

Genesis 28

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[0 : 00] Would you turn us through now to the chapter we read, Genesis chapter 28, and in particular to verses 10 through to 22.

The account of what's usually called, I think, Jacob's Ladder, isn't it? I want to say something about that shortly. But I guess you young people, the boys and girls in the congregation, will certainly remember that story.

This story, rather, from reading at home or at Sunday school or wherever. It's one of the great stories, isn't it, from the Old Testament. But you may well be wondering why we should turn to this passage on the last service of this year.

Well, it seems to me that the context of this passage, what happened in Jacob's life at this point, is one which involves Jacob, as it were, looking back on the one hand, and also on the other hand, looking forward to what lies ahead.

And is that not really what we tend to do on this last day of a year, looking forward, thinking about the new year?

[1 : 24] We tend to hear about new year resolutions. Most new year resolutions, from what I can make out, certainly in my own life, tend to get lost sight of fairly quickly.

But I do think that we have these two aspects here in this passage, looking back on the one hand and looking forward on the other. Jacob, well, you can see Jacob at this point in his life in a number of ways, I suppose.

In one respect, he's a fugitive, running away from the results of his sin. That's something possibly which, in time past, we have experienced ourselves.

It's the case, isn't it? Perhaps I should say this to the young people. When you commit a sin, and remember sin is doing anything, not just which God has forbidden, but anything which God, or failing to do, what God has told us to do.

And, you know, when you sin, there's something you can always rely on. It's going to get worse. You know, if you tell a lie, in order to cover up the lie, you're going to have to tell a bigger lie.

[2 : 43] And to cover up that one, you're going to end up telling a bigger one. And eventually, you're going to get found out. So, if you young people, if there's something in your life, in this last year, in this last few weeks, which you know has been wrong, where you know you've disobeyed God, where you know you've done anything wrong at all, then one of the really important things, before this year finishes, is to acknowledge it, and to ask God to forgive you for it.

And if you've done wrong to somebody, quickly tell them, and confess it. You know, one of the things that the Lord Jesus said, was if a person was going to the temple in Jerusalem, and they had a sacrifice with them, and they suddenly realized that their brother had something against them, that they'd wronged a brother, he said, leave your sacrifice at the altar, and go and sort things out with your brother.

So, here was Jacob. He hadn't yet sorted things out with Esau. It was going to be some years before he sorted things out with Esau, but he was running away from the results of his sin.

Don't be a person who runs away from the results of your sin. Deal with the sin by God's grace, and ask his forgiveness, and ask, if you've wronged somebody, ask their forgiveness as well.

Another way of looking at Jacob, I think, is as a troubled son, in search of his place in life. It may well be, that that's where you are at the moment.

[4 : 14] You're not sure of your place in life. You're not necessarily running away from something. You're not necessarily weighed down and troubled, I think, in the way that Jacob almost certainly was, but you're still searching for your place in life.

You're not sure where you're going to end up. If you put that more spiritually, you're not sure what the Lord wants you to do. The end of a year, if that's been what it's like in the previous year, it's no bad thing to actually seek, that the Lord will guide you in the year that lies ahead, and in his providence the years before that.

It may be, and I think it probably is an element of truth in this, you can perhaps also see Jacob as, shall we say, a shrewd shepherd, setting out to find a wife.

It may well be, that you're a person like that. You know what you want to do, and in 2007, you're planning to do it. But let me say this, don't leave the Lord out of your intentions.

Seek his presence, seek his blessing, in what you're going to be doing in this year, which God willing is shortly to begin. But that's not the whole story, because this chapter here, these verses here in chapter 28, they're really a massive turning point in Jacob's life.

[5 : 45] What we have here is a revelation of God's gracious dealings, which transform this worldly individual into someone who's a worshipper.

Up until this point, there's no record at all that Jacob was anything other than a nominal worshipper of the Lord. But there's something different, because after what's recorded here in these verses, after this encounter with God, if you like, he's a partner with God as a recipient of God's covenant promises, and he becomes a true worshipper.

