

# *This Week at the Creek*

is an e-mail ministry of

## the Church at Dyers Creek

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**Here's the text from the pastor's Sunday message:**

### Stairway to Heaven

Genesis 28:10-22

February 11, 2007

At an ROTC summer camp at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, the young men were quite nervous about approaching survival training—because they'd be pitching their tents near a snake-infested swamp. Their instructor, advising them on the treatment of snakebites, explained that the venom of rattlesnakes, copperheads, and water moccasins affected the circulatory system. Their bites were to be treated with tourniquets, incisions, and suction. The poison of the coral snake, on the other hand, affected the nervous system. At this point he closed his manual. "Sir," asked one the cadets, "what do we do if a coral snake bites one of us?" "Turn to page A1-7 in your manuals." There was a flurry of activity as they flipped through the guides. When they looked up, their smiles were sort of sickly. Page A1-7 consisted entirely of interdenominational prayers.

Many of us remain so hard-headed that we turn to God only as a means of last resort. Such was Jacob. Up to this point, the Bible gives us no cause to think of Jacob as a godly man—no cause to see him as a man of faith with insight into the character of God. Little is said that sheds light on his spiritual condition or his relationship to God. In fact, we're shown more of the scoundrel than of the saint in him! He's stolen his brother's birthright, hoodwinking his father in the process. He's lived on one deception after another. Now he's on the run, facing quite an uncertain future. He's far from home and isn't sure of making it back. He has no assurance of finding a wife, a job, a home to stay in, or food to eat. He was completely alone in a hostile world where he might be hunted down and killed by his brother Esau or beaten by a bandit or attacked by a wild animal. His back was against the wall.

He had traveled about a seventh of his 450-mile journey toward Haran and needed to rest for the evening. He set up a meager camp in a "certain place," using a stone for a pillow – a stone that was at least as hard as his head! The place isn't noteworthy; it doesn't even have a name. It's just a place of dirt and stones, leaving Jacob no reason to expect anything unusual.

As Jacob drifted off, he was likely in a mindset described by the Led Zeppelin song: "There's a sign on the wall, but she wants to be sure, / And you know sometimes words have two meanings. / In the tree by the brook there's a songbird who sings; / Sometimes all of our thoughts are misgiven. Woe oh oh oh oh oh / And she's buying a stairway to heaven." Of course, Jacob didn't have to buy his stairway to heaven – although I could see him trying had he know about it. Falling asleep, this deceitful dreamer dreams of a regal stairway with angels gliding up and down from heaven to earth and back again. And at the top of the stairway stood the Lord Himself. The gates of heaven had been opened and the presence of Almighty God was visiting Jacob – making promises to him of all things! Of course, Jacob didn't deserve anything from God, but God in His mercy came to Jacob anyway.

Jacob, like every one of us, is a work in **process**; like us, he's another of God's **reclamation** projects. He has done nothing to deserve God's attention, yet God reaches out to him at a time when he's probably feeling nothing but despair and vulnerability. God encourages Jacob by His presence and comforts him with His promise. It's important for us to realize that God doesn't wait until people "arrive" at spiritual maturity before He makes overtures toward them.

God sometimes shows up at the most unexpected times and places! It may be in the shower, during your drive to work, or when you're cooking dinner. God isn't limited to showing up at so-called spiritual places like this church building. God can show up anywhere He wants – after all, He's everywhere all the time anyway – and in this case, He decided to encourage and assure Jacob through a dream.

When Jacob wakes up – in more ways than one, I might add – he responds in two ways. Now that he recognizes the sacredness of that spot, he set up the stone as an altar and gave the place a name: Bethel, which means "the house of God." In essence, he worships. But not content to stop at just worshipping God, Jacob also makes a vow committing himself to God's service. We, too, should respond to God's assurances and encouragement with a **commitment** to honor and serve Him.

Still, we all face times in our life when, like Jacob, we're discouraged and despairing because our future seems so uncertain. Sometimes it seems life is falling apart as a result of our own wrong decisions; sometimes it seems life is falling apart through no fault of our own – just as a result of living in a fallen world. Doubt, discouragement, and uncertainty affect us deeply. We might be uncertain about our material needs being met. We might be uncertain about our personal relationships. We might be uncertain about our physical health.

