

Jacob's Test

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 March 2020

Preacher: Nick Louw

[0 : 00] Well, the story we find ourselves at is the weird but fairly well-known story of Jacob's ladder, this vision Jacob receives in the wilderness of a ladder reaching to heaven, very bizarre.

A story which by itself doesn't make much sense. But in the context of the story so far, it's actually quite important. Because if you've been with us, you'll know through Genesis so far, you'll know that Jacob is now running for his life from his brother who is seeking to kill him because Jacob stole his blessing from their dodderly old dad, which was all their scheming mom's idea.

Okay, so a pretty dysfunctional family. And yet we've also been seeing how despite all this, God saw fit to use this family to continue his purposes for the world through the covenant that he swore to Abraham, Jacob's grandfather.

And we've seen that none of the recipients of God's covenant promises so far did anything to deserve those promises. Not Abraham, not Isaac, not his son Jacob, not the nation of Israel later, of course, and certainly not you or me.

But we've also seen that these undeserving covenant members, people who have received God's covenant promises, and there's really nothing greater than receiving a promise from God and knowing that it applies to you.

[1 : 24] And he's done that through his word and his covenant signs. He's made promises and he's sealed those promises on particular people who believe. And we've been seeing in Genesis how despite the undeservingness of covenant members, they still need to respond to God's promises if they're actually to receive them and have them sealed to them, which of course is the same today as back then.

Namely, the primary thing people need to do to receive God's covenant promises is to have faith in those promises. Not just to say they have faith and come to church and pretend, but to actually have real faith and to show it.

And that is why we've seen as well in Genesis so far that God designs tests of faith to assure his covenant people that their faith is actually the real thing and even to make it stronger each time it's tested.

And so we read about Abraham's journey of faith and the tests that God gave him. And then we read about Isaac's journey of faith, Abraham's son. But it's now in this story and in this section of Genesis that we begin Jacob's journey of faith in the next few chapters.

And it starts out here in the middle of nowhere in the darkness of the night. And God appears to Jacob for the first time in his life.

[2 : 51] This is the first time he's ever had any contact with God. Now he knew the stories, of course, that Isaac, his dad, had told him about him and Abraham.

But their God wasn't his God yet. In fact, we saw that hinted at in the last story. I wonder if you picked it up in conversation with Isaac in the previous chapter. He still referred to God as the Lord your God.

Not the Lord our God or the Lord my God, but the Lord your God. Because God hadn't spoken to Jacob yet. Or given him promises like he had given to Abraham and Isaac.

He didn't even know whether he was part of the plan and maybe he didn't even care. Well, all that was about to change. Because here he is on the run from his brother. No place to stay.

The best he can do is use a rock as a pillow. So, he manages, oddly enough, to get some sleep.

But then, as he's in a deep sleep, God shows up in his dream.

[3 : 51] Which is a way God often spoke to patriarchs and people in the Old Testament. And even today, God often speaks to people who have no other access to his word. In the Muslim world, we see it often.

People are spoken to by God in dreams. But here, God is speaking to Jacob in his dream. And he gives him this strange vision. Have a look. You can see from verse 12 in your Bibles. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth with its top reaching to the heaven. And the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord. Now, what on earth does all that mean? It's one of the strangest things. And there have been a lot of fanciful interpretations. You know, Bible teachers who have to say something. Come up with all these weird and wonderful interpretations of this. But, like with everything in the Bible, it becomes clearer if you just read on. Because what God says to Jacob next as he gives him the promises that he gave his father and grandfather helps us to understand what the vision actually means.

[5 : 01] And he also did that back with Abraham. He gave him this strange vision at night as well. And then he spoke to him. And what he said made sense of the vision he just gave him. So let's read on from verse 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. Your descendants will 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. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you.

And I 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. Okay, so here God is calling Jacob to the exact same faith in the same promises that he has given to his grandfather and his father.

That covenant of blessing to the rest of the world and that through the offspring of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the whole world will be blessed. Of course, that is a covenant which is still working its way out through the gospel and through Jesus, the true offspring of Abraham, who is bringing salvation and restoration to the world through his death on the cross.

[6 : 13] And so he gives this promise here to Jacob and he's calling Jacob into his place in the covenant. He's saying to Jacob, you're also part of this. These promises are for you too. But very interestingly, he's added something.

