

March 1-5, 2021 Edition

The "BIG Story" Of The Bible #39

Finding Jesus In The Old Testament Who's Climbing Jacob's Ladder?

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday: May God pass on to you and your descendants the blessings he promised to Abraham. May you own this land where you are now living as a foreigner, for God gave this land to Abraham." So... Jacob left Beersheba and traveled toward Haran. Genesis 28:4 (NLT)

Reflection: This week we're looking at the second story that shapes the life of Jacob- his dream. This story is often called Jacob's Ladder but that's a terrible translation of this word (sorry King James) that is actually referring to a giant staircase. Somehow Jacob's Staircase just doesn't roll off the tongue, does it? But that's what it is. In fact that reminds me of a very interesting story (at least it's interesting to me). I have had lots of friends in my past who claimed the King James Bible is the only one that anyone should read. "It's the authorized version after all" they spout. What does that mean? Just that King James "authorized" this translation of the Bible into English. Before that you could get burned at the stake for translating the Bible into any common tongue.

King James sounds like a great guy, doesn't he? But here's where things get interesting. James wanted his name to be in the Bible but there wasn't a James in the Bible. Not in the New Testament or in the Old Testament. "But wait a darned tootin' minute!" you say. One of Jesus' disciples was named James (two actually) and His brother was named James and that brother wrote a book in the New Testament that is called James. Yes that's true. Now. But it wasn't before the King James Bible was printed.

Since the king wanted his name in the Bible the scholars decided to change the name Jacob to James for any New Testament Jacobs. At first they were going to change the Jacob of Genesis into James as well but the king put the kibosh on that. Why? He didn't like Jacob of the Old Testament one bit and didn't want his name associated with that scoundrel. So only the Jacobs of the New Testament got the name change. I'll never forget how confusing it was in first year Ancient New Testament Greek class when we were given the assignment of reading the passage of scripture where Jesus calls His disciples. We started feeling pretty confident because for the most part if you sounded out the names it was obvious which disciple was which. The name Peter written in Greek sounds like Petroi. Matthew sounds like Matthoi. Bartholomew sounds like Bartolomoi. Then we got to someone whose name sounds like Ee-yak-o-boi. I remember looking up at my professor with a blank look on my face. That doesn't sound like any of the disciples. "James" my professor said and I shrugged and we went on. It wasn't until much later that I learned why James doesn't sound anything like "James" and why it sounds suspiciously like Jacob.

Was I right? Was that interesting? Oh well, can't win them all. But I wanted to tell you that story to point out that even King James didn't like Jacob. This story we're going to talk about this week is mainly about heaven and how to get there- kind of. It's a kind of a surprise story that plays out in 3 acts. In all 3 acts heaven is mentioned and in all 3 acts we see Jacob's (and maybe ours too) faulty ideas about heaven and how one ascends to heaven.

So here's the setup for the story- Jacob has just finished cheating his poor, blind, dying father into thinking that he is in fact Isaac's oldest son, Esau. So Isaac gives Jacob the blessing he had intended to give to Esau even though God had promised Jacob the blessing of Abraham. But Jacob wasn't taking any chances. Now he has what he thinks he wanted but all of his relationships are destroyed and he will never see the only person who cares about him again.

He is running for his life and while sleeping one night he has this dream that (should have) changed his life (but it didn't- at least not for a long time yet) and that brings us to act one which we'll look at tomorrow. But maybe for today spend some time thinking about why God would make such an unlikable character one of the central players in the BIG story of the Bible- the reason might surprise you.

Tuesday Reflection: **Act 1:** So as Moses paints the picture of what Jacob is experiencing he does it masterfully. I guess it's even more noticeable and impressive in Hebrew but you can even see it in English. I heard once- but I'm not sure it's true- that the most often used opening words in English books are, it was a dark and stormy night. Seems to me it would be once-upon-a-time but what do I know? But those words, it was a dark and stormy night paint a picture for the reader, don't they?

