

August 30, 2020
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AT THE ALL INCLUSIVE RESORT
Genesis 28

Our little granddaughter, Ella, has been the source of some great humor for all of us. I recently was looking at some pictures on my phone and included in them were some shots of the day that Toby, Ella's daddy, graduated from medical school at UCSD. What a great day that was. Years of incredibly hard work culminated that day as he became, for the first time, Dr. Toby Myatt. Shortly after that he was treating patients in the hospital emergency room. Ella was only 2 at the time, but she still understood that something great was happening. She said several times on that graduation day, "Dadden (her word for dad) is great." She knew Dadden had done something big. But she also said repeatedly, "Dadden wears a funny hat. Dadden wears a funny dress." She found his cap and gown to be unusual apparently.

Not long ago when we were watching our granddaughters an altercation between them arose because they both wanted the same toy. Laurie refereed and in the process explained to Ella how important it is to share. Ella didn't like the idea much. In fact, initially she wanted no part of it. Laurie said, "I know this is hard when you're 4. But you will be better at it when you're 54." Ella shook her head and said, "I'm just not going to be good at that."

What kind of life do think Ella will have if that's true, if she never did learn to share? How will her life be if she always has to have everything her way, get what she wants and never share with anyone else? It will be miserable. Laurie was not trying to teach her to share just to keep war from breaking out between the sisters, just to keep the peace. She was teaching her that because she wants her to have a joyful life, and that is a crucial part of doing so.

Today we are going to see a man in the middle of God teaching him a lesson, and it is a lesson that is essential to having a joyful life. It is not the lesson of sharing, though it is related. We will see this lesson in Genesis 28.

JACOB WAS NOT SEARCHING FOR GOD

At the end of the previous chapter we see still more maneuvering and manipulation by members of Isaac's family. Rebekah, who had instigated the underhanded subterfuge by which Jacob, her favorite son, stole the blessing from Esau, Isaac's favorite, continues to scheme. She knew that Esau was determined to get revenge

on Jacob by killing him so it was imperative to get Jacob out of town where he would be safe. The healthy way to bring that about was to bring it out in the open and talk about it with her husband, Isaac. But that, apparently, was not the way things were done in that dysfunctional family.

Instead of talking about the real issue Rebekah came up with another reason for Jacob to leave town. In 27:46 we see that Rebekah said to Isaac, “I’m disgusted with living because of these Hittite women. If Jacob takes a wife from among the women of this land, from Hittite women like these, my life will not be worth living.” Sounds a bit like she was overselling it, doesn’t it? If Jacob marries one of these local girls, which Esau had evidently already done, Rebekah insisted she couldn’t bear it. She would rather die, she claimed. My guess is that she really did have an issue with the local girls. But that was not the reason for the discussion she was having with Isaac. She insisted it was about him finding a suitable wife, but it really was about sending Jacob away to keep him safe. I suspect Rebekah figured if she told the truth, that she was afraid Esau was going to kill Jacob, that Isaac would have defended his favorite boy and insisted that wasn’t true.

Rebekah’s plan worked. Isaac agreed it would be best to send Jacob to the “old country” to find a wife. Go back to Haran, the family home town that Abraham had left so long ago. There he could connect with the relatives who would help him find a suitable Mrs. Jacob. Isaac went along with this plan because he was also not thrilled with the local young ladies, including the ones Esau had married.

Jacob set off for the ancestral home of his family. It was a journey similar in length to going from here to San Francisco, roughly a little more than 500 miles, which would probably have taken about a month. Mostly Jacob was running to get away from Esau. There was no spiritual component to Jacob’s intended journey. This was not a sort of pilgrimage. Up to this point God had not been much in Jacob’s calculations about life. He did not concern himself about how God would have him behave. Trick and cheat your brother, lie to your dad, play the God card in order to maintain the lie, and don’t ever ask what God would have thought of any of that. It didn’t matter to Jacob. He only operated on the basis of doing whatever he had to in order to get what he wanted.

