

Jacob's Dream of the Ladder Between Heaven and Earth

Genesis 28:10-22

Genesis 28:10-22 - *"Now Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ So he came to a certain place and stayed there all night, because the sun had set. And he took one of the stones of that place and put it at his head, and he lay down in that place to sleep. ¹² Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.*

¹³ And behold, the LORD stood above it and said: "I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. ¹⁴ Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. 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 spoken to you."

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!"

¹⁸ Then Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on top of it. ¹⁹ And he called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of that city had been Luz previously. ²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, ²¹ so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God. ²² And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You."

Background Notes

After Jacob left Beersheba, he traveled about 50 to 60 miles north on his way to Haran, and he decided to spend the night at a place called Luz. Did Jacob know that Abraham had stopped there when he entered the Land in Genesis 12? There the Lord appeared to Abraham; there Abraham had built an altar unto the Lord; there Abraham worshiped the Lord.

The "ladder" that Jacob saw probably did not have rungs, but was like a wide staircase with hosts of angels going up and down between earth and Heaven. We've all heard the song, "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder." However, that is **not** the meaning of the dream! There was **no** idea of Jacob (or anyone else) climbing the ladder to Heaven! Be careful! Don't build your theology on hymns or Christian songs, but from the Bible!

Jacob changed the name of the place from Luz to Bethel, meaning "House of God, and he vowed that when he returned home, this place would be the "House of God," a place of worship for the true God (v22).

In those days, people would set up stones as monuments or memorials in places where significant events had taken place, so early in the morning after the dream, Jacob set up the stone he had used for a pillow as a monument. Then he

poured oil on the stone. Pouring oil on the stone was an act of consecration or devotion. Jacob did the same thing when he finally came back to Bethel, after being away for 30 years: *“So Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He talked with him, a pillar of stone; and he poured a drink offering on it, and he poured oil on it” (Genesis 35:14).*

Doctrinal Points

1. God’s grace was seen in the timing of Jacob’s dream.

Jacob was no “Mr. Nice Guy” when he left BeerSheba and came to Bethel. He had just deceived his father and stolen the blessing from Esau, and as far as we know, Jacob never apologized to Esau, or to his father, or to God. So God didn’t choose to reveal himself to Jacob in a dream because of any good deed that Jacob had done!

Look at God’s grace in the amazing promises that He made to Jacob: *“I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. 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 spoken to you”(v13-15).*

The blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant were part of Isaac’s blessing on Jacob at the beginning of the chapter, but now **God Himself** confirmed the Covenant to Jacob. Can you believe it? Think of the timing of this event. When Jacob least deserved God’s favor, God confirmed the covenant with him! Why? The grace of God!! Grace is “God’s **unmerited** favor” toward man.

Think of the timing of God in our salvation. Romans 5:8 says, *“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* Notice the timing - while we were **still sinners**, Jesus Christ died for us! Now that is the grace of God! God’s grace is seen in the timing of Jacob’s dream.

2. God’s grace is seen in the meaning of Jacob’s dream.

What was the meaning of the dream about a staircase ascending from earth to heaven, and the angels going up and down? Was it that Jacob could work his way up, or climb up to heaven? No! The meaning was that in spite of Jacob’s past, God was willing to bridge the gap between heaven and earth. He was willing to have genuine, uninterrupted communication, communion and close fellowship with Jacob. Now **that** is **grace!**

What’s the application for today? Because of God’s grace, there is a bridge across the huge gap between God and mankind. Communication, fellowship, and communion between God and man is possible. It is only possible because of what the Lord Jesus Christ has done for us.

In essence, that is what the Lord told Nathanael in John 1:50-51: *“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, “Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”* Possibly Nathanael was meditating on Genesis 28 while he sat under the fig tree, and the Lord knew it. The Lord Jesus revealed that He Himself is like the ladder or the staircase of the dream. **He** is the means by which the gap between man and God is bridged. As 1 Timothy 2:5 tells us, *“there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus...”* God’s grace is seen in the meaning of Jacob’s dream.

3. God’s grace was seen in the receiving of Jacob’s dream.

Commentaries have different opinions about Jacob’s response to the dream. Some commentators think Jacob was making a very unspiritual response. He didn’t confess his sins, and he was not sensitive to God’s presence (v16). It even sounds like Jacob was surprised! *“Oh, Wow! I didn’t know the Lord was here!”* They feel he had an unhealthy fear of God: *“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!”(v17).*

Commentators who view Jacob’s response as unspiritual feel that he showed unbelief and doubt by using the word **“if”** in his vow: *“If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that I come back to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God.” (v20-21).* **If** God will be with me? God had just said He **would** be with him! And he bargained selfishly with God. Notice the emphasis on ‘me’ and ‘I’ in verses 20-21. And big deal – he promised to give only a **tenth** back to the Lord, when he should have promised **everything** (v22)! *“I’ll give you a dime, Lord, for every dollar you give me!”* How selfish and unspiritual could he be?

But some commentators see Jacob in a good light. He was aware that God had visited him, he showed a reverential fear of God, and he didn’t take the event lightly. He set up a pillar as a monument and a memorial, and renamed the place “Bethel,” the “House of God.” And they don’t feel that his vow was filled with doubt - the “if” was just the way vows were stated in those days. The word “if” could have been translated “since” - **“since** God will be with me.” In addition, the vow was not meant to be selfish bargaining with God. Rather, Jacob was making a pledge to God.

So you have both ways of looking at Jacob in this passage. What’s the right answer? We can’t be sure. My own position is a “middle of the road” position. Jacob’s response was basically a good response, but it wasn’t the response of a mature believer. Jacob had a long way to go in the school of God before he would finally emerge as the “man of worship” that God intended him to be.

God’s grace is seen in the receiving of the dream, regardless of Jacob’s response. God did not rebuke him. Jacob didn’t confess his sins, and only seemed concerned about his own welfare, but God’s message to Jacob did not change. Aren’t you glad God’s grace doesn’t hinge on perfect human response? God’s grace is seen in the receiving of Jacob’s dream.

Practical Application

What is your response to the grace of God?

This application is for Christians and non-Christians alike. If you're not yet a believer, what is your response to God's grace? God loves you, and in His grace He has provided salvation for you. Jesus Christ died for your sins! What is your response? Is it a response of unbelief and doubt? Why not put aside your doubts and respond right now with thanks to God for his love and grace. Put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation.

Christians, what is your response to the grace of God? Is it a response of bargaining or making deals with God? "Lord, if you get me out of this problem, I'll serve you more." "Lord, if you bless me financially, I'll tithe more faithfully." "Lord, if you get me a different job, I'll go to church more often." (And on and on we could go!) Or is your response a glad recognition of what the grace of God is all about – that we deserve **nothing** from God, but He has given us **everything** in Christ? Do we respond with love and devotion, with willing service for Him - and at the very least with tithing?

What is your response to the grace of God?