



So Isaac called for Jacob and blessed^a him and commanded him: “Do not marry a Canaanite woman. ² Go at once to Paddan Aram,^b to the house of your mother’s father Bethuel. Take a wife for yourself there, from among the daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother. ³ May God Almighty^c bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. ⁴ May he give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien, the land God gave to Abraham.” ⁵ Then Isaac sent Jacob on his way, and he went to Paddan Aram, to Laban son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, who was the mother of Jacob and Esau.

⁶ Now Esau learned that Isaac had blessed Jacob and had sent him to Paddan Aram to take a wife from there, and that when he blessed him he commanded him, “Do not marry a Canaanite woman,” ⁷ and that Jacob had obeyed his father and mother and had gone to Paddan Aram. ⁸ Esau then realized how displeasing the Canaanite women were to his father Isaac; ⁹ so he went to Ishmael and married Mahalath, the sister of Nebaioth and daughter of Ishmael son of Abraham, in addition to the wives he already had.

¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. ¹¹ When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. ¹² He had a dream in which he saw a stairway^a resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ There above it^b stood the LORD, and he said: “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 lying. ¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵ 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.”

¹⁶ When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” ¹⁷ 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.”

¹⁸ Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. ¹⁹ He called that place Bethel,^c though the city used to be called Luz.

²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear ²¹ so that I return safely to my father’s house, then the LORD^d will be my God ²² and^e this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God’s house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.”

If you watch or read any news at all, then you know how the media saturates us with the latest scandal. There are political scandals with charges of corruption and injustice from both political parties. There are relationship scandals with accusations of marital affairs and infidelity. There are financial scandals with everything from billion dollar government scandals to pastors and priests who have embezzled thousands of dollars from their churches. Because there are more than six billion sinners in the world, there is never a shortage of the latest and greatest scandal to hear about. We can easily become scandalized by all of the scandals. Most scandals have several things in common—someone has done a dastardly deed, the dastardly deed has been revealed in all of its ugliness and the person who was caught attempts to hide behind a web of lies in order to protect themselves.

When you read this chapter in Genesis, the word scandal should immediately come to mind. We are familiar with the dastardly deeds done by Jacob and his over-protective and equally scandalous mother. We know that Jacob was revealed as a first class scumbag. He knew it, his parents knew it and his brother, who was already planning the finer details of murdering Jacob, clearly knew it. Jacob’s situation was a little different in that he didn’t really hide behind a web of lies, but that’s only because the scandal itself *was* a web of lies and deceit. As I said last week, if you think your family is dysfunctional, you’ve got nothing on Jacob’s family. If you could turn this into reality TV, it would be the most watched show in television history because everyone loves a good scandal. The main reason that Jacob got himself into such trouble was because he was such a wimp. He followed his mom around like a puppy dog on a leash. He was willing to be used by others as long as it worked to his own advantage in the end.

Even the events that take place in this chapter were a consequence of Jacob’s sins. His brother planned to kill him so his over-bearing mother concocted a plan to send Jacob away to her brother Laban’s house under the pretext of finding him a wife. Rebekah tried to cover up both her and Jacob’s dirty deeds by using a very spiritual excuse of finding a good wife for Jacob. She didn’t go to Isaac and tell her husband the truth—“Look, I really messed up. I was the one who put Jacob up to this whole ‘let’s pretend to be Esau scheme.’ It was my idea. I cooked the goat. I put the goatskins on Jacob’s arms and hands. I took Esau’s clothes and dressed Jacob in them. Now because of what I did, Esau has lost his blessing and is comforting himself with killing Jacob. You *know* he’ll do it, Isaac. He is sharpening his arrows as we speak. We need to hurry up and send Jacob as far away as possible—all the way back to my brother’s place in Haran—so that Esau will not bother to chase after him.” That is what Rebekah should have done, but instead, she baptized her many sins in spiritual jargon.

