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STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

Part 1 - - Jacob

If you have attended church for awhile, you are familiar with the story of Abraham. Genesis 12 describes how God chose this obscure man for a unique role in human history. God called Abraham: (1) to move away from his family and nation (2) to move to a foreign land (3) to trust God for his protection and provision (4) to become the “father of faith” or the “father of the faithful” (5) to be the father of a family, tribe, nation, although at that point he and his wife were elderly and childless (6) to be a blessing to all the world (7) to be the ancestor of the Messiah, the Savior (this was the principal way the blessing was to come to the world, which, of course, was unknown to Abraham) (8) in all these ways, God called Abraham to reveal the invisible God to the world.

Let’s think for a moment about God’s “call” to Abraham. It is really not described in Scripture. Genesis 12:1 simply starts, *Now the Lord had said to Abram: “Get out from your country, from your family.....etc.”* Remember that Abraham lived in a pagan nation that worshipped idols. That is the only kind of worship there was in the world at that time. No one knew about the God of the Bible. No one can reason their way to God, and He had not made Himself known. So how did an invisible God make Himself known to Abram? Did He appear in a magnificent vision in the sky? Did His voice shake the mountains? We can only speculate, for the Bible doesn’t say. We do know that Abram had to “believe,” he had to come to God by faith, or else his being the “father of faith” would not make sense.

Think about the way you came to God. How did it happen? Romans 10 says that *Faith comes by hearing the Word of God.* (That is exactly what happened to Abram. He heard God speak, and He believed the One who spoke.) Someone has come up with about a dozen steps that the average person takes before he becomes a “believer.” A person can attend church, he can believe that there is a God, he can believe all sorts of things about God, and still not be a “believer,” not be born from above. Belief involves surrendering our will to the One who speaks, it involves turning away from our sins and control and entrusting our life to Another. It’s a difficult experience to understand, much less to explain. All we can say is, “Once I was blind, but now I see!”

In due course, Abraham and Sarah gave up on the promise God had made and took things into their own hands. Sarah insisted that Abraham have relations with her servant, Hagar, so that they could have a son by proxy. The son thus conceived was named Ishmael, and their disobedience also gave birth to a good deal of contention that continues between Jews and Arabs to this present day. Afterward, Abraham’s aged wife miraculously gave birth to Isaac. (It is so difficult for us to believe God and to wait for Him to keep His promises. True?)

A generation passed, Isaac took a wife named Rebekah, and she gave birth to twins, Esau and Jacob. The custom in those days was that the firstborn son received the “birthright,” which meant headship of the family and a double share of the inheritance. The birthright also meant you were responsible to lead your family spiritually. Isaac and Rebekah must have endlessly discussed and explained to their sons why they were living in tents in the land of Canaan, why they had left the comfort and security of their former life in Ur and Haran, the amazing way that God had spoken to their grandfather and called him to live a life of faith, the way God had miraculously given fertility and a child to an aged couple, and the amazing promises God had given to Abraham and to his descendants.

All of this meant nothing to Esau. Esau became a very carnal man who lived only for his appetites. One day he came in from the field and was hungry. Jacob, who loved to cook, had a big pot of stew bubbling on the fireplace. When Esau asked for a bowl, Jacob offered to swap a pot of stew for his rights as the firstborn son. Esau should have responded, “What! Are you crazy!” But Esau was famished. He answered Jacob, “Look, I’m starving. I don’t care about the birthright.” So he swore to Jacob that the bargain was made. And the Bible says, *Thus Esau despised his birthright.* This was a very big deal to God.

(Before I move on, maybe we should pause and think about our own lives. How have we shown that we valued: (a) the things of God, compared to (b) our appetites, particularly food and sex? For all of us who have received a new birth by the grace of our heavenly Father, a question we should consider is: Have we despised our birthright?)

