

37. A Stairway from Heaven (2007)

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[0 : 0 0] We're going to turn now to our Bibles and to our reading this morning, which you'll find in the book of Genesis, right at the beginning of the Bible. I think it's page 22 or so in our church Bibles.

But whatever Bible you're in, it's almost at the beginning. And we're in Genesis chapter 28. And picking up again this story of Jacob, you remember that a fortnight ago or so, we looked at chapter 27.

This great story of intrigue and deception and family chaos ending up in the decision that Jacob to flee his brother's wrath and the family disruption.

Jacob has to go away from the family and from the land of promise back to Paddan Aram, back to the place that his ancestors came from.

So at verse 10, we read, Jacob left Beersheba and went towards Haran. And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night because the sun had set.

[1 : 1 2] 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, look, there was a ladder, or as the footnote says better, a flight of steps, a stairway set up literally towards the earth.

And the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, look, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And behold, look, 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 I will keep you wherever you go and bring you back to this land.

For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised. And Jacob woke from his sleep and said, surely the Lord is in this place.

[2 : 4 1] And I did not know it. And he was afraid. And he said, how awesome is this place. This is none other than the house of God. And this is the gate of heaven.

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 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.

Amen. And may God bless us. This is his word. Well, if you would turn with me to the passage we read there in Genesis chapter 28, verse 10 to the end.

[3 : 4 7] In these chapters of Genesis that we've been studying recently, the linking chapters between the story of Abraham and the main story of Jacob and his family.

What has shone through so clearly has been the sheer tenacity of the covenant of God's grace. His covenant promise given to Abraham and his line will be fulfilled in his covenant people.

Despite all the chaos and the corruption that there is among that covenant people. We saw in chapter 27 the sin of every actor in the story was absolutely plain.

None, none of this family covered themselves in any glory at all. And yet God's purpose was fulfilled just as he said. The tenacity of God's grace amazes us.

It even shocks us. And yet God's grace is never cheap grace. His grace always demands a response.

[4 : 58] God's tenacious grace is also his transforming grace. And his revelation to man always demands a response from man. The call of grace is a call to discipleship.

That is to a life lived under the discipline of the Lord with his rule and his direction and under his command. And that's what it means to be God's covenant people.

Moses who wrote these stories. Moses was always teaching that to the children of Israel. Deuteronomy chapter 6. The great confession of Israel's faith. He says the Lord, the Lord our God is one.

And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and your soul and your might. And therefore he says his words shall be upon your heart. His commands shall rule your life.

The Lord Jesus said exactly the same thing, didn't he, in his great commission. Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations.

[6 : 03] Teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. God's grace demands response. And so it's very important that we remember that.

Especially when we are speaking about God's electing grace and God's sovereign choice of his people. Again, that's something Moses always did in Deuteronomy chapter 9.

He says to Israel, you're a chosen people. You are holy to the Lord. But not because of your own righteousness. You're a stubborn people, he says. A rebellious people.

Remember that. And remember God's discipline of you. Remember how hard God had to teach you his ways. Hard testings.

Humble yourselves. Take heed lest you deceive yourselves. Learn that you must love the Lord your God. That you must cleave to him. That you must obey his voice. Well, none of this is new.

[7 : 06] Jacob himself, Moses is saying, the great father of Israel. He also was disciplined by God through great conflicts. Conflict with his brother Esau.

Conflict under his uncle Laban. And he too endured long years out of God's promised land. In a place where he was transformed.

Transformed, as one writer puts it, from the ambitious Jacob who prevails through his physical strength and malevolent coming. Into an ambitious Israel. Into an ambitious Israel. Who prevails through prayer to God.

And these chapters, the second half of Genesis 28 through to chapter 32. These are the very heart of the Jacob cycle of stories. And they tell us of a great transformation over 20 years and more.

Through great trial and great struggle. But throughout, Jacob's life and Jacob's experience are hedged in astonishingly by God's scandalous grace.

[8 : 09] Indeed, the shape of the whole story itself serves to emphasize this. It begins here and it ends in chapter 32 with Jacob encountering angels. And encountering God's presence.

And these encounters at Bethel here and at Peniel later on. They're like bookends that hold together. A story that has so much to teach us in between about God's transforming grace.

