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Gen 28:10-22

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SURELY THE LORD IS IN THIS PLACE

There were two sides to Jacob's personality. He was a selfish opportunist who tricked his dim-witted brother Esau out of his inheritance, but he was also a hopeless romantic who fell in love with Rachel at first sight. By nature he was self-reliant and resourceful, but he came to understand that in the final analysis, everything really depended on God.

The watershed in Jacob's life came at an early age. After he had cheated his brother Esau out of his inheritance he learned that Esau was planning to kill him so he ran away. (Talk about your dysfunctional families!) After his first day's journey, he lay down to rest at a place called Luz. During the night God appeared to Jacob in a dream. He saw a ladder reaching up to heaven with angels ascending and descending on it. Then God appeared and promised Jacob that He would always guide him and protect him and fulfill through him all the things he had promised his grandfather Abraham. He would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the heavens and one of those descendants would bring blessing to all the people on earth. He would take care of him wherever he went and one day bring him back to the land He had promised Abraham. When Jacob awoke, he knew that he had received divine promises from God that could never be broken. These promises created a brand new reality for Jacob: whatever he did, wherever he went, whoever he encountered, God would take care of him and make him a blessing to others.

Now something seems a little out of kilter here. Jacob committed serious sins: he usurped his brother's rightful place in his family and stole his inheritance. Even worse, he deceived his blind, aged father and made him an unwitting accomplice in his skullduggery. And then God responded by promising to bless Jacob, to take care of him and to make one of his descendants a blessing to all mankind.

Jacob sins and instead of punishing him, God blesses him. What's going on here?

In this enigma we encounter a profound mystery which we see throughout the Bible: the mystery of sin overcome by grace. We provoke God's wrath by sinning against Him and our fellow man and God responds by forgiving our sin and granting us grace and mercy and peace. We continue to sin all the more and God continues to forgive us all the more, as Paul writes, "...where sin did abound, grace did super-abound." (Romans 5:20) The takeaway is that we can't out-sin God's willingness to forgive, although God knows, we try.

In human terms this makes no sense. Why doesn't God just keep us from sinning in the first place? Why does he let us go ahead and sin and then forgive us? It seems illogical, but then if God treated us logically we would all be fried. That is why God doesn't operate by logic; He operates by grace. He doesn't wait for us to seek him, He seeks us and finds us and makes us His own. He sends His Holy Spirit to go to work in us and re-align our wills with His will. He teaches us to think His thoughts rather than our thoughts and to thank Him for the things He gives us rather than complain about the things he doesn't give us. The way God does this is by opening up a tiny portal in our minds to let in His light and show us the truth. That tiny portal that lets God's light into our lives is called *faith* and without it all we can do is stumble around in the darkness. Faith is what God gave to Jacob that night at Luz: faith in His divine plan for Jacob, for his descendents, and for all of mankind.

Jacob gave the place where God had come to him a new name. Instead of Luz, which meant "almond-branch," the place would now be called Bethel—the house of God. Bethel was the first church because church is the place where God comes to people who have sinned grievously and are fleeing from the consequences of their sins and covers their sins with his grace and mercy and peace. Church is the place where God makes us His ambassadors who can carry his grace and mercy and peace out into the world.

After giving the place a new name, Jacob made a vow. He said: "*If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the Lord will be my God and this*

stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth." (Genesis 28:20-22)

Now there are two ways of understanding this vow and I think Jacob intended them both. The first way is the way Jacob the shrewd businessman would have intended it—as a bargain with God: *"If you will do good things for me, God—like giving me food and clothing and safety—I'll acknowledge You as my God and pay you back by giving you a tenth of all you give me."* Not a bad deal, Jacob the businessman would have thought! A return of 90% on his investment before he even had to come up with the funds! And no risk—he only had to return ten percent of what God gave him. Such a bargain!

Now this is the way an unbelieving world proposes to worship God. In effect, they say: *"God, let's see what you can do for me and then we'll talk about what I might offer in return. Prove yourself to me and I promise to acknowledge your existence. Then, if you're everything you claim to be, and if you give me everything I think I need, we can have a working relationship. I might even consider giving you back a tenth of what you've invested in me, although I must say the price seems rather steep."* That's how pagans worship God. It's also how Jacob the shrewd businessman proposed to worship Him. And to a certain extent, it's how we sometimes try to worship Him as well. We think: *"As long as God does what I think He ought to do, I'll keep him in my life."*

The other way to understand Jacob's words is the way Jacob, the man of faith intended them to be understood. *"Since God will be with me and watch over me on this journey I am taking, and give me food to eat and clothes to wear, so that I can return safely to my father's house, then the Lord will be my God, and I will return to him a tenth of all He has given me."* What God has said, God will do.

Do you see the difference? It's the difference between law and Gospel, between pagan and believer, between the lost and the saved. One way asks God to prove Himself to us before we agree to acknowledge His existence and put our trust in Him. Show me the meat, God, and I'll consider buying the hamburger. It was the teenage me with the front of my Dad's 51 Ford in a ditch at 1:00 in the

morning saying, *"God if you will get me out of this ditch, I promise to believe in you."* Can you believe it?

The other way is to grasp and cling to God's promises by faith even before he has fulfilled them and trust Him to do everything He has said.

Now I submit to you that we are a lot like Jacob. Sometimes we approach God one way, sometimes another. Don't we occasionally try to strike bargains with God just like the pagans do—demanding that He prove Himself to us by doing what WE think He ought to do if He expects us to continue believing in Him? We say, *"Why are you letting this go on, God? Why don't you do something? If you don't do something, I'm not sure I can go on believing in you."* Then don't we turn around the next day and confess Him as our Savior and mean it with all our heart? Sure we do. We do them both because spiritually speaking, we are two different persons just like Jacob was. We are believers who know that God loves us and will cause all things to work together for good in our lives. But we are also doubters who wonder if He will really come through for us THIS time even if He's always done so in the past. Aren't we a lot like the father who brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus and asked if he could heal him. *"If you can?" said Jesus. 'Everything is possible for him who believes. Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!'"* (Mark 9:23-24) Don't we often find ourselves saying, *"I believe—but I still have doubts!!"* Or like Peter who had the faith to step out of a boat into raging waters and then began to sink as doubts set in. Luther once said that every believer struggles with one thing more than anything else and that is doubt in the inmost heart.

We all have different faces we present to God. We know it and God knows it and He still loves us. And He still overcomes our sin with His grace and gives us the faith to believe it. And that's not only the truth, it's a pretty good deal.

Amen

Genesis 28:10-22 Jacob's Dream at Bethel

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.

²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear ²¹ so that I return safely to my father's household, then the LORD will be my God ²² and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth."