

## Genesis 28 — Stairway to Heaven

**May 8, 2016**

It is great to have you. We are studying our way through the book of Genesis. This morning we are in Genesis 28. Take out your notes and open your Bibles and iPads.

We are studying the life of Jacob. Led Zeppelin and U2 wrote songs about this chapter so this will be a fun week. I am not endorsing their songs but when rock musicians write songs about a chapter in Genesis, you know the sermon will be good.

For those of you who are new — or just returned from a warm winter in Arizona — let me take a moment to get you up to speed. In our study of Genesis, the first 12 chapters of the book dealt with big issues. The first chapters of Genesis talked about the creation of the world, sin, the creation of languages and a worldwide flood to wipe out everything because sin — like an aggressive cancer — was running totally out of control and destroying everything. God hit the reset switch on Planet Earth with a worldwide flood. He restarted the Earth with Noah, his family and an ark full of animals.

After Noah, beginning in Genesis 12, the book of Genesis moved from a worldwide big focus to zoom in on one man and his family through which God worked a new plan to rescue the world from sin. This plan began with a man named Abraham. He was a godless Babylonian. He wouldn't wear his wedding ring in public. He tried to pass his wife off as his sister in public multiple times. He almost lost her to other men multiple times because of his sin, cowardice and

lack of faith in God's care. Abraham was not a great piece of raw material but that is where God began his plan. Abraham and Sarah eventually had a son named Isaac. Isaac wasn't much better than dad. He also lied about his wife and claimed she was his sister.

Isaac and his wife started off strong, but after they had twin boys, their relationship went down the tubes. They had incredibly poor communication skills. Isaac did things behind his wife's back and didn't discuss things with her. She manipulated him. She consistently told half-truths — like a politician. She put a spin on things to manipulate Isaac. Both Isaac and Rebekah were terrible parents. They openly played favorites with their kids. Isaac blatantly favored Esau because he was a hunter and a great cook. Rebekah played favorites with Jacob in that overdone repulsive way. They were a rich family but they were a dysfunctional family. The cops were called to their house all the time to settle problems with domestic violence. They were like a dysfunctional reality TV family.

Last week, we began our study with Esau in line to be the next patriarch. Neither Esau nor his younger brother Jacob were worthy of that title. Esau's first problem was excessive hair growth. His entire body was furry like an ape. He looked like a wookiee. He didn't just look like an animal; he lived like an animal. All he did with his life was hunt, eat and chase women. He was a man ruled by three "Fs" — fun, food and females. He was not a good prospect for the next patriarch. Even though Esau was a basket case, Jacob, his younger brother, was not much better. His life was even worse. He was a trickster. He was a

crook. He was a manipulator and a player. He was good at the casino because his best life skill was ripping people off. He ripped his brother off twice and didn't even blink when it came to ripping off his blind father for millions of dollars in inheritance. Those are not the career highlights you want listed on your resume when you are applying for the job of the next patriarch. Jacob sounds like a guy who should have spent time behind bars, not leading God's people. Even Jacob's name came to be synonymous with cheating in Hebrew. If you wanted to call somebody a cheater, you called them a Jacob. That is not a great legacy. The only woman that loved him was his mother. You can be a liar, thug and murder serving time in prison and your mother will still love you. If your mother is the only woman that loves you at age 50, that is not impressive.

Ultimately, God chose to make Jacob patriarch. God chose to work on his heart and his life, to grow him up and change his heart. Twenty years from then God would change his name from Jacob — which means to cheat — to Israel — which means prince of God. It would take 20 years of trials to begin to straighten the bends in Jacob's heart but God did it.

As we begin the story, Jacob still lived at home. His mother washed his underwear and microwaved his burritos. He was a spoiled brat rich kid that specialized in conning others. After seeing Jacob's background, it gives the rest of us hope. If God could use Jacob as a patriarch, there is hope for you and me.