The irony, of course, is that that God wanted him to have the things he schemed and cheated to get. Early on God had declared that they would belong to him. But Jacob was convinced it was up to him to make that happen. Why, he figured, if he and Rebekah hadn’t acted, Isaac would have given his blessing to Esau and Jacob would have been left out in the cold. God’s will would have been thwarted, so

obviously what they did was the right thing because it brought about God's will, right? Wrong. That's saying the ends justify the means. It is not right and certainly not God's will to lie, cheat and steal.

My point here is that Jacob was not a spiritual person on a spiritual quest looking for God. He was a guy looking out for number one, doing whatever he thought he had to in order to get his share. He had badly treated two members of his own family and that had resulted in blowing the family up. The upshot of his dishonest dealings was after he left, his family would never be together again. Jacob had been devious, dishonest and selfish on a consistent basis. There was nothing admirable in his actions. There was certainly nothing about him that would make him appealing to a good and moral God.

JACOB ENCOUNTERED GOD

As far as we know, Jacob had never been away from home alone. He was a mama's boy. Now he was on the road all alone. He had grown up with all the privileges of wealth. That had been at least a part of his motivation for cheating his own brother. He wanted to get a larger share of the family estate. So he got the rights to it, but now he has none of it. All he has are the clothes on his back and a staff, a walking stick. His tricks and his cheating have gained him exactly nothing, and it will stay that way for some time.

On his trip Jacob arrives at a random place because he ran out of daylight. It was getting dark so it was time to camp for the night. Scholars say there was nothing special about this place, that it was a pretty barren spot. It was in what we know today as the West Bank. There is an Israeli settlement there called Beth El, but it is not certain that is the sight of the original events. It is north and east of Jerusalem.

The text says Jacob used a rock he found close by as a pillow. I don't understand that. A rock pillow seems to me to be worse than no pillow at all. I can tell you for a fact that this absolutely would not have worked for Laurie. She searched for much of our married life for a pillow that will work long term for her before she finally found one. Maybe sleeping with his head on a rock had something to do with what happened that night. While he was asleep he had a dream, and it was not your average dream.

In the dream he saw a stairway that came down from heaven right to where he was. At the top of the stairs was the Lord himself. Going up and down on the stairs were angels. The Hebrew language is stark so as to emphasize how vivid and startling this dream was. One scholar said you could translate it literally saying, "He had a

dream. There, a ladder! Oh! Angels! And look, the Lord himself!” In the dream God made some promises to Jacob, the same promises of the covenant he had made with Abraham, repeated to Isaac, and now were passed on to Jacob. God would give him descendants and they would be many. God would give the land he was living in, to him and his descendants not just to live there, but to possess. He would bless him and his descendants, and through them would bless all people. God would be their God and would watch over them.

Recently Laurie told me one morning after we woke up that she had a vivid dream that night. In this dream we were going to live in a beautiful house on the island of Kauai. But to get to this house you had to swim through underwater caves for 12 days, and she was distressed because she knew there was no way we could do that. She knew in the dream our little grandchildren could never manage that. She could feel the frustration of that dream even after she was awake, to the point where she was still talking about that next evening.

Jacob’s dream was not merely a dream like that. It was more like a vision than a dream. You get a sense of that from his reaction. When he woke up he didn’t just say, “Well that was a strange dream” or even, “Hey, that was a cool dream.” He was a bit intimidated by what he had seen because it was so awesome. He was kind of fearful, but also glad. He had been in the presence of God. Verses 16-17 tell us that when he woke up he said, “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.” He set up a pillar to mark the spot and called it Beth El, which means “house of God.” His reaction tells us this was way more than a vivid dream. This was a profound experience for him.

The message of the dream was powerful. God was not there because that was an especially holy place. The new age types around us like to believe there are particular places that are “more spiritual,” where one can get in touch with the spirits, powers and forces in the spiritual realm. I remember driving through New Mexico and seeing the local license plates with the words, “Land of Enchantment” on them. My reaction was, “Land of enchantment? Are you kidding me? Have you looked around? You’ve got to be under some kind of spell to think this is the land of enchantment. Excuse me, but this is actually the land of “how much longer until we’re out of here and get to some place less desolate?” I guess it would be hard to fit that on a license plate, so maybe that’s why they didn’t use it. But I later realized that “enchantment” idea came from that whole “spiritual place” thing, which some claim parts of New Mexico are. Bethel was not a spiritual place, a

holy place all on its own. It only became a holy place because God chose to reveal himself there. Any place where God is, where he shows up, is a holy place.