That's why Moses wrote these things. He wrote them to teach his people about that. That's why these things are preserved in the Bible by the Holy Spirit for us. So that as Paul says, through perseverance and the encouragement of the scriptures.

We might have hope. Hope in a God who disciplines all his true sons and daughters. As Hebrews 12 says.

All who belong to him through covenant grace. He disciplines to transform. But of course, true hope comes through receiving God's word.

[9 : 14] Not rejecting it. Receiving these words of encouragement and warning. Of course, Hebrews 12 goes on to say very plainly. See to it that you do not refuse him who is speaking.

Well, Jacob didn't refuse. Jacob responded. And it all began when he met God personally. When he was confronted by God himself. And the stairway from heaven that is the only gate to heaven here on earth.

And that's what this story is all about. Hope you can see it falls naturally into two halves, doesn't it? First of all, in verses 10 to 15, there's God's revelation to Jacob.

And then from verse 16 to the end, there's Jacob's response. Which corresponds exactly to the three parts of the revelation. God's place of revelation. God's presence in the vision.

And then God's promise to Jacob in his words. So let's look first at verse 10 to 15. That speaks of a personal revelation. A personal revelation of God to this man, Jacob.

[10 : 21] And the first thing we're told about it is the place that it happened. Verses 10 and 11. You see, that's the key word there. A certain place. Verse 11. The stones of that place.

He lay down in that place. And the place of God's revelation to Jacob was a dark place. It was night, says verse 11.

The sun had set. And so it was dark. But you see, the physical darkness simply echoes a far greater darkness in Jacob's experience at that time.

The opening words tell us of his isolation, don't they? Jacob left Beersheba. Jacob was a homeboy, remember. Always staying around the camp. And here he is, leaving home.

Leaving his family. Leaving everything he knew for the very first time. He's off on a long journey to find a wife. But notice, it's not at all like chapter 24, is it?

[11 : 21] Do you remember? When Abraham sent off his servant to find a wife for Isaac. With that great train of camels and gifts and all sorts of things. And no doubt lots of other servants too. Now the impression we get here is that Jacob is very much alone.

He was fleeing from the murderous anger of his brother Esau. And ahead of him, although he didn't yet know it, lay years of exploitation at the hands of Laban.

He's situated between a death camp and a hard labor camp, is how Bruce Waltke puts it. He's alone. And it's dark.

And it's a very barren place he's in. It's a windswept rocky moor some miles north of Jerusalem in the wilderness. Think of somewhere like the Larry Grew in the middle of the Cairngorms with all those boulder fields in the middle.

If you've ever been there. That was the kind of place this was. And Jacob has no tent. He's sleeping out rough in a land of wolves and of jackals and even of lions.

[12 : 25] And so we're told he takes a big stone. No doubt more to protect his head than as a comfortable pillow. And he lies down to sleep. Well, I doubt if he got to sleep too quickly, don't you think?

I don't think I would. What was he thinking about as he lay there in the dark with his head on that hard stone? He must have felt very lonely and fearful, don't you think?

Pretty weary and stressed. Maybe he was tormented by a sense of guilt about everything that had happened. Maybe he was full of doubts about his own security, his own significance.

His own identity. What's it all about? Jacob was in a very dark place, make no mistake, both physically and emotionally.

And it was made all the darker because he knew that it was all of his own doing. That is a very, very dark place to be, isn't it? To find yourself in a bed of your own making.

[13 : 28] Particularly if it involves estrangement from people that you've loved. Ruptured relationships. Maybe with a brother or a sister or a father and mother or with your children.

Or with a wife, a spouse, a husband. That's a place of real agony, isn't it? And it's a place of even more tortured agony if you know that that situation is all your own fault.

Or largely your own fault. Isn't that so? Maybe some of us here have known that particular agony. Well, Jacob deserved to be in a dark place.

And that made it darker still. Perhaps unbearably dark for him. And yet into that dark place, we're told, came something that he didn't deserve. Verse 12 and 13.

In that dark place, Jacob found a divine presence. Verse 12 says, at last he did get to sleep and he dreamed. And look, behold, there was a ladder.

