

A STAIRWAY

Genesis 28:10-22

Some of us are uncomfortable with the realization that our TVs or computer monitors may be watching us and listening to us and our cell phones are tracking everywhere we go. More and more people are buying gadgets that they have in several rooms in their houses to which a person can give commands such as “turn off the lights in the living room” or “play soothing Christmas music.” Just think about it. If the device can hear your commands to do something, then it can hear everything else you are saying. When we think about all these newfangled things, we may long for a simpler time.

As it turns out, having everything we say, where we go and what we do being watched and remembered is not something new. This has been happening forever. Not only are what we say and do being tracked, everything we think is also known. We are not alone! The idea that this physical world is coexistent with a spiritual world or realm could make us somewhat uncomfortable. At the very least, this idea should make us more careful. Oh, I forgot, even beyond what we think, our motives are known.

If all this sounds and seems a bit eerie just think how Jacob felt when he waked up from the vision/dream he had when he was on a long trip from where his family lived to a place that was about 500 miles away from home.

We are familiar with the account of why Jacob had left the area where his family clan lived. Thus far in his life, Jacob had managed to buy a birthright that he was not going to be able to use, he had stolen a blessing that God had already promised to give him, he had caused his father to be so emotionally upset that he literally shook, he had made his twin brother Esau so mad that he intended to murder him as soon as his father Isaac passed away.

I wonder if it ever occurred to Jacob, life was not supposed to be this way. I wonder if it ever occurred to him that he did not have a clue as to how God operates. He had a lot to learn not only about God, but also to know God and to have a face-to-face encounter with God. The learning and encounter are the fruits of discipline.

Because of the pending threat, Jacob and his mother Rebekah came up with a reasonable excuse of why Jacob needed to leave home and that was that he wanted to find a wife that was not associated with the Canaanite people. His brother Esau had married two Canaanite women and his mother was very displeased with them. The plan was for Jacob to go to Rebekah’s brother’s home (500 miles away) to find a wife.

Dreaming – 28:10-12

¹⁰ Then Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ He came to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place. ¹² He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. Genesis 28:10–12 (NASB95)

Jacob’s situation when he began this trip was that his life was in danger; he was traveling alone, his future was very uncertain and maybe his conscience bothered him, but that was unlikely. Jacob was the able, seemingly clever, natural man. He was God’s choice to inherit the blessing – not because he was clever – but just because God in his sovereignty wanted it. All Jacob’s cleverness did not help him to realize or receive what God had for him. Jacob’s intention was that God’s will would be done. This was right and good. However, Jacob did not wait for God’s time and look to God to accomplish it. No matter how perfect the heart’s intentions may be, if it is man using his natural strength to do it, the result is failure to please

God. Jacob had not learned to know and to quietly wait for the God Who said, “I will work, and who shall hinder it?” (Isa 43:13 ASV)

Jacob had it relatively easy up to now in his life. Now he was on his way to Haran and had lost the support of his family and perhaps realized for the first time that he was vulnerable and was not self-sufficient. That first night was spent sleeping out in the open with a rock for a pillow. He had a strange dream or vision during the night. You’ve heard of Jacob’s ladder, well this is where he saw the ladder or as some suggest stairs were spanning between heaven and earth. The descriptive phrase “top reached to heaven” is like that used to describe the Tower of Babel which was a ziggurat or a stepped pyramid-like structure.

The vision or dream used imagery that was consistent with the general thinking of people of that day that heaven (the home of the gods) was up in the sky and that it could be reached by climbing up. The imagery also showed that there is a connection between heaven and earth and messengers are going back and forth between these two spiritual realms. We do not know how much understanding Jacob had about the spiritual realm and the concepts that were developed in an attempt to explain spiritual things in terms that we as mortal humans can understand.