For God to take Jacob and transform him from a crook to a patriarch the first thing he needed to do was get him out of his dysfunctional home and introduce him to adversity. One of God's best tools to produce life change is

adversity. As we put out fingers in the text, we see Jacob signing up for the first day of class in the school of hard knocks.

Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him and directed him, “You must not take a wife from the Canaanite women. Arise, go to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel your mother’s father, and take as your wife from there one of the daughters of Laban your mother’s brother. God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. 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!” Thus Isaac sent Jacob away. And he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban, the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, Jacob’s and Esau’s mother. Genesis 28:1–5 (ESV)

Last week we left off with Rebekah telling Isaac to send Jacob out of town to find a wife from Laban, her brother in Paddan-Aram. That wasn’t the real reason. The truth is Rebekah was afraid Jacob would be killed by Esau. In true Rebekah fashion, she manipulated her husband into thinking her primary concern was Jacob marrying a good woman when in reality that was only part of the truth. Jacob needed to run for his life to keep from getting skinned alive by his brother.

Before Jacob left, his father blessed him. This blessing was essentially the same blessing Jacob received last week but this time Isaac did it willingly.

What about Esau?

Now Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there, and that as he blessed him he directed him, “You must not take a wife from the Canaanite women,” and that Jacob had obeyed his father and his mother and gone to Paddan-aram. So when Esau saw that the Canaanite women did not please Isaac his father, Esau went to Ishmael and took as his wife, besides the wives he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham’s son, the sister of Nebaioth. Genesis 28:6–9 (ESV)

We talked about this last week. Esau appears dumber than a box of rocks. He realized his pagan polygamous marriage wasn’t putting a smile on the

faces of Mom and Dad. He figured he could improve things by marrying a closer relative. He picked up a third wife from the daughters of Ishmael. That made things worse, not better. Remember Hagar and Ishmael were sent away. They were the family nightmare. That was their grandfather Abraham's girlfriend. The family was trying to forget the days of Grandpa Abraham having a woman on the side. Nobody was allowed to talk about those days at the dinner table. That topic was off-limits because the memories of grandpa's affair were so painful. Marrying an Ishmaelite back into the family was like pushing a splinter under your parents' fingernails. Way to go Esau! He didn't improve the situation. He only made it worse.

Esau didn't understand that the damage was done. More wives, especially Ishmaelites wives, did not help. They only made things worse. Can you imagine what it was like at Thanksgiving when Esau's three pagan wives were trying to cook in the same kitchen with Rebekah? You know holidays were a nightmare.

Let me talk to those of you who are single. I mean no disrespect to those who are married or divorced. This is just a fact of life. Esau reminds us that with some sins, we don't get a do-over. We are stuck with the consequences of our choices. Marriage is one of those choices. If you are single, you need to be very careful who you date and marry. They need to be passionately in love with Jesus. If they are not, the results can be disaster and you can't escape the consequences. Trying to add another person to your life usually doesn't straighten things out, it usually makes it worse, just like it did for Esau.

I am not saying God doesn't forgive. I am not saying God's grace is not operative. I am simply pointing out that some choices need to be made very carefully because we need to live with the consequences. We don't get a do-over. Marriage is one of those choices. Better to be single and wish you were married than to be married and wish you were single.

Now we get to the fun part.

Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. 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. 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! 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. 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. 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." Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." 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." Genesis 28:10–17 (ESV)

Jacob was on the run. He had the shirt on his back and the staff in his hand but not much more. I am sure Rebekah packed him his superman lunch box and gave him milk money for the trip but that was about it. When Jacob talked about this time in his life in Genesis 35:3 he said these were the days of his distress. They were tough times. He was literally running for his life. He was constantly looking over his shoulder expecting to see his brother with a bow in hand chasing him to kill him. When Esau has a bow and you are on the run in the wilderness, you are dead meat.

Jacob was doing the right thing. He was heading to Paddam-Aram to get a godly wife, but he was doing it the hard way. He was heading there penniless, running for his life.

