



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Genesis 28: 1-22

“Jacob's Ladder: Grace Unsought, Unstinting and Unforgettable”

TRANSCRIPT

The Scripture reading for this morning is Genesis chapter 28. Remember, in the context of Genesis chapter 28, we have, in the preceding chapter, been given an account by Moses of the stolen blessing and then of the response of Esau to the confirming of the blessing to Jacob, of the threat of Esau to murder Jacob, and then the reaction of Rebekah to that threat in urging that Jacob leave and go to the East in order to escape the wrath of Esau. Genesis, chapter 28 begins with,

"So Isaac called Jacob and blessed him and charged him and said to him, 'You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan. Arise, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel, your mother's father, and from there take to yourself a wife from the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother.' (You will notice from this that Jacob is to take a wife from his first cousins and this of course has caused some difficulty due to the fact that it is not our custom to marry within that particular relationship. But as we mentioned from time to time, the genetic problems probably did not exist in those early days of the human race and consequently this really is no serious problem at all. The 3rd verse continues the account:) 'And may God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you that you may become a company of peoples. May he also give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your descendants with you, that you may possess the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Abraham.' Then Isaac sent Jacob away, and he went to Paddan-

aram to Laban, son of Bethuel, the Syrian, the brother of Rebekah, the mother of Jacob and Esau’ (And notice the order of words. That probably is not a slip of the pen. Instead of Esau and Jacob, as one might expect for Esau was the older brother, now in the light of the preeminence of Jacob, we have ‘Jacob and Esau’). Now, Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him to away to Paddan-aram to take to himself a wife from there and that when he blessed him, he charged him saying, ‘You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan.’ And that Jacob had obeyed his father and his mother and had gone to Paddan-aram. So, Esau saw that the daughters of Canaan displeased his father, Isaac. And Esau went to Ishmael and married. Besides the wives that he had, Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham’s son, the sister of Nebaioth. 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 sent 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.’ (You will notice from that threefold occurrence of the word *himeh* translated “behold” in verses 12 and 13, but this is designed to be presented as an account that was a surprising and startling experience for Jacob. In verse 13, we read,) “And behold, the Lord stood above it.”

Now, that little expression, if you have a Bible with a marginal reading, may be rendered “beside him” rather than “above it,” the ladder. In the light of verse 16 in which we read that Jacob said when he awakened from his sleep, “Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it,” it would seem that the translation, “beside him,” is really better than “above it.” So, we will take it in that way. “And behold, the Lord stood beside him, and said, ‘I am the Lord.’ Continuing with the words of the Lord in this theophany in verse 14, we read:

“Jacob’s Ladder: Grace Unsought, Unstinting and Unforgettable” by S. Lewis Johnson
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“Your descendants shall also 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.” (Isn't that interesting? “I will keep you wherever you go.” It is not, “I will keep you in all places wherever you follow the divine leading.” But it's, “I will keep you wherever you go.” In other words, the keeping is a keeping that is guaranteed regardless of the experience of Jacob.) “I will keep you wherever you go. And I will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until what I have done what I have promised you.”

In other words, as we have been saying over and over again in the exposition of the Bible in Believer's Chapel, ‘The God of the Bible is a God who cannot be frustrated.’ Again, that sentiment is expressed. It's expressed so much in the Bible; it's a miracle that so many people do not understand that, cannot see it. ‘I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.’
Verse 16:

“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.’ The Authorized Version renders that, ‘How dreadful is this place!’ (The adjective, ‘dreadful’, of course has different connotations now from its connotation when the King James Version was rendered. Dreadful then meant awe-inspiring, and that is the meaning of this Hebrew word, *no-rab* which is a participle from the verb, which means “to fear.” So, 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’ which means of course ‘House of God’. 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.”

That has often been taken as a kind of a bargain that Jacob made with God, and of course it is possible but rather unlikely. When Jacob says, “If God will be with me,” he does not mean to suggest any doubt about the matter. God has just said in verse 15, “And behold, I am with you.” Now, this “if” is the “if” of assumption such as we might make if you were to say to me, “I am going over to Northpark to do some shopping.” I might say, “Well, if you are going to Northpark, would you mind buying this for me.” Now, that would not be an expression casting doubt upon the truthfulness of what you have said, it would be an assumption of the truthfulness of what you said. So when Jacob makes the vow, he says, “If God will be with me” in the sense of “Since God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take and will be 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 doest give me, I will surely give a tenth to Thee.” That’s a tithe. And you can see that the tithe again is a voluntary gift. The tithe became a requirement in the Law of Moses later on but here, it’s a voluntary gift. The tithe in the Law of Moses was like the income tax. It was something that you had to give. It really was not even a gift. Gifts and offerings were above the tithe but this is something voluntary. “I will surely give a tenth to Thee.”