Since the messengers who were spiritual beings (normally referred to as angels) were ascending and descending, their originating and terminating places were also spiritual. Ideas were developed that there were three spiritual realm levels: the first heaven, the second heaven and the third heaven. The first heaven was the spiritual realm in which we reside as humans. The third heaven is said to be the dwelling place of God and the realm between the first and third is the “air” (second heaven) as the spiritual realm of angels (both good and evil). We can recall the description of the devil as being the “prince of the power of the air” which is thought to be where spiritual battles happen. We may also recall the incident mentioned in Daniel chapter 10 regarding an angel that brought a message to Daniel. The angel told Daniel that he was delayed twenty-one days by the prince of Persia which was a reference to the evil spiritual being (angel) ruling in that area of the world. The angel that came to Daniel was assisted by another (higher ranking) angel named Michael and that allowed the messenger to come to Daniel.

Promised – 28:13-15

¹³ And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. ¹⁴ “Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth 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 promised you.” Genesis 28:13–15 (NASB95)

As Jacob (in this dream or vision) was allowed to look into the spiritual realm and see things in images to which he could relate, he “saw” above it all the Lord identified as the “God of your fathers.” God repeated the covenant he had made with Abraham and had confirmed with Isaac. That covenant was unconditional in that God made no demands on Jacob for its fulfillment. This message from God confirmed the blessing and the birthright with comments about Jacob’s descendants and the land. In addition to what Abraham and Isaac had been told, Jacob was given a new promise. Perhaps the greatest part of the message that was of immediate and ongoing benefit to Jacob was the promise of God’s persistent presence and his protection in whatever Jacob might encounter. The promise of Jacob returning to the land that was promised to him provided a sense of destiny that would keep him focused on the outcome that God was working to accomplish through the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Because of this promise, Jacob was not satisfied to just live out his life in Haran with his family but was motivated to go back to the land of Canaan.

It is thought that Jesus made a comment regarding Nathaniel that was related to the dream that Jacob had. Not long after His public ministry started Jesus saw Nathaniel and referred to him as an “Israelite indeed in whom there is no guile.” Of course, Israel was the new name given to Jacob after he had wrestled with God at the Brook Jabok. Before that wrestling encounter, Jacob had operated with guile and afterwards was a different person. A little later in the conversation Jesus told Nathaniel that before long he would “see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.” In the vision that Jacob had the “ladder” was the connecting link between heaven and earth and Jesus was telling us that He was the true connecting link or the “way” between the spiritual and the physical or between God and man.

Gate of Heaven – 28:16-17

¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.” ¹⁷ 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.” Genesis 28:16–19 (NASB95)

When the dream or vision was over and Jacob awakened, he was in awe of what he had “experienced” during that dream. The statement he made sounds as if he thought that he had accidentally found a place where a person could go from the physical realm to the spiritual realm; that is, he had found the “gate of heaven.” When he arrived at the place and prepared to sleep for the night, he had no awareness of the presence of God.

Just how much the patriarchs understood about the omnipresence of God is uncertain. Many of the accounts in Old Testament would cause us to think that many viewed God as somewhat localized. After the dream Jacob was convinced that he was in God’s house and he was humbled or awestruck with that realization. Some have suggested that Jacob may have been concerned that by his casually coming to this place and sleeping there that he had profaned or not shown proper reverence to God’s house.

Some authors of secular books have suggested that certain places exist that a person might go from the physical realm into the spiritual realm as in *Alice Through the Looking Glass* and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. That sort of thinking might have been around in ancient times and if that was the case, then these places became worship centers where people might have built altars to mark the spot for future encounters. Abraham erected altars at places where he had encounters with the Lord. Certainly, Jacob marked the spot by standing up the stone he has used for a head rest and pouring oil on it maybe as a sacrificial offering or as an act of acknowledging that the location was a sacred place.

The Vow – 28:18-22

¹⁸ So Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on its top. ¹⁹ He called the name of that place Bethel; however, previously the name of the city had been Luz. ²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, ²¹ and I return to my father’s house in safety, then the LORD will be my God. ²² “This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God’s house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.” Genesis 28:18–22 (NASB95)

Jacob went to sleep fearfully and full of anxiety. He should have awakened with a sense of assurance and confidence. This was such a powerful experience that when he waked up he had a reverential fear about what he had seen in the dream. This was by no means a complete conversion of the schemer that he was; however, he did realize the possibilities of being in God’s camp. Now, instead of just being full of fear, he was full of awe. He named the place Bethel, which means the House of God.

