The sermon

Intro

The imagery of Jacob's ladder, or a stairway to heaven, found in Genesis 28 has frequently showed up in pop culture, even if the significance of the event is largely ignored and misunderstood.

In 1971, Led Zeppelin recorded a song called Stairway to Heaven. The stairway is something bought by a lady. Whatever it's about, the lyric writer himself is a bit unclear, it's not about Christianity.

In 1986, Huey Lewis and the News had a number one hit called Jacob's Ladder. About rejecting sleazy, cheesy TV preachers selling salvation and begging for your money. And doing the best we can. Climbing Jacob's Ladder is trying to be a better person on our own, without God.

In 1996, there was a country song titled Jacob's Ladder that was about a commoner named Jacob using a ladder to get into a rich girl named Rachel's room. Heaven at the top of the ladder, the angel at the top of the ladder, was Rachel.

Note mentioning a biblical story or a phrase of Jesus doesn't make someone a Christian. People can talk about the Bible and use it out of context. People can talk about the Bible and have no clue what they're talking about. Happens all the time.

This morning we'll see what Jacob's ladder is all about.

Body

Passage Focus

We'll walk through the passage in four points.

READ 28:1-5

Point 1: Isaac submits to God's will (28:1-5)

Something's changed in Isaac. Last chapter Isaac was determined to bless Esau before he died. Isaac loved Esau whereas Rebekah loved Jacob (Gen 25:28). Then Isaac was duped by Jacob and Rebekah. When Isaac realized he was duped, he *"trembled very violently"* (Gen 27:33). His worst fears came true: Jacob got the blessing, not Esau.

Having been deceived and his will thwarted, one would expect Isaac to be raging and hateful and depressed and bitter. But now we find Isaac firmly in Jacob's corner like nothing awful went down.

Isaac's come around to Rebekah's line of thinking (Gen 26:34-35; 27:46): Jacob can't marry a Canaanite woman (28:1). Recall God's will for Isaac was marrying a woman from Abraham's kindred (i.e., Rebekah), not a Canaanite woman.

We find Isaac praying the blessing of Abraham upon Jacob.

God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. – 28:3

That's have a lot of children and multiply. ***"company"*** suggests an assembled peopled gathered for worship.

May he give the blessing of Abraham to you and to your offspring with you, that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings that God gave to Abraham!" – 28:4

The blessing of Abraham will live on in Jacob. Meaning prosperity and protection. Blessing of allies. Cursing of enemies. Numerous offspring. Land. In order to possess the land, they need protection and provision and God to oppose their enemies.

So Jacob's sent to Laban (28:5). Jacob's leaving the promised land. In part to find a wife. If there's no wife, there's no offspring.

What happened?

How do we explain Isaac's change of heart in spite of the fact that Isaac's will was thwarted and he was deceived by his wife and son? Best suggestion? Isaac's come to grips with God's will. God wanted Jacob to get the blessing. So Jacob got the blessing. What can Isaac do about it? Nothing. Better to embrace God's will than to fight against the Almighty.

Isaac's denied himself and given up his desire (i.e., the blessing must go to Esau). We find Isaac behind Jacob rather than holding a grudge. The turn of events was painful and heartbreaking, but God's will was served. What can I do now except agree with God and help Jacob experience the promises?

Biblical spirituality: submitting to God's will

One fundamental element of biblical spirituality is submitting to God's will. When God wills what we don't will we need to submit. We submit because we recognize God's above us. We submit because we trust God is good.

Sometimes God's will is revealed. Before the cross, Jesus knew the Father's will.

And going a little farther he [Jesus] *fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."* – **Matthew 26:39**

Jesus submitted. In a multitude of things we know God's will: tell the truth, use your mouth to edify rather than to destroy, bear with your brothers and sisters in the local church, etc.

Sometimes God's will is hidden. Not revealed.

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"- [14] yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. [15] Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." – **James 4:13-15**

Sometimes we have plans. Sometimes the Lord wills otherwise. We need to be flexible and say to ourselves, it's okay that I didn't get what I wanted because the Lord willed something different. That's biblical spirituality.

Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. – **1 Peter 4:19**

Suffering here was persecution including slander. When I'm slandered call it God's will. Yes, sometimes God wills suffering. Yes, sometimes God wills that I be sinned against. What do I when I'm unjustly treated? I call it God's will. I entrust my life to God. I continue to obey God. That's biblical spirituality.

When that person of the opposite sex whom you desire a relationship with has no interest in you.

When you don't get the job you really wanted. Or you have to wait a decade for it.

When someone else gets the promotion you're qualified for. Sometimes more than once.

When you're mistreated by a loved one.

When you experience injustice because of someone else's sin. And it takes years for a resolution.

When your health is failing in ways you never expected. And you have to wait months for an appointment.

Can you say okay Lord? Can you bend your will to God's will? Can you say honestly, this isn't what I want God, but I know it's what you want God, so please give me the ability and strength to obey you?

It's better to go with God than to resist the Almighty. Ask Jonah. Isaac accepted God's will and moved forward.

Practical question: how am I doing in submitting to God's will these days?

READ 28:6-9

Point 2: Esau longs for approval (28:6-9)

Esau was aware of what was happening. This had to be hard to hear. Jacob's basically being told don't make the choices your brother made. Esau's the negative example. Don't imitate Esau!

Esau discovers his parents disapprove of Canaanite wives. Esau has at least two of them (Gen 26:34-35). Not only that. Jacob obeys (28:7). Jacob's the good son. I'm the bad son.

How does Esau respond? Esau resolves to please his parents by marrying a woman who isn't a Canaanite (28:8). He settles on Ishmael's daughter Mahalath (28:9).

Ironically, the sons outside the covenant, outside the blessing, find themselves bound together by marriage.

Application

Remember, from previous readings of Hebrews 12:15-17, Esau is a picture of the person who falls short of the grace of God. Concern for God's will is nowhere to be found.

Sometimes people look for approval everywhere but God. Esau wants to please his parents. But pleasing God isn't in the equation.

Practical question: whose approval am I seeking?

READ 28:10-15

Point 3: Jacob encounters God (28:10-15)

Jacob's about 60 miles into his 550-600 mile journey when he stops to rest (28:10-11).Jacob has a dream with a ladder (28:12). The top of this ladder reached up to heaven. Angels were both going up and down this ladder.

There's debate about whether it's a ladder or a stairway. This is the only time the word's used in the Old Testament. The dream pictures angels departing for mission and angels returning from mission. The top of the ladder is the place of God's presence.

In **John 1:51**, Jesus says I am Jacob's ladder. I am the pathway to God. God is accessed through me.

The message is more important than the picture.

"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. – 28:13

Yahweh is a personal God. Abraham and Isaac had personal relationship with God. They were "saved" people in right standing with God. One day Jacob and his descendants would personally possess the land Jacob's on.

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. – 28:14

Jacob's descendants will be countless and they'll spread out. At creation, Adam and Eve were supposed to fill the earth (Gen 1:28). After the flood, Noah's family was supposed to fill the earth (Gen 9:1). One sins of the people at the tower of Babel was staying put and refusing to fill the earth (Gen 10:4).

Ultimately, the world will be filled through Jacob's offspring, Jesus Christ, the one in whom ***"all the families of the earth"*** experience blessing. In the new heavens and new earth there will be people present from every tribe, language, people, and nation (Rev 5:9-10). Those people will fill the renewed earth and God's intent for mankind will be realized.

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." – 28:15

Jacob will never be alone. God will be present to protect (***"keep"***). God will be present to direct his steps back to Canaan.

Who is God with?

Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." – **Hebrews 13:5**

The Hebrews author applies the promise ***"I will not leave you"*** to every believer. I don't have to love money because God is with me. God is present to provide so we need not obsess over money.

And God is personally present with us wherever we go because his Holy Spirit indwells us. If you're born again, you can't escape God's presence. He's within you to reshape your desires and actions (Phil 2:13).

