Scotland years ago.

His parents died when he was young and so he was put in the care of his grandfather who's a shepherd. The highlands of Scotland are filled with sheep.

The grandfather raised the boy to be a shepherd too. The boy never went to school, was unable to read but his grandfather was careful to teaching the scriptures and to cling to God by faith.

[27 : 41] As you would expect, the grandfather taught the son Psalm 23 and taking the boy's hand he taught him to cling to the first phrase of Psalm 23 the Lord is my shepherd.

He's just this boy that couldn't read. He's helping to understand and cling to the Bible. The Lord is my shepherd.

One night the boy was out in the hills caring for the sheep when a terrible snowstorm swept in. The mountains were engulfed.

The sheep did not return and the boy did not return either. The boy's grandfather set out to find him. Set out to go search for the boy but the winds and the snow were so great he was afraid of losing his sense of direction.

So he spent a long restless night in the house. When he was finally able to search for the boy he found him frozen to death in the snow. As he bent over to lift the boy he noticed that his hands were clasped in a rather odd way.

[29 : 03] His hand was clasping his fourth finger. The Lord is my shepherd. The little boy died clinging to the promise.

that the Lord is not just any Lord. He's my Lord. I think that's what Jacob is doing here.

I believe that's what Jacob is doing here. I believe that's what God is urging you to do by faith to cling to this promise. It is a five finger promise. I will be with you.

In so many ways that's what he's after. That's what Jacob's after as well. And then he promises to give him a tithe. Look at verse 22b.

It closes with of all that you give me I'll give you a full tenth back. He has nothing to give now but he says when I get anything all this stuff that you're going to give I'm going to give ten percent back.

[30 : 07] A tithe back. There's perhaps no better indication that God is transforming Jacob than this one. The grasper becomes a giver. The thief begins to share.

The schemer starts to set aside for others. There's no better indicator for how God's transforming our life often than how we deal with money.

Do we give? I think I could just camp out here and talk about this. Not because I love talking about it because it's so vital but I think what God is doing right here is showing us kind of a window into what God does when he calls us.

He essentially calls us to turn from everything and to cling to him. When he called Abraham he called him out of Ur out of the Chaldeans and called him.

After he gave him his son he called him to go up on the mountain and sacrifice his son because he wanted him to hold nothing back. The thing that had become most precious to him God called him to give it up.

[31 : 09] Same thing with Isaac God called Isaac but what we see is that Isaac did not end so well. He continued to cling to game to what he could taste with his mouth what he could see with his eyes and yet he died trying to bless Esau instead of Jacob.

Here you see Jacob the grass for his whole life who is letting it go to cling to the Lord. I think in so many ways that is the invitation of this passage is to turn from everything to the Lord.

In fact while we were singing earlier I just had a picture that felt like the Lord put on my mind of a hand completely clasped on something.

I don't know what it was. Could have been success could have been money could have been a relationship could have been one of these things and you cannot cling to the Lord unless you let go of that.

That's what we're seeing with Jacob he lets go and he clings to God by faith and the place becomes a sanctuary the stone becomes an altar and the betrayer becomes a pilgrim.

[32 : 20] Point three Christ's fulfillment Christ's fulfillment the Lord promises to be with Jacob wherever he goes but how do we think about this promise?

All throughout the Old Testament the Lord promised to be with them and to give them signs that he was with them all along the way when the people were in Egypt for 400 years the sign that the Lord was with them is the Lord just kept blessing them increasing them in number after the Passover when they took off running the Lord continued to be with them he sent them signs and he was with them a pillar of cloud by day a pillar of fire by night the Lord came to them in the tabernacle when their tent camping through the wilderness they set up a tent in the middle for the Lord the tabernacle it's symbolic to say the Lord is with us that's who we are we're the Lord's people finally the Lord gets fed up with them in Exodus 32 for going back to the golden calf he says I'm not going with you anymore Abraham says if you don't go with us we're not going he goes with them the Lord builds a temple the

