



Summer 2017 – **Genesis 28: a rock, a hard place, a stairway and a gateway ... Part Three**
(21 May 2017, Paul Langham)

Reading: Genesis 28: 10-19 (NIV UK)

¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. ¹¹ When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. 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. ¹³ There above it 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. 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.'

¹⁶ When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, 'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.' ¹⁷ He was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.'

¹⁸ Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. ¹⁹ He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz.

Introduction – the type of preaching ...

1 Why Jacob & not Esau?

In other words, why do some people have these experiences and others don't?
More helpfully, why do some people seem to have them more than others?
Wesley ...

This is clearly a defining encounter ... so why not everyone?

Very hard to answer – some of the answers would need to be worked through pastorally rather than from the pulpit ... blockages etc.

Clearly, **God's sovereign choice** plays a part – there is no indication that Jacob is seeking God at this moment in his life (indeed, his reaction afterwards is clearly one of surprise ... v. 16).

Here we see the reality of grace (before the cross) in the life of Jacob.

Very difficult to make too firm a connection between spiritual awareness then and now, but we can detect similarities ... if you read the previous chapters, God is clearly a reality in Jacob's life in terms of his parents' language and culture – but Jacob had never met him until now.

Many of us will have had the same sort of experience – brought up in Christian homes, but our sense of God is more inherited than inhabited.

Some of us came to faith by praying the Jesus prayer – maybe the impression that this was a one-off rather than an invitation to repeated encounter?

As well as acknowledging God's sovereign choice, we must also acknowledge **God's sure desire** – the whole

tenor of scripture is that God is longing for encounter.

So why do some of us seem to experience God hiding his face? Not revealing himself? Again, that might have to be addressed pastorally ...

But I am convinced that God hides things for us not from us ...

So what can we do to encourage Encounter with the living God?

2 **Worship**

Worship acts as a sort of hinge between Invitation and Response

Worship is both

- Invitation to God to meet with us
*Come down, O love divine,
seek thou this soul of mine,
and visit it with thine own ardor glowing;
O Comforter, draw near,
within my heart appear,
and kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.*
- Response to God in that Encounter

Our worship is a reaction to Jesus and a barometer of our relationship with him. Our worship will reveal how much we love him, how much we understand of his love for us. Jesus said it himself – ‘The one who has been forgiven little loves little ...’ (Luke 7:47)

Every Christian is somewhere on the journey into worship with God – like Jacob, we can discover that every place can be sacred / holy, a place God can reveal himself to us.

Our choice is whether the place we have reached on that journey is a stopping point or a staging post. Are we content with where we are, or are we pressing on for more?

v.13 The Hebrew is delightfully full of meaning. Most translations render it as the Lord being ‘above’ Jacob – but the Hebrew word can also be rendered ‘beside’ and ‘around’ (it’s almost Trinitarian ...)

It encapsulates the beautiful reality of God’s awesome majesty at the same time as his desire for intimacy with us.

So how can we pursue God in worship? [I am speaking in our context as members of Christ Church attending the 10 – if I were vicar of an Anglo-Catholic congregation, I might at this point have spoken about genuflecting and making the sign of the cross: 2 key physical acts of worship in that tradition].

I remember the feeling of trying to coax teenagers through GCSEs and A levels – getting the balance right between exerting sufficient pressure that they do themselves justice and give themselves a chance to do the best they can; but not enough pressure that they feel guilt and failure. Sometimes, church leadership is like that – but I want to encourage you to consider the possibility that closing your eyes and raising your hands could be helpful.

I can only share my own testimony here – temperamentally, I am not an arm-raiser! But I was advised to do so, and when I swallowed my pride and dislike, I began to find the practice transformative. I still have times when it’s the last thing I want to do – but I find those are the times when, as I press through my own tastes and desires, I find myself experiencing the One who is above, around and beside me.

Now, this isn't a formula – it's not as though you can simply do what the person next to you is doing and expect to have the same result.

All I can ask is that you take time to be with the Lord and ask him how you are to respond to what I'm saying. What's the worst that can happen?