It might well be that you're in a similar situation. And if that's the case, may it be the case that in this year which is about to start, or even before the new year starts, that you turn to the Lord and you acknowledge the promises which he's made to you as a sinner, and you put your trust in the Lord Jesus, and you become a true worshipper, one of the covenant people of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So what we've got here is one of the commentators said, Jacob goes to find a wife, but first he finds God. But I want to look much more closely, really, especially first of all at verses 10 to 15, at God's revelation to Jacob and what it teaches us.

Let's look first of all at what it was that Jacob actually saw. Now this thing used to trouble me when I was wee. Can I say something again to the young people? We all talk about Jacob's ladder and I could not see how everything that's recorded here could be happening on a ladder.

[7 : 29] Now it's really good that here we have something, I think, much more helpful in the way that that word is translated. There in verse 12 tells us that Jacob had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth.

And that's, I think, really almost certainly what Jacob saw. It wasn't a ladder like we have that we go up on the sides of walls and things like that. What you had was what the archaeologists have dug up in places like Babylon.

Of course, that's now the land of Iraq, which was so much in the news, isn't it? But in ancient times, the Babylonians and the people they got, they had them in Ur of the Chaldees where Abraham came from.

Their temples actually tended to be big buildings which had stairways going up to the top usually from the four sides. And almost certainly that's what Jacob saw.

He didn't see a ladder with rungs and angels going up and coming down and that's what used to give me a lot of trouble. I couldn't see how angels going one way and angels going the other way could actually pass each other on the one ladder.

[8 : 42] But what you have is actually a stairway. Like what you have, they're actually called ziggurats. If you want to look up in the dictionary what a ziggurat is, you'll probably find a picture if you look on the web or something like that.

You'll see what it was. So the angels were going up and coming down on this and we need to think about that. Because the detail is there for a purpose.

The detail in scripture is always there for a purpose. And I think what the angels going up and coming down are doing is that they're symbolizing, they're bringing to Jacob's attention God's care for the needs of his people.

And that's one of the functions which the angels are given by God. They're actually given as ministering spirits, ministering to the needs of God's people.

They bear men's needs, men and women, young people's needs before God and they convey God's help to man. Can I tell you a story actually, I don't know if any of you know this, about the late Professor John Murray.

[9 : 50] The late Professor John Murray was born in Scotland and he went over to America and he became the Professor of Systematic Theology at the Great Westminister Seminary in Philadelphia.

Well, there was a Welshman actually, it wasn't an Englishman, it was a Welshman, it wasn't a Scot either, a Welshman who was driving him somewhere in America. I think it was actually in New York if I recollect the story.

And they were driving and they came to traffic lights. The light was red and then the light changed to green and they set off across the intersection.

Then there was somebody who was running the lights and there was this massive squeal of brakes and literally the car stopped about two inches from their car. The man who was driving was quite shaken and Professor John Murray was absolutely calm and collected.

The man who was driving him who subsequently became a minister said, how can you be so calm and collected? Cool. And Professor John Murray said to him, Ministry of Angels.

[10:55] It's a great truth that we need to remember it when angels are mentioned in the scriptures, don't just think about shining figures with wings or anything like that.

The angels are spirits which one of whose functions is to care for God's people. And we need to remember that. And this, there they are.

Jacob sees the angels going up and coming down. So the ladder symbolizes the uninterrupted communion between heaven and earth and in particular God's care for his people.

Remember, the Lord Jesus himself said something like that in John chapter 1 at verse 51.

Remember the story about Nathaniel. Nathaniel was one of the very first believers in the Lord Jesus Christ as Messiah.

He was the man who was sitting under the fig tree and his brother Andrew came and said, come and see the one who's been promised by the prophets, the Messiah. And Nathaniel said, who is he?

[12:01] And Andrew said, he's Jesus of Nazareth. And Nathaniel quoted that prophecy or saying rather, can any good thing come out of Nazareth?