May the Lord bless this reading of his word.

The subject in the exposition of the Book of Genesis is “Jacob’s ladder: Grace Unsought, Unstinting, and Unforgettable.” The vision of Jacob’s ladder is a stunning display of the divine grace. It provoked in the patriarch Jacob, a rather telling response of thanksgiving and gratitude. It was a display of grace that one of the commentators has called ‘unsought and unstinting.’ It was unsought because Jacob was no pilgrim or prodigal returning after having spent a long way away from God. It was not the picture of the prodigal son, Jacob rushing out to meet the Lord and the Lord rushing to

meet him, but rather Jacob was taken wholly by surprise, and it was unstinting because there was no word of reproach or demand in spite of the experiences of Jacob. All that Jacob heard was a stream of promises that flowed from that central utterance, “I am the Lord, and I am with you.” He was promised that his influence would extend to the four corners of the earth, and that he would be, by virtue of his relationship to Abraham and Isaac, the promised seed a blessing to all of mankind.

These words that the Lord spoke to Jacob were remarkably relevant to the condition of Jacob because the promise of the presence of God was just what this solitary, lonely, sojourner on his way from Beersheba to Haran needed. And the mention of the divine covenant was something that was calculated to sustain him in a very special way, the promise of the land as an inheritance has been repeated over and over again, and that, too, would have been an encouragement to him because he was now being forced to leave that land.

But most of all, the promise of this omnipotent, powerful God, “I am the Lord,” being with him was the thing that would have been a means of tremendous encouragement and assurance to him. The sovereign assurance that this God was the one who could not be frustrated in His purposes and that they would ultimately come to pass must have also been an encouragement to Jacob. We know that this experience was so unforgettable for Jacob that he erected a permanent reminder of the occasion at Bethel, the House of God. The response of Jacob has sometimes been called a mere bargain, but I tried in the Scripture reading to make it plain that Jacob is not really bargaining, he is arguing or expressing his own affirmation, his own dedication on the basis of the promise that God has just given him: “Behold, I am with you!” And so, this is not a bargain that the patriarch makes with God, it is really an expression of his faith.

Now, when you think of the story of the life of Jacob, and it certainly is an interesting story, almost as interesting as the life of Abraham, in the minds of some even more interesting because Jacob seems at times to be more like us. You will notice that right here there begins the series of experiences that have to do with his sanctification. You will notice that Jacob, on the one hand, is a man of faith, and then, on the other hand, he is a man of “slick maneuvers and cunning ways,” as

someone has put it. He was by nature strong-willed and ambitious and self-reliant and shrewd and at times, unethical.

Jacob was a man of domestic capability and fidelity, and Esau was a brave, generous, heroic, rugged hunter who broke away from the quiet pastoral life and lived a reckless, self-indulgent career of pleasure. Unfortunately, because we possess the sin nature, we are often influenced toward Esau rather than toward Jacob, but the important way in which Jacob differed from Esau is something that we must see if we are to understand God because, you see, he is not influenced by how attractive we are. He is not influenced by the fact that we are, in the eyes of men, appealing. The thing that is important to God is the fundamental spiritual commitment of an individual, and Jacob, with all of his ways that are very often almost despicable to us, had the fundamental relationship to God upon which the Holy Spirit builds a foundation.

But in the case of Esau, there is no foundation at all. Esau is the unbelieving man. Jacob is the believing man. They both are crooks, but in different ways. Jacob is one in whom the work of God has begun and it’s a long ways from being perfected. The work of sanctification is a lengthy work. And you will see in Jacob’s life that it takes a long time for him to reach the stage where we might say in our own self-righteous hypocritical way. Well, I see that he is worthy of our pronouncing upon him the fact that he might be one of the faithful. The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints must be understood in the light of the experiences of the saints of the Old Testament. And if you have some idea that the perseverance of the saints means that the saints lived a perfect life outwardly after they believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, then, of course, you must change your views. It is an excellent illustration of what a Christian is and also what a Christian must go through on the way to the perfection, which is in the future.

