

## To Bethel and Back

*Series: Jacob Have I Loved*

by David H. Roper

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We continue in the biblical account of our friend Jacob. In our last study we saw two contrasting ways of looking at legitimate, God-given rights. Isaac, Jacob's father, let God fight for him, and he secured his inheritance. The Lord gave him in every way what his heart desired. In contrast, Jacob fought for his rights, and he brought about a great deal of ruin and destruction in his own life and the life of his family.

As chapter 28 begins, we see more of the continuing disintegration of their family life. The first five verses describe Jacob's physical departure from Isaac's household. Verses 6 through 9 describe Esau's spiritual departure. Jacob was sent off to Paddan-aram, the "fields of Aram," the place his mother came from, to find a wife among the daughters of his uncle. Rebekah arranged this in order to protect her favorite son from Esau's revenge for the loss of his birthright. So Jacob went off to Aramaea, about 450 miles to the northeast across the Euphrates.

Esau is described as departing even further from the Lord. He had married Hittite wives. And to try to undo what he felt had displeased his father, he now married descendants of Ishmael, the other son of Abraham, who was outside the Messianic line. It is so characteristic of men that they try to undo one evil by doing another evil thing. This is what Esau did. He thought it would please his father if he took a wife from the tribe of Ishmael. But this simply indicates how spiritually obtuse Esau was; he could not get the point. He couldn't understand that God was going to work in a certain way, and that he needed to align himself with God's will, rather than try to work according to his own conception of right.

Then, in verse 10, the description of Jacob's journey from Beersheba to Haran begins. As far as we know, Jacob never had been very far from home. He was not young--in his seventies at this time--but had lived most of his life in the Negev, the southern part of Canaan. But now he is called upon to make this dangerous journey across uncharted territory, where he would have to live off the land, and where there were giants and fortified cities. It was only about 500 years later that Moses sent spies into this same area, and they came back with the report that it was a land flowing with milk and honey, extremely fruitful, but that there were also giants and fortified cities in the land. A piece of Egyptian literature called *A Tale of Sinuhe* was written about this same time. It describes some of the rigors of travel in this area--conflict with giants and care provided by traveling Bedouins. It gives us an inkling of Jacob's experiences as he traveled across country.

**Then Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran. And he came to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place. And he had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it, And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. Your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And behold, I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."**

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on its top. And he called the name of that place Bethel; however, previously the name of the city had been Luz. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey, that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, and I return to my, father's house in safety, then the Lord will be my God. And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God's house; and of all that Thou dost give me I will surely give a tenth to Thee."

This was a remarkable experience--one that marked Jacob for life. It was perhaps his second most important experience with God. It evidently occurred at the end of Jacob's second day of travel. Luz is about 50 miles or two days' journey from Beersheba, and Jacob had traveled these two days looking behind him every step, certain that Esau was after him. I am sure he was lonely and homesick, frightened and hungry and cold, and he happened upon this particular site.

The New American Standard Version marginal note for verse 11 says he "lighted on" the place, implying that it was by accident. That is, there was nothing particularly significant about this place. It is true that some years earlier his grandfather Abraham had camped for a brief period near Bethel -- between Bethel and Ai--but this would be some miles to the east of where Jacob encamped that night. The point Scripture seems to be making repeatedly in this passage is that it was merely a place, an insignificant location. It had been the ancient Canaanite city of Luz, but since had fallen into ruin. And since the sun had set and it was growing cold, Jacob took a rock, one of the stones from the ruins, set it up as a backrest, perhaps built a fire to warm himself, and leaned against this stone, exhausted, hungry, frightened, lonely--for there was no one around. It was just a campsite. It had no particular religious significance whatever.

But in the middle of the night Jacob had a dream. He saw a stairway which seemed to incorporate part of the stone--i.e., the stairway began at his head -- and reached up to heaven. And on this stairway were angels, ascending and descending as if on a celestial escalator. Angels, in the Scriptures, are messengers sent to care for the saints. They carry out God's commands, and carry the requests of the saints back to God. So this is a picture of access to God, and of supply--Jacob offering up his requests, expressing his needs, and God moving immediately to meet them.

Then in this dream there is a statement from the Lord. He is standing at the top of this stairway, so that the angels were coming from him to Jacob and back again--a beautiful picture. And he promises Jacob the same things that he promised Abraham. This is the first appearance of God to Jacob. He had appeared to Abraham numerous times; he had appeared to Isaac; and he will appear to Jacob some seven times during his lifetime. But this was the first occurrence. He reaffirms the covenant he made with Abraham: first, he will have the Land, the land of Canaan, from the river Euphrates on the northeast, south to the River of Egypt. As a matter of fact, he says that the very spot on which Jacob is lying belongs to him. The sons of Israel have the land of Palestine by divine right, and they have enjoyed the possession of that land when they have walked in obedience to God. Second, he will be the father of many descendants, who would spread to the east and west and north and south. This, of course, is the promise of the millions of Jews who sprang from Jacob, the father of the nation Israel.

