

"THE LADDER TO HEAVEN"

SERMONS

By Mike Burnham

GENESIS 28:10-19

Genesis 28:10-19 (KJV) *And Jacob went out from Beer-sheba, and went toward Haran. 11 And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep. 12 And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. 13 And, behold, the LORD stood above it, and said, I am the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; 14 And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. 15 And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of. 16 And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not. 17 And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven. 18 And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it. 19 And he called the name of that place Beth-el: but the name of that city was called Luz at the first.*

Verses 10,11...Jacob was a rascal. His name means "supplanter", to clutch, to overtake, to circumvent, Gen 27:36. He was the fellow who deceived his father, conned his brother, and entered into an unGodly conspiracy with his mother. It is

hard to imagine that the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham could be so corrupt. But in the course of his life he underwent a radical transformation. It started at Bethel. When Jacob had settled into sleep, he had a dream that was destined to change his life.

Verses 12-15...this ladder served as a bridge between heaven and earth. Up to this point in his life Jacob was not a man who was in touch with heavenly things. He had a sense of the "absence of God." It seems strange that he would be so "secular". He must have heard stories from his father and grandfather about God. But heavenly matters made little impression upon him. As far as he was concerned there was an unbridgeable chasm between heaven and earth. If there was a God he was so remote, so utterly transcendent (separate from the earth) that he had no relevance to Jacob's life. This God of whom his parents spoke was too high for Jacob to reach. Until he had a dream.

The ladder was a contact point, a connection between the realm of the holy and the realm of the profane. The angels were moving in both directions, from earth to heaven and from heaven to earth. The traffic was continuous. At the top of the ladder Jacob saw the figure of God and God spoke confirming the promise that he had made earlier to Abraham and Isaac. Jacob would be the carrier of the covenant that God had sworn.

Whatever happened to Jacob's ladder? The image disappears in Old Testament history. Centuries pass with no mention of it. Then suddenly, it appears again in the New Testament: John 1:45-51. Jesus declared that he is the ladder of Jacob; he is the bridge between heaven and earth; he is the one who spans the chasm between the holy one and mortal men. The angels of God ascend and descend upon him. What were the angels doing when they descended? See Heb. 1:13,14. He makes the absent God present among us. Was this what Jacob saw in a dim, shadowy way?

Verses 16,17...when Jacob awoke he was stunned. The name of the place where Jacob had his dream became known as "Bethel", which means "the house of God". There was no tabernacle, no temple, no church building there. Jacob called it

the house of God because there the holy one made himself known. Jacob's words, "surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not" are typical of the plight modern man feels. We see no burning bushes, no pillars of fire, no incarnate Christ walking among us. Sometimes it feels like we're abandoned in an indifferent universe.

Jacob felt the same way until he had his dream. God was there all the time and Jacob was not aware of it. The tragic ignorance of God's presence is played out in our culture every day in the lives of millions of people. God is here but we are not aware of it. The moment awareness of his divine presence begins, a deep personal struggle a man can experience begins as well.

"How awesome is this place!" this was Jacob's response to being in the house of God. People do not normally feel that way in church. There is no sense of awe, no sense of being in the presence of one who makes us tremble. The complaint that church is boring is never made by people in awe.

SPINE SHIVERING WORDS

MATTHEW 27:19-25

Matthew 27:19-25 (KJV) *When he was set down on the judgment seat, his wife sent unto him, saying, Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him. 20 But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitude that they should ask Barabbas, and destroy Jesus. 21 The governor answered and said unto them, Whether of the twain will ye that I release unto you? They said, Barabbas. 22 Pilate saith unto them, What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ? They all say unto him, Let him be crucified. 23 And the governor said, Why, what evil hath he done? But they cried out the more, saying, Let him be crucified. 24 When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it. 25 Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children.*

Verse 25 always sends shivers down my spine. They took the assumption of guilt for murdering an innocent man, and not just a man but the holy one of God, his beloved son, the only true innocent man to ever walk the face of this earth, upon themselves and their children. No matter what the consequences are, crucify him. We and they will cheerfully bear the penalty of God's wrath. Those words are frightening. The terrible events connected with the destruction of Jerusalem, the eighteen centuries of exile and dispersion, the hate and holocaust of the Jews down through the centuries bear witness to the reality of the vengeance they brought upon themselves. Still the guilt of his blood rests upon the Jews and only his blood can cleanse the stain. For the blood of Christ can cleanse even those who shed it.