Lord plants them on the land plants a temple with them they they they they abandon the Lord they turn away from the Lord the Lord kicks them off the land and yet brings them back years later on another temple that's what sets the people of God apart the Lord is with them the Lord is in their midst and on the first Christmas when in Matthew 1 when the angel appeared to Mary he said behold the virgin will conceive you'll call his name Emmanuel which means God with us anybody that knows the story of the Bible should say what exactly do you mean God with us do you mean another sign like another cloud another dream another fire another wind another promise or is this something different is this God with us the Gospels leave us with no doubt Jesus teaches with authority Jesus forgives sin Jesus conquers demon

Jesus quiets the sea Jesus is the true son of God sent to be with his people but the wonder of the Bible continues that Jesus came to be God with us so that he could be God for us Jesus was fully God and fully man so that he could be the mediator between God and man Jesus is the fulfillment of the staircase tower that Jacob saw the stairway was Jacob's dream but the access to God is Jesus's reality and John 1 when he's calling the disciples he comes upon Nathanael and he says behold an Israelite in whom there is no deceit now you know the story of Jacob they changed his name from Jacob to Israel and so he's referencing his history and he's saying an Israelite in whom there is no deceit because there's lots of deceit in Jacob slash Israel and he said how do you know me said I saw you under the fig tree and he says truly you're the son of God but look what

Jesus says next we have this for you John 151 Jesus said truly truly I say to you you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the son of man so what he's saying is that the stairway tower that Jacob saw was pointing forward to Jesus Christ that the chasm between God and man between a holy God and sinful man is the man Jesus Christ he's the way the truth and and the life no one comes to the father except through me first Timothy two there is one mediator between God and man the man Christ Jesus the Bible's coming together so the only way sinners can come to God Jesus Christ that's what we offer in so many ways such a simple message and yet it'll take an eternity to understand he became man fully God mediator has to be able to represent both sides that's why it's so hard to get the siblings to mediate a conflict you know it doesn't work they got vested interest

[37 : 24] Jesus Christ fully God fully man made like us in every respect yet without sin so that he might bring us to God he died the righteous for the unrighteous that he might bring us to God the wonder though of this passage we could pull it one step further he was God with us so that he could be God for us and so that he could be God with us forever Sinclair Ferguson says God with us has become has come to be God for us by dying for us on the cross and he came to be God for us on the cross so that he could be God with us for the rest of our lives the end of the gospel of Matthew after finishing his work Jesus sends out his disciples saying I am with you always even to the end of the age now obviously that's a promise for the apostles they're going out they're going to preach the gospel almost all of the apostles were killed for their faith but when we put aside this beside

Genesis 28 I think this is a self conscious reference to the promise to Jacob we have it here for you look at the parallel between Genesis 28 15 and Matthew 28 20 behold I am with you and will keep you wherever you go will bring you back to this land for I'll not leave you until I've done what I promised the presence of God being promised to a forefather you're talking about the promise to Jacob the parallel is the Lord I am with you that's what Jesus promised but there's a parallel also in blessing the nations in 28 14 in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed Matthew 28 19 go therefore and make disciples of all nations it's a promise the

Lord who promised to be the God of Jacob to be the one that would be with him wherever he goes the same promise that he leaves with his people to take to the end of the earth until all people confess Jesus Christ until the end comes in so many ways this is your promise do not fear the Lord Jesus will be with you wherever you go the first words of Christmas are fear not the Lord of hosts is with us God of Jacob is our fortress let us pray Father in heaven we hide in you this day and always humble ourselves before you and pray for help but we don't want to hold anything back we want to cling completely to you you might uphold us by your almighty hand praise you and thank you that you have been

God with us so that you might be God for us that you might be God with us forever thank you and praise you in Jesus name amen you've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens Tennessee for more information about Trinity Grace please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com trinity and trinity and trinity and and trinity trinity and trinity and trinity trinity