

The Place of Salvation

Genesis 28:10-22

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Every so often in life, we have what I call an “aha” moment. It is a moment where things that otherwise did not make sense, or we did not understand, become clear. There is this “aha” moment.

This past week I was talking to my daughter, Bobbi. She was struggling with some new concepts in her trigonometry class. I was not much help. She was frustrated, and a couple of days later I asked her how things were going. She said, “Well, the whole class was confused so the teacher went back through the material again and all of a sudden I just got it. All of a sudden it just made sense.” That is an “aha” moment.

We all have those moments in life. I will have to admit I didn’t have many in math class, but in general we have those moments. Certainly that is true in our spiritual walk. There are times when we hear stuff and we kind of understand it. We can probably repeat the verbiage, but we just really do not get it. All of a sudden there is this “aha” moment where it all comes together and it makes sense. It tends to be a life-changing experience.

In our story today, Jacob has an “aha” moment where he understands something that he had heard before but he did not really understand. When he finally gets it, when the light goes on, it is life changing. Perhaps in understanding what Jacob understood, it could be an “aha” moment for us and could be life changing.

Turn with me to Genesis 28, where we pick up the story in verse 10:

Then Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran. (*NASB)

Let’s back up a little bit and remind ourselves of what is going on. Jacob is leaving his home in Beersheba and he is headed back to the home of his mother in Haran. Haran would be the city. Paddan-aram would be the region that is talked about earlier in the chapter. From Beersheba to Haran is about 500 miles, so it is a lengthy journey. In those days, it was a very dangerous journey. The place where we find him when this particular story takes place is about 60 to 70 miles from Beersheba, so it was a 2-3 day journey.

He came to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set...

(v. 11a)

We need to understand what is being said here because it really sets up the whole story. Whenever you are studying a Hebrew narrative like the book of Genesis, one of the things you always want to look for is the repetition. If there are certain words or phrases that are repeated, especially if they are repeated in an unnatural sense and it is overdone, there is usually a reason for that. The writer is trying to tell you something.

In this case, the word “*place*” is unnaturally repeated over and over and over again. It is not that there was something terribly significant about that piece of geography. As a matter of fact, the writer goes out of his way to say that is not the case when he tells us that the only reason Jacob stopped there was because the sun had set. In other words, he wasn’t on his journey and he stopped and said, “I think God is in this place.” Or it wasn’t that he stopped

and said, “This is a beautiful place. I think I will camp here for the night.” It was nothing more dramatic than, “This is as far as I can get. The sun is down.”

The idea of a certain place is not so much the geography, but maybe more of a metaphor for that place in Jacob’s life and where he was when he was ready to hear God speak. Let’s think about this. Jacob, by and large, was an upright man. He was a man who cared about his family and cared about God and the promises of God.

He also was a man who didn’t yet really get it. Because of that, he still was motivated by fear and that led him to deceive and manipulate his father to get the blessing. He created such a mess at home that his brother literally wanted to kill him. So Jacob is fleeing for his life. He does not know if his brother is chasing him or not. He does not know if he is about to be killed or not. As a matter of fact, the writer tells us that Jacob is concerned about this. He is fearful. We will look at that in just a minute.

But beyond that, Jacob had grown up in a home that was very wealthy. God had poured out his blessing on Isaac; we are told that. So Jacob would have had pretty much everything he ever wanted. He would have had servants and probably all the food that he could desire. He had it all. Now, all of a sudden, he is all alone. There are no servants. There is no food. There is no entourage. He is traveling alone, and to travel alone in the ancient areas was very dangerous. One could probably say this was the low point of Jacob’s life up to this point. That is the place where he is at that prepares him to hear what God has to say.

As we look back in our lives, and we think about those “aha” moments spiritually, most of those were probably times when we were struggling—when we were at a low point. It is typically in that place in life when we finally are willing to hear God speak. Oftentimes those “aha” moments are not something new. It was not something new for Jacob. It is probably something we have heard over and over again, but we get to that place in our lives where we are finally willing to hear it.

