



BESEIGED BY GOD

SERIES: THE JACOB STORY

Genesis 28:10–22

3rd Message

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February 16, 2020

How would you describe the relational dynamics in your home growing up? When we examine the home of Isaac, it is hard to imagine a more dysfunctional family. Last week we saw how Isaac, in direct disobedience to God’s oracle, was determined to bless the wrong son, Esau; and then how Rebekah used Jacob to deceive his “blind” father into giving the blessing to the right son. It was an Academy Award performance—Jacob received best actor for his role as Esau. Isaac got best supporting actor, playing himself. But Rebekah stole the show winning three Oscars: The first for Costume and Makeup, the second for Set Design, and the third for Best Director.

That tension-filled drama pales in comparison to what comes next. After Isaac gives the blessing to Jacob, Esau returns from his successful hunt and prepares the game into the savory dish his father loves. Then the bomb drops. Learning his father has given the blessing to Jacob, Esau loses it. He screams and vents all his anger on the one he now hates. This hatred transforms him into a murderer, as he vows to kill Jacob after his father dies. Once more, Rebekah hears all the family secrets and leaps into action, using all her organizational skills to prevent a war. At his father’s command, Jacob heads to his mother’s home in Haran to seek a wife. But underlying his quest is the fear of being killed by a brother who hates him. The emotional damage in Jacob’s wake is so great, I doubt he thought he could ever ever go back as he enters an exile of his own making. It is a parent’s worst nightmare. Being banished is a horrific thought, which Shakespeare describes as worse than death.

Ha, banishment! Be merciful, say “death;”

For exile hath more terror in his look,
much more than death. Do not say “banishment”...

There is no world without Verona walls,

But purgatory, torture, hell itself.

Hence banished is banish’d from the world,

And world’s exile is death.

(Romeo and Juliet, Act III, Scene III)¹

But the Bible gives a different view, suggesting that for God’s people, exile can be the critical starting point of an authentic journey with God. In Jacob’s story this will become the place where God no longer directs the affairs of men from behind the scenes, but takes center stage. This commences a journey that will last twenty years. It is at the most critical junctures in this journey, at the initial stage of his flight and return home, that heaven breaks into his life. These two encounters will transform Jacob and his entire world.

Jacob’s Journey

A Jacob flees Esau

B Angels of God meet Jacob at Bethel

X Jacob in exile in Paddan Aram

B’ Angels of God meet Jacob at Mahanaim

A’ Jacob reconciles with Esau

Jacob’s holy encounter becomes a paradigm for what God would later do with the nation Israel in the Exodus, and a thousand years later when she lay in lonely exile awaiting her Messiah (Isa 43:1-7). Thus it models for us how God in his grace breaks into the lives of his children who are “on the run.”

Our text has two movements, each with three parallel scenes. In the first Jacob is asleep and God descends. In the second Jacob is awake, and God receives his worship.

I. Jacob Sleeps, God descends (Gen 28:10–15)

A. On the run: Jacob arrives at a “no-place” (v.10–11)

10 Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. 11 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 lay down in that place to sleep. (Gen 28:10–11 ESV)

The key word in our text is “*place*” (used 6 times). Jacob fled home and “came” to a “certain place.” The verb “came” (*paga*) is better translated “to meet, encounter, or reach.” When used geographically it usually pertains to a border crossing. But most often it describes life-changing encounters with people or angels (32:1). So Jacob’s “no-place” will become a “border crossing” where he has the encounter of his life.

The conditions of that place are a mirror that reflects and magnifies the ache within his soul. He is lonely refugee shut out from all hospitality. The only comfort at his “Dream Inn” is a stone pillow. As Bruce Waltke explains,

The setting of God’s encounter with Jacob matches Jacob’s psychological condition. The security of the sun has been replaced by the dangers of night. The comfort of his parents’ tents has been replaced by a rock. Behind him lays Beersheba, where Esau waits to kill him; ahead of him is Haran, where Laban waits to exploit him. He is situated between a death camp and a hard-labor camp.²

Ironically however, it is harsh conditions that enable the human soul to receive a vision of God’s grace. Jacob needed to be removed from a controlling mother, a passive father and a competitive brother in order to connect with God. Now that Jacob is off stage and his only friends are the demon of fear pursuing him and the unresolved guilt pressing upon him, his soul becomes very sensitive to the voice of God.