Years passed, and Isaac knew that the time of his death was approaching. Another important custom of that time was that before he died a father would give a formal blessing to his eldest son. Isaac was old and “his eyes were dim,” and Genesis 27 describes how Jacob deceived his father and “stole” the blessing that Isaac wanted to give to Esau. When Esau learned what had happened, he burned with hatred and vowed that after his father died he would kill his brother Jacob. When Rebekah learned about Esau’s plan, she sent her son, Jacob, far away to another land to find a wife among her relatives.

All of the above is background for what is, in my opinion, one of the great, understated experiences recorded in the Bible. It was simply a dream that Jacob had, but, oh my! what a dream! It is a thrilling dream and prophetic word from God, and I want to quote it from the New Living Testament:

Genesis 28:12-15: *Meanwhile, Jacob left Beersheba and traveled toward Haran. At sundown he arrived at a good place to set up camp and stopped there for the night. Jacob found a stone to rest his head against and lay down to sleep. As he slept, he dreamed of a stairway that reached from the earth up to heaven. And he saw the angels of God going up and down the stairway. At the top of the stairway stood the Lord, and he said, “I am the Lord, the God of your grandfather Abraham, and the God of your father Isaac. The ground you are lying on belongs to you. I am giving it to you and your descendants. Your descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth! They will spread out in all directions – to the west and the east, to the north and the south. And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants. What’s more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you.”*

Wow! What an amazing prophecy, and what an amazing God! Think how God reveals His sovereignty, power, and wisdom through this prophecy. He says, in effect: “I am the Lord, the Master of the universe. I am the multi-generational God that transcends time, for I am the God of your father and grandfather. I am the God that owns and controls the earth, and I am giving this piece of land to you and your descendants. I am the God who knows and directs the future. I am going to bless all the earth through you and your descendants. I declare that you, one man, will be the father of a great nation that will spread out over all the earth, and that I am going to be with you during your life and start bringing all of this to pass!”

And most important of all, think about that fantastic vision of a stairway (or ladder) reaching from earth to heaven, with angels of God ascending and descending on it. Jacob, of course, did not have a clue what that vision meant. He thought that God was telling him that the place where he had the dream must be a special location that was like a portal to heaven. He said, “*What an awesome place this is! It is none other than the house of God, the very gateway to heaven!*” So he named the place “Bethel,” which means “House of God.”

Finally, consider the man to whom God gave this revelation and these great promises. Was he a mighty man of faith and character? Absolutely not. His very name, Jacob, identified him in the Hebrew language as “Heel-grabber, Deceiver, Usurper.” (We must not idolize people who have magnificent prophecies, dreams, visions, experiences with God. Their experiences tell us more about the greatness and mercy of God than about the person who received the experience.) God was going to have to work with Jacob for years before his name could be changed to Israel and he could start inheriting the promises God had made to him.

One thing we can say for Jacob is that in spite of the deficiencies in his character his heart yearned for God and His blessings. He wanted the birthright that his brother despised, and he wanted the blessing that belonged to the firstborn son – and he lied and cheated to get something that God had already told his father that he would get. God had prophesied to Isaac, *The older will serve the younger*. All Jacob had to do was wait for God to give him the blessing.

Part 2 -- Jesus

The first chapter of John begins with what is called the “Prologue,” which tells about Christ’s preexistence in heaven and the reason He was sent to earth. The prologue ends at verse 18: *No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father’s heart. He has revealed God to us.* (Whenever doubts or questions about my faith start pestering me, I immediately read **the first chapter of John, the first chapter of Colossians, and the first chapter of Hebrews**. I have probably read those three chapters a hundred times or more.)

Following the prologue, John continues with the ministry of John the Baptist and tells how Jesus called his first disciples. Starting at Verse 45 in the NLT: *Philip went to look for Nathanael and told him, “We have found Him of whom*

Moses and the prophets wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Nathanael said, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said, “Come and see.” As they approached, Jesus said, “Now here is a genuine son of Israel – a man of complete integrity.” “How do you know about Me?” Nathanael asked. Jesus replied, “I could see you under the fig tree before Philip found you.” Then Nathanael exclaimed, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God – the King of Israel!”