This is fulfilled in his physical descendants, first of all, but also in his spiritual descendants. For, hidden away in this passage is a Messianic reference. The Hebrew word for "seed," like the English word, is a collective noun, i.e., it is singular in form, but can be used either as singular or plural. In its plural application it would refer to all the physical descendants of Jacob; in its singular, it refers to Messiah. Paul picks this up in Galatians 3:16:

**Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as referring to many, but rather to one, "And to your seed," that is, Christ.**

And this refers not only to Jesus, the Messiah, but to all those who are in Messiah, i.e., all those who believe, who are identified with Christ. So the promise given to Jacob refers physically to his descendants and spiritually to Christ and all of those who know him.

The third promise Jacob is given is found in verse 15:

**And behold, I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.**

Now, this is the great promise. This is the one that would lighten Jacob's heart as perhaps no other: "I am with you. Wherever you go, whatever you do, whatever your circumstances are, I am with you." And he underscores this by this vision of the stairway. "Jacob, utter your needs, and I will respond. Ask and you shall receive; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you." This represents a continual supply; whatever our need is, God meets that need. This is what the Lord wanted Jacob to know. Wherever he went, he had this same sort of access to God.

Actually, this had been true in Jacob's life for seventy-seven years. The Lord had been that kind of God to Jacob. Whatever his need was, he met it. But it was only now that Jacob saw it. The veil was torn away from his eyes so that, for an instant, he saw spiritual truths which ordinarily are hidden--because we humans live, for the most part, in the physical dimension-but which are none the less true.

This happens from time to time in Scripture. There is the account in 2 Kings 6 of an incident which took place in Elisha's life. He and his servant had taken refuge in a little city called Dothan (the place where Joseph was placed in a pit by his brothers) while fleeing from the Syrian army. Elisha had inside information about the Syrians and had been tipping off the Israelites as to their whereabouts. So the Syrian king decided to get Elisha. During the night the whole Syrian army surrounded the city, and in the morning Elisha's servant looked out and saw this vast army and knew they were all after Elisha. The servant panicked, but Elisha said, "It's all right; there are more of us than there are of them." The servant counted, "One, two...two of us, and several thousand of them..." Then God opened the servant's eyes, and he saw on the mountains surrounding the Syrian army a vast army of angels, and he was no longer fearful. God tore the veil away so he could see. This is what the Lord is doing for Jacob. He opens his eyes so he can see what has been true all along.

So the significance of this site is not that it had some religious history attached to it. The reason God was there was that Jacob was there. Wherever Jacob went, God would be there. Jacob was on his way up to Haran, which by this time had become idolatrous. The people there had rejected the truth and worshiped another god entirely, as becomes apparent later on. He was going to be in a situation where people were deceitful, cruel, vicious, and untrustworthy. But wherever Jacob went, that would be "Beth-el," "the house of God," that would be the gate of heaven. There would be access to God there. God would be there, because Jacob would be there.

We have a tendency to invest certain places with religious significance, because we feel that is where God is. Passages like this show us that God is wherever we are. God does not live in this church building. He is here when we are here. But when we are gone, this is not a holy site. Wherever you go, that is the house of God, that is the gate of heaven. This means that your house -- which may seem a cold and loveless place to you--is the house of God. There are angels ascending and descending upon you as you move about in that house. Your kitchen sink is the house of God, when you are there. That ought to change your attitude about washing dishes! When you have been cooking all afternoon, have served up a fine meal, and then everybody has gone off to watch TV (as they probably did on Thanksgiving Day) and you are left to wash the dirty dishes, remember, that is the house of God. God is available to you right there. For some of you businessmen, your car is your office, and in it you go from place to place. And because of the state of the economy, you are really suffering. Remember, that car is the house of God. Your office or workbench, or wherever you are throughout the day, is the house of God.

I am not sure Jacob understood this thoroughly, because he did invest a great deal of significance in this site at this point. But later on, as we will see, he recognized this truth. He says in verses 20 and 21,

**If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, and I return to my father's house in safety, then the Lord will be my God.**

He was concerned, as we are, about the nitty-gritty things of life: clothes and food and shelter and protection. He was in a country where he was vulnerable to attack, both from man and beast. And he was hungry, he needed food; he was cold, he needed clothing. And God is concerned about those very practical affairs of life. Wherever Jacob went, the God of Bethel went with him. He had that sort of access.

In John 1 Jesus picks up the figure of this episode. I never saw the connection until I studied Jacob's life. I am sure you are familiar with the account. Philip found Nathanael and brought him to Jesus. Jesus said, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" Israel is the other name for Jacob. And here was an Israelite, a descendant of Jacob, who was guileless, without deceit, which is the meaning of the Greek work for "guile." Nathanael was a descendant of Jacob who was without deceit—a rarity indeed. We can say the same thing about ourselves. It is rare to find one of us who is not deceitful, But here was one who was not. And Jesus said so. Nathanael asked Jesus, "How do you know me?" Jesus told him, "Before Philip found you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." And Nathanael realized that a person with that kind of insight into his life, character, and activity must be the Messiah, and he said, "You are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." Jesus said to him, "Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You shall see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you shall see the heavens opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

That term, "the Son of Man", is the term Jesus uses to refer to his own identification with mankind. It is a Messianic term, but it refers primarily to Jesus' identification with us as man. He was man, as God intended man to be. And what he said of himself is true of all of us. When we return to the Lord, when he becomes our Lord, then, just as Jesus said, the angels ascend and descend upon us. We have the same kind of firsthand relationship to God our Lord had. It ought to change our attitude toward life to know that wherever we go, whatever we do, we have this kind of relationship.