If you recall the circumstances surrounding finding a wife for Isaac, all of the details were bathed in prayer, faith and Godly motives. As a dying wish, Abraham sent his most trusted servant back to Haran to find an excellent wife for his son Isaac. We spent three weeks looking at the wonderful details in that story. But Jacob’s is just the opposite. Jacob did not wait prayerfully for several months while a trusted servant went on a great journey to find him a wife. Instead, Jacob

himself was whisked away so that he could flee for his life. Moreover, his quick exit was not bathed in prayer but rather was bathed in more lies. At the end of chapter 27, Rebekah said to Jacob. “I’m disgusted with living because of these Hittite women. If Jacob takes a wife from among the women of this land, from Hittite women like these, my life will not be worth living.” This was the perfect plan. Isaac and Rebekah really did not like Esau’s wives. We are told in 26:35 that “they were a source of grief to Isaac and Rebekah.” Not only did Rebekah not confess her sins to Isaac but she told more lies to cover up the first lies. And the really great thing about this last whopper of a lie was that while it was clearly scandalous, it was also scandal-proof. There was no way she could be found out because her reason for sending Jacob away was true and was shared by her husband. Not only did Rebekah appear to be innocent in the matter, she came off looking like one deserving the Mother of the Year Award.

This is the context of Jacob’s departure from his homeland. As he packed his belongings and loaded the animals with provisions, all of this would have been weighing heavy on his mind. As it states in Number 32:23, Jacob’s sins had found him out. Not only was his sin uncovered, but the consequences of his sin were literally forcing him away from his family to travel to an unknown land to avoid being murdered by the brother whom he cheated. The scene focuses on Jacob’s first night of travel. He probably left early that morning and by all appearances he was all alone. He had nothing but his own thoughts to occupy his time and those thoughts must have been tortuous. There is no question that Jacob’s actions were most definitely scandalous—that is the best word to describe this entire scene—a scandal. However, the real scandal in this chapter is not what Jacob had done but what the Lord was about to do.

Before we look at that, let’s think about how we might have responded to Jacob if we had been his friend. In some respects, this is an easy assignment. We are fully aware of Jacob’s list of sins, so a good friend would lovingly point out all of his sins and encourage him to seek genuine Godly sorrow, to repent of all of his sins, make restitution where possible and fully accept all of the consequences of his sin. This is easier said than done because Jacob lived in a very dysfunctional family. Repenting of his sins would have fully implicated his mother. He could have apologized to Esau, but he really couldn’t make restitution. The blessing of the father was irrevocable and could not be transferred from Jacob to Esau. Such an apology might not have deterred Esau from his commitment to revenge.

Regardless of how it all worked out, if you had been a good friend to Jacob, you would have helped him walk through the steps of repentance and if possible, reconciliation. But when the Lord spoke to him in a dream, the Lord did not do any of this. He did not confront Jacob on any of his sins. Instead, the Lord gave this amazing promise.

“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 lying. ¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵ 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.”

This was nearly identical to the promise given to his grandfather Abraham in chapter twelve which contains three parts—the promise of land, the promise of many descendants and the

promise of being a blessing to all peoples on the earth. There were some differences. For one, when the Lord spoke to Abraham, he was married but childless, but when the Lord spoke to Jacob he was both childless and unmarried! At least Abraham could have guessed that he would build his family through Sarah, but Jacob was still a single guy. And since there were no adoption agencies, there was no artificial insemination or surrogate mothers, this promise from God meant that Jacob would find a wife. Inherent in the Lord's three main promises was a secondary promise that Jacob's journey to Haran and his search for a wife would be successful. That would be comforting news at the beginning of a long journey, would it not? Wouldn't it be great if when we started a new work of service to the Lord that we could be guaranteed of success? It was not a guarantee of an easy life for Jacob, but it was a reminder of God's perfect faithfulness.

By now we are familiar with the Lord's big three promises. We know that they will inherit the land and we know they will grow into a great nation, but I want to especially focus on the third promise in verse 14, *all peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring*. If you recall from chapter twelve, this is a promise that would ultimately be fulfilled in the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The "seed of Abraham" is Christ and we know that individuals from every tribe, nation, people and language will be in heaven surrounding the throne of God. In the book of Revelation, the curtain of Heaven is pulled back and we see actual worship services with people gathered from all over the world. What a gorgeous sight that will be and what a great salvation we have been given. This is clearly the ultimate fulfillment of this promise, but Jacob would not have known all of that, just as Abraham could not have had a full understanding. They accepted it on faith but the end result was far from obvious.

