Genesis: *When Jacob Met the Lord*
Genesis 28:10-22

As we return to our journey through Genesis, we come to one of the most famous stories in all of scripture. It is the story often referred to as Jacob's Ladder. I consider it to be one of the greatest conversion stories in all of literature, and it points powerfully to the Gospel—so much so that I have entitled my message, "When Jacob Met the Lord." So, with no further ado, please stand and let us read together Genesis 28:10-22: **10** Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. **11** And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. **12** And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! **13** And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. **14** Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. **15** 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." **16** Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." **17** 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."
18 So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. **19** He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first. **20** Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, **21** so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, **22** and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you."

There are many ways that both Jewish and Christian scholars have interpreted this story, but I would have us think of this story within the framework of Jacob's personal testimony. For that reason, I will frame my message under the classic divisions of a Christian testimony: 1) Before Jacob Met the LORD; 2) When Jacob Met the LORD; and 3) After Jacob Met the LORD.

I. Before Jacob Met the LORD

Not long ago I had the privilege of baptizing an amazing couple named Michael and Shelby. Michael grew up in a nominal Jewish family, but it was only recently that Michael met the Lord. Shelby had some Christian background, but she had never had a personal relationship with Christ. It was my privilege to disciple Michael and Shelby for many months and watch the transformation happen as they both personally came to know Jesus. Michael's resulting baptism, along with Shelby's renewal service, will forever remain one of the great highlights of my years as a pastor.

So just over a week ago we were sitting on Michael's back deck getting caught up, and he mentioned a very stressful situation that had happened at work. I asked him how he dealt with it, and his response illustrated the life-change that comes with meeting the Lord. Michael looked

and me, smile and said, “Well, let’s just say there is a big difference between Michael before he was baptized and Michael after he was baptized!”

This is a very common story for those who have met the LORD. They have a “before and after” story that accounts for radical life change. To some degree, this is what we will find in Jacob’s story here in Genesis 28.

Remember that prior to this encounter with God under the stars, Jacob was the guy who strategically withheld food from his starving brother Esau until he agreed to hand over the birthright that was set apart for the firstborn. Then, later on when their blind, aging father Isaac was preparing to speak a powerful blessing over his firstborn son, Esau, it was Jacob and his mom who intentionally deceived Isaac into speaking the blessing over Jacob instead.

Not surprisingly, Esau became so angry about Jacob’s deception that he came to hate Jacob and even pledged that, once their father passed, he would kill Jacob.

Jacob has been a mess since the moment we met him, and his selfish, greedy, deceptive behavior has led to his exile. Jacob has now been sent away from his parent’s home in Beersheba. He has been instructed by both his mother and his father to travel over 500 miles to the city of Haran, to the home of his shady Uncle Laban, and there he is to take a wife and hang out until he gets word from Mom that Esau has finally settled down.

So, as we enter back into the narrative, we must use our imaginations to zoom in on Jacob as he now trudges along an unfamiliar path…alone. The text reads, “Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep.”

Church, don’t jump to what comes next just yet. Sit here in the dark with Jacob for a minute. What is going through his mind? How is he doing? How is he evaluating his life and his decisions? What hope does he have for his future? Can you see him in your imagination?

Jacob is likely a handsome and well-dressed middle-aged man. Not only does he come from money, but due to his deceptive ways, Jacob will now inherit a veritable fortune when his father dies. Nevertheless, on this dark night, because of what Jacob has done and who Jacob has become, we find the conflicted young man utterly alone. For the first time in his life, he has been sent away--away from his home, away from his controlling mom, away from his aging father, away from his angry brother, with no servants, no tent, and not even a pillow. He is in many respects a “boy” living in a man’s body, and for the first time in his life he is experiencing a loneliness unlike anything he has ever known.

I don’t know if you have ever spent an evening alone out under the stars, but it can be a daunting experience. A man sleeping alone outdoors is vulnerable to all kinds of critters and predators, but he is even more susceptible to unwelcomed thoughts about what he is or is not doing with his life. On this dark night, not far outside the city of Luz, Jacob is no doubt replaying

his life and thinking deeply about the choices he has made and where those choices have led him. Jacob's life has been lived for one man and one man only, Jacob—and his selfish ambition has led to alienation and isolation. This is not a proud man we find lying on the side of the road with his head resting upon a stone; instead, it is a man who is running from his past into an uncertain future. He is a man who is, in every sense of the word, lost. Little does he know that on this very night, his life is about to be forever changed by the One who sees him!