All of his misery was unnecessary. He didn't have to leave this way. If he hadn't ripped off his father and brother, he would have left with everything he needed, even his own sushi chef. Remember he came from a multi-million dollar family. Later in the story when Jacob arrived at Padan-Aram, he worked for 14 years to get his two wives (It's an interesting story how he ended up with two. That wasn't his plan.) The reason he worked for 14 years at a minimum-wage job was because he didn't have any money for a dowry to buy his wife. He didn't have any money because he ripped off his dad and brother and left home penniless and on bad terms with his relatives. Compare this to Isaac, his father. When it came time for Isaac to get a wife, Abraham sent his servant with the cash-in-hand to buy her and return the next day. This was because Abraham and Isaac had a good relationship. Isaac and Jacob had a bad relationship because Jacob was a liar.

God will get us where he wants us to be, but we get to choose how rough the road is getting there. As the next patriarch, God would get Jacob a godly wife. God would take care of Jacob but Jacob made his own life hard because of his sin. Jacob's sin cost him 20 years of hard labor and pain. The same is true for each of us. If God called you to him he will remake you into the image of his son Jesus. What God began he will be faithful to complete. The question is, how difficult do we want to make it getting there? We are like fish with hooks in our

mouths. God will land us on his boat. The question is how long and hard do we want to fight the line?

Jacob found himself a place to stop for the night. It was about a two- or three-day journey from his hometown — approximately 50-70 miles. This was the area where Abraham, his grandfather, built his first altar in Genesis 12:8; 13:3-4. At this time in history, it was no place. Jacob was camping in the open with nothing more than a rock for a pillow. When a rock is your pillow, you know you are short on supplies. Jacob was used to a down feather pillow.

In his dream there was a ladder set up on the earth that reached all the way up to heaven.

This is the first time God made himself known to Jacob in a personal way. Jacob was about to enter 20 years of painful exile from the Promised Land. He was leaving behind his identity, wealth and status as a child of a rich family to work a tough, minimum-wage job. God met him in this crisis moment when he ran from the Promised Land fearing for his life to encourage him for the 20 incredibly tough years he was about to endure. God would meet him again in Genesis 32, not when he was leaving the Promised Land, but when he was returning to the land fearing for his life from his brother's hand. The purpose of these two encounters was to remind Jacob that while his life was falling apart around him and he felt like he was a long way from God, God was still with him. Jacob's sins did not separate him from God.

There are some of you who need to know this. Just as Jacob was about to go through a really hard season in life where he felt a long way from God,

some of you are also in a hard season in your life. You also feel a long way from God. God hadn't left Jacob. God hasn't left you.

Let's talk about this ladder that is often called Jacob's ladder. If you look at the footnote in your Bible and check the Hebrew you will see it technically wasn't a ladder. It was a stone staircase. It was a Ziggurat.

This is important. The background of this vision is the tower of Babel story in Genesis 11. The builders of the tower of Babel were building a Ziggurat, that was a stone staircase to heaven.



The purpose of the Tower of Babel was to 1) Make a name for themselves and 2) Keep them from getting scattered across the earth. They wanted *security* and *significance*. Their security and significance was coming in their attempt to build a bridge to God. God didn't like it. He scattered them and destroyed their work.

In contrast, Jacob had an encounter with God not in a city packed with people but in the middle of no place. He didn't build a staircase to heaven but a stone staircase from heaven to earth was given to him. Of all people, Jacob the cheater, the deceiver, the bold-faced liar and manipulator who stole millions of dollars from his own blind father was the last one on earth that deserved to have God build a way to him. Jacob was the most undeserving guy out there but God reached down to him.

This is the opposite of the tower of Babel. Instead of man trying to reach God, this was God reaching down to man in his most undeserving and desperate

moment. Instead of men deserving God by the perfection of their lives, God reaches down and shows grace to the most undeserving crooked people out there. When the rich boy had lost it all and was forced to use a rock as a pillow, God reached out to him. Jacob didn't deserve any of this. This is God's grace at its finest.