What does it mean for God to be with a person?

God is present to provide. God is present to protect. God is present to act for us. God is present to change us.

My daughter Lydia has frequently expressed fright of murderers before bed. Probably the 2023 manhunt resulting from a Lewiston shooting. What if a murderer enters my room while I'm sleeping? What can I say? I had recently read her the story of Jesus commanding the wind, so I reminded her of that. If Jesus has the power to tell the wind what to do, he can prevent a murderer from entering our house.

I trust God is present to protect me and my family. I don't worry about murderers because I trust in God's presence. If I were to live in a crime infested inner city apartment complex, I would take appropriate cautions. If there was an active shooter in the area, I would take appropriate cautions. One caveat. Sometimes God wills the suffering of his people. Sometimes Christians are murdered. In such cases, which aren't the norm, God was present with them throughout their life and their time was up. Now they're present with God in a new way.

Some things we learn in Scripture. God numbers our days (Ps 139:16). God protects from danger. God wills suffering. God is with us every day of our life!

God with us is supposed to free us from fears of money and murders so we can focus on pleasing God.

Practical question: how does the truth that God is with me affect my daily life?

READ 28:16-22

Point 4: Jacob's vow (28:16-22)

Jacob now knows God is present: ***"Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it"*** (28:16). An encounter with God resulted in fright and awe (28:17).

Jacob responds with a monument (28:18) and a vow. **If** God does five things (with me, protect me, bread, clothing, bring me back safely), **then** I will do three things (***"the LORD shall be my God,"*** my stone will become a house of worship, and I'll tithe a tenth of what God gives me – 28:20-22).

Commentators are divided on the virtue of Jacob's vow. Some see Jacob selfishly trying to manipulate God or bargain with God. I'll serve you, but only if you do these things for me. Others see Jacob's response more favorably: a vow is a commitment. Jacob's committing that Yahweh will be his God.

I'll reserve a conclusion until we proceed further.

For now, taking the passage at face value, it appears Jacob has some doubts, reservations, uncertainty. It doesn't sound like Jacob has total confidence in God. It sounds like he's saying, if God meets the conditions, then he'll be my God. That's not how we come to saving faith in Christ. We don't give God a one year window to prove himself then, if he proves himself, we commit to follow him. Jesus doesn't say try me out and see if it works for you. Jesus says repent, believe, take my yoke upon you, deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me. Paul didn't say try out Jesus and see if he works for you. Paul said repent, believe, turn from idols, don't trust in your deeds.

You don't live the Christian life with uncertainty about whether or not God will keep his promises. Faith is trusting God's promises. Banking your life on them.

When I sit down in a chair I have total confidence it's going to support my weight. I'm not wondering whether or not it'll crumble and I'll hurt my back. If I had reservations, I wouldn't sit in it. I sit in the chair because I trust its structural integrity. Same with Jesus. The person who trusts in Jesus believes Jesus is who he says he is and that Jesus will keep his word.

John says, *"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know you have eternal life"* (**1 John 5:13**). God wants us to know with certainty. Not some sort of half-hearted commitment we might take back if God doesn't cut the mustard.

Practical question: how confident am I that God keeps his word?

Conclusion

Jesus is Jacob's ladder. The pathway to God. How?

Jesus went to the cross to die in the place of sinners, so that all who believe would receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Then he rose from the dead.

Jesus' death indicates we have a sin problem. Sin meaning doing life our own way, not God's way. Our sin separates us from God. Our rebellion alienates us from God. So we need to be reconciled to God. But how?

We must repent, follow Jesus, believe, exercise faith. Meaning, to receive the promises, to come into right relationship with God, one must turn from sin by trusting in Jesus. To trust God's promises is to trust in the merit of Jesus' death to forgive sin. To not trust in ourselves. Trusting in Jesus is the pathway to God.

Confess your sins.

Thank God for sending Jesus to the cross.

Ask for God's forgiveness.

Trust fully. Commit fully.

Tell us if you do.