[14 : 33] There was a stairway set up, literally towards the earth. And the top of it reached into heaven. Now, this dream of Jacob's ladder has made the phrase part of our language, hasn't it?

Perhaps it was at least part of the inspiration for what some people call the greatest rock song of all time. Stairway to heaven by Led Zeppelin. I remember as a teenager learning to play it on my guitar. I'm glad I grew up and put my guitar away.

But there we are. You remember the refrain? She's buying the stairway to heaven. And I think a stairway or a staircase, as the footnote says, is a better translation here.

Because the image is most likely something of the ziggurats of the ancient world. You remember Babel and the Tower of Babel? That's what it was. A ziggurat, a tower with a great stairway going up to try and reach heaven.

So that people could reach heaven. And find significance and find identity and find security. So that we will not be scattered, they said. So that we'll make a name for ourselves.

[15 : 38] We'll build this tower, this stairway to heaven. You see, that attitude encapsulates absolutely everything, doesn't it, about human religion and aspiration.

It's all about buying the stairway to heaven. Finding the way to significance and security in life, whether it's by piety and religion, or whether it's through prosperity or glamour or fame or fortune or fitness.

Whatever it is, the world is full of people trying to find and trying to buy the stairway to heaven. So that they can knock, knock, knock on heaven's door, to quote another rock song.

It's funny, isn't it, how so many of the songs and ballads express that very searching. And you see, that is exactly what Jacob had been doing hitherto in his life.

He'd been seeking to grasp what he thought would give him the blessing of a stairway to heaven. He had the right instinct, in a sense, didn't he, in seeking the divine blessing.

[16 : 39] Just as so many people today have the right instinct. They're seeking for something more than this world seems to hold or afford. It's a right instinct. But Jacob was seeking it by reaching out and reaching up with his own strength, with his own cunning, with his own manipulation, with his own will.

And yet here, in his darkest hour, at his most impotent, what does he see? He sees reality. Look, behold, he's told.

He sees three things. Look, behold, verse 12. A stairway set up towards the earth. A stairway set up from heaven, come down to earth.

A stairway from heaven, bridging the gap to earth, from the top down. That's what he saw. And behold, look. It's all heavenly activity that's going on.

Not earthly activity. It's the angels of God who are ascending and descending on this ladder, bringing about God's plans for earth and heaven at his behest. As if to say, Jacob, I don't need any help from you to arrange all of these things.

[17 : 49] I've got legions of angels who are doing it. And behold, look, verse 13. God himself is in the midst of all of this activity.

It's God's sovereign charge that is over every detail. The divine presence from heaven, come down to earth, through a stairway built from heaven to earth, to come down and knock on Jacob's door.

You see, here is a divine revelation that is the exact opposite of all human religion. Not man searching for God, but God reaching down and searching for man and finding him in his sovereign power.

God himself has chosen exactly where and exactly when and exactly how to open heaven and to build a stairway for himself to come down from heaven to earth to meet Jacob.

It's not the other way around. It's a very, very striking image, don't you think? And yet, just in case it might be possible to misunderstand this, this vision of God's presence, Jacob, and we also, we're left in no doubt because God speaks to explain it all.

[19 : 09] Do you see in verse 13 to verse 15? In this dark place is a divine presence who articulates clearly a definite and also a disturbing promise.

It's a definite promise. That's so clear, isn't it, in verse 13. I am the Lord, the God of Abraham, your father, and the God of Isaac. He's deliberately repeating to Jacob not only the blessing of Isaac in chapter 27, but explicitly giving a covenant promise in words used to Abraham, his grandfather, many, many times.

In fact, if you go back to chapter 13, verse 14, you'll find almost identical words used that God gave to Abraham. Also, interestingly, associated with the place of Bethel.

It's the quad promise we see again, isn't it, about the land, the place of God's inheritance, and about offspring, the progeny, who will be like the dust of the earth, and of God's plan, his plan of salvation, to bless all the families of the earth through his seed.

But do you see what's so striking about this repetition of the promise to Jacob? So striking is the particular aspect of presence and protection with him.

[20 : 29] Three times, do you see it in verse 15? I will be with you, says God. I will keep you wherever you go and bring you back to this land. I will never leave you until I've done everything that I promised.