What are we to conclude regarding Jacob's vow? Was it a good thing that showed his surrender, acceptance, and devotion to the Lord or was it an attempt to maintain control and to manipulate God with a covenant that he (Jacob) initiated?

Matthew Henry saw this vow as a really good thing that Jacob did. He pointed out that "Jacob had just experienced a gracious visit from heaven. God had repeated the covenant made with Abraham and Isaac with him, and the covenant is mutual. When God ratifies his promises to us, it is proper for us to repeat our promises to him." One might question the idea that the covenant was mutual and the propriety of our repeating our promises to God. The covenant that God made was unconditional and neither Abraham nor Isaac thought it necessary to offer a vow in return.

Matthew Henry noted "Jacob's modesty and great moderation in his desires. He will cheerfully content himself with bread to eat, and raiment to put on." We could argue that this was admirable in that he did not ask for great wealth and power. Perhaps this request for food and clothing was mentioned by Jesus in Matthew 6:31-32 where He said "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans strive after all these things, and your Heavenly Father knows that you need them." In Jacob's defense, we see that Jesus did instruct us to pray "Give us this day our daily bread."

Albert Barnes Notes as well as *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown* include comments that support the idea that Jacob's vow was an appropriate response and more or less an acknowledgment of God's gracious promise to him. The latter commentary points out that if we start the vow with the word "Since" rather than "If," then the vow becomes a statement of faith rather than a conditional quid pro quo contract.

An alternative view which seems to be supported by the evidence that Jacob was still a schemer over the next twenty years of his life as he interacted with his uncle Laban. Some see his vow as "classic Jacob." God has just given him the greatest unconditional, no-strings-attached covenant promise that anyone could have and Jacob responded with "Let's Make a Deal." His deal was something to the effect of "If you will provide for my needs and keep me safe, then I will let you be my God and I'll name this place in your honor and I'll become a thither." What Jacob was offering to God was not his to give. First of all, God is God. It is not a question of our letting Him be God. (In the same way, it is not a question of our "accepting" Jesus as Lord. He is Lord! One day, every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God.) We could argue that naming a place in honor of God is redundant. All of creation already bears the mark of the Creator. The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork. Tithing is not a bargaining tool that we can use with God. It already belongs to him. In fact, all of everything belongs to him.

Alexander MacLaren noted that Abraham believed God but "Jacob barely believed, and will wait to see whether all will turn out as it has been promised. That is not the glad, swift response of a loving, trusting heart. Nor is he contented with repeating to God the terms of his engagement, but he adds a couple of clauses which strike him as being important, and as having been omitted. There was nothing about 'bread to eat, and raiment to put on,' nor about coming back again 'in peace,' so he adds these." Jacob was true to his basic nature. He was great at making a deal and determined to get all he could.

The experience at Bethel made a significant impression on Jacob but it did nothing to change the basic Jacob. *Miracles may impress people and get their attention, but they are not necessarily life changing.*

We cannot know if this response of Jacob was self-serving or not. The real question that

we need to address is whether or not our responses to God are self-serving. When it comes to “bargaining with God,” we need to start with a realization that we have nothing that God does not provide. We cannot give a tithe to Him until He has first given to us. This reinforces the fact that God is the owner of everything and that we are not the source of what we have. A realization of this relationship is a statement of faith. The work of faith that should follow this realization is that we tithe. This is what Jacob promised to do.

Much of Jacob’s life was spent in trying to outsmart other people or to manipulate them. None of this was necessary! By impatience, we run ahead of God and cause ourselves all kinds of grief. All Jacob’s scheming and cleverness did not help him to realize or receive what God had reserved for him. The birthright (the double inheritance) did him no good since he was in exile for 20 years. The blessing did him little good with regard to leadership of the family since he had so thoroughly alienated his brother that any kind of civil interaction was impossible at the time. We can argue that Jacob’s thoughts were good in that he wanted to see God’s will worked out. However, it did matter what the intention of his heart intention was. Were his actions motivated by the benefits he would experience or was the motivation to please God?