I wonder if you spotted it. He added. You wouldn't have spotted it unless you know well the promises he gave to Abraham and Isaac. But he's added something for Jacob right at the end. It's verse 15.

I am with you and I 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. Those are special words to Jacob alone. Especially that phrase, I will watch over you or I will keep you. This is the first time that God has ever promised a human being this. The word means to guard or to watch carefully.

Basically what all parents are doing with their children now every 10 minutes. Have you washed your hands? They're watching carefully to make sure that no coronavirus can get into the home. That's the kind of careful, vigilant watching over that this word implies.

[7 : 22] And here God, as I said, for the first time ever in human history promises a human being that he will be watching them carefully. Not in a negative way to see where they go wrong.

Like many people think God is watching. But he's promising this particular covenant member he will be guarding him. He will be watching over him. He will be protecting him and providing for him. Protecting him against all threats. And that is quite a profound promise. But why now? Why does God give this particularly to Jacob?

Why does he now need to hear this and trust in it? Well, because he's on the run for his life. And he's about to embark on a journey into an unknown situation. And so in that context, his first job as a covenant member was to believe in God's daily involvement in his life.

And that his life is guarded by the God of Abraham and Isaac. Who has already shown himself in history to be the true God. And the next few chapters then in Jacob's story are going to test that faith.

[8 : 29] In that promise, whether God is really guarding him and watching over him. But do you see the differences in the way each of the patriarchs had to exercise covenant faith? They all had to have faith in the promises.

But they had to show that faith in a different way. As we've been reading through these stories. So we've already looked at the first two in past weeks. You'll remember while Abraham had to show

faith by leaving everything behind.

And while Isaac had to do the opposite to actually show faith by staying in the situation he was in. Even when things got bad because he was born into the covenant. Well now, Jacob is being called to show his faith in a different way.

By trusting in God's active involvement in his life on his journey into the unknown. Even when he was away from everything he knew. And that I think makes sense now of the vision of these angels going up and down the ladder.

You see in the Old Testament, angels were seen as God's envoys. They are throughout the Bible seen as God's envoys. But especially in the Old Testament, they were seen as doing God's work in particular different places.

[9 : 36] And in particular kingdoms on earth. And literally patrolling different zones of the earth. Sounds fanciful, but it's what the Bible teaches. Zechariah 1.8 says, These are they whom the Lord has sent to patrol the earth.

And so with these different angels working in different places and different nations. And that was probably the mind of Jacob and Isaac and Abraham as well. That God's envoys were working in the land.

They definitely knew that God's envoys were working in the land. But what about outside the land? Were there any angels working there? Well now, just the existence of angels alone.

Which is something that is still a little bit foreign to the Western rational mind. That there might also be an unseen realm. But of course there is. Because where did all this come from? Just the existence of these envoys of God.

Is a reminder that God is actively working in this world behind the scenes. Even when it doesn't look like he is. There's a whole network of spiritual forces around us every day.

[10 : 41] Who are working and carrying out God's work in this world. That we can't see, but the Bible reveals to us. Are there. But that was especially important for Jacob to know now.

As he's embarking on this risky journey. To know that God would be working behind the scenes wherever he goes. Even if he moves out of this land. There will be angels to replace the ones in this land.

And assign to where he's going. Some going up. Some going down. And so as a member of the covenant. He can be sure of God's active and yet invisible keeping of him. And his involvement in his life wherever he finds himself on earth.

And that's what makes sense now of this vision. But of course what does that all mean for us today? Well it means exactly the same thing actually. If we are members of God's covenant.

You see each of the requirements God gave to these first members of his covenant. He expects of Christians today. As he expected Abraham to leave what he knew to enter into the covenant.

[11 : 44] So he expects Christians today to leave the values and priorities of the world we live in. To not store up our treasures here. To pursue a holiness and purity of life which is foreign to our culture.

And to seek the coming kingdom. That's how we leave this world. For now. We don't stop caring for it. And our neighbors. But there is a certain separation of life that needs to happen.

For God's people to effectively be peculiar people. Different people to stand out. And to do God's work in this world. And that of course is one of the reasons why.

Especially in a time of social distancing. Christians must still make every effort to spur each other on in love and good deeds. To keep helping each other in our fight against sin.

