

“GOD WORKS THE NIGHT SHIFT” **(Genesis 28:10-22)**

Today we return to our study of Jacob, and are in chapter 28 of Genesis. I appreciate Anthony preaching the last three Sundays on Habakkuk – God’s Word is so rich from cover-to-cover and Anthony did a great job in drawing out the truths of this Old Testament book. Some years ago someone gave me a book called *God Works the Night Shift*. It’s a great title and I’ve never forgotten it. The book was written by a pastor in Portland named Ron Mehl, who I believe was John Traut’s pastor when he was growing up. In his book, Mehl talks about all the different people who go to work when we’re getting ready to go to bed... there’s the garbage man who goes from house to house collecting the trash that was set out the night before... there’s the nurse at the hospital who goes from room to room checking on her sleeping patients... there’s the pilot of a jumbo jet who navigates his airplane through the sky while his passengers are asleep behind him... there is the policeman, the dispatcher, and security guards who are all on duty while we’re asleep. There’s lots of activity going on we’re not aware of, and we depend on people working the night shift more than we realize.

The book goes on to talk about how God also works the night shift, working behind the scenes in ways we don’t always realize, to accomplish His plan in our lives. The psalmist talks about this when he says: “He who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, He who watches over Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers” (Psalm 121:4). Sometimes from our perspective it appears like God is asleep on the job. There are times, perhaps, when you feel like God is not intervening on your behalf – when there doesn’t seem to be a plan or purpose for what’s happening in your life – and you say, “If God is at work, I sure can’t see it.”

Today’s passage assures us that God does not forget His people – His eyes are always on us – and He is continually working on our behalf, even when we’re not aware that He is. For some weeks we’ve been looking at the life of Jacob, and have seen how God chose him to be part of His plan to bless the world. 65 years before Jacob was born, God promised Abraham many descendants, a land to live on, and to bless the world through him. The ultimate blessing would be Jesus – the direct descendant of Abraham – who would bring salvation to the world.

Abraham passed the family promise onto his son Isaac, and Isaac passed it on to his son Jacob. Isaac intended to give the blessing to Jacob’s brother Esau – who was the firstborn – but Jacob deceived his father into giving it to him by pretending to be Esau. When Esau found out what his brother did, he said, “As soon as our father dies, I’m going to kill Jacob.” Isaac and Rebekah decide to send Jacob away, both to flee his brother’s wrath and to find a godly wife from Abraham’s family.

Jacob is a fascinating guy – he’s chosen by God to carry on the family promise, but from all we’ve seen so far, there’s not much about him that you can define as godly. He makes his way through life through scheming and deceiving and relying on himself. God is going to make him into godly man, but He first must break him. For the next twenty years, God is going to use a series of circumstances to break Jacob of his self-destructive patterns and teach him to rely on God. This sound very familiar to what God does in our own lives, and in many ways, Jacob’s story is our story.

We pick up the story in verses 10-11... “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.”

Jacob is a fugitive... he's on the run, and he sets out on a 500-mile journey to Harran. He leaves from his home in Beersheba and travels about 70 miles north where he stops for the night when the sun sets. He stops at a certain "place," a place that will take on huge significance for him and his descendants for generations to come. There's nothing special about the place when he arrives – it was just a place to camp out for the night.

He takes a stone and puts it under his head to use as a pillow. He could have used the *My Pillow* guy right about then, instead of using a rock. Many have puzzled over what this is about, but it's probably symbolic of his impoverished condition. Jesus said, "Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." Jacob, after living in his father's house and enjoying certain creature comforts, is now on the run... he's all alone... it's dark... he doesn't know who or what he'll run into... and he has no idea what the future holds... he's scared... but out of exhaustion he lays his head against his stone pillow and falls asleep.