But what was the stairway to heaven imagery all about? It was about one of the classic rock songs of all time, right? Uh, no. It was way more important than that. It communicated that God had chosen Jacob and made a way for him to have access to heaven, to God himself. God made a way for Jacob to be connected to him and to relate to him. The angels descending and ascending pictured God sending his angels to watch out for Jacob and take care of him. You can see what Jacob understood God to be saying by his words in verses 20-21. Jacob said, "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." He was saying, "If God will really do the things he promised in this dream then he will be my God." What did he understand God to have promised? I see 4 crucial ideas. They are ideas that would be important to anyone, certainly to us today as well.

His Presence

God said, "I am with you." That is a hugely important promise. I recently had to have a surgical procedure done. I've had a couple of surgeries in the past as well as some colonoscopies. This time was different. Because of the stupid corona virus they made Laurie stay out of the surgical facility. She couldn't sit in the waiting room with me before the procedure and she wasn't there with me in the recovery room when I woke up afterward. I hated that. Somehow it is comforting to have her with me. Of course, in the past she wasn't there in the operating room when they were actually doing the deed, but I was unconscious, so I didn't know about it. I didn't like having to go through the whole thing alone. It makes a difference to have someone with you.

Imagine if Laurie not only could be with me through the whole thing, but that she also had the power to guarantee that it all went the way it was supposed to go. Having her there would make a huge difference. It would remove any fear or uncertainty or uneasiness. I could be completely confident because she was there. Having God be present would be even better than that, because God has the power to make sure that everything goes the way it is supposed to go. David would later write some of the most well known and beautiful words of all time in Psalm 23:4. I will quote the more familiar and I think lovelier New American Standard translation. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me." No matter how intimidating, how ominous the situation I might face, if you are with me then I will not be afraid.

Do you remember when you were a kid and you feared some sort of monster in the dark? What took that fear away? If Mom or Dad came and sat or lay down with you in the room. Is it that monsters cannot exist in the same room as a parent? No, it was simply that if Mom or Dad were there and you weren't alone, you knew you had nothing to fear from monsters. I remember as a kid always wanting to have the bedroom door slightly ajar and be able to see a little light from outside the room. I wanted it mostly dark in the room to sleep, but seeing that light through that small gap made me think a parent was out there and awake, so I was safe. Jacob understood having God with him was better than knowing a parent was there.

His Protection

Jacob also heard God promise to watch over him. In other words, he would protect him. It wouldn't do him much good if God said he would be with him, but was just along for the ride as an observer. I have a curious attachment to a few old movies that not many people liked. One of them is *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves*. I know Kevin Costner's occasional feeble attempts at a British accent were brutal, but I still liked the movie. In the story Robin helped save the life of a Moor named Azeem during an escape from prison. Azeem then said he had a life debt to protect Robin. The two of them go to England, where Robin is set upon by evil Guy Guisbourne and some henchmen and has to fight them off while Azeem merely watches. Robin says, "Is this how you repay your debt, by watching while I get beaten?" Azeem says, "You whine like a mule. You are still alive." Jacob understood God to promise that he would watch over him and protect him, not merely stand by and observe while Jacob is overwhelmed by enemies.

His Provision

Jacob understood that God also promised that he would provide what he needed to survive. Notice that he knew what he needed was food to eat and clothes to wear. This is a reminder of the sad state of affairs he had fallen into. He had been part of a wealthy family and he stood to inherit a lot of that wealth. But now he is just anxious for God to provide food and clothes for him, because he had so little. God did promise that he would provide what Jacob needed.

His Peace

Finally he understood God to be saying that he would make sure that Jacob would get home safely. Safety is an issue in that promise, but there's more going on than just safety. He literally said, "that I may return to my father's household in shalom." Shalom in that instance certainly included safety and security, but it was more than that.

