

From Panic to Pilgrimage

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[0 : 00] Now, if we could have our Bibles open at the chapter we just read, please, that would be a help. And let's ask the Lord's help in a moment of prayer.

Lord God, how we praise you that you have given to us this word which so fully and faithfully points to Christ Jesus. And so I pray that you will take my human words in all their imperfection, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word.

And so lead us to the living word himself in whose name we pray. Amen. Amen. There was a young man who decided that he wanted to explore world religions because he wanted to find God.

He wasn't particularly well taught in any particular religion. He certainly didn't know his Bible, but he decided the best way to do this was to travel around, meet various people, meet representatives of various faiths and so on.

In his journeys he came to the banks of the Ganges and he talked to one of those old guys who sit there in their ragged robes and so on.

[1 : 32] And he said to this man, I want to find God. And to his astonishment the old man grabbed him by the neck and held his head underneath the rather filthy waters of the Ganges.

As a young man came up spluttering and coughing, he said, why did you do that? And the man replied, once you want to know God as much as you wanted to breathe there, then you will find him. Now there is obviously truth in that. The letter to the Hebrews says, he who wants to know God must believe that he is and is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him.

But there is another equally profound truth and that is that unless God searches for us, we are never going to find him. Unless he pursues us as the hound of heaven.

Unless he makes the first move. And so it is in this story of Jacob. Obviously, what God says to Jacob is far more important than what Jacob says to God.

[2 : 37] The voice from heaven is more important than the voices on earth. Indeed, we would have nothing at all to say to God unless he first spoke to us. So let's remember that as we look at this story this week and at the story in chapter 32 next week.

This is initiated by God. Four or five times in Jacob's story, Jacob has a meeting, a confrontation with God. And none of these occasions are actually sought by Jacob.

Jacob is not looking for God the way that young man was looking for God on the banks of the Ganges. Obviously, Jacob's response matters and will come to that.

But the important thing to remember is that this meeting is initiated by God. And after he meets God, it's important to notice he continues the journey.

He doesn't go back home. He continues the journey. That's why I've called this morning's sermon, from panic to pilgrimage. Jacob runs in panic.

[3 : 42] Jacob is fleeing for his life. When he meets God at Bethel, or the place he calls Bethel, then he continues the journey, but he's now a pilgrim.

Outwardly, nothing has changed, but inwardly, nothing will ever be the same again. Everything has changed. When we come together, we come together to meet God, don't we?

Not because of anything magical about 11 and 6.30 on a Sunday, or anything especially holy about a building, but we do believe that we come here to meet God, and we believe that we hear him, we meet him, as we hear him through his word.

Now, our author has very conveniently divided the passage into three for us, and not only that, I don't look for alliterative headings very often, but they simply jump out of this passage.

The letter is V. First of all, there is the vision, then there is the voice, and then there is the vow.

Now, that alliteration was just too good to be missed, and I honestly, I don't think it strains, because very often, when I was a boy, I used to listen to lots of alliterative preachers.

[4 : 57] You always got two good ones, and the last one was simply strained, whereas these arise out of the text itself. At least, that's my excuse, and I'm sticking to it. So, first of all, let's look at the vision.

Jacob left Beersheba and went towards Haran. Beersheba is in the very far north of the land, later to be Israel, just as Dan is in the south.

Very often, in the Old Testament, you read the phrase, from Dan to Beersheba, which is rather like our land's end to John O'Groats. It means the entire country. Now, notice what Jacob is doing. Jacob, very far from doing a pilgrimage, is doing what C.S. Lewis called a pilgrim's regress. He is going back to the country from which Abraham had been called.

This does not sound like a man searching for God. He's on his way back to the place where Abraham had been called. For him, it's just a journey.

[5 : 59] It's a panic-stricken journey. And I'm sure he no more expected to meet the Lord between Beersheba and Haran, and Saul of Tarsus expected to meet Jesus Christ on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus.