However, let's consider how this third promise would have had immediate relevance to Jacob that very same day. The promise was that *all peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring*. Now compare this promise to the sinful preoccupation of Jacob and his family in chapter 27. Everyone was consumed with getting a blessing. Esau begged and cried for his blessing that would forever elude him. Jacob followed the trickery of his mother until the blessing was firmly in his grasp. Every motive of their heart and every course of action they pursued was driven by an obsessive desire to get a hold of the blessing. But the Lord's words were very different—Jacob would not only get a blessing, he would be a blessing to others—in fact this blessing would extend to the entire world! Do you see the radical difference in thinking here? Their purpose was to get a blessing but God's promise was that they would be a blessing.

How often do we make the same mistake as Jacob? How often do we get consumed with getting a blessing instead of being a blessing? But the saddest part in mixing these two options is that the pursuit of a blessing guarantees nothing, but the pursuit of being a blessing guarantees both. In other words, if my goal is to receive a blessing my heart is revealed as primarily selfish and, unlike Jacob, I will probably not receive the blessing. However, if my goal is to be a blessing to others, then in order to be a blessing I first have to be blessed. Do you see? If we are merely conduits for God's mercy and grace, then we must first receive his mercy and grace before we can pass it on to others.

C.S. Lewis makes this point about putting first things first, in one of his books.

The woman who makes a dog the centre of her life loses, in the end, not only her human usefulness and dignity but even the proper pleasure of dog-keeping.

The man who makes alcohol his chief good loses not only his job but his palate and all power of enjoying the earlier (and only pleasurable) levels of intoxication.

It is a glorious thing to feel for a moment or two that the whole meaning of the universe is summed up in one woman—glorious so long as other duties and pleasures keep tearing you away from her. But clear the decks and so arrange your life (it is sometimes feasible) that you will have nothing to do but contemplate her, and what happens?

Of course this law has been discovered before, but it will stand re-discovery. It may be stated as follows: every preference of a small good to a great, or partial good to a total good, involves the loss of the small or partial good for which the sacrifice is made.

. . . You can't get second things by putting them first. You get second things only by putting first things first.¹

Again, I would say you can't get blessings by pursuing blessings but rather you get blessings through the pursuit of *being* a blessing. I think Jacob understood this as is shown in part of his vow in verse 22, *and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth*. Here is the principle of tithing which is rooted in the pursuit of being a blessing, or more precisely, the pursuit of being a conduit of God's blessings. Jacob realized that everything that would come to him in his life would not be because he got his earthly father's blessing through deceptive means but because he got his heavenly Father's blessing through sheer grace and mercy.

Herein lies the true scandal of this story. Jacob deserved nothing. The wages of his sin earned him death. Justice would dictate that Jacob died in the wilderness or that Esau caught up to him and slit his throat while he slept. As we said before, at the very least a good friend would have pointed out all of his sins and called him to repentance. But instead of justice, God gave him mercy, and mercy of this proportion, if we truly grasp it, is scandalous. Right about here our "Fairness Meter" kicks into high gear and we scream, "It's not fair! Jacob is a first class scumbag who deserves to be punished. Mercy is too good for him, especially such great mercy like this coming directly from the Lord." This is always a good indication that true mercy is in view—the louder people scream "It's not fair!" the greater the mercy is present.

Jacob had two main responses to this scandalous mercy, the first one coming in verse 16. *When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it."* This has to be one of the strangest and saddest and yet most glorious sentences in all of Scripture. It is glorious because Jacob was blown away by the actual presence of the Yahweh, the Lord of heaven and earth. He didn't just hear about the Lord through Isaac or Abraham. He was no longer merely the God of his father's but he was now his God—the God of Jacob. But the sad part of this sentence is that he was unaware of the Lord's presence.

