

## SURPRISED BY GRACE

### GENESIS 28:10-22

It did not look like the gate to heaven. When Jacob arrived there after sunset, it looked more like a spooky place. The large stones that cluttered the countryside must have thrown off spooky shadows as he looked for a place to spend the night. He finally found a stone that would serve as a hard pillow as he sought some rest from a long day. He had traveled about sixty miles away from home either by camel or on foot. This means that he had left very early and had not taken much rest along the way. His body must have been weary from the trip as well as from the stress that was created by being forced to leave home.

He must have been even wearier in spirit. He was away from home for the first time in his life, and was utterly alone. His broken relationship with his twin brother had made the journey necessary. His mother had planned the trip, but he had left home with the blessing of his father. His mind must have been full of distractions as he sought sleep that night. What would the future

hold? Would he ever see his parents again, especially his mother? Would he be able to find his mother's relatives? Why had he wanted the birthright and the blessing so much? They did not seem to have much value on this cool, lonely night.

What Jacob did not know was that he was sleeping in the gate to heaven. It was during the night that the Lord revealed to Jacob in a dream his true situation. Truly the God of Jacob is the God of mercy and grace. There is so much encouragement for my troubled soul from this encounter between the Lord and Jacob.

I have always felt a kinship to Jacob. There is a lot of Jacob in me—I think it is called the flesh, or the old sin nature. It was just more obvious in Jacob than in most people, but it is present in all of us. Let us learn of the ways of the God of grace from the experience of Jacob.

## I. GOD IS CLOSER THAN YOU THINK.

When Jacob went to sleep, he thought he was all-alone. He felt alone. There was no one with him that he could see, but God was closer than he thought.

During the night as he slept, the Lord came to him. He had a dream in which he saw a staircase that sat upon the earth, but reached up into the heaven. To the amazement of Jacob he saw angelic beings coming down the stairs and ascending up the stairs. They were obviously coming to earth to accomplish a mission for God and were returning to the heavenly presence of God for a new assignment. Then he saw the Lord God himself standing at the top of the staircase, and he heard the Lord God speak. He had a message for Jacob.

When Jacob awoke the next morning, he was overcome with a sense of awe. The “fear” that he felt was that of reverential awe. He knew that he was in the presence of the living God of Abraham. He declared the place where he has slept to be Beth-el, the house of God. He declared it to be the gate to heaven. Is this not a revelation to us? God is closer than we think.

His nearness is not based on our worthiness. Never had Jacob been more unworthy of the nearness of the Lord! He was leaving behind a shameful record of attempted manipulation and broken relationships. He left behind an angry and offended brother. He left behind a weeping mother. He left behind a disappointed father. There was no reason for him to expect any visit from the Lord of Abraham. He had not sought the presence of the Lord in prayer.

The visit from the Lord caught him completely by surprise. Those of us who know our own hearts know that we are just as undeserving of the presence of the Lord as Jacob. We too have acted in selfishness and sin. There is no reason for us to expect anything from the Lord except his anger and wrath.

But He always comes to us in grace. Jacob found himself in the gate to heaven because God is a God of grace. So it is with us. Whatever good comes to us from the Lord comes through grace. Is it not encouraging to know that God is closer than we think—as the God of grace?

## II. GOD IS MORE GRACIOUS THAN YOU EVER IMAGINED.

We know more about Jacob than we know about God. It is easier for us to understand Jacob than it is to understand God. We have a lot in common with Jacob. We too discover that God is more gracious than we ever imagined.

### 1. It is His grace that makes the first move.

What happened that dark, lonely night was not an answer to prayer, as far as we know. It was not a response to some move that Jacob made toward God.

It was totally a response on the part of the Lord to a need that He saw in Jacob. To the total surprise of Jacob there was God standing at the head of the heavenly staircase speaking to him in gracious terms.

It worth remembering that the staircase was not there so that Jacob could climb up to God, but rather so heaven could come to Jacob. Those little choruses that we sang about climbing Jacob's ladder were totally off the mark. We do not climb up to God; rather He comes down to us. We do not find God; rather He finds us. We learn from Jesus that the Staircase is actually the Lord Jesus, the Son of Man.

Did not God make the first move in your life? Did He not seek you before you sought Him? Did He not speak the first word? Yes! Yes! He is always the God of grace who responds to our need rather than our worthiness.

2. It is His grace that causes Him to give more than we expect.

As far as we know, Jacob did not expect anything from the God of Isaac, unless it was judgment. Why should he? Had not everything he had attempted turned out wrong? Had he not left behind a shameful mess? Was not his family in shambles because of his selfish blunders? Yet as the God of

grace, God speaks to Jacob. He announces what He is giving to this unworthy young man—all of grace.

Take a careful look at what God gave Jacob that night! He gave him the land on which he slept. He had already given it to Abraham and Isaac in the past, so now God transfers the title to Jacob. What a promise! His seed will own and occupy that land on which Jacob slept that night, and the borders will even be expanded. All of this is by grace.