So we're not dealing with a man searching for God. We are dealing with God searching for Jacob, not Jacob searching for God. Sometimes you get these programs on television, the long search, which talks about human search for God.

Once again, to quote C.S. Lewis, you might as well talk about the mouse's search for the cat. It's God who searches us. And very often when we are searching for God, we're not searching for the living God of the Bible.

We're searching for a God of our own fantasies. But in any case, Jacob came to a certain place. Notice verse 11. It's a certain place. The narratives of Jacob are brilliant examples of biblical storytelling.

They actually happen, but the narrator is telling them in such a way as to bring out the true meaning. It's only a certain place. But glance ahead at verse 16. It's become more than a certain place.

[7 : 10] It's become the house of God and the gate of heaven. To begin with, it's only a certain place. In other words, in spite of what some commentators say, Jacob is not stopping here because it's a sacred place.

There is nothing special about this place. He is stopping here because it's time to stop for the night. But yet, God reveals himself here. He has a vision of God.

And this changes everything. Now, Jacob's journey, the whole journey from where they lived right to the far off Mesopotamia would be hundreds of miles and would take him many weeks.

And yet, it's only these 24 hours and only this particular place that are mentioned. Now, all places matter. All times matter. But surely, there are certain times and we know of these in our own lives where God reveals himself in a particular way and which changes.

We do business with him. We meet him. And nothing is ever the same again. So, let's look at the vision itself then. Verse 12, he looked. 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 there ascending and descending on it.

[8 : 27] Now, vision is not seeing what's not there. Vision is seeing everything that's there. In other words, Jacob is not having a hallucination.

Around him is this stony place. Around him is darkness. And yet, he sees beyond it to a greater reality. I know so many of you have been studying the book of Daniel and you know that's at the very heart of the book of Daniel.

That Daniel lives in the real world but sees beyond it to a world which is yet more real. The world of the heavenly places. And what Jacob sees is a ladder or a stairway literally placed towards the earth.

Now, that's very important. A ladder set up on earth better placed towards the earth. Now, you see what that means? That means the ladder is stretching from heaven to earth, not from earth to heaven.

In other words, God has placed that ladder there surely reminding us of that story some chapters back. The story of the Tower of Babel. Let us build a tower whose top will reach to heaven.

[9 : 37] When you read that story, notice the irony and the humour. This tower whose top was to reach to heaven was so small that the Lord had to come down and see it. There was no question

that this was, there was no question that this human achievement was other than a fiasco.

God initiates the communication and that ladder is there already. The ladder through which the angels, God's servants, ceaselessly pass, between heaven and earth.

At the beginning of the service we sang that paraphrase of Psalm 103 and it's at the end of that psalm that the psalmist makes it very plain that angels are God's servants who travel throughout his dominions carrying out his will.

We really ought to rescue angels from the company they keep in waterstones and borders. If you go to the mind and spirit section you'll find them along with tarot cards and so on.

Angels are not fantasy figures. Angels are not some kind of new age phenomenon. Angels are God's mighty ones who do his will, who carry out his bidding and so it is here and their particular task is to protect God's servants.

[10:51] My God says, Daniel, remember in the famous story of the lion's den, has sent his angel who has shut the lion's mouth. Well here, angels protect Jacob from any dangers.

It's very dramatic in the behold angel ascending and descending. If you translated it literally you'll get something like this, look, there was a ladder and oh, angels and look, the Lord himself.

This word translated behold which we, unfortunately, we don't really have a modern phrase that really sums that up. look, look, look, it's there. Jacob, this is not a fantasy.

Jacob, this is more than a dream. But most astonishing of all is verse 13, behold the Lord stood above it or perhaps beside it. I think the rendering beside it is probably better.

The Lord himself is standing there on earth just as one day he is going to become one of us and come to earth. Remember John 1, 51 Heavens open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

[12:04] The ladder between earth and heaven, the cross that stands there, the cross that links the holiness of God and the sinfulness of humanity. The old hymn says to the pilgrim patriarch the wondrous glimpse was given so seems my saviour's cross to me a ladder up to heaven.