I often have people say to me that they heard a certain truth, and it was life changing. They will say something like, “I just have never heard that before.” I am thinking, *Yes you have. I have seen you sitting there, and I have said it twenty times before.* But we just reach a place where we finally hear it, and there is that light that goes on.

That is what I think the writer means when he says that “*place.*”

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. (v. 11)

We are asking ourselves why we need to know that he used a stone for a pillow. That is going to come up later in the story. I think the translation is a little bit misleading. It is not saying that he used the stone for a pillow. As a matter of fact, the Hebrew could be translated instead of under his head, it was “at his head.” In the ancient Near East if you slept in the wilderness, you would find a large stone and put that right next to your head, so if a wild animal came through in the night it at least protected your head. Even more than that, if you feared someone was trying to kill you, it protected your head, which increased your chance for survival. Really, what the writer is telling us is that Jacob was filled with fear, and he thought someone was trying to kill him. So he got this stone, and he put his head by it to provide some level of protection.

He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set 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. Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will 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.” (v. 12-14)

Jacob has a dream. In the ancient world, before God’s revelation was given, God sometimes spoke to people in a dream. We do need to understand that this was still extremely rare. But God speaks to Jacob in a dream, and it is a dream about a ladder that reaches from heaven all the way down to his feet on earth. There are angels ascending and descending on this ladder. There at the top of the ladder is God Himself and He speaks. He says, “I am the LORD”... capital L-O-R-D. That is always important to notice that name, which is the Hebrew *Yahweh* or *Jehovah*. It is the God who is intimate. It is the God who is personal. It is the God who makes covenants with His people.

In Genesis 1 we are introduced to *Elohim*, the Creator God, who is so big. You come out of chapter 1 thinking that He is so big no one could ever know Him. But in Genesis 2 we are introduced to *Yahweh*, the God who is so intimate that He breathes the breath of life into the very nostrils of Adam. It is a very intimate, personal picture that tells us this God who is so big is also so personal and intimate.

God introduces Himself then to Jacob as the God of your grandfather Abraham and the God of your father Isaac. That is very personal. As a matter of fact, that is the first time that God ever introduces Himself as the God of Isaac. The God of Abraham...the God of Isaac—what is implied in this is that God will be the God of Jacob. It is personal; it is intimate. There is a connection between God and Abraham, God and Isaac and now God and Jacob. That is very unique. In the ancient Near East, the pagans believed in multiple gods and they had absolutely no concept of an intimate, personal God. That is what made the Hebrew people unique. There was one God and they could be intimate with that God. That is what God is saying here.

Then He restates the promise, saying to Jacob that He is going to give him land; He is going to give him prosperity. He is going to give him the promised seed. This was not new information. At the very beginning of chapter 28, Isaac already went through all of this with the blessing, and promised that Jacob would have all of this. But Jacob did not get it. He didn’t understand it until he had this moment where God spoke to him. But God says more than that.

“Behold, I am with you [that is a promise of His presence] and will keep you wherever you go [that is a promise of guidance and protection], and will bring you back to this land [that is a promise of preservation. God is saying, ‘I will get you to the finish line. I will complete this thing.’]; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” (v. 15)

God comes to Jacob in a very personal, intimate way and He says, “I will be with you. You will have My presence. I will guide and protect you. I will complete this thing. I will fulfill My promise to you. I promise I will do that.” And Jacob believes.

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.” 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.” (v. 16-17)

Jacob realizes he is in the very presence of God. This is God’s house. This is God’s presence. This is the very gateway into heaven itself. Jacob is learning what it took Isaac so long to learn—that as a son of the promise, God is concerned about him personally. God has made a promise to him that should radically, dramatically change his life.