Jacob's devious schemes had blown the family apart. Isaac and Rebekah were not on the same page at all, Rebekah was not happy with Esau, Isaac was seriously angry at Jacob, and Esau was so mad at Jacob he planned to kill him. Evidently he realized what he had lost. Going back to his family was not safe for him. What he longed for was not only that he could go back and not be killed, but that there would be peace, that the broken relationships could be mended and there could be unity and love in that family. He wanted God's shalom to rule in his life.

JACOB TRIED TO NEGOTIATE A DEAL

At first glance it seems that Jacob responds well to this dream. He sees that God has done a great thing for him, has met him there in that barren place, and given him promises, and he responds by setting up a monument to God's action. He humbles himself and promises that he will have God as his God and will honor him. But if we pay closer attention then we will see that's not exactly what happened. Notice the form of Jacob's statements in verses 20-22. They are an "if-then" statement. Jacob didn't say, "because you have promised these things for me," or "since you have done this for me." He said, "If you really will do what you promised, then here is what I will do in return." In other words, he's trying to make a deal with God.

Jacob is like that student who is facing a test and is confronted as he or she looks at the test with the fact that they haven't really made any effort to prepare for it by studying. Staring a big fat fail right in the face the student prays, "Lord, if you will do a miracle here and somehow let me get a good grade on this test, I promise that I will never do this again. I will study hard for the next test." The student is trying to convince God to do something for him or her and is trying to buy God off. Or maybe it's the soldier in the middle of a fire fight who prays, "God, if you get me out of this safely, I promise I will believe in you and will do what you say from now on."

This is Jacob doing what he knows. He is a schemer, a con man, a fast talker who thinks he knows how to get what he wants. He believes it is up to him to convince God, to make him an offer he can't afford to refuse, to get him to do the things Jacob wanted him to do. What he did not do was to believe God, take him at his word. Maybe part of the reason for that was that he had trouble believing that God would want anything to do with him after the dirty stunts he has pulled. He has to convince God that if the Lord will be nice to him he will do better in the future.

What Jacob had not yet done was to quit relying on his schemes, quit plotting how he can get his way and manipulating to make it happen, and to simply trust God, doing what he says to do. This ends up being borne out in subsequent events. Jacob is going to spend the next 20 years matching wits with another shyster who cheats him. The cheater gets cheated, and he ends up spending many years struggling, away from home until he finally learned his lesson. He will eventually have another encounter with God in which he at last turns the corner after God forces him to it, but that day is still years off on this day.

IMPLICATIONS

GOD COMES TO UNDESERVING PEOPLE

Have you ever seen the movie *Catch Me If You Can*? It is based on the life of Frank Abagnale, who began a life of scales and cons while in his teens. He successfully passed himself off as at various times, an airline pilot, a doctor and a lawyer. He was skilled at check fraud, and pulled scams worth millions of dollars. He was basically incredibly skilled at stealing from other people. He was more extreme than Jacob, but he shared something in common with him. He would do whatever it took to get what he wanted, no matter how he harmed other people.

Jacob was committed to doing whatever he thought was good for Jacob, and nothing else really mattered. He said was definitely not deserving. He was devious, scheming and selfish. But God chose him anyway. It gets even more astounding. God didn't attach an "if" to his promises to Jacob. He simply 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. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go." He didn't say, "If you will clean up your act," or "If you will at least make an effort to do a little better." He simply said, "I will do these things for you." And God did. God made a promise to a deeply flawed, unworthy man, and he kept his promises.

God makes a habit of doing this kind of thing. In the New Testament Jesus called a man named Matthew to be one of his chosen disciples. Nothing unusual about that, except he was a self-serving, dishonest traitor to his own people. He was one of the most hated people in town. Jesus called another similar guy named Zaccheus. He met a woman with a badly tarnished reputation that was well-earned and called her to be one of his followers. Later God would pick his most militant enemy, a man who described himself as the chief of sinners, to be one of his own.