II. When Jacob Met the Lord

As we return to the narrative, we read in vs. 12ff: **12** And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! **13** And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. **14** Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. **15** 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."

The verses we just read describe a supernatural encounter with God that will forever change Jacob's life! I know the text states that Joseph dreamed, but it's clear from the outset that this is something more intense and more real than "just a dream." Jacob is physically asleep, but for the first time in his life, he is now spiritually awake!

Note that three times the word "Behold!" is used to describe what happens in the dream. That word in Hebrew (*hinne*) is a word that sets something apart as exceptional. In other words, there is nothing normal about this dream. Everything that is about to happen is exceptional!

Within the dream, Jacob first observes a structure that touches the earth and somehow connects to heaven. The Hebrew word translated here in the ESV as "ladder" is the Hebrew term ***sullam***. You should know this is the only time *sullam* is used anywhere in the Bible, and there is no record of this word prior to its use here in Genesis 28. So, the only reason we translate *sullam* as "ladder" or "stairway" is because those are the only images the ancients could muster for a structure that would touch the earth and extend to heaven. Had this dream been given to an American in the 21st century, we may have used the same word and meant an escalator!

However we might envision the *sullam*, Jacob observes that the angels of God are using it to both ascend to heaven and descend to earth. Because this image comes in a dream, we are naturally invited to interpret the imagery rather than be bound by it. Thus, many scholars interpret the imagery of the *sullam* as a revelation that heaven and earth are not disparate realities. God is not the great Watchmaker in the sky who creates but remains aloof from His creation. The *sullam* reveals that Heaven is intimately connected with all that is happening on earth. God's messengers and servants, those called angels in scripture, are actively coming and going—always at work both in heaven and on earth.

Even more profound is what Jacob observes next. There, very near to the *sullam*, is the LORD Himself. Now, the ESV interprets the Hebrew here to say that "the LORD stood above

[the *sullam*].” That is a very reasonable translation of the Hebrew, but many have noted that the Hebrew here may also be translated to read “the LORD stood beside [the *sullam*].”

Either translation works, but I think it likely that the LORD stood beside the *sullam*, not above it. And here’s why: because God is going to make a promise that He will be with Jacob, and that promise packs way more power when the LORD’s feet are standing on earth as opposed to Him remaining above the earth in heaven. Think about it: The *sullam* is an early picture of incarnation. It is a revelation of God coming down to be with us. It is a pre-Advent picture of Emmanuel! Such is why I think it likely that Jacob saw the LORD standing beside the *sullam*—the LORD came down and promised to be *with* Jacob.

Are we reading into the *sullam* too much here? I don’t think so, and I’ll tell you why. You might recall that in John 1, when Jesus meets Phillip’s friend Nathanael for the first time, He proclaims, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael is shocked that Jesus knows him, so he asks, “How do you know me?” And Jesus answers, “Before Phillip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” Nathanael knows there is no way Jesus could have seen him under that fig tree unless Jesus was God Himself, so Nathan proclaims, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Jesus is pleasantly amused, and He responds, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe?” And then He says something profoundly enigmatic. He states to Nathanael, “Truly I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending *on the Son of Man*.”

Did you hear what Jesus just did there? Knowing He was speaking to a faithful Jew who would have been very familiar with Jacob’s dream in Genesis 28, Jesus used the exact words of Jacob’s dream but then substituted Himself in place of the *sullam*. In other words, Jesus just said, “I am the *sullam*!” Jesus is the bridge between heaven and earth, and here in Genesis 28, Jacob unknowingly gets a glimpse of the One who comes down; the God who sees us in our despair and our loneliness; the God who is with us, even when we have been behaving poorly.