I will be with you. Jacob is the first person in Scripture to hear those wonderful words from God. The Emmanuel promise, the God who will be with you.

But Moses knew its significance. That was what God said to him. Do you remember when he shrank back from the task of going to confront Pharaoh and lead the children of Israel out of Egypt? I can't do that, said Moses.

And God said, but I will be with you. And he kept on saying that to Moses and the Israelites. In fact, Moses said later on, if your presence will not go with us, we can't possibly go.

But God did go with them and he remained with them. Even after Moses, I will be with you, he said, as Joshua took over the leadership of the people. And I will keep you.

[21 : 35] Moses' readers recognized those words. It was part of the great priestly blessing, too, that Aaron, the priest, would speak on the whole people of Israel. The Lord bless you and keep you.

Just as faithful Israelites later on would sing it in Psalm 121. The Lord will keep you from all evil. The Lord will keep your life. He will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forever.

And I will never leave you, says the Lord to Jacob, until I've done everything I promised. What a wonderful assurance that must have been to the Israelites all those centuries later.

They, too, were about to be brought back into the land of promise. And they heard God's words to Joshua. As I was with Moses, he says, I will be with you.

I will never leave you nor forsake you. What a wonderful encouragement to be able to realize that those words were first spoken to Jacob, their patriarch, and to say to himself, yes, it was true what God said to him.

[22 : 42] He never left him. He never forsook him. He accomplished everything he promised. And our very existence here today is the proof of that. And so surely we can trust God for the future.

That's why Moses is writing this to them. And isn't it a great promise also to believers today, fearful believers, and to believing congregations today, especially when we may very keenly feel what it means to be outside the camp, to be bearing the reproach of Christ, as Hebrews 13 puts it.

Isn't it wonderful when you read on in that very chapter of Hebrews 13, that the apostle quotes these words, Be content, he says, for he has said, I will never leave you nor forsake you.

Something wonderful, isn't there, in that definite promise of God's committed presence and protection, given to a man like Jacob, given so freely, so gratuitously, despite all his misdemeanors, despite all his defects, and indeed at this stage without any evident sign of a change of heart or a change of behavior in Jacob.

You see, that is exactly what makes this definite promise also a disturbing promise, isn't it? Because we immediately ask, Why? What on earth has Jacob done to deserve a blessing like that upon his life?

[24 : 18] He's a deceiver. He's a twister. He's a man who's just broken up his own family. Everything about his downfall and his darkness is self-inflicted.

It's self-induced. It's well-deserved. But what is God doing? As William still says, he pours his grace into the heart of the prodigal with seemingly indecent extravagance.

The tabloids would be screaming, wouldn't they? This is a scandal. There's just no way Jacob deserves all this. No doubt that would have been godless Esau's reaction.

And no doubt it would be the reaction of the average punter in the street today. We're very good, aren't we, at knowing what people don't deserve. Bankers don't deserve their bonuses. Prisoners don't deserve televisions and fancy cells and voting in elections.

Terrorist suspects don't deserve to live it up at the expense of the state and to bankrupt us with legal aid, fighting their deportation. These things are a scandal and we know it. We see these things.

[25 : 28] And Jacob certainly didn't deserve favor at the hand of God. It is a scandal. Not just the pagan world that knows that either, is it?

It's just as disturbing to the pious religious mind. It's just as scandalous. In fact, that's why Jesus told the story, wasn't it, in his ministry about two brothers.

A prodigal younger brother and a dutiful elder brother. He told it to make exactly that point to the Pharisees, their pious religion. But you see, the point is, God's grace is very disturbing.

It's deeply disturbing to every human heart. Indeed, it's offensive. It's scandalous. It enrages our human sense of justice. That's one of the things that's so powerfully portrayed in Victor Hugo's story, Les Miserables.

We know it best, don't we, in the marvelous musical. We saw it ourselves just the other week as a family when we were on holiday. And you've got Javert, the austere policeman, the arm of the law, the embodiment of justice.

[26 : 35] He's baffled. He's enraged. In fact, in the end, he is undone by the grace and the mercy that he sees embodied in the man Jean Valjean, the former prisoner who himself has been transformed by grace and by mercy.