George Swanwick, one of the Puritans, said, “A sanctified person is like a silver bell, the harder he is smitten, the better he sounds.” What we learn that at the heart of Jacob is a heart that is right with God. But there is an awful lot of chance and as we follow him in his experiences, we will learn how a supplanter and a crooked man can become a prince with God in reality. The road is

hard and it is difficult, and it is rocky but the one who is set on his road by God is certain to reach the destination. That is what the perseverance of the saints means. It means they persevere in the faith. It does not mean that they are holy and righteous and that we cannot see any flaws in their character. It means there has been a fundamental transformation in the innermost being and that they do not apostatize from the faith.

Now our account begins with the story of Jacob’s departure to Paddan-aram from Beersheba and the chapter opens specifically with a charge from Isaac. What a great amount of trouble would have been averted if Isaac, long before this, had called Jacob to him and charged him to go and get himself a wife from the daughters of the family in the north and in the east. Isaac evidently delayed telling Jacob that he ought to find a wife for himself because he was still hopeful that Esau might be the recipient of the promised blessing.

But Jacob was God’s choice to perpetuate the land of the promised seed. And furthermore, there was some danger that Esau might attempt to slay Jacob. And I think also if you read this account fairly closely, you will see that Rebekah had some personal feelings about those wives of Esau. He married two Hittite women and they were difficult people around the house. In fact, verse 46 of chapter 27 says that Rebekah said to Isaac, “I’m tired of living because of the daughters of Heth.” It is not pleasant to live in a house in which there are believers and unbelievers. Unbelievers and believers do not think the same way. They have different world views and when issues come up, unbelievers respond one way and believers respond another. I sympathize with Rebekah. She must have had a great deal of trouble. And so in the light of Esau’s threat to slay Jacob, and in the light of the wives of Esau, those Hittite women which were giving her difficulty, she saw immediate need of sending Jacob off to escape Esau and to give her some relief.

Now I think also she used the occasion and the occasion was simply that Jacob needed a wife and so she went to Isaac and she said: “Look, he needs to have a wife. And he needs to have a wife from our family because it was not easy to find those who truly believed in Jehovah.” And the faith still was part of the possession of the family to the north and east. Isaac’s charge to Jacob

reflects Abraham’s to the servant, which he gave, “Don’t take a wife from the daughters of Canaan, but go to my family and select a wife there.” And Jacob is urged to find a wife among his cousins and these were first cousins too. Not first cousins, once removed, or second cousins or third but first cousins. Because the race was relatively young still and the mutational defects in the race were probably very minimal at this time. So off to the relatives in Mesopotamia, Jacob goes, and the patriarch is sent off with a blessing from God Almighty or El Shaddai reminding Jacob of the covenant promises given to Abraham.

Incidentally, he was to go and select a wife who would be a believing wife. Now this was to be a scriptural marriage in other words. It was to be something, well, Abraham had made that very plain that believers should marry believers. The Apostle Paul makes it very plain in the New Testament. It is still a truth that we should pay strict attention to. Because, you see, the Christian home is the simplest form of the church of Jesus Christ. It is the simplest form in this respect that the husband is to love the wife as Christ loved the church and the wife is to be in submission to her head as the church is to be in submission to its head. And so in the Christian home, there is the simplest illustration of what a true local church should be. How foolish it is for a husband to marry a woman and not love her as Christ loved the church and how foolish it is for a woman to marry a man and not desire to be in submission to him as the church is in submission to Jesus Christ. And what a tremendous testimony a Christian home is of the relationship that exists in the true church when the husband loves and the wife is in submission.

So Jacob is to find himself a wife. Incidentally, you can certainly tell a great deal about a man if you meet the woman that he loves and you learn something about Jacob when you meet Rachel, and you learn something about Abraham when you meet Sarah. And I think that you can tell something about a woman by the man that she loves too. So, we learn something about Jacob when we get acquainted with Rachel.

Now Jacob left and he stayed in Mesopotamia for twenty years, so he was given a rather lengthy period of discipline. As a matter of fact, Rebekah, so far as we know, never saw Jacob again.