Why? Why was he unaware of the presence of the Lord? Was it because of his sin? Remember that his sin was the very reason he was all alone in the desert at night. Did his sin block the

presence of God or was God always there and he didn't know it? Many Christians and many churches can have one of two opposite problems—either the Lord is present with them and they don't realize it, or perhaps worse, they assume the Lord is present and he is not. How can such things happen? Some say that the presence of the Lord is not felt because too many people focus on dry doctrine. Some would say that we are too busy *talking* about God instead of *experiencing* the God that we talk about. There is a lot of truth behind this statement. On the one hand, good doctrine is absolutely essential. God must be defined by good doctrine. And where does doctrine come from? It comes from the Bible. Without a good understanding of how God is revealed in the Bible, we will continually make God in our own image. A vigorous upholding of Scriptural belief is mandatory because God has commanded that we define him in the way that he has revealed himself in his word.

On the other hand, how sad it would be to finish a worship service and say to one another, "I think the Lord was present, but I was not aware of it." In the same way that good doctrine must bring about good works, good doctrine should illicit strong emotions and an awareness of the Lord's presence. I don't mean at all to say that doctrine or fancy preaching should manipulate your emotions into feeling a certain way. A gifted storyteller, like a good filmmaker, can make you cry basically when he or she wants you to cry. The right music, lighting and story can bring tears, anger and fear—or all of them at once. The mere presence of strong emotions does not at all mean that the Lord is present. Rather, right doctrine when properly understood will illicit right emotions. When you get a promise like Jacob was given, *I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go*, you can't help but feel something. We see Jacob's strong emotions in the next verse.

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." Jacob's experience of the presence of the Lord illicit within him a fear of the Lord. You will find very few Christians who seek out a fear of the Lord. Most believers love it when they have the joy of the Lord. When we really enjoy a time of worship it is nice to clap and jump up and down with excitement. But who among us enjoys trembling in fear before the Lord? When Jacob actually experienced the Lord's presence he could not help but encounter his blazing holiness, especially as compared to the utter sinfulness of his own life. We have an interesting paradox here. The Lord had just promised Jacob that he would be with him and watch over him wherever he went, but at the same time Jacob trembled in fear. For many of us, these two don't seem to go together. But what we have here is more of the scandal we have been talking about. How does a God who is perfectly holy abide with a scumbag like Jacob?

To answer this question, we have to look to Jesus' comment on it in the Gospel of John. *Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that."*⁵¹ *He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man"* (John 1:51). This was clearly a direct comment on Jacob's vision where angels ascended and descended on Jacob and Jesus claims the same will happen to him.

The meaning of Jesus' words here has various meanings and may represent many events in his life, but at the very least Jesus is the mediator between God and man, the "ladder" to heaven, if you will and he is also the very presence of God with men. If the disciples had been more aware

of Jesus' identity, I think they might have shared Jacob's astonishing words: "*Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.*"

The true scandal in this story is not the scandal of Jacob's sin but rather the scandal of God's grace. Like Adam and Eve, Jacob deserved to be cast from God's presence but instead he entered into it. This scandal of the cross is described in 1 Cor. "But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block (skandalon—σκάνδαλον) to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1.23). The word for "stumbling block" is *skandalon*, from which we get our word *scandal*. We must understand how scandalous the cross really is. How do you respond to this scandalous grace? How does it make you feel? What do you do with it? What person do you need to forgive? How does it help you repent of sin? Right doctrine properly understood will illicit right emotions and right actions.

Rich Maurer
August 15, 2010

^a Or *greeted*

^b That is, Northwest Mesopotamia; also in verses 5, 6 and 7

^c Hebrew *El-Shaddai*

^a Or *ladder*

^b Or *There beside him*

^c *Bethel* means *house of God*.

^d 20,21 Or *Since God... father's house, the LORD*

^e 21,22 Or *house, and the LORD will be my God, then*

¹ C.S. Lewis, "First and Second Things," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Eerdmans, 1994), p. 280.