But God's grace is disturbing, deeply disturbing. And it's offensive to mankind. Why? Well, I think because God's grace to others undermines my sense of self-worth.

Because my sense of self-worth comes, doesn't it, from comparing myself to others. Like the older brother in Jesus' story, I want to feel better than him and her and them.

That's what gives me a sense of significance and feeling I'm good. But if he's shown favor, well, it's enraging to me. It demeans me. And in a sense, if I'm shown grace, it's almost as bad, isn't it?

Because grace inevitably humbles us and we can't bear that. I want to deserve what I get. I want to achieve my blessings my way. I want people to say, look at him.

[27 : 49] He's done so well. Look at him. He's made it all himself. That's what I want people to say. You see, deep down, I want God to say that too.

I want to knock, knock, knock on heaven's door and say, let me in. I've earned it. I've deserved it. Surely I do. Don't look at all these other people. Look how much better I am than them. But Jesus said to everyone who thinks that way, and especially to very religious people, very moral people, very good people.

He said to them, unless you understand that it doesn't work that way with God, not ever. Unless you understand grace, you're never going to understand God at all.

Not even begin to. You see, Moses is teaching us just exactly the same thing here in Genesis chapter 28. Here is an undeserving renegade, if ever there was one, in the pits of life.

But in his dark place, he finds a divine presence. And he finds this wonderful, definite promise. We might find it disturbing.

[29 : 07] We might find it offensive even. But that was the personal revelation of God to Jacob. Well, how does Jacob respond?

Verse 16 to the end shows us how. It shows us, doesn't it, a personal response. A deeply personal response to God's personal revelation to Jacob. And again, it's in three sections.

It corresponds to the place and to the visionary presence and to the promise that God gave. In the Hebrew text, there's a whole lot of word plays that make that even more obvious. But first, there's his response concerning the place in verse 16 and 17.

And what was a dark place, Jacob now sees is a divine place. Surely the Lord is in this place, he says, and I didn't know it. He can see what he couldn't see before, but in fact had always been true.

All that Jacob could see was a place of tribulation. But in fact, that was the place of God's beginning of transformation for him. It was the beginning of a whole new meaning to Jacob's life.

[30 : 16] A place of insignificance. A place of great insecurity was in fact, verse 17, none other than the gate of heaven. The house of God, Beth-el.

Not Babel. Not man's self-built route to the divine. That led to just catastrophe and confusion. But the very gate of heaven opened by God himself offering fellowship with him in his own dwelling place.

Notice though there's nothing flippant, there's nothing trite about Jacob's reaction. When somebody encounters God for real, there never can be, can there? Verse 17 is very clear.

Jacob was afraid. He was afraid with a right sense of fear. In one sense, this had been an awful place for him, but now it was an awesome place, he says. He was conscious deeply of the presence of a living God.

Just as Isaac in chapter 27 had trembled greatly when he realized that God had undone him in his attempt to thwart him. And he rightly trembled.

[31 : 26] It's the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom. It's no accident that in times in the church's history when there's been great awakenings, great revival, great true movements of the Spirit of God, that has not resulted in joking and in laughter and frivolity.

Quite the reverse. It's resulted always in a sense of awe and the fear of God. It was an awesome realization. And yet it was also a wonderful one.

Jacob sees heaven opened. He has a personal sense on his own heart of God's reality. God is here with me. He'd known God all his life, in a sense, through his family, hadn't he?

He'd known of God. But now he was saying that God is real to me personally. It was like Charles Wesley who had known of God all his life. He thought he knew God. He thought he was a Christian. Until that one night in Aldersgate Chapel in London, he said, My heart was strangely warmed.

And he knew God personally for himself. Just as it is for many young folk, many of you here. It's your story. You've been raised in a Christian home. But the time comes when you know that this God is real.

[32 : 38] He's my God. And that's Jacob here. And then in verse 18 and 19, he responds to the divine presence with a divine proclamation.

That's the significance of this pillar that he sets up just as the stairway was set up. It's a public witness. It's a determined proclamation of the way that God has made to earth by which heaven might be opened.