Why this lengthy time for Jacob? Why didn’t he simply go and get himself a wife? Well evidently, he needed some disciplining. And so he went there because he needed some maturing. He was after all a man of the home. He was not like Esau who was out on the mountains, but he was person who was a homebody. He was also clearly under the influence of Rebekah and what he needed to do was to learn some waiting upon God for himself. He needed to get off by himself in the pastures as a shepherd, which he did become, and to think about spiritual things. He needed to learn to wait upon God. That is a lesson that we sadly desperately need in the 20th Century, waiting upon God. There are people who say we cannot really meditate upon divine things in the 20th Century. We cannot really wait upon God as they did then because our lives are so busy.

Now, that’s not the problem. The problem is we don’t really want to. We don’t really want to wait on God. If we wanted to wait on God, if we wanted to spend time meditating upon him, there’d be plenty of time to do that. And furthermore, you will discover that God would make it possible. So if the Holy Spirit has implanted within your heart the desire to wait upon him and to get off by yourself with him, follow the urgings of the Holy Spirit and learn to wait upon him. So it was a form of discipline that Jacob needed. Stephen Charnock has said, “We often learn more of God under the rod that strikes us than under the staff that comforts us.” So Jacob needed to have some experiences that were disappointments to him that would try his patience. And his patience was really tried, too.

Now the marriage of Esau is inserted, and it’s a beautiful illustration of how unbelievers often seek to imitate believers in order to gain an accolade or two from other professing believers, and even believers. Have you ever noticed in the Christian church how there are some genuine believers, who guided by the Holy Spirit and true desire to please the Lord and in meekness and humility, serve the Lord effectively, and then there are others who seek to imitate? Esau heard the words that were spoken by Isaac to Jacob, or he found out about them. He knew that Jacob had said, “Go and get yourself a wife from our family, not from the daughters of the Canaanites.” Well, he’d already married two of the daughters of the Canaanites. He’d lost his birthright; he’d lost his

blessing and evidently thought, “Well at least I can get some commendation from Isaac by marrying within the family.”

So he went off to Uncle Ishmael and married one of Ishmael’s daughters. He didn’t put away his other two, he just added a third. So he has three now, and furthermore he also married one of the daughters of Ishmael, and it’s already evident that Ishmael had been cut out by God as far as the national promises were concerned. But I’m sure there were some people who said: “Wasn’t that nice of Esau. He went out and married someone who’s in the family.” But only immature people make statements like that. This is clearly an indication of how the unbeliever seeks to imitate the believer.

In the Christian church, there is a great deal of that. There are those who see a true deacon rise in the church who has a desire within his heart to truly serve and he hears somebody say, “Isn’t that nice, the way God had implanted in that man’s heart the desire to serve, and he is serving so effectively.” And then the individual says, “Well he’s doing this work and he is being commended for it. I think I’ll do it.” And so he does it out of a desire for commendation. Or a man rises in the midst of the assembly with a deep desire to “shepherd the flock.” They have the oversight. And the elders see that this man has been appointed by the Holy Spirit as an elder. That’s the way incidentally you become an elder, by the appointment of the Holy Spirit. And there is implanted within the Holy Spirit a desire to oversee.

You don’t elect them by voting upon them. There is only one vote that really counts and that’s the vote of the Holy Spirit who appoints an elder to office. An elder always exercises his oversight before he is recognized, not afterwards. You don’t go and say to a man, “We’d like for you to be an elder.” And he’d say, “Well, I’ve got to be an elder now, so I’ll have to exercise oversight.” No, no. That’s the reverse of the way in which it should be done. You look and see what God has done and you see there is a man who is exercising oversight, who has a desire to serve the flock, to guard them, to keep them, to shepherd them. And then the elders recognize that, which the Holy Spirit has done. But then someone sees and hears some say, “Isn’t it nice, the way he has been

appointed by the Holy Spirit and is serving the flock in humility and self-abnegation? I think I’ll do that.” And so an imitation in order to gain commendation. One of the commentators says it was a rather pathetic attempt, like the closing of the barn door after the horse was gone.

Well the major part of the chapter has to do with Jacob’s dream at Bethel and we turn to it. The distance from Beersheba to Haran was over 400 miles, and so this was a lengthy journey for Jacob. It was a lonely and trying trip because he was not used to this kind of thing. He was already 70 miles out when he reached Luz. He left Rebekah. He left the comfortable environs of his home, and the text of Scriptures said, “He lighted upon a certain place.”