Jesus asked him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.”

Then He said, ***“I tell you the truth, you will see heaven open and the angels of God going up and down on the Son of Man, the one who is the stairway between heaven and earth.”***

Whoa! Doesn’t that give you an inner thrill? Think about the implications of all of this. Jesus was saying:

- Two thousand years ago my Father gave a dream to Jacob, through whom the nation of Israel would come. Jacob was shown a stairway to heaven.
- Jacob thought that stairway pertained to a place, and he named that place Bethel, House of God.
- But that dream was describing a Person, and I am that Person.
- **I am the Stairway to Heaven.**
- *I am the gate to the sheepfold. I am the good shepherd. I am the doorway to God.*
- *I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.*
- *You will see the angels of God going up and down on that Stairway – as messengers of God sent to earth to perform their duties.*
- *For there is only one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and humanity – the man Christ Jesus.*
(1 Tim. 2:5)
- *No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is Himself God, is near to the Father’s heart. He has revealed God to us.* (John 1:18)
- *There is salvation is no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.* (Acts 4:12)
- *When you have seen Me, you have seen the Father.*

When I was a new Christian, I read that the founders of all other world religions were not central and crucial to that religion, but were acknowledged to be men who were enlightened or given revelation about God and the nature of reality: Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, Joseph Smith. But for Christianity, everything is centered on Jesus Christ. According to the inspired words of the Bible, Jesus claimed to be God who came down from heaven and was also born as a sinless man. He claimed to be, and His followers proclaim Him to be: The way, the truth, the life, the gateway, the door, the one and only mediator, the stairway to heaven. He died for our sins, He was buried, He was resurrected on the third day and ascended into heaven. He is our substitute. He is our salvation. He is our hope of heaven.

Choose today, or choose again today, to confess Him as your Lord and Savior. Repent of your sins, of your self-glorifying life, and believe on Him, follow Him, love Him, and serve Him all of your days.

DISCOURAGING TIMES

During the month of May the Associated Press reported: “Two-thirds of U.S. would struggle to cover a \$1,000 crisis.” Their Center for Public Affairs Research reported that three-quarters of people in households making less than \$50,000 a year and two-thirds of those making between \$50,000 and \$100,000 would have difficulty coming up with \$1,000 to cover an unexpected bill. And even for the country’s wealthiest 20 percent – households making more than \$100,000 a year – 38 percent say they would have some difficulty coming up with \$1,000.

During the same month, The Atlantic magazine had an article that said: “Since 2013, The Federal Reserve Board has conducted a survey to monitor the economic status of American consumers. They reported that last year they asked Americans how they would pay for a \$400 emergency and that 47 percent of respondents said they would cover the expense

by borrowing or selling something or they would not be able to come up with the \$400 at all.”

The author of the article, Neal Gabler, who lives on Long Island in New York, confessed that his family is included in this depressing statistic, although he is a writer for television and his wife is a film executive. He said that his family lives a no-frills existence: “We drive a 1997 Toyota Avalon with 160,000 miles that I got from my father when he died. We haven’t taken a vacation in 10 years. We have no credit cards, only a debit card. We have no retirement savings, because we emptied a small 401(k) to pay for our younger daughter’s wedding. We eat out maybe once every two or three months, etc....I don’t ask for or expect any sympathy.” Mr. Gabler explained how nationwide income has stagnated for almost two decades and that hard working Americans can find themselves in this quandary not because they have been irresponsible but for a great many reasons over which they have no control.

He also says something that all of us know very well: new, unanticipated expenses are an unavoidable feature of life – a stove that won’t light, a car that won’t start, a dog that limps, a faucet that leaks, a drop in income, a hospital visit, the loss of a spouse, a major repair, etc. In effect, he says, economics comes down to a great New Yorker cartoon that was captioned: “We thought it was a rough patch, but it turned out to be our life.”