It's his way. And it's his house. And Jacob acknowledges that by anointing this pillar with oil to proclaim that this is God's anointed way.

This is how God has invaded this lost pagan world to bring hope into its darkness and its confusion. Nearby Canaanite, Lutz was apparently a very large city.

But you see, like Babel. And all its merely earthly wisdom. It was worthless compared with God's great revelation of his house, Bethel, and his open gate to heaven.

[33 : 44] It's so often hard to believe that, isn't it? As Christians, we think that the gospel that we have to proclaim seems so feeble. It seems so insignificant. Just like a little tiny pillar set up amid the great monuments of human culture and civilization and progress and learning.

I often think about the Apostle Paul going into these great cities of ancient Greece. Ephesus and Corinth and so on with their magnificent temples and statuary and all of these things.

And here he is, one little man in weakness and trembling. With a message to proclaim that seemed like foolishness. And utter insignificance.

And yet that world was changed by that message. God chose to bring to nothing the things that are.

To demonstrate his power and his wisdom. To bring eternal life to countless men and women by the mere power of the gospel that was proclaimed. To unveil the gate of heaven.

[34 : 51] To unveil the gate of heaven. To call men and women into the kingdom of his grace. And likewise, Jacob proclaimed the presence and the power of the living God who had come down from heaven.

But third, perhaps most important of all, Jacob makes a decisive personal response to God's promise. In response to that definite promise of grace. Jacob makes a decisive pledge of faith.

Verse 20. Jacob made a vow. Sometimes people try to argue here that Jacob's still trying to bargain with God. But that's just to misunderstand. His words are couched in a typical way of making a vow.

This is a real confession of trust. If this promise is really true, he's saying, and I believe it is true. Then the Lord, this God, shall be my personal God.

This is a yielding to God that reorients the whole of Jacob's life from now on. He's calling God to keep his promise. He's calling God to do what God has said he will do.

[35 : 56] That's what the Bible means by faith. Taking God at his word and trusting him and pledging yourself to him. And notice carefully here what real faith for the Bible actually looks like.

It's personal. Do you see? It's a personal submission to the lordship of this God. The Lord shall be my God, he says. In other words, I will be his servant.

I will be obedient to his voice, not anybody else's voice. I will take his direction. I'll be at his call. Faith is personal, if it's real faith.

But then, verse 22, it's public. This stone shall be his house, he says. Faith is personal, but it's not private. Jacob makes immediate public witness to the God of heaven.

People sometimes say, oh, faith is just a private matter. It should be kept utterly private. That is completely wrong. For the Bible, real faith can never be private. That's why in the New Testament, public association with Christ's church through baptism marked the move from paganism into the family of God.

[37 : 10] Faith is public. And notice, thirdly, very importantly, it's palpable. It's practical, if you like. Jacob acknowledged that everything he had was the Lord's.

And so he gave gladly a tithe of all that he had as a token to show that he acknowledged God's ownership over everything in his life. See, real faith always has an impact on your pocket.

It's as simple as that. Real Christian generosity and real Christian grace always go together. It's two sides of the same coin. And where faith is real because God's grace has become personally real in a joyful response to God's personal revelation in somebody's life, then that faith will always involve a personal surrender to the Lordship of God in Christ.

It will always involve a public witness to God. It always involves real and palpable service to God with glad and generous giving to God in real and tangible ways, not just in theory.

That's what real faith looks like in the Bible. Well, why does any of this matter? Why is it relevant, this story about Jacob?

[38 : 27] Why is it in the Bible at all? Well, of course, it was very relevant for the Israelites in Moses' day because they were called by God, just like Jacob, chosen for a purpose.

But they, too, needed to respond personally to God, to their revelation. Again, God had appeared to them at Sinai in power, visibly. He'd given them words of promise to be with them and to be their God.

And so God had called them to respond through Moses' words to be his people, to make a personal and a public and a tangible bowing to God's rule, trusting him and pleading to him.

Your God is the God of Jacob, Moses is saying to them. This God who is present is the God who promises you a future. You must make him your God. You must keep faith with him.

You must cleave to him. So it was very relevant to those who first read this story. Well, that's all very well. But what's it got to say to us today?