Many years ago, a man who is now quite a famous Christian, attended the first night of a Billy Graham rally in London. He sat at the very back of the vast stadium, right up in the roof line – his seat happened to be next to one of the many volunteer stewards from local churches on duty. As Billy Graham finished his talk, hundreds of people responded to his call to the front, but this man remained in his seat. 'Aren't you going forward?' asked the steward. 'No,' said the man. 'If I want to respond, I can do it right here.' 'No you can't,' replied the steward. 'You've got to go to the front.'

The man was really angry at this and remained firmly in his seat. But he was back the following night where the same thing happened at the end of the talk. And the third night ... and the fourth. On the fifth and final night, the talk ended, and the man got to his feet and began to walk down the steps. 'Where do you think you're going?' asked the steward. 'If you want to ask Jesus into your life, you can do it right here ...'

The point was that the man had come to a place where he was willing to respond on God's terms, not his own ...

I've taught a lot about raising hands and why we do it (it's biblical, that's the main thing! But it also symbolises our desire to 'catch' whatever the Lord wants to give us ...). But it occurred to me on the way to church this morning that raising our arms is the universal human sign of surrender. Could that be why the practice is so resisted in certain circles?

3 Awe

¹⁶ When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, 'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.' ¹⁷ He was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.'

Encounter always has a purpose – it never exists for its own sake.

This encounter changed the way Jacob saw the Lord – he has moved from an inherited faith to an inhabited faith.

We need to understand the bible's understanding of 'fear' of the Lord. It doesn't mean the fear which makes us recoil from someone – if we recoil, we end up further away from them.

It means the sort of fear which makes us bow towards the person – so that we end up closer ...

While we are right to emphasise the Lord's desire to be around and beside us (intimacy) we do well not to forget that he is above us (majesty). A place of encounter (an awesome place) is also hugely significant in terms of evangelism. The more we encounter the Lord here in all his majesty, awesome splendour and yet deep love for us; the more people will walk in and encounter him for the first time.

Like Jacob, people will arrive here unaware that they are accompanied – but leave aware that they are accompanied.

4 Follow the advice of Jesus (Luke 11)

Keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking – pursue him for Encounter

5 There is a repeated sense of God's faithfulness to what he's promised in this passage

v. 13 land

v. 14 descendants

v.15 land

In v. 15 God says

'... I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.'

Move forward just 4 chapters, and we find Jacob wrestling with the Lord (Genesis 32). I believe that it is this previous experience (in chapter 28) and the Lord's voice speaking these words which gives Jacob the courage to wrestle with the Lord and say to him

'I will not let you go until you bless me' (Genesis 32:26)

And notice, finally, that God focuses on the future, not on the past.

Keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking – pursue him for Encounter.

I spoke in the first talk on this passage about the stone which became a pillow – we saw in that Jacob's ability to rest amid the rough circumstances of life.

Now, at the very end, as Jacob responds in worship, the stone which became a pillow becomes a pillar, symbolising the place of first encounter.

QUESTIONS

1. Be honest about your own experience of encounter with the Lord
2. Is your faith inherited more than it is inhabited?
3. Where are you on the 'journey' that is worship?
4. How much do you consider you have been forgiven?
5. If you are irritated or even offended by something said by a preacher or church leader you otherwise normally respect or trust, that is the place to wrestle with God for an answer – it may be that the preacher has made a mistake or had a bad day at the office: but it could just be that your offence is revealing somewhere the Lord wants you to work ...
6. Do you have an appropriate balance of awe at God's majesty and comfort in his intimacy?
7. How conscious are you of God's faithfulness to what he has promised in your life?
8. Are you able to tell the Lord that you won't let him go until he blesses you?

Use the first verse of this wonderful hymn as your prayer of invitation and response:

*Come down, O love divine,
seek thou this soul of mine,
and visit it with thine own ardor glowing;
O Comforter, draw near,
within my heart appear,
and kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.*

Paul Langham, May 2017