Verses 12-13a says, "He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord." In the Bible God sometimes used dreams to communicate to people. We don't know why God used dreams, but part of it may be that when people are asleep, they're not in control of their thoughts and can't resist what He's saying to them. It's like when Dr. Jessica operates on you – she knows you will fight what she's trying to do if you're awake, so she has an anesthesiologist put you to sleep.

While Jacob is asleep, he dreams, and in his dream, he sees three things:

- He sees a stairway that goes from earth to heaven.
- He sees angels going up and down the stairway.
- He sees the Lord at the top of the stairway.

What exactly is a stairway or, as some translations say, a ladder? In the ancient world the common thinking was that the closer you were to the heavens – the higher up you ascended – the closer you were to God. This was the whole idea behind the tower of Babel in Genesis 11. The tower – called a ziggurat – was a temple with an external staircase leading up to a small shrine on top, dedicated to a god or goddess. The shrine at the top of the tower was seen as the place where heaven meets earth – and where priest could call upon the gods for what they needed.

To Jacob, the stairway was a picture of heaven and earth connecting. The stairway was set upon the earth – where Jacob was – and reached to heaven – where God was. On the stairway Jacob sees angels, who are God's messengers to carry out His plan and purpose on earth. On the stairway, some angels are ascending – meaning they have been on earth fulfilling a mission – and some are descending, almost like they're taking shifts and one shift has finished its work and they're going up and the other shift is beginning its shift, so it comes down.

At the top of the stairway stands the Lord. The whole point of the dream is that God is intimately involved in human affairs, and there is constant activity going on between heaven and earth. Here is Jacob – all alone in the dark, he's scared and uncertain of what the future holds – and God assures him in a dream that He's working on his behalf. He has angels coming and going – actively engaged in God's work on earth. It's the kind of vision Jacob desperately needed.

It reminds me of the story in 2 Kings 6 where the prophet Elisha is surrounded by a foreign army. Elisha is calm, but his servant isn't. He says, "What on earth are we going to do? We're surrounded." Elisha prayed, "Lord, open his eyes so that he may see." The Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he saw the hills full of horses and chariots, with an angel army surrounding Elisha. God has a vast network of spirit beings working around the clock to carry out His plan – and even though we can't see all that God is doing, we are assured in His Word that He surrounds us with His presence and protection.

In verse 13 Jacob's dream continues... There above it stood the Lord, and he said: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (13-17).

Not only did Jacob receive assurance of God's work in his life by a vision of the stairway, he's also reassured by God speaking to him at the top of the stairway. God repeats almost word for word the promises He gave to Abraham that He's now passing down to Jacob, and assures Jacob of three things. First, He assures Him of His **provision**. "I will give you the land on which you are lying." Jacob is on his way out of the land and doesn't know when and if he will return. God says, "You will come back and this land will belong to you and you descendants." The land will later be called the Promised Land, a land that has been fought over for centuries, and continues to be fought over today. God says, "Even though you will be away from the land, I will bring you back."

Over the centuries God has brought Israel back to the Promised Land several times. When the Children of Israel were held captive in Egypt for 400 years, God brought under Moses and Joshua. Later when Israel was carried away in captivity to Babylon, and God brought them back to the land after 70 years. Most miraculous of all, after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 and the Jewish people were scattered throughout the earth, in 1948 Israel came back to the land and the nation of Israel was reborn.

In addition to the land, God promised that he and his many descendants would be a source of blessing to the world, and every one of us here today are the fulfillment of this promise because of Abraham's greatest descendant, Jesus, and whenever someone comes to faith in Christ, they become part of Abraham's spiritual family.

Secondly, God assures Jacob of His **presence**. "Jacob, as you leave the land and travel an unknown path, rest assured that I will be with you each step of the way and will watch over you." I've read that this is the most repeated promise in the Bible – there are at least 100 references God saying, "I will be with you."

One my favorites is Isaiah 43:2-3... "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you (like the Red Sea); and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you (like the Jordan River); when you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze (like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego); for I am the Lord your God."

