

Sermon: Genesis 28:10-22. “Stairway to Heaven”

Rev. Bruce Stanley

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- Title slide

- **Intro: Bear Gryls**

I watched Man Vs Wild this week. Each week, Bear Gryls is dropped somewhere in the wilderness with a knife and a piece of string and he has to find his way back to civilisation. This week, he had to sleep in the middle of the wilderness in an area with bears. So he set up a perimeter alarm had a sharp stick ready as a weapon just in case. But you could tell he was still worried. Just the thought that there COULD be a bear was enough to keep him awake during the night.

Today, in Genesis 28, Jacob is Bear Gryls. Man vs wild. He’s fled from home under difficult circumstances – remember that he stole his Father’s blessing from his older brother Esau. It was like a big fight over the family will. And now his brother Esau wants to kill him. So Jacob’s parents have sent him to stay with his uncle, 1000kms away, from Canaan to Haran. So here he is, sleeping in the middle of the wilderness. Man Vs Wild. Completely alone. But, unlike Bear Gryls, Jacob is about 75 years old!

But the other important piece of background here is that, at this stage, Jacob doesn’t have much of a history with God. Until now – when God comes to him in a dream. About a stairway. Verse 12:

- *“¹² He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.”*

So why a stairway? Let’s think about that. What is the purpose of stairs? Stairs are a **passageway** between the bottom and the top. And that’s what this dream is about - Jacob sees a **passageway** between the heavens and the earth. Between the place where God lives and the place where humans live. And on this stairway, God’s messengers, his angels, are ascending and descending on this ladder.

So what does the stairway tell Jacob?

- **1. God is always with us**

First of all, the stairway is God’s way of showing Jacob that he’s involved in the world. God’s showing Jacob that his angels are up and down, back and forth, between heaven and earth because God is **continually** involved in the world. He’s not hiding. He’s not at a distance.

- “From a distance.”

I always remember that (horrible) song by Bette Midler in the 1980’s – “God is watching us... from a distance”. It’s actually a horrible idea – that God creates the world and then stands “at a distance”. Because God is actually **right here** with us. He sends his angels, his messengers, back and forth among us. He is really involved in this world.

The second thing God tells Jacob in this dream is in verses 13-15:

- *¹³ There above it (the staircase) stood the LORD, and he 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. ¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.*

God wants Jacob to know that **he is the same God with the same promises.**

- **2. Same God, same promises**

You know what happened in 1928?

- Sliced bread.

1928. Otto Frederick Rohwedder of the USA, invented the first loaf-at-a-time bread-slicing machine. Sliced bread is such a great thing! In fact, I think sliced bread is the best thing since... bread! But the thing about sliced bread is that it can't get any better!

God is the God of sliced bread. He's good from the very beginning **and he never changes.** God can't get any better! He's the same good God as always. God says to Jacob: I'm the same God. I never change. I'm the God of your grandfather Abraham. I'm the God of your Father Isaac. And I'm your God too. And I have the same promises. I'll give you land, I'll make you a great nation with plenty of people, and I'll make you a blessing to other nations. **And,** verse 15:

- ¹⁵ *I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."*

Jacob is 75 years old, lying in the wilderness, on his own, outcast from his family, on a 1000 kilometre journey to Haran – and God says: "I am with you. I will watch over you. I will not leave you."

So how does Jacob respond to God after hearing all of this?

- **Jacob's response**

First of all, he's excited, and a little fearful, about what's happened. Then he makes a pillar out of the stones and calls the place Bethel, which means "house of God". He recognises that an amazing thing has happened and that this place is special.

But then Jacob does something interesting. He bargains with God! Verse 20:

- *"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 house, then the Lord will be my God and this stone I set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth."*

He says to God: **if** you look after me and **if** get me through this and **if** you get me home, **then** you will be my God!

He's excited and committed to God and builds a pillar. But then he wakes up the next day and he doesn't seem so enthusiastic. So he says to God, after all the excitement is over, "OK. Well, let's not rush into anything. We'll just see how you look after me and I'll make my decision then of whether I follow you or not."

You see, God has already chosen Jacob. But Jacob hasn't chosen God yet. He's still testing God. And you might think that's a bit of a stupid thing to do. But how does God respond to Jacob? With patience.

- Perhaps there are times you've been excited in your faith, and you've had all these good intentions, but the next day... well... you're not so excited. Not so trusting. Not so faithful.

When we do that, the amazing thing is that God is still faithful and patient. Even when we're like Jacob and bargain with Him and put him to the test, God is patient with us. God doesn't say "Look, forget it. Get lost! I don't need you to follow me. I don't need your tick of approval! I don't need you to put me to the test! Get lost!" No. God says: "OK. You don't trust me completely. You've got doubts. I've never let you down. I've supplied all your needs. I've

done amazing things. And you still don't trust me completely. But... I love you. So I'll wait for you." God really is patient with us. Even when we're unsure or unfaithful, God is patient. Just like he was with Jacob.

- So to finish today, let's just quickly reflect on Jacob's life. And first of all, remember Jacob's NAME means "heel grabber" or "deceiver" or "supplanter". Listen to what he did in his life:
- He **exploited** his brother Esau's birthright with a bowl of lentil soup.
- He **deceived** his Father Isaac to steal his brother's blessing.
- He **bargained** with God for food and clothing and safety. IF you do this, THEN I'll follow you.
- But he's also an **adulterer**. After this chapter, he marries two women, and sleeps with them and their maidservants.
- On top of that, he's an **idolater**. It's not until chapter 35 that Jacob actually gets rid of the false gods and idols in his house.

Does this remind you of anyone? Exploiter, deceiver, bargainer, adulterer, idolater? Someone here today? Anyone?

It's me. And it's you. It's every normal person. Full of problems. Full of sinful behaviour. Always falling short. Always struggling with sinful desires. This is who we are.

But God is patient. God is willing to wait for us. God is willing to tolerate our sinful and rebellious behaviour. And the amazing thing is that no matter what we do, God is willing to be patient and loving **and forgiving** towards our sinfulness. Even to the point of sending Jesus to die for us – for our sin. Romans 5:8 says:

- *"⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

While we were sinners. God saves his enemies. You and me. Because of his mercy. Because of his love.

Jacob was not really a nice person. Yet God was patient with him and God was able to save him and use him for his purposes. The same way in the New Testament, God chooses Paul, a murderer of God's people, to be an apostle and do his work. The same way God chooses YOU and ME.

We are not perfect. We are not worthy. We are not good. We are not deserving. But God is patient and loving and merciful and kind and forgiving. And he saves people like Jacob, like Paul, like you and like me – and uses us for his amazing purposes.

How do we respond to that? Thankfulness. Gratefulness. And ... confidence – that even when we exploit, deceive, bargain, commit adultery, or worship any of the many idols in this world, God is patiently at work in your life through his Holy Spirit help you become more like Jesus every day.

Amen.

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