B. The dream: A ladder, angels, and God! (vv. 12–13a)

12 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! 13 And behold, the Lord stood above it...(vv. 12–13a)

When Jacob's life is dark, the world silent, and he lay still, God makes himself known through a dream. As Brueggemann writes,

The wakeful world of Jacob was a world of fear, terror, loneliness. Those were parameters of his existence. The dream permits the entry of an alternative into his life. The dream is not a morbid review of a shameful past. It is rather the presentation of an alternative future with God. The gospel moves to Jacob in a time when his guard is down. The dream permits news.³

In his dream Jacob sees three marvelous things, each introduced by the word “*behold*” or “*see*.” First he sees a stairway, firmly planted on the earth, and as he gazes upward he sees its top (lit. “*head*”) reaches into the very heavens. The stairway was probably shaped more like a Mesopotamian ziggurat than a ladder, a “vast ramp with terraced landings.”⁴ This is what the builders of the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9) hoped in vain to build. The stairway indicates heaven and earth are connected, but only God can bridge the chasm. Then upon this stairway, Jacob sees hosts of angels ascending and descending between the two realms as effortlessly as one would cross the street. Their presence absolutely shatters Jacob's world. “He had assumed he was traveling alone, and his only purpose was survival,” but now he learns that “earth is not left to its own resources, and heaven is not a remote self-contained realm for the Gods.”⁵ The heavenly realm is exceedingly present and near (Deut 30:14; Ps 91:11–12).

Finally Jacob gazes up to the top of the stairway, where the Lord himself is poised over him. This “no-place” becomes a holy place, the very intersection of heaven and earth. After Jacob sees this wondrous connection, he hears the voice of God speaking to him as intimately as he did with his grandfather, Abraham. In the oracle God reaffirms the promises of Abraham to Jacob, intensifies them, and then uniquely commits himself to this lonely fugitive.

C. The Oracle: God speaking (vv. 13–15)

13 And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring.” (v. 13)

Instead of a sharp rebuke Jacob might expect, God's first words are tender, personal and gracious. This is so typical of God. Rather than rebuking us when we run away, he chases us and gives us a fresh vision of his love for us (John 21:1–19). The land God promised Abraham and Isaac is now gifted to the grandson, Jacob. The verb “*give*” is significant, for it communicates to Jacob that he will receive the blessing he so longed for not by scheming and manipulating, but by simply opening his hands and receiving it by faith. Moreover, this gift will be uncontested and irrevocably secured for all his descendants.

14 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. (v. 14)

God reiterates the second aspect of the covenant granted to Abraham regarding his seed. If Abraham's seed would be as numerous as the stars, Jacob's will be like the dust of the earth. This language is much more vivid than he heard from his father, Isaac. God adds that not only will they be numerous, but they will be powerful, “**breaking out**” everywhere across the globe (the Hebrew verb means “to break out with destructive force; it connotes holy war”⁶). No national border or physical boundary can confine them. Jesus further develops the image when he says, “The gates of Hades

will not overcome it” (Matt 16:18). Lastly, the blessing Jacob so desperately longed for will be so firmly anchored in his descendants that it will bless every family on earth. What a word to this exiled man, so alone and alienated. He is no longer a refugee. God tells him he is the most honored vessel in the world. But there is even more.

God now moves from the far future to Jacob's painful present. I'm sure Jacob was familiar with these earlier promises from his father, and though hearing them personally from God would have produced awe, their content would not have shocked him. But these next words speak right to Jacob's fearful heart and take the grace of God to a new level.

15 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. (v. 15)

The opening words, “I am with you,” resound with an astonishing personal commitment by God to Jacob. As Brueggemann explains, “The introduction of this formula dare not be treated like a cliché. It is the amazing new disclosure of Jacob's God, one who is willing to cast his lot with this man, to stand with him in places of threat.”⁷ God explains that he will be Jacob's private escort, personal protector, and a passionate guarantor for this journey's success. Jacob is guaranteed a round trip ticket home, at the very moment he finds himself lost from home. God is not merely promising to accompany the patriarch as a passive spectator, but as a powerful protective presence to accomplish the specifics of the promise.

The expression “until I have done what I have promised” doesn't imply the relationship ends when the task is done. For as Waltke writes, “The Hebrew ‘until’ does not entail a situation change after God has fulfilled his promises.”⁸ This promise so impacted Israel it later becomes the priestly blessing for all Israel (Num 6:24–26), David's famous shepherd's prayer (Psalm 23), the pilgrims' prayer on his journey to Zion (Psalm 121), the promise to Israel in its exile (Isa 43:1–3), and the seal of Jesus' great commission (Matt 28:20).