Now, we’re not to think of this as a chance location. “God does not throw dice,” Einstein has said. He does not lead people by chance. This is something that was determined by God. It was at Luz that Luz became Bethel. It was there specifically. And when the texts says that he lighted upon this place, it means that so far as Jacob was concerned, he had no special purpose in camping at that spot. This incidentally was the first of seven theophanies which Jacob experienced. So he was a man who was blessed by God, with seven appearances of the deity. And I think it is significant that this theophany occurred to Jacob while he was alone. I stress that because I do think that one of the reasons that we do not experience the blessing of God is that we do not get alone with God. I don’t suggest to you of course that you’re going to have a theophany if you get alone, but you might have something just as valuable. You might have some experiences of getting to know the Lord that would be just as significant and effective in your life.

Well the description of the word of God is rather striking and it’s startling to Jacob, no doubt, and that’s why we have these “beholds” and he had a dream and, “Behold, a ladder was sent 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 beside it and said ‘I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac.’”

The ladder; now what is signified by the ladder? Well I think it’s very plain that this is designed to be symbolic of something. The ladder that he saw, which must have been very wide,

because the angels were both ascending and descending upon it, and it was certainly very tall because it reached to heaven. So it was a very large ladder and it was a very wide ladder, very high and very broad. One of the Lutheran commentators, a very good commentator, H. C. Leupold, has said, “Such a clearcut dream must embody a deeper symbolism. Why a ladder? Why the angels? Why the Lord above it? Answer, in order to convey via visible sign what the words themselves also convey as Yahweh speaks.” That’s right. In other words, this is designed to express in symbolic fashion what is expressed by the words that are spoken at this theophany.

Now you can, of course, immediately sense that if we have a ladder that reaches from the earth to the heavens, that there is a communication between earth and heaven. So there is some communion between the earth and heaven. That would be signified, right at the beginning. There is an uninterrupted communion between heaven and earth, and it is mediated by the angels.

Now, also, Jacob needed help and he needed protection, an assurance of protection. And the angels going up and down, for the angels are the ministers of God for those who are to inherit salvation. I would suggest the divine help that comes by virtue of his servants, the angels. That would surely be involved in this.

Now when we turn to the New Testament, we see something else that’s not obvious from the old, because, remember, in the Bible we have progress in the divine revelation. We do not have in the Book of Genesis the same full clear unfolding of the ministry of the Lord Jesus that we have in the New Testament. We don’t mean by this that the saints of the Old Testament did not have a personal faith in a Redeemer to come, they did. That’s very obvious. The New Testament writers affirm it. The Old Testament also expresses it but it was not as plain and clear. And so, when we turn to the New Testament, we can expect that certain things should be added to it.

Now there is an interesting passage in the fourth gospel in which this particular text is referred to. It is the incident in which Nathaniel was brought by Philip to the Lord Jesus. Philip was one of those individuals who thought that the best way to propagate Christianity is to proclaim it. And so he proclaimed it. And he also was one who thought the simplest and profoundest

apologetics was “come and see.” Now, Nathaniel, in that little incident at the end of John chapter 1, had evidently been meditating on Genesis chapter 28. It’s clear from a couple of things. It’s clear, because when he comes to the Lord Jesus, the Lord said to him, “Behold an Israelite, in whom there is no guile.”

Now remember an Israelite is a follower of Jacob. So it’s almost as if he were saying, “Behold an Israelite in whom there is no Jacob.” Now Nathaniel was a man like that, he was a man who was guileless, not sinless, guileless. He was a very frank man. He said, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” He did not realize, of course, that The Good Thing comes out of Nazareth. And later on he will acknowledge it. He will say, “Behold, The Son of God, the King of Israel.” The Israelite acknowledges his King of Israel. When he comes to the Lord Jesus, and the Lord said to him, “Nathaniel, before you saw me, I saw you sitting under the fig tree.” And sitting under the fig tree incidentally was, according to rabbinic thought, the proper place to sit when you wanted to meditate on the Bible.