This is important for us to grasp, because we are right there with Jacob. The more honest we are with ourselves the more we will see how we are undeserving. Even when we have put our faith in Christ many, maybe most, of us struggle to believe consistently that God could really love us and accept us. We see our failings, our shortcomings. We know we should be better. We have those moments where we get down on ourselves and think we are phony, that our faith isn't real or we'd be much better and more consistent.

If God could choose Jacob and keep his promises to him, then don't you think he could choose you, too? Do you ever feel unworthy? Do you ever feel you are hopeless before God? Remember Jacob, who cheated and lied to his own family and even when God revealed himself to him he still was trying to work a deal. If God can save Jacob, and Matthew, and Zaccheus, and the woman of ill repute at the well and murderous Saul, then he can choose and save you.

Do you feel like you are not deserving of God's love and promises? Many of us struggle with that. Here's the thing to remember. If God only gave his love and his promises to people who deserved them, he wouldn't give them to any of us. There are no deserving people. There are only people in need of grace.

Jesus referred to this incident in John 1:51. He told Nathanael, "You will see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." Jesus is the "stairway to heaven." By faith in him, by trusting in him and what he has done for us, we have access to heaven. There is hope for us, no matter how far short we feel like we might fail. That hope is not in our ability to do better or try harder, but in what Jesus has done for us. God's grace in Christ is that stairway to heaven.

GOD'S PRESENCE IS THE BEST THING WE COULD HAVE

When our kids were little they both had imaginary friends at one time or another. Carissa had a friend she called Silsa. Toby had a couple of imaginary friends, one of whom he reported was eaten by an alligator when we were visiting friends in Florida. I once heard an atheist opponent of Christianity talking about how sad it was that Christians were adults who had to believe in this imaginary friend that no one can see. Is God an imaginary friend that's really no different than Silsa?

One of the fundamental questions of life, one that we urgently must answer, is the question of whether God is real. Paul says God has given us ample evidence of his reality in creation. That's true. We can see that all of this did not happen on its own. It is reasonable to believe that there is a Creator. The resurrection of Christ is

solid, historical, flesh and blood evidence that God has visited this planet in physical form. So yes, we have reason to believe God is quite real.

But is he real in our lives? Laurie and I once had a landlord who did not want to be bothered with maintaining the property. His deal was he would lower our rent a certain amount if we would agree to handle all routine maintenance issues below a certain cost at the house. So we sent him a rent check every month. But we never saw him or heard from him. We knew he existed, but he almost didn't seem real. There came a point, though, where the carpet in the house was so awful we contacted him and told him it needed to be replaced. It was orange, and it was literally rotting away. He didn't want to do anything about it, but we insisted he at least come and look at it. He made a mistake. He brought his wife when he came. He started to say it wasn't that bad, but his wife interrupted him and said, "This is disgusting. We have to replace this." We rented that house for 7 years. That was the only time I ever saw him.

Is God like that? Is he kind of like an absentee landlord? He doesn't want to be bothered with us. Just send in your rent check every month. Make it out to the Anchor Church. Just kidding. That is not what the Bible says God is like. This story claims God would be involved in Jacob's life. He would be with him, he would watch over him, he would provide for him and he would give him peace. Here is the amazing news. God says in Christ we have entered into a covenant with him, just as Jacob enjoyed a covenant relationship with God. And in this covenant relationship he has promised us those same things. He is with us, he is watching over us, he is providing for us and he will give us peace.

GOD IS AT WORK IN OUR LIVES

God is very real, and he is present in our world. He is at work directing, shaping our lives, even when we can't see it. But we need to learn a lesson from Jacob. From the very beginning Jacob was told that God had a role for him to play. He would be the next patriarch, he would have the birthright, and all that came with it. All he needed to do was trust God. But this is the real world! He wanted those things, so he had to make them happen. And so he schemed and lied and cheated.

The result was he destroyed his own family and for years struggled when, had he just done it God's way, God would have brought it all about at the right time. In this incident God showed up and gave him promises. What he needed to do was trust the plan. Trust God. Let him work it out. But he wasn't ready to do that. So he tried to negotiate with God, then he went back to his old ways of conniving to get what he wanted.