Moses is doing something similar here and using colorful and symbolic language to lead the reader into a certain mindset:

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. Genesis 28:10-11 (NIV)

What's Moses trying to get us to feel? First that Jacob is in the middle of nowhere. The place doesn't even have a name- yet. He just calls it a "certain place" because there was no other way to describe it. So Jacob is all alone. Moses also makes sure to point out that Jacob lays his head on a stone. Why? Well, why would you use a stone as a pillow? You wouldn't, would you? Unless you had nothing else to use as a pillow. If you had ANYTHING else to use you'd use it, right? Moses is telling us not only is Jacob alone- he's got nothing. And finally the sun has gone down. It's a literary device- not only is it physically dark but heaven is dark to Jacob. Heaven is closed off to Jacob. And if you've ever tried to go to Chick Fil A on a Sunday you know how he feels. I've tried and I've been severely disappointed that I had to go to In-N-Out instead.

But there's one big difference between me and you attempting to go to Chick Fil A only to find they're closed because it's a Sunday. The difference is- you and I went to Chick Fil A seeking Chick Fil A. Jacob isn't seeking heaven (or God) as far as we can tell. He doesn't pray. He doesn't cry out to God. Jacob has spent his life believing he's all he's got to make sure he gets what he deserves and nothing's changed in his mind.

He's alone, he's got nothing which is interesting because all the larceny and deceit with tricking his blind dying dad was about getting the lion's share of the wealth that belonged to the first born- and he doesn't even have that. He has to be wondering what's wrong with God. Heaven seems to be dark and silent.

Ever felt like that? Like your life is falling apart and heaven seems to be dark and silent? Yeah, me too. So has every human that has ever lived. Look at something King David once wrote:

Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not desert us forever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression? Psalm 44:23-24 (NLT)

I think most of us have felt that way multiple times in our lives. Heck, multiple times in the last year. We cry out and don't seem to hear anything and so we assume Heaven is dark and silent. But in this story Jacob learns something about heaven (and this leads to our second act)...

Wednesday Reflection: The second act of Jacob's dream story shows that Jacob was wrong- Heaven isn't closed off- not even to him. It seemed to be dark and silent but then Jacob has his dream:

*And he dreamed: A stairway was set on the ground with its top reaching heaven, and God's angels were going up and down on it. Yahweh was standing there beside him.
Genesis 28:12-13 (CSB)*

So Jacob sees three things- a stairway that goes from the earth up to heaven. He sees angels ascending and descending on this stairway and then he sees God come down and stand next to him, watching him sleep.

This is a position of intimacy and care- like a parent watching over their child sleep. And sometimes that's the only time a child looks innocent and sweet. I'm sure that was true with Jacob.

I grew up in church and so I heard all the stories of Jacob and Esau and I thought that was pretty mean but the story was always told to me with the slant that Jacob was doing what God wanted him to do. Maybe. But are you going to teach your kids that lesson from this story? It's ok to cheat your parents as long as it leads to you getting the blessing God intends for you to get. Not me.

Moses who wrote this story intends for us to be disgusted by Jacob- at least at first. Read the story again without the rose colored glasses we get from Sunday school stories and tell me you don't feel dirty after reading how he cheated and tricked his father who was dying and blind. This was an ancient culture that valued honoring your father above just about everything else. We're supposed to read that story and feel sick and disgusted with Jacob. That's how Moses wants you to feel about Jacob. But now we get here and God is standing over Jacob like a dearly loved child? What's up with that? But you ain't seen nothing yet:

Look, I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go. I will bring you back to this land." Genesis 28:15 (NLT)

God himself makes Jacob the promise that he made to Abraham and Isaac and this is huge. Jacob hasn't met God yet. Abraham met him many times. Sarah met God. Even Isaac met God. But not Jacob. Not yet. Now Jacob gets his chance to meet Yahweh and we're all rooting for Jacob to finally get Who God is and who God wants Jacob to be becoming. Will he? We'll see.