Now we reach the second half of text as the narrator captures Jacob's threefold response. Each one parallels the three movements of the first scene.

I. Jacob sleeps, God descends

A Jacob arrives in a “no place”

B Jacob's Dream

C God's oracle

II. Jacob awake, he worships

A' Jacob's awe in that “place”

B' Jacob's response to the dream

C' Jacob's response to the oracle

II. Jacob Awake: He Worships (Gen 28:16–22)

A. Jacob's awe in that place (vv. 16–17)

16 Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.” 17 And 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.” (vv. 16–17)

“The story shows Jacob waking up in two stages.”⁹ The first emotion Jacob experiences when he awakes is awe. He fell asleep in a “no-place,” discovered in the dream God was in “this place,” and is now amazed he didn't perceive this. His second emotion is fear,

which is common when sinful man encounters the holiness of God (Isa 6:5), as he now realizes he is at the entrance to God's sanctuary.

B. Jacob's response to the dream: A "no-place" becomes a holy place (vv. 18–19)

18 So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. 19 He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first. (vv. 18-19)

With the eyes of his heart enlightened, he embraces the new world of the dream, which gives him far greater hope than his previous world. As an act of faith he sets his stone pillow upright as a memorial. The term pillar is "*masseba*" and "denotes a single upright stone and forms a word play with "resting" (*mussab*, 28:12) and "stood" (*nissab*, 28:13)."¹⁰ Then he sanctifies it with oil to serve as a miniature replica of his dream. In one case the top (lit. "*head*") of the ladder reached to heaven; in the other, the stone that lay under his *head* is now stood upright and sanctified with oil on its *head*. This suggests that from this time forward Jacob will be keenly aware that heaven lives in the very air he breathes.

Once Jacob has set up the pillar he names this "place" Bethel (meaning "house of God"). Only now does the narrator tell us that this "place" was a Canaanite city called Luz. So why did the narrator wait until now to tell us the name of a city as significant as San Francisco? Fokkelman suggests,

Before the theophany transformed the maqom ["place"] into Bethel, it had already accomplished another thing. By the theophany, Canaanite Luz has been exposed, leached, purge to the zero-state of 'a place'. God does not want to appear to Jacob in a Canaanite town, but he wants to appear in another which only his appearing will turn into a something, but then no less a House of God. Where the history of the covenant between YHWH and his people begins, all preceding things grow pale. Canaan loses its face, Luz is deprived of its identity papers.¹¹

C. Jacob's response to the oracle: Worship (vv. 20–22)

20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "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, 21 so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, 22 and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you." (vv. 20–22)

Finally, Jacob responds to God's oracle with a vow to serve this God, his Lord. "This is the longest vow in the Old Testament,"¹² and it reveals the critical moment when Jacob binds himself by faith to the God of his fathers. But while God's promises were unconditional, Jacob's vow is conditional.

God has already promised him in the dream that He will do all these things for him. Jacob, however, remains the suspicious bargainer—a "wrestler" with words and conditions just as he is a physical wrestler, a heel-grabber...now he wants to be sure God will fulfill His side of the bargain before he commits himself to God's service.¹³

Though his vow is done by faith, it is not the highest expression of faith. But let us remember that faith is not perfected overnight, and this vow serves a great function in Jacob's life. With promises of God now in his possession, the vow totally reorients his life. He will go to the same destination with the same intention to secure a wife, but with a different identity papers and transcendent purposes.

The vow transforms his exiled flight into a holy pilgrimage, just as an "encounter with God changes a stony place into a sanctuary."¹⁴

Second, notice how the vow leads Jacob into worship that is more enduring and tangible than mere feelings. The act of raising the stone serves as a perpetual memorial of his encounter with God and his newly placed hunger to be a temple builder. And the giving of tithes "marks an important moment in his transformation—no longer grasper but giver."¹⁵ This is not a one-time gift, but a perpetual one. God has promised fertility, and in turn, Jacob promises to give back the first and the best, as a public testimony that all he has belongs to God.

We might say that the very thing Rebekah feared most, turned out to be a best thing for Jacob's life. When Jacob went on the run, heaven went on the run, pursuing him and filling him with God's presence, something he had never experienced at home. As Waltke writes, this presence totally transforms him.