God further assures him that his descendants will be an innumerable multitude, and that through them the whole world will be blessed. “Your descendents will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and east, to the north and the south. All peoples on the earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.” Have you noticed that these promises are without conditions? They are not the way that God will respond to what Jacob may do; rather they are an expression of the grace of God. Jacob is receiving more than he ever imagined or deserved. We know that this promise was fulfilled supremely through the Lord Jesus—He was the Offspring of Jacob that has blessed the whole world, including us.

The Lord adds yet more to the gift—“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 promised you.” All of this is from grace. Jacob did not deserve God’s watchful presence. He did not deserve an opportunity to come back to the land of his father. But God did it because of His purpose of grace.

The last thing God said is the most encouraging to me—“I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you.” Does this not remind you of some promises the Lord gave to us? Did he not promise to complete what He has begun in us? Did he not promise never to leave or forsake us? Surely there were times when Jacob did not deserve the presence or the care of the Lord, yet the Lord kept His promise. It is the nature of the God of grace to do more than we expect—not to mention more than what we deserve.

What a wonderful God of grace and mercy we serve! He is the God of Jacob.

III. GOD’S GRACE PROVOKES OUR RESPONSE.

What do you do when God surprises you with grace? How do you respond when God goes so far beyond what you might have expected from Him? We have the privilege of watching Jacob try to respond to what God had said. Quite frankly I don't think he did a very good job responding, but it is easier to criticize someone else than it is to respond properly yourself.

1. It is all right to mark the spot, but you should not become too tied to it. Jacob marked the spot where God had surprised him, and gave it a new name. He named the place "Beth-el" which means the house of God. It would always be a sacred spot to Jacob. He would come back to the place when God brought him back to the land.

However there can be a danger in marking spots where the Lord has surprised you. The place can become a substitute for the God who met you at the place. The stairway to heaven can be set up anywhere. Any lonely spot can be the gate to heaven. It had nothing to do with the place, but everything to do with the God of grace who made the first move.

Have you marked some places along the way? There is nothing wrong with it even though it may present some dangers.



2. Responding with a vow is not appropriate.

I may be off target here, but I don't think so. What Jacob did just does not sound right. He makes a vow, but it is conditional. He will do something if God will do something. God has already stated what he is going to do, and it is unconditional. Does Jacob not trust God to keep His word?

I even wonder about his pledge to tithe. It too was conditional. I find no record that he ever honored this pledge to the Lord—do you? Let me point you to what I think is a more appropriate way.

3. A grateful, unconditional commitment to God would be better.

Why not respond to God like He has made Himself known to you? He revealed Himself to Jacob as the God of grace. His promises to Jacob were without conditions—they were based totally on the sovereign goodness and grace of God. Would it not have been better for Jacob to have said something like this: “Lord God of Abraham and Isaac, since you have been so gracious to me, have given me such gracious promises, from this day forward you are my God. I make my total life available to you for your redemptive purposes in the earth. It will be my joy to serve you all of the

days of my life. As a sure sign of the gratitude I have for the grace you have bestowed upon me, I will return to you ten percent of everything that you put into my hand. Thank you for being my God. I take you at your word. I am yours from this day forward.”

I acknowledge that Jacob was still living in the shadows of the Old Testament, but it was the God of Abraham who had approached him in grace. I acknowledge that he was still a young man, and still had big ideas about himself and what he could do, but it is still the God of grace that he is responding to.

How do you respond to the surprises of grace? It is well to remember that we are always in the responding mode. It is always God who makes the first move. It is God who gives first. It is God who makes the first promise. Trust and gratitude are always appropriate when you are responding to the God of grace. It is always proper to make a loving, trustful commitment of life to Him. This will surely be what pleases Him.

Are you sleeping in the gate to heaven and don't know it? The God of grace may surprise you before the day is done. He is closer than you think. Be prepared to respond to Him with genuine humility and gratitude.

(Alternative Outline)

## I. SURPRISED BY WHERE GOD MEETS US.

Where were you when God became more than a word to you? Jacob was sleeping on the cold ground while he was on his way to Haran. Nothing about the place indicated that it was the gate to heaven, but God chose to make it the gate to heaven that night.

1. He meets us when we least expect it.
2. He meets us when we least deserve it.
3. He meets us when we need Him most.

## II. SURPRISED BY WHAT GOD GIVES US.

What Jacob had been seeking all of his young life, God gave to him as a gift—and more.

1. He gives a promise.

He promised the land.

He promised the seed.

He promised fulfillment.

2. He gives His presence.

“I am with you.”

### III. SURPRISED BY WHAT GOD WANTS FROM US.

God wanted and got a response from Jacob. The response from Jacob was the best he was capable of that day. Later the response would even become more meaningful.

1. He wants respect.
2. He wants a relationship.