But first let's notice the activity on the staircase. Angels are ascending and descending this staircase. What's the point? The point is, Heaven is NOT closed for business. Heaven is hard at work. Angels are the messengers of God. That's what the word "angel" means- messenger. And Jacob sees them going back and forth from Heaven to earth and then back again. What's

happening. The messengers are going out from the throne room of God to work on God's behalf in the world and then reporting back to get further orders.

Heaven is a beehive of activity working on behalf of earth. It seems to Jacob like heaven is dark and silent and closed like Chick Fil A on a Sunday but it's not. Heaven is busy at work. Jacob just couldn't see it.

The same thing happens to us. There may be times in our lives where we wonder why heaven is dark and silent and closed but the testimony of the Bible is, don't you believe it. You may not be able to feel it but heaven is a bee hive of activity working out the will of God in your life and the world.

So heaven is not not closed to the world but there's something even more remarkable we're supposed to get out of this story that we'll look at tomorrow.

Thursday Reflection: So yesterday we learned that contrary to what Jacob felt- heaven wasn't dark and silent. It was hard at work on behalf of the people of earth. But we learn something else in Act 1 of the story- heaven isn't closed to Jacob either. You'd think it would be. You'd think God would be thinking, until you shape up and fly right heaven is out of the Jacob business.

But He's not. He comes down and stands right next to Jacob in a position of intimacy and care and we wonder why God would do such a thing? Turns out it's because that's Who God is. He is drawn to the broken.

When Jesus is calling His disciples people were shocked at His choices. They weren't the cream of the crop of Jewish boys that Jesus was calling. It was simple fishermen with questionable backgrounds. But everybody would have been shocked when Jesus called Matthew to come follow Him. Matthew was a tax collector. There was nobody hated more in Israel than a Jew who had signed up to collect taxes for Rome.

Matthew is blown away by the attention Jesus shows him. So he decides to throw a dinner party and invite all his friends. Why? My guess is so that they would have the opportunity to meet Jesus and maybe their lives would be changed forever like his was. This is one very powerful form of evangelism. Matthew doesn't have the words to say that will change his friends lives but he knows someone who does. So what does Matthew do? He thinks to himself, if I can just get my friends close to Jesus then Jesus will take care of the rest. It's a brilliant strategy actually.

Jesus goes to the party and the local religious leaders are scandalized:

Later, Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. But when the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with such scum?" When Jesus heard this, he said, "Healthy people don't need a doctor--sick people do." ...I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners." Matthew 9:10-13 (NLT)

This is really good news for disreputable sinners like Matthew (and me and you and everyone else you know who recognizes just how messed up you are). Turns out if you put Jesus in a

room with a bunch of people it won't take long til He gravitates toward the person who is the most messed up who has messed up the most. Turns out He's drawn to our us not in spite of our weaknesses and flaws but because of them.

And that's what Jacob should be learning in this encounter with God but is it? Let's go to act 3 and find out:

Friday Reflection: Warning- this one is REALLY long and you may want to split it up into two days: In Act 3 we see Jacob's faulty assumption. What's Jacob's faulty assumption? He wakes up and is terrified that he actually saw God and he wonders why he's not dead:

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." Early 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. He called that place Bethel. Genesis 28:16-19 (NLT)

He sees God and isn't dead and he seems to come to the conclusion that the reason is because he has discovered the house of God and the gateway to heaven. I wonder if he thought that he had completed a quest that gave him power because he knew where the house of God and the gateway to heaven was?

But that's not the lesson God wanted Jacob to get. If that was Jacob's assumption (and I think it was) then he was dead wrong and got the wrong message. The house of God and the gateway to Heaven don't reside in a singular place called Bethel.

I think it's obvious that Moses' intention was that when we read this story our minds would go back to another story in the BIG story of the Bible that we read back in chapter 11- the tower of Babel. Do you remember? The people who are supposed to spread out and fill the earth decide instead to settle down together on the plain of Shinar which would become the city of Babylon (in modern day Iraq). They decide to build a tower that would "touch" heaven but God doesn't like it one bit so He comes down and confused their language so that they could no longer work together and the project is abandoned.