Living like this has become the norm for a great many people, and there is a long list of other things on our minds that can also cause great stress: the national political insanity, the precipitous moral decline of our nation, terrorism, the drug culture, etc.

So how are we Christians to live in the midst of such chaos? Consider the following encouraging words from my dear friend, Paul Haglin:

COMFORT, O COMFORT MY PEOPLE, SAYS YOUR GOD

Acts 14 says that Paul and Barnabus went about: *Establishing and strengthening the souls and hearts of the disciples, warning and encouraging them to stand firm in the faith, and telling them that it is through many tribulations that we enter the Kingdom of God.*

I (Paul) opened a letter from a precious businessman friend and an anguished cry poured out: “I’ve been fired! After 25 years of service, no notice, no pension, no explanation. Help!” he desperately cried out. Meeting with him later that day, I was aware that I was NOT to say, “There’s a lot of that going around these days!” like he was suffering from a head cold. Nor was I to give him a generic comfort Scripture like Romans 8:28: *God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God.* Nor was I to bellow at Satan and demand that he give back my friend’s job. (Though sometimes God may say to do any of those things.)

The Holy Spirit urged me into the second kind of comfort: encouragement, which includes encouraging someone to get up and get going again. I prayed with him to cut all roots of judgment and to seek deep forgiveness. Then I suggested he examine his God-given natural talents and desires instead of his present circumstances and past employment, and dared him to take up the challenge and risk of looking for a job where his interests and giftings from God really lay.

I reminded him of the several different careers God had led me through, and how each time He had faithfully lifted me from apprehension to confidence, using each new experience to develop more of the character of Jesus in me. Then I put my arm around his shoulders and asked God to deliver him from the fear of the future that had gripped him. He left for home with his shoulders squared and a grin on his face. He could barely wait to see God’s plan unfold in his life, which I rejoice to say was relatively prompt and very rewarding.

Learn to exhort as you walk alongside a wounded saint. Be a Paraclete - a Holy Spirit Comforter – to them! Exhort them to rise up and take one more step. Point them toward Jesus. Never allow them to become dependent on you for strength and guidance, but on Jesus. Always on Jesus!

WHAT HAPPENS IN VEGAS.....

.....is written down in heaven, and when you stand before God the books will be opened and you will be judged according to your actions when you lived on the earth:

He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My Son. But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns

fire and brimstone, which is the second death. (Rev. 21:7-8)

A show on television is named, I Almost Got Away With It, and records the lives of criminals who “almost got away with” fraud, murder, extortion, theft on a grand scale, etc. We believers understand that the very name of the show is a deception, for no one gets away with anything in this life - - because there is a God who is omniscient and just. I feel sorry for the families of murder victims who agonize for years because the thug that murdered their daughter, or the drunk that killed their loved one, received a tap on the wrist by a liberal judge. They don’t know that there is a just God and unless that guy repents he will suffer an unimaginable penalty forever. (If you have not read 23 Minutes in Hell, by Andrew Weiss, please read it.)

You are not going to get away with it, including what happens in Vegas (and obviously they are implying you can go to Vegas and enjoy yourself with prostitutes, perversion, pornography, or whatever) because:

- (1) God cannot be mocked. *Be not deceived. God cannot be mocked.* (Gal. 6:7a)
- (2) Exposure is certain. *You may be sure that your sin will find you out.* (Num. 32:23)
- (3) Consequences are exponential. *They sow the wind and reap the whirlwind.* (Hosea 8:7)
- (4) Forgiveness does not erase the consequences. *Whatever you sow, that shall you also reap.* (Gal. 6:7b)

The good news, the wonderful news, is that not only is there a God who is just, but a God who is merciful. His Son came to earth and died on a cruel cross to set us free from the eternal consequences for all those “hidden” things we have done, and to free us from the power of sin so that we can start living the clean, joyful lives we were created for.

God Bless Glenn

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