In Psalm 23 David says, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me" (NKJV). God promises that you will never go through the dark valleys of life by yourself, and because He is with you, you never have to be afraid.

Third, God assures Jacob of His **protection**. God says, “I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” Another great promise of the Bible, repeated often, is God’s hand of protection on His people. God’s promise of protection doesn’t mean that we will be kept from trials and danger – but no matter what happens to us, God promises to fulfill all He has for us to do on earth. God has a different plan for each of us – some missionaries are killed spreading the gospel, and some live long lives – but God promises to protect us until our time on earth is done and reward us with eternal life. Knowing this gives us confidence to live boldly and not worry about what happens to us – because God has His hand on us until it’s time for Him to call us home.

Verses 16-17... 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.” I don’t know if you have a place where God met you in the special way. One place I think of is a Bible camp near Butte Falls where God got a hold of my heart at age 15 and my walk with Him became real. It was the turning point in my life, and the camp will always be a sacred place for me. Another spiritual place for me is Havasu Falls, at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, where one night I sat out under the stars and was overwhelmed with the presence and power of God. I’ll never be able to hike down there again, but every time I see a picture of the water fall, I’m reminded of the awesome encounter I had with the Lord. And there are many other places – in the hospital, in the cemetery, and along with highway that God’s presence was special and reassuring.

God doesn’t always reveal Himself as dramatically as He did to Jacob, but if you’re tuned-in spiritually – you can see Him everywhere. Psalm 19:1-2 says, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech.” I remember someone visiting church from Texas, and he couldn’t get over what a beautiful place we have. He said, “You guys live in paradise.” He’s right, and every day we God speaks to us through the glory of His creation.

But even more special than that is that every day God speaks to us through His written Word. I heard someone say recently, “If you want to hear God speak, read your Bible. If you want to hear God speak audibly, read your Bible out loud.” During the seasons of life when God seems silent and absent – when you’re alone and scared – when you’re uncertain about the future – go to the Word and let God speak to your soul. God also speaks in a way we never think about, and that is through other people. As believers we are the hands and feet of God, and when someone speaks a timely word to you, God is speaking to you through them.

Jacob was not expecting God to speak to Him, and when he wakes up, He’s terrified, in a good way. He’s in awe. He says, “Surely the Lord is in this place and I was not aware of it. When I arrived here it was just a camping spot – just a place to grab an ordinary stone and go to sleep. When I went to sleep God seemed far away and removed, but when I woke up, I said, ‘God is here! This is the house of God – the gate of heaven.’” An ordinary place became a holy place.

After experiencing such an encounter with the Lord, it’s only natural that Jacob would react, and he does so by doing two things. First, **he builds a memorial**. Verses 18-19... “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, though the city used to be called Luz.”

Jacob took the stone – the stone he used for a pillow – and used it as a pillar or memorial. There is something in our DNA that wants to remember significant events by making a monument, so that people who pass by in the future will know something significant happened there. Sometimes on the highway you’ll see a cross where someone died in a car accident, or you’ll see an historical marker telling the story of what happened at that spot.

What happened in this place was so significant to Jacob that he wanted to memorialize it – not only for him but for his children, and grandchildren, and future generations – so they could remember that God was watching over His people and would fulfill everything He promised them. Jacob transforms this ordinary rock into a sacred monument, and pours oil over the rock to anoint it. He then gives the place a new name – Bethel – which means “house of God.” This very ordinary, non-descript place was now set aside as a sacred place.

Later, after Israel returned to the land and God miraculously parted the Jordan River for them to cross, Joshua built a similar memorial of twelve stones to commemorate what God had done. He said, “In the future when children ask their parent, ‘What do these stones mean?’ you can tell them what the Lord did and worship Him.” It’s good for us to remember all that God has done for us in the past, so that when we’re going through trials and tribulations, we can have confidence that God is working and He will see us through whatever circumstance we’re in.

