

BIBLE STUDY

Text

Genesis 28:10-17

Topic

Jacob has his famous dream of the ladder whose top reached to Heaven

Title

"Ladder Day Saints"

Introduction

You are on a boat. On the side of the boat there is a ladder with six steps. Each step is exactly one foot apart from the next. It rains and the water raises six feet higher than before it rained. How many steps on the ladder are underwater?

While you're calculating the answer, let me ask you this:

- Why did the singer climb a ladder?
She wanted to reach the high notes.
- Why did the boy bring a ladder to school?
He thought it was a high school.

Back to the riddle. How many steps on the ladder are underwater? None. The boat rises with the water so all the steps stay above water.

I got to thinking about ladders because the events in our text in Genesis twenty-eight are most often summarized as "Jacob's ladder."

Gen 28:10 Now Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Haran.

Gen 28:11 So he came to a certain place and stayed there all night, because the sun had set. And he took one of the stones of that place and put it at his head, and he lay down in that place to sleep.

Gen 28:12 Then he dreamed, and behold, a **ladder** was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

While Jacob's ladder steals the scene, I'd like to suggest that a different object is at least as important, if not more so.

Don't you think it strange that "he took one of the stones of that place" and used it for a pillow?

I've heard of pillows filled with walnut husks and others with buckwheat. There are polyester pellets and something called microbeads. Horsehair, millet, flaxseed, and natural shredded rubber are used to fill pillows. In Japan they fill pillows with something called corma beans.

There *are* rock pillows, but these are foam-filled pillows made to *look* like rocks, not feel like them.

The mystery of Jacob using a rock for his pillow goes back to chapter thirteen of Genesis.

His grandfather, Abraham, had been to this exact spot, and had constructed a crude altar. The "stones of that place," and the one Jacob was using for his pillow, were likely **the very stones of that altar.**

Jacob, lying on the stone was, in a sense, lying on the altar.

Reminds us, does it not, of one of the Bible's most inspiring verses:

Rom 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service...

Granted, Jacob was unaware of the altar at the time. But aren't we often unaware that we are supposed to be lying on the altar, offering ourselves?

God never condoned human sacrifice, but there are three examples of "living sacrifices" in the Bible:

1. Isaac willingly put himself on the altar and would have died in obedience to God's will, but the Lord provided a ram to take his place.
2. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the perfect illustration of a "living sacrifice" because He actually died as a sacrifice in obedience to His Father's will.
3. The third example is... You! You are called upon to "present your bodies a living sacrifice."

"I beseech you" is not an expression of *duty*, but one of *devotion*.

As J. Vernon McGee puts it, beseech is “the language of grace, not the law.” Since we’ve been saved by grace, we are to walk in it.

Romans 12:1 is not a once-for-all event that never needs repeating. It is an exhortation to believers to present themselves, and to go on presenting themselves, day-by-day, for as long as we are pilgrims and strangers on this earth.

Discipleship is not a once-for-all event. It is an on going process - otherwise we wouldn't need the many exhortations, directed at Christians, we encounter as we read through the New Testament.

A little later in the Book of Romans, we read this further exhortation:

Rom 13:11 ... now it is high time to **awake out of sleep**; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed.

This is a 'wake-up call' from the apostle Paul, and it is most certainly addressed to believers.

Jacob, on the altar, had a dream that served as a 'wake-up call':

Gen 28:16 Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it."

Gen 28:17 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!"

Gen 28:18 Then Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on top of it.

Jacob, awakening from his sleep on the rock from the altar, is therefore a picture for us of ourselves awakening from spiritual slumber to a renewed commitment to discipleship.

It's accompanied by a reminder that God is present when we gather in such a way that we ought to say, "how awesome is this place!"

I want to explore waking-up and being awed by God. I'll organize my thoughts around just those two words: Awake & Awe.

#1 Awake!

If you are a regular here, you're probably wondering why we are in Genesis twenty-eight today, and not Matthew nineteen.

I can explain. A week ago Saturday, at First Watch, one of the guys had what I'd call a vision - of a ladder.

When you hear the word "ladder" in a biblical context, you immediately think of Jacob's ladder. Since it is the only use of the word anywhere in the Bible, it's a pretty safe bet God is directing our attention there.

Going to the text, I was arrested by the Holy Spirit when I read, verses sixteen and seventeen. "Awake" & "Awe" are the active words.

The Lord put the ladder on our hearts, while we were at prayer, and highlighted the verses. The least we can do is listen to what He might be saying to us - individually, for sure, but corporately, as a fellowship, as well.

We might put it this way. We believe that The Lord still speaks to us, and especially by His Word as it is highlighted and anointed by His Spirit.

He did that and we want to be obedient to listen.

Before we do that, let's say a few things about the ladder, and the dream Jacob had.