He would spend the next 20 years working for a man who would pay him pennies on the dollar and would try to cheat him just as he had cheated others. It would end up causing considerable heartache for him. He could have avoided all of it by simply doing it God's way. Every day we are going to find ourselves facing a similar question. Will we do it our way, or will we do it God's way? Will we trust God or will we trust ourselves and our clever schemes and ploys to get not what God wants to give us but what we have decided we need?

God has promised to those who believe in Jesus Christ all of the things that he promised to Jacob. He has promised to be with us. In Hebrews 13:5 he said, "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you." He will be with you every moment of every day. Even when you sleep he is with you. You are never alone. He has promised he will watch over us. Jesus said God watches over even sparrows, and we are worth far more than sparrows to him. God has promised to provide for us. Philippians 4:19 says, "My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus." And God gives us peace. Philippians 4:7 says the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. John 14:27 Jesus says he gives us his peace. John 16:33 he says the things he teaches us are so that we may have peace, and that he has overcome the world.

God wants to bless us with all of these things that Jacob desired. They are ours in Christ. If we live in the reality of them imagine the confidence and peace that will give us. Imagine how freely we can live. I recently reflected back to when Laurie and I went on our honeymoon to Hawaii. We had to pay cash for everything. It was a little risky to carry enough cash to pay for everything we wanted to do so we had to get traveler's checks, which were accepted like cash. I can't ever remember the last time I bought traveler's checks. But we had a limited amount of traveler's checks and cash, so we had to be careful about how we spent that money. That meant we didn't do anything extra, like rent equipment or go on snorkeling boat tours. At one point while we were on Maui we realized the cash was running low so we decided we would go to McDonald's for dinner. Yeah, it was that bad. The point was, it was a little stressful at times. I have never been to an all-inclusive resort. But Michael and Carissa have. They went to one in the Caribbean and told us about the resort. It had several terrific restaurants. They could go to any of the restaurants they wanted and order as much of whatever they desired, and it was all included. If they wanted to do some snorkeling, the snorkel gear was provided free of charge. It was included. If they wanted to do some stand up paddle boarding, that was included. Here's the thing, is your relationship with God more like an all-inclusive resort or our honeymoon? What God promises is the all-inclusive resort. I

don't mean that you get whatever you want. But I do mean it can be that stress free because we can know that it is all taken care of. God has a plan that includes everything we need. He is with us, he is protecting us, he is providing whatever we need and he is giving us peace, so we can relax and enjoy the ride.

Jerry and I were blessed to have a dad who not only loved us, but who was a godly, admirable man who was a great example for us. He was such a vital and healthy man, I thought he would live to be very old. He didn't. When he was 72 years old he was diagnosed with the colon cancer that would take his life. He was told that his cancer would be terminal, but that through treatment he could live perhaps for several more years. That was a terrible time for all of us who loved him. Only a couple of months after his initial diagnosis there was an awful day when he had an appointment with the doctor and they had to share the crushing news. The treatment was not working and he would not live much longer. In fact he died only 3 months after his diagnosis. I remember that moment so well because Dad looked over at Mom and said, "Nothing has changed." She didn't understand what he meant, because it seemed like at that moment everything had changed, much for the worse. She said, "What do you mean?" He said, "God is still with us, he still loves us, and he is still in control." Dad was not getting what any of us wanted, but he was living in the all-inclusive resort. He was totally at peace in the most crushing, despairing of moments. He was living in God's presence, trusting in God's protection and provision, and experiencing his peace. The promises God has given, his presence, his peace, his provision, are most important in those moments when it feels like our world is imploding. My dad experienced the power of his promises and his presence.

But we can also decide we don't trust that. We can decide, like Jacob did, that we have to take control and get what we need and want for ourselves. We can try to negotiate with God and we can manipulate and struggle and connive to get what we want. And all we will do is create stress for ourselves, do harm to other people, and in the end make life much more difficult for ourselves just like Jacob did. Let's not do that. Let's trust in God's presence, protection, provision and peace. Let's live in that all inclusive resort.