One of the problems with Isaac, Jacob’s father, is that it seemed like no matter how many times God told him, Isaac just didn’t get it. He would hear the promise and it was just like, *Okay*. He would hear the promise, but then he would go on and live his life as if he was no different from anyone else, just scratching it out in the trenches and trying to do his best. He just did not understand that God had promised His very presence. The very resources of heaven were poured out upon Isaac because he was a son of the promise. It wasn’t until Isaac was wanting to bless Esau, and ended up blessing Jacob, that the light bulb finally went on, and he had an “aha” moment. He finally realized, *Wow, this is what this means!* He turned right around and he restates it to Jacob at the beginning of chapter 28. But Jacob did not get it until this moment.

The question is still: So what? What difference does this make? It has to do with this ladder. The point is that the very power and the very presence of God are coming down this ladder to Jacob personally. What does that ladder mean? What is the point?

Let’s go back and review a little bit. In Genesis 15 God made the initial promise to Abraham. In that promise God said, “Abraham, we are entering into a covenant. If either you or I fail to keep the covenant, I will shed My blood in order to make it right.” This is a unilateral covenant, where God was making the promise, and Abraham was merely the recipient. Abraham believed that, and it was credited to his account as righteousness.

The sign of the covenant was circumcision, which was the removal of the flesh. This was a way of saying there is nothing we can do in our own power, in our own flesh, to fulfill this covenant. Therefore, the flesh is thrown away, and that is our way of saying it has to be totally God. God has to do it all. We can’t do it.

Then it moves to this ladder, this connecting point, between heaven and earth that Jacob dreams about. What is the ladder? Thankfully, Jesus describes it in John 1:51. Jesus is engaged in a discussion with Nathanael, who would become one of his twelve apostles. It is believed that Nathanael was reading this story right before he met Jesus. Jesus said to him, “Nathanael, I am that ladder. I am the ladder upon which the angels of heaven will ascend and descend. In other words, I will be that connection between a holy God and sinful man. I am the ladder.”

Paul said the same thing to Timothy. Paul told Timothy, “Remember that God desired for all people to be saved, but there is only one God. There is only one mediator, one ladder, between God and man and that is Christ Jesus; Christ the Messiah, Jesus.” (1 Timothy 2:4-5)

Jesus Himself said it when He said, “I am the way [*I am the ladder*], the truth and the life. Nobody comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

Let's put it all together. God promised that because we cannot keep the covenant, He would shed His blood to atone for that. God had become flesh and was ultimately nailed upon that cross. He did what He promised. He shed His blood because *we* could not keep the covenant. Those who believe that, those who embrace that and say, "Yes, I believe You did that for me, because I could not keep the covenant"—for them He becomes their Savior. He forgives our sin; but more than that, He is what links us to a holy God. He is the ladder from sinful man to a holy God.

Because of that, the very presence and power of God comes from the heavenlies and fills my life, where I become now a radically new person. So often we are like Isaac; we are like Jacob. We say we believe that, but then we just keep cranking it out in life as if we are just like everybody else. Sometimes we fail to realize that because of Jesus Christ we have God's presence, God's power, and God's blessings channeled from the heavenlies into our lives personally. I am now a son of the promise, which gives me what I need to live radically different than those who don't know Christ around me.

Oftentimes I hear people, especially when they are in difficult times, talk about how they just know they need religion—how they need God in their life and how they need to do better. But we need to understand what we are really talking about here is not religion. It is not doing better. What we are talking about is the one and only way that we can have a relationship with God. It does not matter if you are Berean, Lutheran, Roman Catholic or Seventh-day Adventist. What matters is what you do with Jesus and to believe that Jesus is the only means by which sinful man is connected with a holy God.

That is what Jacob finally understands. That is the ladder, and he understands that it is God's power and God's presence that now are going to be poured into his life personally, because he is a son of the promise. How does he respond?

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. (v. 18)

Again, we are not talking about his pillow here. We are talking about his protection—what he had believed would be his protection. He is now saying, "I get it. God will be my protection. God will take care of me." Therefore, he is taking what he was trusting in and, in a sense, he is dedicating it to God as a testimony. He believes.