The word for "ladder" is *shallum*, used only here in all of the Bible. We don't know what is really meant, whether a ladder or a series of steps or a bridge or a stairway.

That's probably because, in truth, Jesus Himself **is** the *shallum*.

When talking to Nathanael, recorded for us in the Gospel of John, Jesus said "... you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

The angels would descend **to** Him, to minister to Him, as they did after His temptation in the wilderness.

But the words here say that they would descend "upon" Him **as if He were the bridge or the stairway.**

Indeed, Jesus is the bridge or stairway that connects earth to Heaven.

Pastor and author Gregory Boyd puts it this way:

Where do we get our picture of God?... the emphatic answer... is... in Jesus Christ.

As the eternal essence of God expressed in human form, Jesus is the visible representation of the Father. Everything we need to know about God is disclosed in him. In knowing Jesus there is nowhere else and no one else we need to look to in order to learn what God is like.

If we are thinking biblically and therefore looking to Jesus (Hebrews 12:2, see also Colossians 3:1-4), we never need to ask, "Show us the Father." The Word incarnate is the fulfillment and complete expression of God's revelation in Scripture.

Do you have a question? Jesus doesn't simply have the answer; **He is the answer.**

One of the biggest questions of all, one we each struggle with in some way at some time, and one on the minds of nonbelievers, is why there is so much suffering in the world. Why do bad things happen to good people, and to God's people?

And not just run-of-the-mill bad things. Some things are so bad, so cruel, so immense, that we are stunned and overwhelmed.

I've been camped out on the issue of suffering for a while - talking about it whenever I get the chance - because I really do think it is a stumblingblock to believers and nonbelievers.

We *do* have a perfectly good theological answer. One word can summarize it: **longsuffering**. God is longsuffering, not willing that any should perish, but that all come to eternal life.

The evil in the world, and all that flows from it, is on account of sin. It was not in God's original creation. It was the free will choice of Adam and Eve, now passed down to their descendants.

Why free will? It's necessary if there is to be love - real love. Something forced can never be said to be love.

God immediately stepped in to the Garden of Eden with the solution. He would come through the seed of a human woman to destroy sin and death by dying in our place.

Right from the beginning, when evil was just a few minutes old, Jesus was the answer.

When Jesus was on the earth, He spent His time freeing people from evil and misery; He fought against evil spiritual foes and forces; He had compassion upon people who were afflicted by sin, disease, and tragedy. He suffered on the Cross, taking your place, in order to redeem you and reconcile you to God.

In Heaven, He has no less passion for you. He is your answer; that is, you will find all you require, grace that is sufficient, as you and He walk together - even if it is through the valley of the shadow of death, as it sometimes must be, as God's longsuffering waits for sinners to repent and be saved.

God is not behind all the evil and suffering in this world. He is against it.

The problem of pain is just one example of how Jesus is the answer; of how Jesus is the *shallum*.

Genesis 28:13 And behold, the LORD stood above it and said: "I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants.

Genesis 28:14 "Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Genesis 28:15 "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 spoken to you."

God reiterated to Jacob the covenant He had made with Abraham.

Part of what Jacob received was unique, only for him and his physical descendants, the Jews; part is shared by us - the spiritual descendants of Abraham.

- The Jews are promised descendants too numerous to measure, and land to own and enjoy forever.
- Gentiles who believe will be "blessed" in other profound ways.

Let's get back to what The Lord is trying to tell us by having God the Holy Spirit highlight this passage.

As a believer in Jesus Christ, called to be His disciple, you are exhorted to present yourself a living sacrifice to Him.

It's not just a 'should do,' it's a **want to** for us. As believers, we want to be in the Lord's will, doing His bidding, serving Him, earning heavenly rewards.

As we saw in Romans thirteen, we can fall asleep, spiritually speaking, and need a wake up call.

Every night, pretty much, I fall asleep on one of the living room chairs. Pam will say to me, "Are you asleep?" To which I *always* answer, "No," even though it's a lie.

Spiritual slumber is somewhat more difficult to recognize. But there are a few characteristics of physical sleep that can help us recognize spiritual slumber.

First, I would say that *inactivity* is a sign you are asleep. When I'm on the chair, and I'm not moving, and the TV remote falls from my hand - hey, I'm asleep. I'm still breathing; that's good - proving I'm not dead. But I'm not doing anything.

If I am doing very little, or nothing, to serve The Lord; if all my activities are secular; if I'm waiting to serve The Lord when it becomes convenient; then I'm probably asleep and need to awaken.

Activity, by itself, doesn't necessarily prove I'm awake. I can be totally spinning my wheels, doing stuff that is not being led by the Spirit, and be spiritually asleep in the midst of a flurry of activity. Sort of like sleep walking.

Insensitivity is another potential sign you might be asleep. I'm a heavy sleeper. It takes a lot to awaken me. We heavy sleepers are not very sensitive to minor distractions, noises, movements and the like.