To keep in contact with each other. And of course to share the gospel with those around us who now so desperately need it more than ever. They've always needed it. They just didn't know it. Maybe now they do.

[12 : 43] But then also just as God expected Isaac to stay and persevere in the land and not abandon his faith in trial. So he expects his people today as Jesus says to hold to his teaching.

To remain in his word. If they are really his disciples. That's what he said to his disciples. If you're really my disciples one way that will be shown is if you stay steadfast to my word.

And you hold to my teaching. And you do not drift from that. You keep it front and center in your life. That's why we gather. That's why we do this. That's why we keep going in the word. That's why even in times of self-isolation.

We're going to keep services going. And Bible teaching as top priorities. Even if it's just me and Dylan here. We're going to keep doing this. And keep helping you to stay in God's word as much as you can.

And so that was Abraham and Isaac's call to faith. But then what do we learn from Jacob's story? Well, just as God expected him to believe that God is keeping him and invisibly involved in his life. [13:46] Even when things around him are unknown and chaotic. So God expects his covenant people today and the ups and downs of journeying through this broken world. To know and rest in the knowledge that God is actively at work behind the scenes every day.

And that he is in control of what is going on. And that he is keeping and guarding his covenant people. So that we will certainly inherit all the promises he has made to us.

No matter what's going on around us. And those promises are the promises of a new restored creation. Without death or viruses or pain or tears or parting or social distancing.

The question is, of course, that's a great promise. But how can we really know it's true of us just because it was true of Jacob? How do we really know God is keeping us for that future hope like he was keeping Jacob?

You know, he got this amazing vision. I bet any of us would love to get a vision like that, right? And he knew God was speaking to him directly. How do we know God's promises still apply to us?

[14:59] Without supernatural visions like that. Well, because this is not the last place in the Bible where we read about angels ascending and descending. And God's involvement in the lives of his covenant people.

Turn with me to John chapter 1. At home as well. If you've got your Bibles with you, please turn to John 1. Towards the end.

John 1 is when Jesus first rocks up on the scene and he starts engaging with people and then the news spreads about him. One disciple goes and talks to another disciple and witnesses of his experience of Jesus and brings him to Jesus.

And towards the end, listen to what Jesus says to Nathanael, this devout Jewish man who was seeking a vision from God. That's likely what he was doing under the fig tree in solitude.

Before he even met Jesus. You know, praying Jews, devout Jews would often go in solitude. And if in the desert you want some shade, so a fig tree is a good source of shade.

[16:04] And you pray and you would seek God. And Nathanael is probably longing for God to be there and involved in his life. Longing maybe for a vision of God. But we'll listen to what Jesus tells him when they meet for the first time.

From verse 48 of John 1. I saw you while you were still under the fig tree. Before Philip called you. Then Nathanael declared, Rabbi, you are the son of God.

You are the king of Israel. Jesus said, you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that. Then he added, very truly I tell you.

You will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the son of man. So, here's Nathanael seeking desperately to connect his life with the divine, with the unseen world.

Seeking to get a vision of what God is doing behind the scenes like Jacob got. Seeking to have God involved in his life like so many people are today.

[17:14] So was Nathanael. But then Jesus says, you don't need to seek for that anymore, Nathanael, because I'm standing right in front of you. And so for anybody today who has come to Christ, who has trusted in his death on the cross and by faith consumed his body and blood into themselves and received his Holy Spirit.

Covenant members know that you, like Jacob, can be assured of God's involvement in your daily life. His keeping of you behind the scenes in ways that you can't see.

His provision to you of all that you need to keep going on your journey to the land of promise. And that is true no matter what he causes you to go through in the meantime and no matter how chaotic the world around you is getting.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you so much for your word that we can open at any time. And as we gather by your Holy Spirit, you speak to us.

We thank you for this reminder, Lord, of your keeping of your covenant people that we will inherit your promises through Christ. We thank you for this assurance. And we pray, Lord, like Abraham, you would help us to separate ourselves from the values of this world and stop putting our hope in the things and the treasures of this world.

[18 : 34] We pray that, like Isaac, you would help us to persevere in your word and not give up Christian disciplines. And we pray, like Jacob, Lord, that you would help us to know your active involvement in our daily lives and to trust that and to live that out in word and deed.
And we pray this all in Jesus' name. Amen.