He called the name of that place Bethel [which means 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..." (v. 19-20a)

The word "*if*" is a little bit misleading. Really, in the Hebrew it says, "If God said, and he did." We would use the word "*since*." He is not questioning it. The end of the story makes it quite clear that he believes.

"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. This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You." (v. 20b-22)

Jacob responds by saying, “I believe.” He gets it. “God has promised He will be with me and He is going to protect me. He is going to take care of me and get me back into the land. He is going to see this promise completed.”

Think how that corresponds to what we have in Christ. God has promised through Christ that He will dwell within us. He has said that His very presence will never leave you or forsake you. God has promised His guidance and His protection. God has promised to finish what He has started: “He who has begun a good work will be faithful to complete it.” (Philippians 1:6) He has said, “I will not leave you until this whole thing is done. Mission accomplished.”

Jacob hears that, he understands it, and he believes it, so he responds. He responds by saying, “God, I will give you back a tithe, ten percent of everything that I have.” It would be several hundred years before the Law would be established with the concept of a tithe. This is not a legalistic thing for Jacob. It is just a reasonable expression of worship. Jacob is saying, “God, because I understand what You sacrificed for me and what You have done for me, then I want to sacrifice for You. I want to give back to You a portion of what You have given to me.”

At this time, Jacob had nothing. It was easy to promise ten percent of nothing. But he also believed that it was not going to be long until he was going to be the recipient of God’s blessing and he would be wealthy. He would just keep giving it back to God. It is really an indication that he got it; he understood. It was an “aha” moment and because of that, he said, “God, I want to sacrifice for You. This is my worship. This is my sacrifice of worship.”

For some of you, that “aha” moment may be the moment where you finally understand, *This is what Jesus did for me and this is why He did it*. You understand and you get it. For you, this is that moment of salvation where, in the quietness of your heart, you just tell God, “I believe. I get it. I believe.”

For many of us, we have already made that decision. We would say, “I understand that. I understand it; I have embraced it. I have asked Jesus to be my Savior.” So in light of that, we really need to ask the question, “*What has been the outflow of sacrifice as a response to what we say we understand, and what we say we believe?*”

When Jacob understood, the natural response—the reasonable response—was a sacrifice of worship. What have we sacrificed as a response to understanding the truth of our salvation? In what ways have we sacrificially given of our time to build the kingdom? So often, we are trying to just make it convenient. We are trying to fit it into our schedule. We don’t want it to interrupt our lives too much. But it is supposed to be a sacrifice. It is supposed to cost us something. It is supposed to be a sacrifice that says, “God, I understand. I understand what You did for me and I, in turn, want to sacrifice for You, because I love You. This is my statement of worship.” It should cost us something.

Part of what we are saying is that when we get it, it changes our value system. It changes what we live for. It changes what matters to us. Therefore, we are going to sacrifice for that which we now value. In what ways are you sacrificing of your money as an expression of worship to God? It is easy to say, “I understand and I have had that ‘aha’ moment.” Okay, then what is our response?

It is interesting how Paul says the same thing in Romans 12. He takes eleven chapters to talk about salvation by grace through faith, this magnificent doctrine of God’s grace and His

sacrifice for our salvation. Then in chapter 12, he finally says, “Therefore, because you get it, because you understand it, then you are to present yourself as a living sacrifice—which is, according to the King James, “a reasonable service of worship.” That is a very good translation. That is exactly what it says. Paul says, “If you really get it, then to sacrifice is a reasonable response.” In other words, if you want to turn that upside down, anything less is unreasonable, given what you say you understand He did for you.

According to the latest statistics, the average born-again Christian gives less than 3% of their income to God.¹ It seems to me there is a problem there. Somewhere there is a disconnect. We say we understand, we receive it and we embrace it, but when it comes to our sacrifice of worship, of giving back, there is a disconnect. We are still doing our own thing and living out our own value systems. Something is not connected there.

The same statistics would show that three out of every 100 Christians tithe. Three out of every 100. Folks, something is wrong there. Somewhere we have made a disconnect between that “aha” moment of knowing this is what Christ sacrificed for us and what we are willing to sacrifice for Him. It flows out of a statement in our hearts that says, “I believe Him. He will protect me. He will provide for me. He will take care of me. He will complete this race in me. I believe that. I believe it, and so I sacrifice as an expression of my worship to say I believe.”

Some of you are thinking, *I don't think I could. That would cost me.* Yes, it will. It is supposed to. That is the whole point of worship. It costs us something. You might have to drive a ten-year-old car instead of a new car. You might have to live in a smaller house instead of a big house. You might have to invest in the kingdom of God instead of the stock market. I understand that. But I also understand that is a reasonable response if you really have understood what God has done for you.

For most of you, this is not new. You have probably heard it lots of times before. But at some point, there has to come an “aha” moment where the light comes on and we say, “Wow, I really understand what God has done for me and what He has promised me. I believe that; and because I believe it, here is my sacrifice of worship in return. Here is my reasonable sacrifice of worship.” Maybe you find yourself in that place where God can speak and you will listen and respond accordingly.

¹ Statistics from George Barna research: www.barna.org

*Scripture quotations are from the NASB (New American Standard) translation.

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October 4/5, 2003

Study Questions

Fear or Faith (Part 1): A Study in the Life of Isaac & Jacob

The Place of Salvation

Genesis 28:10-22

Opening Discussion

1. Have various members of the group share their own personal testimony of trusting Christ as Savior. What were the circumstances?

What led to that decision?

What has changed since that decision?

2. Since your salvation you've probably had a few of those "aha" moments when something about God and your relationship to Him sinks in and you get it in a way you had never understood it before. Share one or two of those moments in your Christian walk.

What were the circumstances that brought about the "aha"?

How has it changed your life?

Bible Study

1. Read Genesis 28:10-22.
2. What changed from the way Jacob had been accustomed to living with his family versus the conditions he now faced?

What are some words that might describe his mental and emotional condition in our text?

3. In a Hebrew narrative it is always important to notice repetition of words or phrases. Notice the repetition of the word "*place*." How many times does it occur in this text?

Do you believe the repetition of the word "*place*" is about physical geography or about the place Jacob found himself in life?

Why was Jacob in this "*place*" in life?

4. In what ways might Jacob's "*place*" in life be similar to where you were when you trusted Jesus as Savior?

5. What is pictured in Genesis 28:12?

What does this picture represent? See John 1:43-51 and 1 Timothy 2:5.

6. God speaks to Jacob in his dream. This is the second time God refers to Himself as the God of Abraham and the first time He refers to Himself as the God of Isaac. Why does God refer to Himself in this way?

Is God's promise to Jacob conditional or unconditional?

Has Jacob just come off a great victory of faith or a great failure of faith?

What does this teach us about God's grace?

7. Genesis 28:18-22 set the stage for many of the events to come in Jacob's life. No matter how difficult things got or how hopeless the circumstances seemed, Jacob could go back to this "*place*" and remember what God promised him. In what ways have you been encouraged by going back to the "*place*" of your salvation in the midst of hard times?
8. Compare Genesis 28:22 with Romans 12:1, 2. What is your "spiritual service of worship" or a reasonable response to God for your salvation by grace through faith?

Given this, what would be an unreasonable response?

Application

1. What did God promise you when you trusted Jesus as Savior?

Has God kept those promises?

Will God keep those promises in the future?

How does that help you cope with the trials you are currently facing?

Name one specific trial and discuss how God's promises directly affect your ability to face that trial.

2. Jacob was willing to give a tenth of all that God would give him back to God as a response to God's promises to him. Paul tells us about a reasonable response in Romans 12. What have you sacrificed for God in response to your salvation?

Does your response reflect a reasonable response to God in light of what He has done for you?

3. Pray for the faith to believe God's promises evidenced in our willingness to give back to God what He's given to us.