As the dream progresses, the Lord speaks directly to Jacob, saying: “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. **14** Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. **15** Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

Note how God immediately identifies Himself to Jacob. Jacob has grown up in the land of Canaan, the land of many so-called gods and goddesses, so God states, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac.” Jacob has certainly heard the stories of God’s appearances to his grandfather Abraham and to his own father, Isaac—it is that same God who now addresses Jacob.

Just as God formerly promised Jacob’s fathers, God promises Jacob that his descendants will inherit the very ground upon which he now lies. God will also bless Jacob with innumerable

descendants, and every family on the entire planet will be blessed through Jacob and his descendants. Following these promises, we get the sense that the Lord draws even closer to Jacob in the dream. There is a tenderness in what comes next. God says to the alienated rascal, the second born, the hated brother who has been deceptive and more than a bit evil, "Behold (because this is exceptional), I am WITH you. I will KEEP you wherever you go. I will BRING you back to this land. I will NOT LEAVE you. I will FULFILL what I have promised you."

Church, put your head on that rocky pillow, and imagine the Lord speaking those words into your troubled heart. The Lord is with you. He will keep you. He will never leave you. He will fulfill His promises to you. You are not alone.

This is grace! This is what God's grace looks like for a sinner who is lost: God's unconditional love and unmerited grace that comes to a lonely sinner in the dark night of the soul.

Note that the context of the story is significant. God comes to Jacob in the darkest time of his life, in the dark of night. The great Christian poet, T.S. Elliot once wrote that "God meets us in our deepest darkness." How many of you have this story as your story? I certainly do! God often waits until we have come to the end of ourselves, when we have blown it completely, when all confidence in ourselves has expired, when we feel that we are all alone and we deserve to be all alone. It is often then that God comes to us and speaks grace to us, and that is likely because it is there...in the dark night of the soul…that we are finally ready to listen.

Church, note what God does not say. God does not say, "Poor Jacob, this is what you get for being such a jerk. Are you learning anything? Think you could try a little harder moving forward? How about getting your act together so you can redeem what's left of your life?"

God does not mention one word about Jacob's character or his behavior. Instead, God speaks of His commitment to be with Jacob, to keep Jacob, to direct Jacob, to never leave Jacob, and to fulfill all the promises that God has made to Jacob. God speaks of what HE is doing. He makes no comment at all regarding those things Jacob has been doing. Nor does God say "I will do these things IF you _____." There is no "IF." Grace is never dependent on an "IF." Grace is what God does because God is God! Grace is God's gift to those who are undeserving, so it is never contingent on an "IF."

Church, when a man covered up in sin comes into personal contact with the grace of a loving God…when he discovers that God is not against him, but that God is WITH him and LOVES him and promises to KEEP him and NEVER LEAVE him and FULFILL all His promises to him…that's a gamechanger! That's what moved Michael to make his profession of faith and be baptized! That's what moved me that fateful day in the Princeton Seminary chapel. When God's unmerited grace and His unconditional love wraps around the lonely soul like a warm blanket and says in no uncertain terms, "My child, I am with you"—when that happens,

you are changed! You will never be the same, and that change is what we will be tracking in Jacob moving forward. This encounter with the Living God will forever change Jacob, and we see the first fruits of that change the moment he awakens.

III. After Jacob Met the Lord

As we return to the narrative, we read in **16** Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." **17** 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." **18** So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. **19** He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

As Jacob awakes, he has no doubt met the Lord. Now, to be sure, he is still Jacob; and, though changed by the encounter with the Holy, he can only interpret the experience through his limited understanding. Naturally, Jacob associates his dream with the literal place where he has been resting, as though it is this particular location where earth and heaven meet. Given the intensity of his encounter with the Lord, Jacob decides to memorialize his encounter by anointing his stone pillow with oil and setting it up as a pillar. In doing so, Jacob anticipates returning to this very place and remembering his encounter with the Lord. He then gives the place a name—Bethel[1]. Bethel literally means, "The house of God."

