

THE MAN WHO WAS SCARED AT THE GATE OF HEAVEN

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And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, . . . and lie 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 (Gen. 28:16-17).

This was true in a dual sense; Jacob slept through the night, but his soul-until that moment-had never been awake. He had heard about the God of his ancestors and was probably acquainted with the brief history of man, but he preferred to trust himself than in God whom he had never seen. The patriarch was a deceiver who lived by his wits, a schemer who devised ways to obtain what he desired. Jacob's conduct alienated him from family and friends and made him a fugitive. Desperately alone, the man had traveled through the desert and, completely exhausted, hardly knew whether he wanted to live or die. The water in the goatskin was almost gone. His body ached, and the sand sticking to his face seemed like cement. He had reached mountains that were possibly terraced, where rocky peaks stood as sentinels. There was no vegetation, and gathering rocks, the poor man made a pillow and, lying upon the ground, fell asleep. His soul was as empty as the landscape, and at that moment Jacob surely questioned the conduct which had banished him from society.

As he was enveloped by the stillness of the night, and stars shone as jewels in a velvet sky, Jacob's mind became a stage where angels performed in an unfolding drama.

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. And behold, the LORD stood above it (Gen. 28:12).

It was entrancing. The terraces on the hill seemed to have been transformed into radiant steps reflecting the glory of God, and the barren landscape had become a scene of

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loveliness. Then Jacob stirred uneasily, for above the ladder he saw the Lord.

The Promises of God Were Reliable

When Jehovah had revealed His plans, Jacob must have been astounded, for what he heard was completely unexpected. The Almighty appeared to be overlooking the terrible defects in the fugitive's conduct. He promised to bless and reward the undeserving listener. This was Jacob's first encounter with the Lord, but instead of being elated with the news, the man was filled with fear and said, "How dreadful is this place. This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." It was as though a pauper had been given a priceless treasure only to respond: "This is the worst day of my life." It was evident God was not rewarding any merit in Jacob's life; the man was a cheat and a reprobate. Why then did God treat him favorably? The Lord said:

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

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spoken to thee of (Gen. 28:15).

Jacob was receiving his first lesson in righteousness. Jehovah had made a covenant with Abraham, and nothing could change that arrangement (see Gen. 15:18). Neither the scheming of enemies nor the failure of men would be permitted to interfere. He who saw the end from the beginning was capable of removing any obstacle that might arise. God, in response to the Abrahamic covenant, would be the constant guardian of this disappointing runaway. The fact that Jacob responded in such a strange manner revealed how uncomfortable he had become in the presence of the Lord. It is impossible for any man to encounter the glory of God and not feel guilty. Jacob would have appreciated the sentiments expressed by Simon Peter who said to Jesus, "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8).
The British statesman, William Ewart Gladstone (1809-

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1898), referred to the Bible as "The Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture." He knew the most reliable foundation upon which a nation or an individual could build was the inspired Word of God. It is a cause for regret that many people have forgotten that profound truth.

The Power of God Was Remarkable

To appreciate the magnitude of God's promise to Jacob, it is necessary to understand the situation that confronted the destitute traveler. He possessed nothing except the clothing he wore. He owned no land, yet God said his seed would possess everything that could be seen in every direction. Jacob was unmarried, but God promised his children would be as numerous as the grains of sand in the desert. Esau, a very angry brother, had vowed to take Jacob's life, but the Lord promised to bring him back safely. Practically penniless, he was to become extremely wealthy. He had no friends, but the Lord would be his constant companion.

These promises reflected the unlimited ability of God to make all things work favorably for the recipient. Yet it did not change the character of the deceiver who continued to be a swindler and a cheat. The way in which later he outwitted his father-in-law, indicated only God can change human nature. It was almost unbelievable that this disappointing man could be made "a prince with God" (see Gen. 32:28).

The reclamation of humanity has always been God's greatest concern. It was easy to bring planets into being but difficult to persuade stubborn sinners to listen to divine reasoning. It is thrilling to know God never abandoned His wayward child. As the master Potter, the Lord remade the marred human vessel into a man of integrity. This was a foreshadowing of other miracles to be seen in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Plans of God Were Recommendable

And he called the name of that place Bethel . . . And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father's house in peace;

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then shall the Lord be my God . . . and of all that thou shalt

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give me I will surely give a tenth unto thee (Gen. 28:19-22).

Great achievements are never accomplished easily. God created planets in moments, but sometimes it takes a lifetime to bring a prodigal back to his father's home. It is good to know that Jacob never forgot his obligations. He went away distressed but returned, devoted. Throughout the varying experiences, he made many enemies and accumulated great wealth but discovered the best things in life could not be bought. Alas, the man became homesick, and he desired to be united with his family. God was already planning to take him home. Jacob was not troubled about meeting his enraged brother; he believed it was possible to bribe anybody. It was a shock to discover Esau's rage was unabated; he had never forgotten Jacob's treachery, and was determined to be avenged. Becoming afraid, Jacob dispatched his family to a place of safety and "was left alone."

And there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day, and when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh, and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him. And he said: Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he [Jacob] said I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. And he (the angel) said unto him, What is thy name? and he said, Jacob. And he said, Thy name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed. And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel; for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved (Gen. 32:24-30).

When at the beginning of his wanderings Jacob saw God he said, "How dreadful is this place; it is the gate of heaven." After he wrestled with the Lord, he believed himself to be the most privileged man in the world. He had traveled from poverty

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to peace; through darkness to a new day. That experience may still be enjoyed by all who share their lives with God.

The Prediction of God Was Rational

Nathanael answered, and saith unto him, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel. Jesus answered and said unto him, Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? thou shalt see greater things than these. . . . Verily, verily, I say unto you. Hereafter ye shall see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man (John 1:49-51).

This reference to Jacob's ladder suggests an important fact. As far as is known, the promise made to Nathanael has never been fulfilled. There were occasions during the ministry of the Lord when angels attended to His need, but none of these related to the promise made by Christ. Angels strengthened Jesus after his temptation (Mark 1:13) and following His ordeal in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:43). They also announced His resurrection (John 20:12-13), but none of these occasions related to anything seen by Jacob. This suggests the fulfillment of this promise will be seen when the angels rejoice at the coronation of the King of Kings. Christ, the eternal

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Word, was, still is, and ever will be the channel of communication between God and humanity. Through the

Savior we may reach God and the Almighty can reach people. Jacob's ladder appeared in a dream; it soon faded away. Christ is the highway by which the eternal Father will always maintain contact with His children. He remains the glorious reality which can never fade into insignificance.

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