Insensitivity in the spiritual realm translates to our becoming less concerned with one another and with sin. We see this, for example, when a brother or sister insists on their liberties in Christ without showing concern for how their behavior might stumble others who do not share their freedoms.

We see this when Christians know they are sinning, but instead of repenting, they try to manage their sin, thinking they can minimize its effects on themselves and others.

The world is out to desensitize us. Let's not cooperate with it.

Illness can bring on sleep. In college I had an illness that was forcing me to sleep. (Explain).

It turned out to be pericarditis. Pericarditis is a condition in which the sac-like covering around the heart (the pericardium) becomes inflamed.

The Bible warns us "and let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart" (Galatians 6:9). Discouragements, depression, defeats - all these can weary us to the point in which we withdraw and, for all practical purposes, are asleep.

There may be other signs of spiritual slumber, but inactivity and insensitivity and illness are three big ones.

I don't feel I need to list any more because, after all, God the Holy Spirit is highlighting this word - "Awake" - and He is fully capable of showing each of us *if* or *where* we are asleep.

It's important we "Awaken." We are soldiers, engaged in a fierce spiritual struggle for the souls of nonbelievers, and for the safety of believers.

We are the watchmen on the walls, sounding the warning.

We are the sowers, going into the world sowing God's Word, working in the fields, to see the harvest.

It's no time to be asleep.

#2 Awe

Jacob awoke from his sleep *afraid* and with a sense of *awe*.

Gen 28:16 Then Jacob **awoke** from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it."

Gen 28:17 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!"

Are you - am I - "afraid" as Jacob was? We should be. If we are not, perhaps we are not hearing The Lord.

For the nonbeliever, the fear of God is the fear of the judgment of God and eternal death, which is eternal separation from God

Believers are not to be scared of God.

- We have no reason to be scared of Him. We have His promise that nothing can separate us from His love (Romans 8:38-39).
- We have His promise that He will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5).

Fearing God means thinking about Him in a way that has great impact on the way we live our lives.

The fear of God is respecting Him, obeying Him, and submitting to His discipline.

Are you - am I - in "awe" of God? Certainly there are moments that inspire awe. When you see something grand in God's creation, or learn of the critical balances that make life possible, or understand how a God has fulfilled prophecy to the letter.

We also need what we might call everyday awe. To stand in awe of His grace and mercy; of His love and of eternal life.

The psalmist also wrote, "But you forgive (people) so that they are in awe of you (Psalm 130:4 Easy English Translation).

One author said, "We recover awe when we acknowledge the greatness of His sacrifice, the depth of our sin, and the height of His love - all in the person of Christ."

Jacob said, "This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!"

Places were significant in the Old Testament - much more so than they are for New Testament saints. We don't worship Jesus in a certain place, but rather, we can worship Him anyplace, since we are to worship Him in Spirit and in truth.

That is not to say, however, that certain places are insignificant. The places I'm talking about are *wherever* and *whenever* believers gather together.

Jesus said of Himself, in the Book of the Revelation, that He walked in the midst of the assembled church on earth.

He said it somewhat dramatically, comparing the churches on the earth to candlesticks, and then saying He walked in their midst.

The writer to the Hebrew Christians strongly exhorted them to quit forsaking the assembling of themselves together, but to get together all the more.

When you realize that the Hebrew Christians were being persecuted by both Jews and Romans, this exhortation carries a lot of weight. I mean, they weren't missing church because there were things they'd rather do; they were missing church so they wouldn't be targeted for persecution.

We shouldn't need any exhortation to gather, but should be glad doing so.

Yes, Jesus is omnipresent. But He has told us He would be present in a special way when His church gathers; and that we should do so more and more, rather than forsaking assembling together.

In that spiritual sense, we today are "the house of God, the gate of Heaven."

The Lord is here, every Sunday, and right now. His speaking to us doesn't depend upon my message; He can speak in spite of it, as well use it.

Once again, I don't feel I need to make much of a point about this, seeing as God the Holy Spirit is the one highlighting it to our hearts. But one point that seems to suggest itself is that we understand that when we come together, we are to anticipate with fear and awe that the living God is among us to speak to us.

He wants all of us to understand we ought to be *afraid* (in a good way) and be *awed* by the presence of The Lord in our gathering.

Psalm 33:8 brings these two thoughts together:

Psa 33:8 Let all the earth fear the LORD; Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him.

Let's hear what the Spirit is saying to the church - to each of us, and to all of us.

We're going to set aside a few moments for you to spend with The Lord, in prayer. It's not a time of public participation, but of personal introspection.

The question to ponder isn't "did The Lord speak to you?," but rather, "**what did** The Lord say to you?," as we were worshipping or studying His Word, or "**what is** He saying to you?" as you reflect upon it in our closing.