Church, we never forget a life-changing encounter with God, and Jacob's instincts are spot on. When God speaks grace into our broken hearts, we will want to memorialize that occasion. When I encountered the Lord that day in Princeton in the fall of 1995, I immediately went home and wrote my wife a letter explaining what happened and confessing all my sin! I think she thought I was crazy, but I had to write down what happened and share it with my bride. If you ever had an encounter with the Lord, you remember exactly where you were sitting or standing. You remember it like it was yesterday, because that encounter changed your life! There was a "before" that moment, and then there was life "after" that moment. Such moments deserve to be memorialized. A personal encounter with God's unmerited grace always requires a response in terms of our behavior, our commitments, and our priorities.

Jacob being Jacob, this was his response. Beginning in vs. 20 we read: **20** Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, **21** so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, **22** and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you."

Now, in case you are wondering, this "if…then" vow by Jacob is not as conditional as it sounds. Jacob is essentially saying, "Wow! If everything that God said is true, then the Lord shall

[1] When Abraham left Haran and sojourned into Canaan, the very first altar he built to worship God was between Bethel and the city called Ai. At the time, Bethel was called Luz, but it was following his encounter with God that Jacob renamed the area Bethel. Scholars believe Bethel was about 10 miles north of Jerusalem.

be my God!" It sounds like Jacob is putting God's Word to the test (and maybe in some small way he is), but Jacob is also realigning his life and his perspective to look for God's presence and provision in his life—and that's huge! Remember who Jacob was yesterday, and consider what he just said today! This man who has only thought of himself and has sinned grievously in his insatiable desire for "more" is now placing his hope in God! And note what he is hoping for. Jacob is not looking to God for riches or power. Instead, Jacob is hoping that God will provide food, clothing, and protection on the road. He is hoping that God will help reconcile him to his father and his family. And then Jacob vows that he will respond to God's grace with a pledge of generosity. He will tithe of whatever he has as an expression of his gratitude for all that God has done in his life. He also commits to establish a place of worship right there in Bethel[2] in honor of God's gracious intervention when he was languishing in the dark night of his soul.

Church, this is a classic response to an authentic encounter with God! When we meet the Living God and experience His unconditional love and His unmerited grace, when we truly come to know that God is with us, that He will keep us, that He will never leave us or forsake us, that He will fulfill His plans and purposes in our lives—we make vows, we respond with generosity, and we realign our priorities with God's Word. Church, this is the goal of the Christian faith—LIFE WITH GOD!

Listen, as we prepare to go, please keep this story in your heart. Go back and read it a few more times this week and reflect on your own life and your own testimony. Ask God to speak these words into your heart in a way that you can hear Him and believe Him! Jacob is our representative, and he was a jerk! He was a selfish, lying, deceitful man—yet God came to Him with grace, and friends—God is still in the business of coming to broken, sinful people with grace! But here's the question: are you ready to listen? Are you desperate enough? Are you still going through life as though you don't need God? Are you pretty sure you can handle life on your own, or do you find yourself in the dark night of the soul?

Here's what God said to a lost and hurting people in Jeremiah 29:11-13: I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. **12** Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. **13** You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.

[2] Jacob will come back and build an altar there in Bethel, and that location will be sacred all the way through the period of the Judges. Sadly, after the division of the United Monarchy, King Jeroboam I of Israel established a golden calf shrine at Bethel to keep the northern tribes from traveling to Jerusalem to worship (1 Kings 12:29). By the time of Christ, the "sanctuary of Bethel" had been adopted by the Samaritans who believed the true location of Bethel was on Mt. Gerizim, and that the temple of Jerusalem was not the actual "house of God" that Jacob intended. See the conversation Jesus had with the Samaritan woman in John 4, and especially vs. 19, "Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." She is advocating for worship in "Bethel" as established by "our father Jacob" (see vs. 12).

That dark night, with his head laid upon a rock, Jacob had exhausted his self-reliance, and no doubt he stared up at the starry sky and quietly prayed, “Where are you God? I need you…I desperately need you.” And God came to him. Jacob’s heart was ready to hear the Lord speak grace over him…how about your heart? Will you seek the Lord with your whole heart? Are you desperately in need of His unconditional love and grace?

Then pray, and listen, and know that the tender words God spoke to Jacob are the very same words He would speak to you. God is with you, God will keep you, God will never leave you, God will fulfill His promises in you. This is grace. Will you pray with me?