So he was meditating, and furthermore, he was obviously meditating on Genesis chapter 28, because the Lord Jesus refers to this specific incident. And he says in his conversation with Nathaniel, “Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe why you’ll see greater things than these?” Then He turned to Nathaniel and then evidently there were others about Nathaniel for he moved from the singular to the plural in verse 51 of chapter 1 of John, and He said, “Truly, truly, I say to you,” plural, “You shall see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Now Nathaniel knew what he was talking about, because he had just been reading Genesis 28. That’s one reason why we don’t have experiences with the Lord. We don’t have the knowledge of the Scriptures. And so the Lord Jesus comes to him, he’s been meditating on Genesis chapter 28 and he says, “Look, you want to see greater things than you have seen when you were meditating on Genesis chapter 28. You’re going to see the heavens opened.” That’s striking, isn’t it? The heavens opened as if there was access to heaven for sinful men. And you’re going to see the angels of God

ascending and descending. There is going to be a communion between the opened heavens and this earth down here. But you’re going to see the angels ascending and descending not upon a ladder, but upon the Son of Man.

Did you notice that substitution? That’s what you call interpreting the Old Testament by the New Testament, historical realities of the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was, in effect, saying the ladder in the Old Testament is a symbolical item and it is symbolical of the Son of Man. It is by virtue of the Son of Man, who has come from the open heavens and has carried out or is to carry out His ministry of sacrifice. It’s by virtue of his mediator that the heavens are opened and there is communion, enduring communion between heaven and earth. That is, those who approach heaven through the ladder of the Son of Man, who is the way, the truth and the life. No man cometh unto the Father, except by Him. “I am the Door, by Me if any man enter in, he shall be saved. He shall go in and out, and find pasture.” So, you see the ladder is symbolical of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jacob didn’t understand the fullness of that yet, but Nathaniel did. Nathaniel came to understand it. And I’ve come to understand it too. That’s what he’s talking about. “You shall see greater things than this.” You shall see the mediation of the Son of Man. Well that’s a magnificent symbolical expression of what is going to take place, but the words that follow are just as great. Now notice the promises. First of all, he begins by saying, “I am the Lord. I am Yahweh. 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.” That very piece of land on which Jacob was putting his head is to be given to him. So, he is talking about something very specific, but listen to the other promises. “Your descendants also shall be like the dust of the earth. You shall spread out in all directions. All the families of the earth will be blessed and Behold, I am with you!”

Now what a tremendous, climactic final promise this is! “I am with you. I will keep you wherever you go. I will bring you back into the land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised to you.” What a relevant promise this was for Jacob because there he was 70 miles

from home, 400 miles almost from his destination out alone, mother’s boy. He was fearful, disturbed, no doubt, wondered what the future held. “He was lonesome,” one of the commentators has said, so God said, “I will be with you”. He feared Esau. God said, “I will keep you.” He did not know what hardships he might have to face. God said, “I will do what I have spoken to you.”

And often you know appearances seem so contradictory to the promises of God, don’t they? You are going through some deep experiences and you hear the promises the Lord is going to be with you, but it seems that the last truth that is really valid in such a situation is that very truth that the Lord is with us and so it is almost as if Jacob said, “Well, Lord you say that you will be with me. You say that you will keep me. You say that I will not be forsaken, but it certainly looks as if I’m forsaken. I am certainly fearful and I don’t see any evidence of you around.” Well it’s at that time that the Lord adds, “I will do what I have spoken to you.” In other words, “I am not going to be frustrated.” Of course, these are promises that belong to believers. They do not belong to unbelievers. They belong to those who have put their faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ by the grace of God.

Now that great promise “I am with you” must have had a special meaning to Jacob beyond that suggested above because Jacob was a man influenced by the times and in those days they did not think of God as we do. We think of God and when we think of the term God we think of someone who is a God in Timbuktu as well as in Waxahachie and Paducah, Kentucky; He’s the same God, but they didn’t have that concept. Beersheba had gods of Beersheba. Dan had gods of Dan. In other words there were little deities. Now Jacob has gone 70 miles from his father’s home and he no doubt would have had in his mind some question: Is Yahweh the God who dealt with Abraham and Isaac? “Is he out here now where I am?” and so the Lord says to him, “I am Yahweh and I am with you.” He was reminding him that he is a not local deity at all. Well that, of course, is a guarantee of an infinite kind of love and it is a guarantee also of help no matter where Jacob might be.

Jacob’s response is very interesting. You notice what he says in verse 16 that the text says he awakened from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.” How true

that is of our experience. You know I have a hunch that there are lots of people sitting in this audience right now who do not realize that the Lord is here. You’d rather think that the Lord is back there with Jacob, but he’s not in the auditorium of Believers Chapel.

Oh, you remember the Bible says that where two or three are gathered together there am I in the midst. Well, it has reference primarily to disciplinary matters, I grant; read the context and you will see that, but the Scriptures also speak of the gathering of the church as the temple of God. It is the temple of the living God. The Lord God, the same God who appeared to Jacob by the side of that pillow on which his head was lying is here with us. He said, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.” It is tragic to be ignorant of spiritual truths.

Someone has said astronomers see the universe yet do not see the God of the universe. Physicists follow the track of the electron in the cloud chamber, but are themselves in a cloud without God. Philosophers are in lost human thought and know not the Lord in which are hidden all the treasures of wisdom, and saddest of all is ministers get sermons from the Bible, yet they do not really know the Lord of the Scriptures Himself at all. So Jacob confesses “The LORD’s in this place and I didn’t know it.” And it is important to note that he used the term “LORD” too. Yahweh is here.

And the thought of the nearness of God induced fear in him. How dreadful! The Authorized Version says “How dreadful is this place.” Now, of course, we do not want to be deceived by the term “dreadful.” The New American Standard Bible has rendered it, “How awesome is this place.” By the way that is the same Hebrew word that has rendered “reverend” in one place. A Hebrew participle *no-rab* has rendered reverend in one spot in Psalm 111, about verse 9 and many have pointed out that the term “reverend” which we apply to men is a term that is applied in the Bible only to God.

Well, it is not really applied only to God, but let’s put it this way, it is never applied to man but we use the term, man. When I was living in Scotland they loved to speak of the preacher as the reverend Mr. So-and-so. I used to get my mail. The Reverend Dr. Johnson. Upset me every time I

got a letter. The Reverend. Reverend is a term that applies to God. That is an expression of one of his attributes. He is awesome. He provokes awe and worship. There is something rather humorous about the fact that he has usually rendered dreadful. The dreadful Dr. Johnson. Some people think that is very appropriate, dreadful.

Why do we want to steal attributes that belong to God and God alone and call preachers reverend? Well anyway the word means “awe-inspiring.” Dr. Barnhouse in some comments on this and says that the basic idea of this word is “tremble” and Jacob was experiencing the emotion expressed by [indistinct] spiritual. “Were you there when they crucified my Lord? / Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.” How often you’ve heard that solo or that spiritual. So he said, “How awesome, how awe-inspiring is this place. This is none other than the house of God. This is the gate of heaven.” In other words, Jacob had met God there and he saw that at this spot there was a way of communion between earth and heaven, a way to heaven through the Lord and a way from heaven by the Lord. The next morning in response Jacob got up and put a memorial pillar there. He called the place the house of God. It was his way of responding to the experience that he had had.

Well, it was a magnificent dazzling display of the grace of God to a man whose life stands in stark contrast to it and yet the entire account is so fitting for the great God of mercy and grace, Yahweh, the God of Abraham. “Behold, I am with you” reverberates down through the centuries until finally Yahweh himself in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ stands in our midst and says “Lo, I am with always even to the end of the age.” Isn’t that a tremendous thing that as believers, we have the same experience that Jacob had? A revelation from Yahweh who confesses to us that he is the Lord and that he is with us to the end of the age, and with that he guarantees that he will fulfill his promises to us. He will not be frustrated and he will ultimately be seen to be a God who is effective in the usefulness of his grace to the accomplishment of his purposes.

If you are here this morning and you have never believed in our Lord Jesus Christ, we invite to come to him who is the true ladder between heaven and earth, who has by virtue of the shedding

“Jacob’s Ladder: Grace Unsought, Unstinting and Unforgettable” by S. Lewis Johnson
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of the blood opened the heavens and made it possible for us to have fellowship with the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit through the cross and death of the Son of God. May, God, through the Holy Spirit, bring you to the conviction of your sin and may you come and receive the forgiveness of sins through the work of the Holy Spirit. We invite you to come. Don’t stay. Come, come and receive everlasting life. Come and receive the forgiveness of sins. Come through the ladder, the Son of Man, and receive life.

May we stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] We are grateful to Thee Lord for these great lessons which are found in the Old Testament Scriptures. May the Holy Spirit accomplish the proper work of bringing men to Christ and of strengthening the saints.

We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.