What was that tower all about? Well, it was an ancient temple called a Ziggurat. Very much like a pyramid but rather than act as a tomb for important pharaohs a Ziggurat was a temple with massive stairways (does that ring a bell with the story we're looking at today?) by which humans could ascend to heaven. It was a human attempt to recover the fellowship humans had once enjoyed with God in the garden before the fall.

Jacob's "stairway" to heaven was actually a massive Ziggurat but it was different than the tower of Babel in one very important respect- instead of Jacob's ladder or stairway being a stairway TO heaven (for humans to ascend to God) it was a stairway FROM heaven where God descends to us. What's the difference? It's huge. All religions are man's attempts to ascend to heaven and there are always, always, always steps required for us to master in order to attain heaven. With the relationship that God offers heaven comes down to us.

How is that possible, you ask? Well I think because of what Jesus would one day do for us on the cross. If you cast your imagination WAY back to the second story in the BIG story of the Bible you'll remember we humans incurred a debt that day which God said we could never hope to pay. A debt He said would be paid by the Rescuer that He would send. I suspect that when Satan got Adam & Eve to reject God's way he fully believed them to drop dead Just like God told them they would if they ate the fruit. But they didn't. Why not? Because God causes the curse that should have fallen on them (a curse that would have killed them deader than dead) to fall on the creation instead. There would be lots of consequences that came with our decision to choose our own way rather than trust God but we would not die the eternal death Satan expected us to die. Instead God would send a Rescuer to pay that debt and save us.

And that's what happened. Jesus came and died on the cross breaking the curse of hell and death and rescuing us from the eternal death that would have been ours had someone not come to rescue us. And when Jesus lays His life down on the cross and then 3 days later picks it up again at the resurrection the curse is broken (although we will all still die and deal with most of the consequences of the fall but because of Jesus death and weakness will not have the final say in our lives) and the benefits flow forward to each one of us. Right to this very moment in time for me and you.

But it also flowed back all the way to Adam and Eve. And to Jacob. I think that's why heaven is able to be open and working so tirelessly on behalf of us humans even in the Old Testament- because Jesus' sacrifice (which hadn't happened yet) would flow backwards in time just as efficiently as it flows forward to you and me. We can't take too much time to talk about why God can't just do whatever He wants but I think it revolves around a certain set of rules-of-engagement that God agrees to or is bound by that was set before the creation of the universe. CS Lewis calls it the "Deep Magic" and the reason it was necessary was because of love. You can't have love without having the possibility of its opposite. You can't have joyful obedience without the ability for humans to reject God.

What does all of this have to do with Jacob's ladder/staircase? I'm glad you asked.

When Jesus was calling His first disciples a man named Philip went to find his friend Nathaniel.

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Come, follow me." Philip was from Bethsaida, Andrew and Peter's hometown. Philip went to look for Nathanael and told him, "We have found the very person Moses and the prophets wrote about! His name is Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth." "Nazareth!" exclaimed Nathanael. "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" "Come and see for yourself," Philip replied. As they approached, Jesus said, "Now here is a genuine son of Israel-a man of complete integrity." "How do you know about me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus replied, "I could see you under the fig tree before Philip found you." Then Nathanael exclaimed, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God-the King of Israel!" John 1:43-49 (NLT)

Now we have no idea what Nathaniel was doing under that fig tree. I've heard lots of theories and ultimately none of us knows. I suspect maybe Nathaniel was praying and asking

God for a sign- maybe of the Messiah. Whatever it was Nathaniel was blown away! And convinced. And look at what Jesus says to him:

Jesus asked him, "Do you believe this just because I told you I had seen you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than this." Then he said, "I tell you the truth, you will all see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man, the one who is the stairway between heaven and earth." John 1:50-51 (NLT)

We would have never fully understood Jacob's dream if Jesus hadn't told us He IS the ladder/staircase. He doesn't ascend and descend to heaven on the ladder/staircase- He IS the ladder/staircase. It reminds me of something Jesus would say later in the book of John. He tells his disciples that He's leaving and going back to His Father's house and they can't come right then but He tells them not to worry because they all know the way. Look at what happens next:

"No, we don't know, Lord," Thomas said. "We have no idea where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus told him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me. John 14:5-6 (NLT)

What does Jesus tell them? I AM the way. Not I'll show you the way. Not I'll leave you map. No. Jesus IS the way.