[39 : 28] Why should this ancient story matter to me in 2012? Well, it matters to me and it matters to you and it matters to every other person who's alive because the same revelation that was given by God to Jacob has now been given just as personally and yet even more clearly and completely in the good news of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he has commanded to be preached to people of every nation.

What Jacob saw in that vision was a glimpse. It was a prophetic preview of what God's promise to Abraham was all about and what it would ultimately accomplish.

The gate of heaven being opened and the way back to paradise restored forever. You remember back at the end of Genesis chapter 3, the way into Eden, the gate to Eden was closed forever.

And the angels with their swords barred the way to the tree of life, to life in the home of God. But here Jacob sees a vision and he hears a glorious promise of that gate opened again forever.

He saw what John the Apostle saw in his vision in Patmos. In these words, we began the service with. Behold, a door standing open in heaven. Opened by the seed of Abraham, says John.

[40 : 54] The lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, the lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. And that's what Jacob saw here gloriously from afar. Jesus himself made that absolutely plain.

Read the first chapter of John's gospel. When Philip finds Nathanael, he goes to him and says, Nathanael, we have found the one that Moses and the law spoke of and the prophets also spoke of.

It's Jesus of Nazareth. And he took him to see Jesus. And Jesus said to Nathanael, Yes, and you will all see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man, on me.

You see what he's saying? What became real for Jacob will become real for all who personally receive this revelation of grace that Jacob received, but now fulfilled in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He is the stairway to heaven because he and he alone is the one who has come down from heaven to earth to open the gate of heaven. He is the stairway from heaven come to reconnect heaven to earth from the top down.

[42 : 16] That's what Jesus coming to earth to die for our sins was all about. That's why the gospels tell us that when Jesus was crucified on the cross in Jerusalem, the curtain of the temple in Jerusalem was torn in two from top to bottom because the way into God's presence that had previously been barred for all sinful humanity was now opened forever through the atoning death of Jesus Christ.

He, the priest from heaven, came down the stairway from heaven because only he was good enough to unlock the gate of heaven and to let us in.

But he did that. And that means that even a twisted deceiver like Jacob means even broken men, even the fugitive, even the feeble, even the feckless, even every outcast and every lonely searcher, even for them, there is a way back to God from the dark paths of sin.

There's a door that is open and all may go in. Calvary's cross is where it begins when you come as a sinner to Jesus.

William still has these lovely words in his notes on this verse. Bunyan, John Bunyan in the pilgrim's progress. Bunyan tells us that there is a slippery path which runs to hell from the very gate of heaven.

[43 : 52] But he says there is also a gate to heaven situated at the very threshold of despair. And that's the gospel that Jacob heard in his darkness.

That's the gospel that the Lord Jesus Christ made real. There is a gate to heaven from the very threshold of despair. And there will go on being a gate to heaven and a ready and waiting call for all who pledge their lives to this great Savior.

However often you might stumble on that stairway. However often you may feel your steps are utterly feeble. His angels are there to guard you and keep you on your way.

His unquenchable promise hedges you in. Behold, I am with you and I will keep you and will never leave you till I have done all that I have promised for you.

Behold, said the risen Lord Jesus Christ, I am with you always even to the end of the age. That's still the promise of the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

[45 : 05] Christ. Does it matter to us this ancient story, this ancient word about a stairway from heaven to earth?

What matters? It matters more to me and to you than anything else and everything else in this whole world. Does it matter to you like that?

Have you said like Jacob, this Lord will be my Lord and God? If you haven't, will you grasp that promise today yourself?

Will you make it personal and public and palpable? Will you make a decisive pledge to give yourself to Him, to this Lord Jesus Christ?

He alone is the gateway to heaven. But the door is open and He stands and says, come, I am the door, said the Lord Jesus Christ, whoever enters by me will be saved and I will be with you always.

[46 : 18] That's why this story matters today. Let's pray. How awesome is this place? This is none other than the house of God. And this is the gate of heaven.

Thank you, Lord our God, that through your Son, Jesus Christ, and at the cost of your own blood shed on the cross for sins, you have opened the kingdom of heaven to all who have faith in Jesus.

Give us faith, we pray. Make us your own now and for all eternity for the sake of your great and glorious name.

Amen.