Pilate tried to wash the stain of guilt away, v-24, but his hands were still full of blood. No mere outward act can purge the soul and cleanse the heart of guilt. There is only one fountain opened for sin and guilt---the precious blood of Jesus

"His blood be upon us" the crowd shouted in their frenzy. The guilt of Christ's crucifixion is upon you too if you have not taken Jesus Christ as your saviour. Your sin put him on that cross, he paid, so you wouldn't have to pay the penalty of your sin which is eternal death (separation from God and therefore all goodness, because all goodness comes from him). By rejecting Christ you are consenting to his death. You can say, "I didn't ask him to die for me." but then you are saying that, no matter what the consequences I will bear them when I stand before God at the judgment.

Another thing they said is frightening, in John 19:15. In renouncing Christ by the lips of their priests, they put themselves under the power of the prince of this world. They elected Caesar their king and by Caesar they were destroyed. Their theocracy fell by their mad rage against the perfect embodiment of the highest righteousness and purest love. The kingdom of God, by the confession of its rulers, has become the kingdom of this world.

Turn over to Luke 19:11-27. In this parable Jesus teaches that the visible kingdom of God would not appear for a while and that his disciples (Christians) were to improve and increase the gifts he had given them. In verse 14 his subjects hated him and said that they didn't want this man to rule over them. The man is Jesus, his subjects, the Jews. What Jesus said here in a parable came true in John 19:15. So it is also true of all sinners that they do not wish Jesus to reign over them, and, if it were possible, would cast him off, and never submit to his reign. Christians too can fall into this sin. They want to do things their way, to rule their own lives, to live by their own rules, and in effect are saying that they don't want this man to rule over them. If Christ is king in your life, you do things his way, let him control your life and live by his rules.

Verse 15 is the coming of Christ for his own and to hand out rewards

according to the improvement of the gifts given to his disciples. One servant did not use his gift. He had it and he kept it but he never used it in the service of his Lord. Many Christians are like this. And like this servant, their rewards will be few if any. God might as well had not given him any gift.

Verse 21...the servant describes his lord as he saw him, as unjust and demanding more than man has power to render. This is the view of those who are lazy and of little faith.

Verse 22..."out of your own mouth will i judge thee" as you were well acquainted with the fact that I should demand a strict compliance with your obligation, you have no right to complain if you are judged accordingly. What Jesus is teaching is that as men know that God will be just and will call them to a strict account in the day of judgment, they ought to be prepared to meet him, and that they cannot then complain if God shows no mercy toward them.

Verses 24-26...show the principal of distribution at the judgment seat of Christ.

Verse 27...by the punishment of those who would not that he should reign over them is denoted the ruin that was to come upon the Jewish nation for rejecting the Messiah, and also upon all sinners for not receiving him as their king.

"GOD IN THE HANDS OF SINNERS"

If we are lost, one thing is certain, "we hate God". We are God's enemies, Rom. 8:7; James 4:4. The central theme of the New Testament is reconciliation. Reconciliation is not necessary for those who love each other. God's love for us is not in doubt. It is our love for God that is in question. We reveal our natural hostility for God by the low esteem we have for him. We consider him unworthy of our total devotion. We oppose his government and refuse his rule over us. Our natural hearts are void of affection for him; they are cold to his holiness. By nature, the love of God is not in us.

It's not enough to say that natural man views God as an enemy. God is our "mortal" enemy. He represents the highest possible threat to our sinful desires. Someday we must give an account to him and the wages of sin is death, Rom. 6:23.

If God were to expose his life to our hands, he would not be safe for a second. We would not ignore him; we would destroy him. If you don't believe that statement just examine the record of what happened when God did appear in Christ. Christ was not simply killed. He was murdered by the hands of malicious men. The crowds howled for his blood. It was not enough merely to do away with him, but it had to be done with the accompaniment of scorn and humiliation. We know that his divine nature did not perish on the cross. It was his humanity that was put to death. Had God exposed the divine nature to execution, then Christ would still be dead, and God would be absent from heaven. Man would now be king.

But, you say, we are Christians. We are lovers of God. We have experienced reconciliation. We have been born of the spirit and have had the love of God shed abroad in our hearts. We are no longer enemies but friends. All of these things are true for the Christian. But we must take heed, remembering that with our conversion our natural human natures were not annihilated. There remains a part of our fallen nature with which we must struggle every day. There still resides a corner of the soul that takes no delight in God.

How can we love a holy God? We can't. Loving a holy God is beyond our moral power. The only kind of God we can love by our sinful nature is an unholy God, an idol made by our own hands. Unless we are born of the Holy Spirit, unless God sheds his holy love in our hearts, unless he stoops in his grace to change our hearts, we will not love him. Without him we can do nothing of righteousness. Without him we would be doomed to everlasting alienation from his holiness. We can only love him because he first loved us. To love a holy God requires grace, grace strong enough to pierce our hardened hearts.

As we grow in our knowledge of him, we gain a deeper love for his purity and sense a deeper dependence upon his grace.