So the vision, the vision is showing Jacob, Jacob this is what it's about. You think what it's about is cheating Esau, running away to your uncle, conniving with your mother, but look this is what it's about.

Look, a ladder, look angels, and look the Lord himself. That brings on to the second part of the story which is the voice. Now it's very important that Jacob is not left to work out the meaning of this vision himself.

Here you saw this as well in the book of Daniel, the visions are interpreted and here this vision is interpreted. God speaks, verse 13, the Lord 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 your offspring.

Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south and in you and in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

[13:28] Now notice what God does. God shows that he is the God of the past. I gave these promises to Isaac and I gave them to Abraham. These promises are still valid.

They've not been set aside. It looks as if they have. After all, Jacob is in a panic-stricken flight back where Abraham had come from. How on earth are the promises going to be fulfilled now?

But more importantly, specifically, a reply to Jacob himself. The land on which you lie I will give to you and your offspring.

Your offspring? Jacob isn't even married. And he's given this promise. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth and you shall spread abroad to the west, to the east, to the north and to the south.

Then this ancient promise, in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. See, the whole, so God is speaking about the past.

[14:26] What he said in the past is valid. Every word he has spoken is going to be fulfilled. He's speaking in the present. He's saying, this applies to you, Jacob, and it applies to us as well.

And in the future. Because surely this is pointing forward to the future in Revelation. I saw a multitude that no one could count from every nation, people, tribe, and language standing before God and before the Lamb.

That's the final fulfillment of this vision given to Jacob long ago. It's special to Jacob but Psalm 139 shows it applies to all God's people.

you saw me in the womb. Every day I live is planned even before any of them happened. All God's people are in God's plan.

Like the phrase the very hairs of your head are numbered. Less of a problem for the Lord with some of us than for others probably. But it's a very dramatic way of saying there is nothing about us, nothing that applies to us that God doesn't know.

[15 : 36] Remember a sparrow does not fall to the ground without your father. So the voice says Jacob I am the God of the past. Jacob I am the God of the present and Jacob I am the God of the future.

The whole journey is planned. Notice behold verse 15 I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land.

That wasn't on Jacob's mind nor did he imagine that 20 years would pass before that promise would be fulfilled. So we have God's voice and we have Jacob's response.

When God speaks we need to respond. Remember when God speaks we always respond. That response may be negative but we need to respond. His response is surprise and fear.

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it and he was afraid. Surely taking us back to Genesis 3 Adam and Eve hid from the voice of the Lord God in the garden.

[16 : 43] Fascinating to see throughout the book of Genesis how these early stories are replayed in later stories because it's the same God. The God of the past the present and the future.

And we need to recover that sense of reverence. We very rightly say that we don't worship buildings. Buildings are not sacred in that sense and yet nevertheless we need to recover that sense.

Micah the prophet is later to say to this one will I look the one who trembles at my word. One of the books on my bookshelf which I always think of every time I'm preparing to preach is called Trembling at the Threshold of the Text.

That's a good good place for any preacher to be trembling at the threshold of the text. That's a good good place for any listeners to be as well as we hear the voice of God.

So Jacob discovers that this empty barren dark place while now the sun has risen it is the house of God it is the gate of heaven.

[17 : 53] But remember Isaiah's words the whole earth is filled with his glory. there is no place where God is absent. Not so much no place where we cannot find God as in Psalm 139's terms no place where God cannot find us.

So we have the vision and the voice of God the word of the Lord explains what that vision means and that vision is amazing it encompasses the whole of the big picture the whole of the plot line of scripture back to the call of the patriarch back beyond that of course to the creation of the world forward to the coming of Christ the ladder between heaven and earth the cross and forward still to the great multitude before the throne of God.

But then there is the vow and Jacob made a vow verse 20 Jacob made a vow that vow is significant clearly because it's repeated in chapter 31 and in chapter 35 now it's often said said by some of the commentators that here Jacob this is the old Jacob coming out the old calculating scheming Jacob because what Jacob does is makes a bargain with God called calculation verse 20 and 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 now I think that's a superficial view because remember what Jacob is doing once you notice particularly two things about this vow Jacob first of all is taking a risk when you make a cold calculation for your own benefit you aren't normally taking much of a risk after all it was now daylight the scene would look very different the events of the night before might seem just like a dream this is in the journey of the magi t.s.

Eliot's journey of the magi the magi speak of voices ringing in our ears thinking this was all folly and Jacob realizes that he must seal the covenant God has unilaterally come to him committed himself to him and Jacob realizes unless he makes a response that nothing is simply going to evaporate and sometimes we feel like this don't we there are moments we feel is it actually true sometimes people will say what if we've been misled what if the promises are not true and that's when we need to commit ourselves notice the word if if God will be with me this is not the if of calculation this is the if of wonder and worship can it be true that the God of Abraham and Isaac the Lord the maker of heaven and earth he's actually committing himself to me that's the wonder of the gospel isn't it

God the God who made heaven and earth is committing himself to you and me committing himself to keep us on our journey to bring us safely home and to guard us every step of that journey and not to leave us and that's why it seems to me Jacob repeats the promises he lingers over the details it's terribly important as Paul says in Colossians to let the word of God dwell in us richly and one thing that's important this may seem a small thing if you have a bible reading plan which I hope you do it's very important to at least read part of what you're reading aloud that's the one thing if you're reading aloud you can't fall asleep it's awfully easy to sit in your armchair nodding off and oh I've read this and you've got the faintest idea of what this is all about sometimes actually saying the words not that it's magic it's just that saying them aloud fixes them in our minds and in our hearts that's what

[22 : 01] Jacob is doing lingering over the details of the promises so first of all Jacob is taking a risk secondly Jacob is showing faith and that's what the author of Hebrews says Jacob is one of the people by faith Jacob just as much as by faith Abraham or by faith Moses Jacob beyond his own resources throws himself on God and he says all you will give me I will give a full tenth to you now it's an interesting study studying the tithe throughout scripture you get it again at the end of the old testament Malachi says bring all the tithes into the storehouse and prove me now the tithe is not it does not mean you look at your income and set aside rigidly a tenth if you do that then and if you feel that's the way to honor God then great that is the way God will bless that a tithing the very principle of tithing means that we give back to

God what he has given to us we give him of our best not just the fag ends and not just the things we don't want in Matthew 23 Jesus in the woes passage condemns the leaders for tithing not for tithing as such but for tithing and laying aside the more important parts of the law such as justice and truth and righteousness but it always happens that when God's word touches God's people one of the signs that God's people give of their time of their talents and of their money happens in different ways and it happens in different proportions but it's undoubtedly true that Jacob is showing faith here and he sets up the stone which becomes for him a temple now later on the law is to forbid this kind of thing because it's so easy for superstition to center around buildings to center around objects and later on in

Israel's history in 2 Kings 13 and 14 Jeroboam sets up an idolatrous shrine here at Bethel at the very place that Jacob had met God well the important thing is Jacob having had this vision Jacob having heard the voice then makes a vow and panic becomes pilgrimage and night becomes morning so just as we finish just let me sum it up by saying this often when God meets us often when totally unexpectedly he comes into our lives he will not so much change the circumstances not so much send us in a different direction but so transform everything that we are different people that's what's happening now Jacob has a long way to go we'll see that next week that there are many many things Jacob has still to learn from this passage we need to learn the importance of listening and the importance of obeying but above all we need to be people of faith put on the shield of faith when we meet

God God meets us to do business with him indeed every time the word of God is opened and unfolded we meet with God and we need to obey and we need to have faith and we need to take risks so let's pray