In sum, the story is filled with transformations due to God's presence: a man running away from home runs into God; a man afraid of his brother fears God; a certain place becomes nothing less than God's place; a rock becomes a temple; night turns to morning; Canaanite Luz becomes Bethel ("the house of God"). When the dream is fulfilled, Jacob ("Heel/Grasper") will become Israel ("one who prevails with God and humans").¹⁶

Could it be the exile we actually fear is necessary for the soul? It certainly proved to be for Moses, Israel, David, Elijah, Jesus, Paul and the early church. So instead of running away from it, or rescuing our children from it, perhaps we should focus on the "value" of it.

III. The Value of Exile

A. It is a place of vision

Exile is a place of profound vision. This is because we must make a geographical "border crossing" to get there, and this disconnects us from all the forces at home that inhibit real change. It is when we are off stage, in extreme loneliness with no one watching, that we can hear the tender voice of God pursuing us. In the vision, we begin to comprehend the connection between heaven and earth. My richest experiences of heaven occurred when I was "exiled" in some unknown place.

- on the island of Mykonos when I felt exiled from my family (1970)
- in a tent hiding from the secret police in Romania (1989)
- in a hospital room where a six year old boy was dying (1992)

B. It is a place of commitment

Secondly, exile is the place where genuine commitments can be made. Here in the darkness of the night, when the soul sinks into a lonely terror, it becomes ready to answer God with genuine commitment and expressions of worship in tangible and profound ways. So parents, when we try to rescue our children from exile, we may be inhibiting them from experiencing the grace of God that leads to genuine commitment to Christ. Young birds would never fly if parents didn't push them from the nest and watch from afar as they first flapped their wings in struggle.

C. It is a place of hope

Third, exile transforms dark despair into sacred hope. Once Jacob hears God's word, his ordinary journey becomes a holy pilgrimage with a guaranteed round-trip ticket home. At some point God tells each of us we are going home. God guarantees it. This explains the

relationship between experiences of “wonder” that totally reorient our world, and character transformation. Though the vision totally transforms Jacob’s orientation, his character remains the same. It will take another twenty years to integrate the vision with his character. But the vision is extremely important. The hope it gives him enables him to endure the suffering that lies ahead. This is a consistent pattern in the Scriptures. Visions of heaven gird the saint with such hope of their destiny, that they are able to endure the suffering that changes their character.

D. It is the place where we encounter Jesus

Finally, Jacob’s experience prepared all Israel to search for the reality behind the metaphor of the ladder. Two thousand years later, the reality came and all Israel was waiting. In John’s gospel, after Philip found Nathanael and brought him to Jesus, Jesus said to him,

Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (John 1:47–49)

Scholars suggest that Nathanael was sitting in seclusion, away from the presence of men to pray, read or meditate. This is indeed a true Israelite who, unlike Jacob, has no guile. The mention of figs recalls his Father’s delight when he first found Israel.

**Like grapes in the wilderness,
I found Israel.**

**Like the first fruit on the fig tree
in its first season,**

I saw your fathers. (Hosea 9:10a)

“Hosea’s image of discovering fruit in a barren land suggests that these new disciples are indeed a precious find, a gift from the Father.”¹⁷ But there is more to come.

Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” (John 1:50–51)

As we come to the Lord’s table, it strikes me that the ultimate parallel of Jacob’s exile and vision ends with a holy meal. Only this time it is Jesus, exiled for 40 days in the desert. He dealt with the devil’s temptations with clear vision and focus, and at the end “angels came and were *ministering* to him” (Matt 4:11). The Greek verb is used for serving a meal and suggests suggests the angels fed Jesus. Through Jesus’ work on the cross, the gates of heaven have been permanently opened. If we let it, exile brings a holy, intimate encounter that brings us close to heaven and reaffirms our relationship with God. As Stephen proclaimed before he was martyred, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56). May God in his grace open the heavens to behold the glory of Christ to each of you.

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1982), 241.
2. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 388.
3. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 243.
4. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 149.
5. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 243.
6. Waltke, *Genesis*, 391.
7. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 245.
8. Waltke, *Genesis*, 392.
9. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (Dallas, Word Books, 1994), 223.
10. Waltke, *Genesis*, 392.
11. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Netherlands, Van Gorcum, 1975), 67.
12. Waltke, *Genesis*, 393.
13. Alter, *Genesis*, 150.
14. Waltke, *Genesis*, 394.
15. Waltke, *Genesis*, 394.
16. Waltke, *Genesis*, 396.
17. J. Ramsey Michaels, *John*, NIBC 4 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1989), 41.