And Jesus IS the ladder/staircase upon which God's messengers ascend and descend TO us in order to carry out the will of God for our lives and all of human history.

And you say, but what does it take for Jesus to want to come to me? And what does it take for Him to want to STAY with me? Great question. A lesson Jacob wishes he had learned much earlier than he did.

I don't know about you but I sometimes still feel like if I'm not good enough then Jesus will leave me. That my flaws and weaknesses will send Him running for the ladder/staircase to go back to Heaven where things aren't as messy as they are in my life. But what's amazing about this story and other stories in the the BIG story of the Bible is that Jesus seems to be drawn to us not in spite of our weaknesses by BECAUSE of our weaknesses. In Psalm 25 David says:

LORD, Forgive my wrongdoing, for it is great. Psalm 25:11 (NLT)

Not forgive my wrongdoing despite how great it is- BECAUSE of how great it is. David had a lot of issues and made a lot of mistakes but he seemed to have a grasp on the character of God that maybe nobody else in the entire Old Testament had.

God's not going to leave you because of your weaknesses and wrongdoing. So great, does that mean I don't have to try so hard to live the life Jesus calls me to follow Him into.

No. Way.

In Rome there was a contingent in the Roman church who thought that way. If we are saved by grace plus nothing and we can't do anything to earn salvation and our sins have all been paid for- past, present AND future- then why not just sin like crazy. Their slogan was, let us sin that grace may abound! Their reasoning was if God forgiving us for our wrongdoing made God look so good (which it does) then let's give Him more opportunities to forgive us

which will just make Him shine even more. They asked Paul if that's a good idea and Paul's response:

No. Way.

Paul tells them that it's the Adam & Eve argument all over again. Did they die when they ate the fruit? No. Did God pay the debt for their sin? Yes. Did they have much harder lives because they chose to go their own way rather than trust God? Yep.

Same thing with you and me. Can we sin and be forgiven. Of course. Happens every day. So why should I try to do my best to follow Jesus into the life He dreams of me living? Because while I can be forgiven for my wrongdoing I often have to live with the consequences of that wrongdoing for years to come- sometimes for the rest of my life. Look at how Paul puts it here:

That means you must not give sin a vote in the way you conduct your lives. Don't give it the time of day. Don't even run little errands that are connected with that old way of life. Throw yourselves wholeheartedly and full-time... into God's way of doing things. Sin can't tell you how to live. After all, you're not living under that old tyranny any longer. You're living in the freedom of God. Romans 6:12-14 (NLT)

It's a strange paradox we live in- God's drawn to you and will forgive you for your wrongdoing but you should do your best to avoid doing weak, flawed messed up stuff because it will make your life so much easier if you do (or don't ;o)

This is the lesson of Jacob's ladder/staircase. I hope you learn it. Heck, I hope I learn it. But did Jacob learn it? I don't think so- at least not yet. Because when he wakes up after hearing God's unconditional promises to be with him, protect him and bless him the only thing that stands out about Jacob's response is how bad it is:

Then Jacob made this vow: "If God will indeed be with me and protect me on this journey, and if he will provide me with food and clothing, and if I return safely to my father's home, then the Lord will certainly be my God." Genesis 28:20-22 (NLT)

What's all this if/then stuff? God comes and gives Himself completely to Jacob and Jacob wakes up and makes all these conditions for God. So what's the lesson? Don't be like Jacob. Learn the lessons God was trying to teach Jacob that Jacob just doesn't seem to get. Thank God for His unconditional love, mercy and forgiveness but don't use that as a license to do whatever you want because there are all kinds of traps in that way of living your life.