The story of the Bible was never about Babel. Babel was about men working hard to reach God. The story of the Bible is Jacob's ladder at Bethel. It is about God reaching down to the most undeserving and unworthy people in the most desperate times of their lives and God making a way for us to know him. It is God loving us when we don't deserve it. That is the story of the Bible.

All other faiths are Tower of Babel experiments. They are man constructing a stone staircase to reach God. For Islam it is the five pillars to reach God. For Buddhism it is obeying the seven-step path to reach God. Those are all Tower of Babel experiments. The Bible says that isn't what a relationship with God is about. It is not about what we do but it is about what God has done when he reaches down to us through Jesus at our lowest and most desperate moments and offers us grace, just like he did for Jacob. We don't reach God. When we least deserve it God reaches us and makes a way for us to know him.

This has always been the story of the Bible. When Adam sinned, did Adam go looking for God or did God go looking for Adam? God reached Adam when he didn't deserve it. When Abraham was in Ur, was Abraham looking for God or did God go looking for him when he didn't deserve it? When Paul was

persecuting Christians on the Damascus Road, was Paul looking for God or was God looking for him when he didn't deserve it? Was Jacob looking for God or was God looking for him when he didn't deserve it? The Bible says nobody seeks God. All of us are hopeless unless God shows up. All of us are lost until God reaches out to us. We do not find God. God finds us through Jesus. God initiates. We respond.

What were the angels doing on the staircase? The angels were going between heaven and earth. Hebrews 1:14 says angels are ministering spirits sent by God to protect and care for us. Psalm 91:11 says angels are sent by God to guard us and protect us.

Jacob was about to face the 20 hardest years of his life. His boss would constantly change his wages to cheat him. His boss would slip his ugly daughter into the bedroom on Jacob's wedding night even though Jacob had already worked seven years for his boss' beautiful daughter. How would you like to wake up on the day after your wedding and discover you made love to the wrong woman? That is a wicked boss.

In all of those years of hardship, Jacob had one memory holding him together. It was this God-given dream. God was watching over his life. God was sending his angels to be involved in his life. God had reached down to him at his lowest moment and God cared about him even though his life felt out of control.

Some of you can probably relate to Jacob on this one. You tried to reach God by all your hard work and effort but all that happened was life fell apart.

When you were at the end of your rope, God broke into your life. The good news of Jesus made sense to you and God saved you. Thank goodness God loves saving desperate people, not perfect people.

Some of you also need to be encouraged by this vision. Just as God was sending his angels to constantly guard Jacob's life in his 20 years of exile, God is sending his angels to guard your life right now. Even if it feels like life is out of control, it isn't. God loves you and his angels are watching over you.

Some of you are living in that time of exile. Life is incredibly hard. You wonder if God forgot you. He hasn't. Remember this chapter from Genesis. Just as God reached out to Jacob at the lowest point in his life, God will reach out to you at the lowest point of your life. Just as God had his angels watching over Jacob's life when all hope seemed to be lost and he felt all alone, know God has his angels watching over your life even if you feel all hope is gone and you are all alone.

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. He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first. 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, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, 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." Genesis 28:18–22 (ESV)

Jacob woke up from his dream and he was pretty amazed. A vision from God was the last thing he expected. He was in the middle of no place except for the fact his grandfather built his first altar there years before.

Jacob decided to call the place Bethel, which literally means house of God. He took the rock he used as a pillow and pointed it to the sky and poured oil on top. What was that about?

How many of you love old hymns? I love old hymns. They are rich in theology. One of the hymns I grew up singing had the line, "I raise my Ebenezer." I had no clue what I was singing. I always had questions. Who is Ebenezer? Why are we raising him? He sounds like an old man. Is an ebenezer part of my body? Maybe it is my nose. Should it be called the ebesneezer? If it is part of my body, I want to know which part I should raise. These are all good questions which nobody could give me an answer. What made it even weirder is we kept singing the song when nobody could tell me what an ebenezer was!