It is interesting that this passage and several others in Scripture mention that Bethel was formerly known as Luz. Ordinarily in Genesis it is stated the other way around: "This is the city formerly called so-and-so; it is now called such-and-such." Moses, writing 500 years later, was using place names which no longer were in use. But this statement, and the others like it, turn it around, says it is now Bethel, but formerly was known as Luz. Whenever you have a statement repeated several times in Scripture, it must have particular significance. "Lu'z" means "deceit", and is synonymous with Jacob's name. I am convinced that the Lord is the Lord of geography as well as the Lord of history, and these names are planned according to the Lord of history, and these names are planned according to his Sovereign activity. Is it not interesting that Jacob, the master of deceit, arrives at a place that was formerly called "Deceit"; and there he learns a new truth: that God is the God of Bethel? This was the house of God. And wherever Jacob went, that was the house of God to him.

I commend to your own study a story in Judges 1. I do not have time to elaborate on it. It is the account of an attack by the house of Joseph against Bethel, which had fallen into the hands of the Hittites. They saw a man coming out of the city and captured him, saying they would let him go if he would reveal the secrets of the city. So he showed them the entrance, and they took the city and let the man go free. That passage also says that the name of the city was formerly Luz. The man went back to his country, the land of the Hittites (in what today is Turkey), and there he built a city and named it Luz. Is it not interesting that some men, wherever they go, perpetuate their deceitful ways. But there are others, like Jacob, who discover wherever they go that God is at work. "This is God's house; he is in control. He is the Master of the house, not I." Jacob's life has been characterized, as we have seen, by scheming and conniving and manipulating people and things in order to get his own way. But he is beginning to learn that he must trust the Lord; he cannot trust himself.

Jacob spent some twenty years in Haran, and by any reckoning, they were terrible years. He met his match when he arrived there, for his uncle Laban was as big a cheat as he. Laban was a schemer and a conniver, and would have chiseled Jacob out of everything he had. But it is amazing to see how Jacob stopped trying to deceive, and stopped trying to manipulate people. He really began to let the Lord be Lord in his life. We do not have time to go through the account, but I am sure it is familiar to you. Laban tried every way he could to cheat Jacob. But Jacob refused to give in to his tendency to go back to the old way of living, working things out for himself. He rested his

case in the Lord's hands and let the Lord fight for him. And he came out of Haran a wealthy man, with many flocks and herds, and a large family—eleven sons and several daughters, two wives (and a number of other items he did not particularly want). But the Lord blessed him immeasurably. As you look through the account you notice a theme which occurs repeatedly. Chapter 31, verse 3:

**Then the Lord said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you."**

In verse 5, Jacob says to his wives Rachel and Leah,

**"...the God of my father has been with me."**

Verse 7:

**"Yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times; however, God did not allow him to hurt me."**

Verse 9:

**"Thus God has taken away your father's livestock and given them to me."**

Verse 13; the Lord says to Jacob,

**'I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me; now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth.'**

You see, wherever he went the God of Bethel was with him. The Lord took away the flocks of Laban and gave them to Jacob. He allowed Jacob to work through all the difficult circumstances surrounding his family life—and, believe me, they were difficult! Yet the Lord brought harmony and accord out of his marital entanglements, because Jacob relied upon the God of Bethel.

Then, in chapter 35, Jacob returns to Bethel:

**Then God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel. and live there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau." So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your garments; and let us arise and go up to Bethel; and I will make an altar there to God who [I want to retranslate this] answers me in the day of my distress..."**

It is not, "who answered me;" it is a participle, "...the God who keeps on answering me in times of distress." The word translated "distress" means "to bind," "to tie a knot." There is nothing that ties us into knots emotionally more quickly than oppression and injustice. And that was what happened in Jacob's life. The entire time he was in Haran he was cheated and manipulated, pushed and shoved, frustrated. Yet he says, "Whenever I was oppressed, whenever I was frustrated, whenever I was tied up in knots, I cried out to the God of Bethel, who answers me." You see, he really learned what that stairway meant. He really had that kind of relationship to God.

This is what Paul is talking about in Philippians 4:6:

**Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Let your forbearing spirit be known to all men.** [(Forbearance is the capacity to hold up under injustice—gentleness and quietness of heart

when the heat is on.) Why?] **The Lord is at hand.**

One mark of maturity is the awareness that in every circumstance, no matter how bleak and barren and ruined and cold, the Lord is at hand. The Lord is near. That is Bethel, the house of God, where you have access to him, where he will never leave you, will never forsake you.

May we never forget, Father, the nearness of the Lord. Thank you for the encouragement and comfort it gives us to know that, despite our circumstances, you are there, you are present. You know, and you see, and you hear, and we have access to you. We thank you, Father, for this access to the grace in which we stand, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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