And Andrew said, come and see. And Jesus said to him, I saw you under the fig tree. And Nathaniel declares, Rabbi, you're the son of God, you're the king of Israel. And Jesus says, you believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree, you shall see greater things than that.

And he then added, I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the son of man.

One of the very first Christian converts is given a promise in virtually the same terms as what Jacob saw here in Genesis chapter 28.

The Lord Jesus is the perfect embodiment of this ongoing, continual communion with the Father in heaven. and we must honor him as that.

[13:05] Then there's verse 13, can I draw your attention to verse 13, there above it, above the staircase stood the Lord. Once again, we have, I draw attention to something similar this morning, but that phrase, above it, is a very interesting one because in the original Hebrew, it can mean above it, it can mean beside him, and I think I'm correct in saying it can mean above him as well.

So what actually do we have? Now I think the traditional understanding has been at the top of this staircase, there was God standing. But if you look at it more closely, probably what we are being told here is that the Lord was, as it were, standing beside him, bending over him.

But whatever it is, the picture is that the Lord is about to speak to him. And that's marvelous.

There's Jacob running away from Esau, obeying his parents, yes, to go and get a wife from his own relatives rather than from amongst the Canaanites.

But there, God appears to him, and with the vision in the background of the angels ascending and descending, symbolizing God's care for us.

The Lord bends over Jacob and begins to speak. And what's happening is that Jacob is being strengthened in his faith and supported by the most marvelous, generous promises.

[14:45] promises. And those promises are made very similarly to every one of Christ's people. It is not unscriptural to place ourselves in a very similar position to Jacob.

Jacob's here can't but be aware of his sins, his failings, and his unworthiness, and yet God appears to him with these messages of encouragement.

And at the end of a year, at the beginning of a new year, every one of us who are Christ's people can think of ourselves in terms like that. If you come here tonight and you're aware of your sin and your unworthiness, then think of God like this.

and think of the Lord Jesus Christ as the embodiment of these promises of God for you. Jacob was penitent over his sin but he was also greatly in need of the assurance of God's grace for him. And the Lord provides it. If you come to the Lord and you're in that position and you acknowledge it to him, then the Lord will give you the same sort of assurance as he gave to Jacob there at what became known as Bethel.

[16 : 20] The whole of verses 22, 10 to 22, are a tremendous example, I think, of God's providential care for his wayward children and the promises that he gives them.

But I think as well as all this, we have here or we have here something which can give us a broader understanding of what the theologians call God's omnipresence means to all his people.

Omnipresence, you young people are saying, what does that mean? Probably, it means God's presence everywhere. God is present everywhere. And we need, I think, now to grapple with the implications of that.

So having looked at what we might call God's revelation to Jacob and what it teaches us in the first place, we need to ask ourselves at a time like this, how should we respond to God's promises and to his revelation?

Well, that's in verses in particular 16 through to the end of the chapter. Jacob was initially overwhelmed, I think, with the fact of the Lord's presence in that place where he was.

[17 : 41] He had never realized that this apparently rather ordinary place could be a holy place. But here he realized what God had promised, that God's presence was with him wherever he was going to be.

And how does he react? How does he respond, perhaps is a better word than react, I think, to that awareness? Well, it tells us basically that Jacob was afraid, that the first thing that struck him was fear.

When the Bible talks about fear, it doesn't just mean terror. It's a complicated word in many respects, isn't it? It has a mixture of terror, yes, it has a mixture of awe, but there's always also the presence of the element of adoration.

It's a worshipful fear. And I want to suggest to you that when we come into the presence of God, not just now, but whenever we consciously do it, whenever we are particularly aware of, we're always, the Lord is always present with us, but there are times when we're aware of the Lord's presence in the same sort of way as Jacob was aware of it here.

And what is the right response is this concept of holy fear. All worshipful acts, I would suggest, must begin with and be characterized by reverential fear in the presence of God.

