

Jacob's Astonishment  
 Sermon for 26 July 2015  
 Texts: Genesis 27:41-46; 28:10-16 & 48:8-20

Jacob has to go down as one of the most astonish-able people in the Bible. In Genesis, we catch the tale end of his deception/betrayal of his father—presenting himself as the firstborn. He snookers Esau out of his birthright and Esau, at the end of the days of mourning for Isaac, their father, resolves to kill him. Rebecca, overhearing this threat, urges him to flee to her brother, Laban, who is a crafty and greedy scheme. Jacob is to find a wife from his uncle's family (and not marry a Canaanite woman). Jacob's mother is a conniving woman, too. None of this portends well for the future of family relations! Jacob, having just lost his father (but having obtained his blessing) flees for his life and heads for the snares and entanglements of his extended family of maternal origin. We know from the rest of the story that Jacob will experience many trial, troubles and afflictions there—he will work for Rachael and get Leah instead (deceptively), he will be defrauded, his contracts will be rewritten numerous times (always to Laban's advantage). Things will not go well overtly, by through it all God is working at character reformation, confronting Jacob with the consequences of his own deception and betrayal and manipulation. It is like he learns nothing from his own experience about favoritism and partiality! So, grieving in anticipation of losing father and home, he is exiled from that place (he was a homebody!), terrified and alienated—an unconscious participant in a grand plan first exposed to his grandfather Abraham, and to his own father, Isaac, as well. Feeling sad, bad, abandoned and alone, his path is strewn with many stones of affliction. **May God Almighty, bless you and make you fruitful, and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. May he give you and your descendants the blessing given Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now reside as a foreigner, the land God gave to Abraham** (Genesis 28:3-4) Isaac sent Jacob on his way prior to his death.

Where you are, God is also.

**Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. When he reached a certain place (Bethel), he stopped for the night because the sun had set.**(v. 10). He laid his agitated head down on a stone to sleep *and he had, in that sad, lonely and God-forsaken place,* a dream. **He saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven and the angels of the Lord were ascending and descending on it.** (v.12) Above the staircase (known in the popular lyrical version as Jacob's ladder—which we, the saints, weary strangers and pilgrims, are ascending to our heavenly home. ) **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 living. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and the east, to the north and the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. 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.** (vv.13-15) This is a providential promise. It is seasonable and it is personal. I want to stress how important it was to Jacob to hear this from the Lord himself. Despite the sorry sample of a son that he was, God still cared for him!

Upon awakening, Jacob, astonished, exclaims, **Surely God is in this place, and I was not aware of it.** (v. 16) **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.”** (v.17) Every time there is a revelation of God—it occurs at a specific time and place to a particular person. Jacob **memorializes the event and place.** (As should we all!) Jacob sets up his pillow as a pillar, anoints it with oil, and makes a vow. **If God will me with me and 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 household, then the Lord will be my God. And this stone which I have set up will be God’s house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.** (vv. 2-22) This is one way to preserve the astonishing goodness of the Lord, to remember it is to anticipate further blessings, the keeping of promises. There was nothing in the natural, nothing in appearance or the remotest tendency of outward things to allow him to foresee divine providence in this manner.

God uses our troubles to further His purposes.

Much later in life, Jacob was deceived by his sons. They had sold Joseph into slavery (Why not make a few shekels off the disposal of their pesky dreamer brother? *It only makes sense.*) and told their stricken father that Joseph had been slain by a wild beast—and produced a bloodied robe as evidence. What kind of a family acts like that?! So, Jacob abandoned any hope of every seeing Joseph again. *But we know that is not how the story ends.* In Genesis, God astonishes Jacob again. His name is now Israel. Joseph comes to visit his failing father and brings with him his two sons, Manasseh (the first born) and Ephraim and began to convey his blessing to the younger. His physical eyes were failing, but his spiritual eyes were open.

**8 When Israel saw Joseph's sons, he said, “Who are these?” 9 Joseph said to his father, “They are my sons, whom God has given me here.” And he said, “Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them.” 10 Now the eyes of Israel were dim with age, so that he could not see. So Joseph brought them near him, and he kissed them and embraced them. 11 And Israel said to Joseph, “I never expected to see your face; and behold, God has let me see your offspring also.”** (Here again is an astonishing thing!) **12 Then Joseph removed them from his knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth. 13 And Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel's left hand, and Manasseh in his left hand toward Israel's right hand, and brought them near him. 14 And Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands (for Manasseh was the firstborn). 15 And he blessed Joseph and said,**

**“The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, 16 the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys; and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.”**

**17 When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him, and he took his father's hand to move it from**

Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. **18** And Joseph said to his father, “Not this way, my father; since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head.” **19** But his father refused and said, “I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless, his *younger brother shall be greater than he* (Just as it had been in Jacob’s case! *Providential preference, again.*), **and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations.**” (And so the seed of promise, as spoken to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) was to come through Ephraim and not Manasseh!) **20** So he blessed them that day, saying,

“By you Israel will pronounce blessings, saying,  
‘God make you as Ephraim and as Manasseh.’”

Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh. (Surprise!) **21** Then Israel said to Joseph,

“Behold, I am about to die, but God will be with you and will bring you again to the land of your fathers. **22** Moreover, I have given to you rather than to your brothers one mountain slope that I took from the hand of the Amorites with my sword and with my bow.” (ESV, Genesis 48)

God is determined to bless His own.

Thus we review the providence of God who delivered Jacob **From the snare of the fowler**— from despair and dejection, from Esau’s plans to murder him, from Laban’s plans to defraud and harm him . . . Joseph’s deliverance from his murderous brothers (not to mention Joseph’s preservation from Potiphar’s wife) and elevation from death row prisoner to governor of the entire kingdom of Egypt!)! **Under His wings you shall find refuge . . . His faithfulness is a shield and buckler!** How absolutely astonishing. Joseph was the refuge for God’s people in a time of severe famine.

When awful things look bad, look up!

If you live close to God, if you honor the Son and obey the Father, the same marvelous care is yours to be had. “There is no face of adversity so formidable but being viewed from this station would become amicable.” (J. Flavel, p.168) In our lives it is helpful to know:

All things work together for good for those who dwell near God’s heart  
Leaning on his promises is proper and will be answered.

God has used unfit families, hopeless parents and sinful children—that is to encourage us, not an endorsement of remaining unfit, or careless.

**For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we.**

Heb. 4:15

**Amen.**