It's during those times when we most need the encouragement and assurance of God. We need to know that God is with us – that things will work out. The good news is that we can have these needs met because God, through His Word and Spirit, reminds us of what to recall in the midst of doubt and discouragement. In fact, this Scripture passage tells us of four things to remember in uncertain times.

First, remember God's promises. The first thing God reminds Jacob of is the promises he had made to his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham – that he, too, was included in God's covenant. When we're facing the hard times, we need to open up our Bibles and let the Holy Spirit remind us of all that God has promised us. We can either pace back and forth and worry and focus on our terrible circumstances or we can be strengthened by focusing on the promises of God. That choice is ours to make and live with.

Second, remember God's provision. When God promised Jacob that He would watch over him, He was also promising to provide for him – to take care of him. God has promised to provide for all the needs of His people. Jesus reminds us that our Father knows our needs, and just as certainly as He provides for the little sparrows, so will He also provide for us.

Third, remember God's protection. Jacob may have feared what lay ahead, but God promised him His protection on his perilous journey. In the same way, we don't have to fear the dangers we hear about all around us – dangers like terrorism, war, disease, crime, and nuclear proliferation. God has promised to watch over us – and that is certainly enough. Yes, we may be hurt by others, by life, by sickness, and eventually by death. But God protects us from being harmed. It's like getting your immunization shot: The shot hurts but doesn't harm you. Rather, you benefit from it in the long run, though you'd still rather avoid the hurt of the needle.

Fourth, remember God's presence. Jacob may have felt alone, but God was right there with him. We've got to know that God is with us if we're going to face an uncertain and sometimes fearful future with confidence. This doesn't mean we will escape the storms of life, but our remembering His presence in those storms will give us certain peace and confidence.

Early Native Americans had a unique way of training their young braves. On the night of a boy's thirteenth birthday, after learning hunting, scouting, and fishing skills, he was put to one final test. He was placed in a dense forest to spend the night alone. Until then, he'd never been away from the security of the family and the tribe. But on this night, he was blindfolded and taken miles away. When he took off the blindfold, he was in the middle of thick woods and was terrified! Every time a twig snapped, he visualized a wild animal ready to pounce on him. After what seemed like an eternity dawn broke, and the first rays of sunlight entered the interior of the forest. As the boy looked around, he would see flowers, trees, and a pathway. Then, to his utter astonishment, he beheld the figure of a man standing just a few feet away, armed with a bow and arrow. It

was his father. He had been there the whole night long. In the same way, we so rarely realize that our heavenly Father is always nearby – close at hand on the stairway to heaven.

There once was a line in *The Upper Room* that said, "God is no fault-finder, always looking for things to condemn in us. He estimates us at our best, not our worst." And so was His estimate of Jacob, and of you, and of me. Deep down, there is more of scoundrel than saint in all of us. Yet God estimates us at our best, not our worst. That's why He sometimes shows up at unexpected places and unexpected times. That's why He is forever active and forever present in our lives—even when we may be completely unaware of Him. That's why He's always gracing us with His promises, provision, protection, and presence.

One last thing: Notice that God's covenant that had been promised to Abraham and Isaac was now being offered to Jacob as well. But it wasn't enough for Jacob to be Abraham's grandson; Jacob had to establish his own personal relationship with God – as do you. Your grandpa or your mama or your pastor can't do it for you. God doesn't have any grandchildren; He only has children. That means each of us must establish our own personal relationship with Him. It isn't enough to hear wonderful stories about Christians in your family. You need to become part of the story yourself. Until you do, you're merely dozing through this magnificent life – failing to realize God on the stairway to heaven close at hand.

Let us pray: Lord, I pray that You'd wake us up to the reality of Your promises and provision and protection and presence. Open our eyes that we may see You nearby – close at hand and at work in the midst of our lives, constantly strengthening us, aiding us, and sustaining us. For we pray in Jesus' name.

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