[19 : 23] Jacob is here experiencing feelings of grateful wonder mingled with emotions of reverential awe and they combine in a way which borders on dread.

Now, how often, genuinely, can we say that we approach God like that? I stand before you and I have to confess that that's not something which I experience all that often and as I confess it to you, I have also to acknowledge that that should not be the case.

How many times do people gather like we are at the moment and when worship begins that's what strikes us? You know, one of the things that apparently characterizes worship at times of revival is that's precisely what happens.

And that explains why people sometimes faint, that explains why sometimes people cry out with a sense of their sin and why the sorts of things that happen when the Lord comes down in revival actually occur.

Because people experience tangibly in some way the fear of the Lord. And that fear is something which it's obviously going to happen when the Lord's presence comes in power like that.

[21 : 03] But it's something that should characterize us every time we gather. Now it's mixed with joy. It's mixed with wonder. But we should never lose sight of that reverential awe or fear if you want to use the word that's used here when we meet with God.

And that should characterize us not just in public. It should characterize every time we worship as families, every time we worship as individuals. things. This is really a serious business.

I think one of the things that's happened in worship in the Western world is that far too often we lose sight of that. We lose sight of this element of solemnity, of awe, of reverence which should characterize worship.

It's not all that because we should come into the house of God with joy and with thanksgiving. But it is this balance that we need to strike. Jacob experiences and he responds with worship and

commitment.

Bethel was to be known now as a place where people could find access to God, where God could be worshipped and it was also a place which testified to the presence of God with his people always.

[22 : 25] Jacob didn't have to go back to Bethel to experience God's presence. God had committed himself to be with Jacob always, all the days of his life and that he would take him back to where this event happened.

So Jacob had seen God in the heavens and so if you like the place, any place where God is worshipped, any place where God's worshipping people are to be found, that's the gate to heaven. That's the point that we need to bear in mind. The gate to heaven is where Christ's people are. And I think there are so many people these days who think there's no particular need to gather with God's people to worship.

They've lost sight of this great truth that the gate to heaven is where God's people are. So let's move on then. What are we told about in Jacob's response?

He responds first of all by this worshipful fear and reverence. But we're also told I think in this passage three other things about worship.

[23 : 33] First of all that worship involves devotion, secondly that worship involves commemoration, and thirdly that worship involves dedication. And on this the cusp of a new year shall we say can I draw your attention to these three things which should be the result of our awareness of God's presence with us always.

We should be devoted, we should commemorate our dealings with God and his dealings with us and we should be dedicated. Well let's look then first of all at the question of devotion and we find it first of all in verse 18.

Earlier the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. Jacob gets up early, he stood the stone on which he'd been lying up as a pillar, at which he could express his submission to God through worship and he poured the oil on it as a gift to God.

He was doing what later on when the worship of the tabernacle was established in the temple thereafter, he was making a sacrifice. He was doing something which demonstrated his devotion to the Lord.

He was commemorating God's appearance obedience and he was guaranteeing the seriousness of the oath which he was about to take. Jacob's response to God's appearance to him, to God's revelation to him, involved devotion first of all.

[25 : 07] He was willing to make a sacrifice to God. I don't know what he was going to use the oil for, but whatever it was, it was poured out to God as evidence of his devotion.

I want to ask ourselves, I want to ask myself as well, at this time of year, the last day of year, the last time we worship in this year of 2006, are we devoted like Jacob?

Am I devoted to the Lord like Jacob was there? Are you? And that I think is an issue, a question which is well worth reflecting on, at least for a short time on this, the last day of the year.

Our worship must involve devotion. The second thing I would suggest is this, and it's in verse 19, worship involves commemoration.

He called that place Bethel, which means house of God, though the city used to be called Luz. Jacob named the place Bethel because God had appeared to him there.

[26 : 15] Jacob was saying, and he repeats it, pardon me, in verses 21 and 22, that when he returned to settle in the land, God would settle with him.