Secondly, Jacob not only builds a memorial, **he makes a vow**. Verses 20-22... Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father’s household, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God’s house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.”

It is very natural to respond to God’s grace and kindness to want to do something for God – He gives you something, and you want to give something back. Jacob makes a vow to God. At first it appears like he makes a conditional vow – “God, if you do this, I’ll do that.” But the word “if” can also mean “since,” and most commentators believe that Jacob is saying, “Since, Lord, you have promised your provision, your presence, and your protection, I vow three things.”

- Jacob vowed his dedication = “I vow that you will be my God.”

Jacob grew up in a family that believed in God, but now he makes his belief in God personal... “you are not just my grandfather’s God or my father’s God, you are my God.”

- Jacob vowed his worship = “I have set this stone up as a pillar will be God’s house.”

Later the temple would be called God’s house – the place where His presence dwelt and the people of God came to worship. Worship is the natural response to God’s blessing. It’s why when we gather together each Sunday we worship – we sing, we pray, and we listen to what God has to say to us.

- Jacob vowed his tithe = “I will give you a tenth of all that you give me.”

A tithe means a tenth. The law would later require the Israelites to give 10% of the crops they grew and the livestock they raised to the temple. A tithe was a way of saying to God that everything I own belongs to Him, and out of gratitude for all He has given me, I will give back to Him.

As New Testament believers we are given a similar command in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 which says, “On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.” The New Testament does not specifically require a tenth of our income, but every Christian should be in the regular habit of bringing an offering to church that is in keeping with your income.

I have always been taught that 10% is a good standard to start with, but we should be eager to give God as much as we can out of gratitude for all He’s done for us. God wants our giving to be generous and cheerful – not given because we have to, but because we delight to do so.

The story of Jacob's ladder has been a source of encouragement for many generations of Christians who are going through a dark, lonely, uncertain season. It reminds us that God works the night shift. Even though we cannot see His hand at work, He has angels descending and ascending on the stairway to heaven, and His Word assures us that...

- He will provide all that we need to accomplish His plan for our lives.
- He will be with us and watch over through every circumstance of life.
- He will protect us until our work on earth is done so that we need not fret or worry. He will see us through all the way to heaven.

But there's even more to this dream because Jesus used what Jacob saw to reveal something even more astounding, and which prepares us to come to the Lord's Table. In John, chapter one, Jesus is just beginning His ministry, and He meets Nathanael, who would become of His twelve disciples. Another disciple named Phillip had just begun following Jesus, and he went and found Nathanael, and as they sat under a fig tree, Phillip told him all about Jesus. When Nathanael approached Jesus, Jesus said, "I know you, you're Nathanael and you've just been having a conversation with Phillip." Nathanael said, "How did you know?" Verse 49-51 says... Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel." Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that." He then added, "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man."

Jesus says, "You're impressed because I knew who you were before I met you... well, stick around and you're going to see even more amazing things. "Do you remember that story about Jacob and the ladder?" Jesus says, "I am that ladder – I am the one who bridges the gap between heaven and earth." What an amazing truth! The Bible says that sin has separated us from a holy God, and apart from God's intervention we will die in our sins and be eternally separated from God. There's nothing we can do – there is no amount of good works or law-keeping that can make us righteous enough to stand before a holy God. There is no stairway we can build to connect earth to heaven.

Jesus says, "I am the ladder that connects man with God." 1 Timothy 2:5 says, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people." A mediator is someone who brings two opposing sides together – and there's only one person who can bring God and man together, and that is the one who is fully God and fully man. As God, Jesus was without sin – and as man, Jesus could die in our place, taking all of our sin upon Himself.

The Lord's Table reminds us that Jesus came to connect heaven and earth, and because of His death on the cross we can have intimate fellowship with God. If you have put your trust in Jesus as your Savior and Mediator, the Lord invites you to partake of the bread and cup – the bread which pictures Jesus' body given for us, and the blood which pictures His blood poured out on our behalf.