An ebenezer is an old word for a stone of remembrance. It is a monument. It is a memorial. This is what Jacob raised in this passage. He took the long stone that laid on its side, which he used as a pillow, and he raised it up to point it to the sky. That way, when he came back in the future he had a memorial to remember the dream of the stairway to heaven God showed him that night. He never wanted to forget the promise God made to be with him, to care for him and bring him back to the Promised Land.

It is very important for us to make and keep memorials as part of our walk with Christ. One way I do this is I keep a journal to help me remember what God is teaching me. When I read journal entries in the past, I am reminded of God's faithfulness in the past that will continue into the present.

An ebenezer doesn't have to be a literal stone of remembrance, it can also be a place to help us remember a special moment in our walks with God in the past.

When my kids were little, I took them to the Christian summer camp I went to from elementary school through high school. It was called Deerfoot Lodge. In junior high school I was baptized in the lake at the camp. That beach at that lake is a memorial place for me. Every time I see the beach on Lake Whitaker in New York I remember my baptism and going public with my faith in Christ in front of my friends. It was my faith. I was choosing to follow Jesus.



If you haven't been baptized, we are having a baptism service in the lake this summer. It is a great opportunity for you to create an ebenezer, a memorial with which you can remember your walk with Christ, when you went public with your faith.

On my library shelves are the first Bibles given to me by my mother. One of my favorite Bibles was given to me by my mother in 1981. Her handwriting is in the front where she dedicated it to me. I like looking at the highlights and the notes I wrote in that Bible when I was in seventh grade. That is an encouragement for me because it reminds me what God began, he will be faithful

to complete. He didn't let me down in those days; he will carry me through these days. That Bible is my personal ebenezer.

Those are memorials that remind me of God's faithfulness in the past. Just as God was faithful in the past, he will be faithful in the future.

I ask you, do you have an ebenezer? Have you raised an ebenezer? No, it is not a part of your body. It is a memorial stone to a significant a moment in your walk with God when you look back and remember God's faithfulness in your life. Maybe it isn't a literal stone. It could be a picture of where you were baptized. Maybe it is a collection of journal entries. Like Jacob, memorials that we can look back on to remember God's faithfulness in the past keep us going in the hard times in the present.

## Conclusion

When we think of Jacob's ladder we are reminded about our relationship with God. Who initiates? God. We don't build a stone staircase to reach God. That is Babel. That is every false religion. God builds a stone staircase to reach us. He reaches into our lives when we least deserve it.

The fulfillment of God's promise to Jacob was not fully realized in Genesis. It wasn't fully realized until Jesus. Jesus was talking to Nathanael and calling him to be a disciple. Look at what Jesus said to Nathanael.

Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of 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!" 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 1:47–51 (ESV)

Jesus referenced Jacob’s dream at Bethel in Genesis 28. Jesus is the stairway to heaven God made. Jesus said to Nathanael, “I am the only way to God.” Jesus is God reaching down to us and making a way, not us reaching up to God and making our own way. Jesus’ point to Nathanael and to us is that he is the only way to know God. Led Zeppelin wrote a song called Stairway To Heaven. That song is about Tower of Babel experiments. It is about everyone making his or her own way to God. Jesus says there is only one true stairway to heaven. His name is Jesus and he is reaching out to filthy rotten scoundrels who are liars, cheats, crooks and deceivers. People like Jacob and people like you and me.

**Applications:**

1. God will get us where he wants us to go, but we can choose the roughness of the road. Jacob was doing the right thing, seeking a godly wife, but he did it the hard way. He was running for his life because of his sin.
2. Jesus is the stairway to heaven. He is the story of God seeking us when we least deserve it. It is the opposite of the Tower of Babel, which was man seeking God through work, plans and effort.
3. Just as God had his angels watching over Jacob in the exile years of his life, he has his angels watching over us in the exile times of our lives.
4. Raise your ebenezer! Set memorials in your life to remember important parts of your walk with God you don’t want to forget.



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