That's what he is placing on record and saying. God would go with him, he believed that, he believed that God would bring him back to his father's house and to the land in peace. promise. And he's saying that when he did return, there would be a house for God in that land of promise. We commemorate God with what we do.

We do that, of course, by being here. We demonstrate our devotion by being in the house of God with his people to worship in his presence. And we commemorate what God has done for us.

How are you and I commemorating what God has done for us? I leave you individually to answer that question.

[27 : 18] But I would suggest that a right response to God's gracious dealings with us involves devotion and it involves commemoration as well. How do we place on record what God has done

for us?

You must answer that. Whatever your situation is, however old you are, let's place it on record. And then in verses 20 to 22, we have the stress on what I would call dedication, if you want to put it in the context of worship.

Worship involves dedication. Verses 20 to 22, Then Jacob made a vow saying, If God will be with me and will watch over me in 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 house, 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 you a tenth. Jacob's promise to worship God at Bethel is solemnized by an oath, or if you like, a vow.

Now, vows or oaths are not made to induce God to do something which he doesn't want to do. And I think in this day and age too many of our vows are really rather like that.

[28 : 35] They're attempts to persuade God to do things which you think he doesn't want to do.

And we say to the Lord, if you do it, then I will do this, that, and the next thing. Now, that's not what a scriptural vow is at all.

Scriptural vows, vows in the Bible, were made to bind the worshipper to the performance of an acknowledged duty. It wasn't to bind God to do something which otherwise he mightn't do.

It was to bind ourselves, the worshippers, to performing something which is our duty to do. Jacob, therefore, made his vow here on the basis of what God had guaranteed to do.

He was taking God at his word. And he was binding himself to reciprocate with his own dedication. If the Lord is with me, and Jacob is accepting that the Lord is with him, then this stone which I'm setting up, this will be the place where I worship.

God had promised to be with him. God had promised to keep him. God had promised to bless him. God had promised to return him in peace. And therefore Jacob promised that the spot would be a place of worship and that he would tithe.

[30 : 06] He would give a tenth of what God gave him. It's interesting that the only concrete part of what Jacob promised to do, shall we say, was that he would give a tenth of what God gave him.

God, you know, I do think that the troubles which as a denomination we are having financially are connected with the fact that perhaps this scriptural principle isn't being taken seriously enough.

Now I know that there are many who want to argue that this is an Old Testament, part of the Old Testament dispensation, it's not part of the life of the New Testament church. church. And I know you can argue that, but I do wonder, and perhaps it's easier for me coming in amongst you and not being your own minister as it were to say this, but an awful lot of the problems of Christ's church, an awful lot of the opportunities which Christ's church doesn't seize, an awful lot of the things which we know should be done and if they were done would bring blessing because God has promised to bless them are not done because Christ's people aren't taking seriously enough this aspect of their dedication.

And I think we're all called on, I say this to myself too, we're all called on to think, are we doing as much as we can in terms of giving back to the Lord what he has given us?

Are we treating that seriously enough? I know that there are many people who give sacrificially, I know also that there are many people who give very little to Christ's cause relatively.

[31 : 48] So Jacob's dedication actually has this commitment to worship and has this concrete promise that he will give back to God a tenth of what God was going to give him. But there's also something very interesting here in verse 22.

There's a change. Up until this point Jacob has been talking about God, has been addressing the Lord as God occasionally, he addresses him as the Lord, but in verse 22 there's a change.

Of all that you give me, I will give you a tenth. He turns from addressing God as he in effect, to addressing God as you.

and that's hugely insightful because people who really have a relationship with God are able to talk about him as you.

Have you thought about that? You young people, do you actually when you pray, pray to God and call him you?

[33 : 05] When I was we, I used to say my prayers each night and I used to say, God bless dad, God bless mum, God bless my brother, and I talked like that, I prayed like that.

And that's not the right way to pray. The right way is to address God as you. Older people say thee and thou, but it's making the same point.

They're addressing God as their own personal God. And here's Jacob doing it for the first time. I would suggest that here Jacob is converted. This is Jacob being converted to a personal faith in God.

That's really hugely important. Jacob is now serious in his relationship with God and his gratitude and his submission to God and his acknowledgement, his acceptance of God as his personal God, God is expressed by the way he talks.

Another guideline that I sometimes think is worth using, does a person, do you use the term God or do you refer to God as the Lord? A person in whom there is spiritual life I would suggest is much more likely to talk about God as the Lord than just as God.

[34 : 25] God. It's a big step when somebody talks about the Lord as opposed just to talking about God. And it's perhaps even a bigger step when you pray and say you.

Jacob also did more than just consecrate Bethel as a place of worship. he did consecrate it as a place of worship for the whole nation of Israel, but he himself was moved to worship there and his acts formed a pattern for later worshippers to follow in the offering of their devotion and of their substance to God.

Jacob gave an example and we must always and again it's a good thing to do it at this time of year if we haven't done it before, to think about the example we've given to the people we love, to the people we live amongst, the people we work amongst.

It's very important to think about the example that we give. And if we're making good New Year resolutions then it's no bad idea to think about whether we can leave the people we love and the people we work with, play with perhaps better examples of what it is to be a Christian and we've given love.

But I think that really the crucial point that we need to make in this connection is the effect of what's happened on Jacob's life. He worshipped and prepared for the worship of his descendants at this place, Bethel.

[36 : 12] It made a difference. Now, we live amongst all sorts of people, not as many as used to be the case, but there's still what, 60 to 65 percent or so of people in this country of ours who actually are quite happy to call themselves Christians.

Very few of them go regularly to church, but can I suggest that the really important thing is the question of what difference does their Christianity make to them and to the lives that they lead? And that's another of these things which I think we should be reflecting on this last day of the year. What difference has my faith made in this last year?

Has it made any difference at all? And if so, what? And if so, should it have made more difference? You see, these are the sorts of things I think which this passage leads us to think. Jacob's life was different after this point.

[37 : 27] There's still aspects of the old shrewdness, shall we say, if we use the best word for it. there are things which weren't the way they should have been in Jacob's life, but I think there is a difference and it's a crucial difference.

And Jacob is worshipping in a way which he never worshipped before, his life is different. God's love for God's love for God's love for God's love for God's blessings.

And they inspire worshipful devotion in Jacob. And when you think about the covenant blessings that God has promised us, it should promote the same sort of worshipful dedication in us as well. love for God's love for God's love for and the sort of reverential fear which Jacob displays here, if there's not the commitment or the sort of commitment or the sort of devotion which is talked about here, then there's probably very little understanding of what the spiritual life is all about.

Awareness of the Lord's presence should lead to a higher level of living altogether. the Lord's people should be making progress spiritually 2006 should spiritually for all of us have been a year which marked spiritual progress over 2005 and so too should this year mark a year the next year 2007 mark for all of us spiritual progress beyond our spiritual lives in 2006 and can I commend those three aspects of what we have here can I ask you to think in terms of the level of devotion which we have embodied which we have given evidence of this last year can I ask about whether our lives have involved commemoration of what the Lord Jesus has done for us and can I ask you can I ask myself has my life involved the sort of dedication which it should have and if we're making resolutions for the new year can I suggest to you that these are things which we could do well to

think of in terms of as we face the new year may the Lord be with us and may he enable us to do these things and to use these examples from the past such as the life and the experience of servants of God like Jacob like Abraham like all the people who are recorded in the pages of Scripture and may the Lord be with us in it and accept us let us pray the Lord our God we give thanks for the examples we have in Scripture the examples of those who we should not seek to follow but also the examples of those who are servants of yours and may we be able more to and let us pray for the good Lord this word and may completeness is important to us in the Featured who could remember and have this in they Soft that cannot origins forever but these words can be example