Foundational Stories #7 of 24:

"Jacob's Ladder"

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Genesis 28:10-19a

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The story known as "Jacob's Ladder" looks pretty simple. Jacob is on a journey; he stops and sleeps; he dreams about a ladder and some angels; God gives him some promises; Jacob is surprised to find God's presence there, and he sets up a pillar. But there's more going on here than meets the eye.

Context matters. Let's back up. Last week I talked about the birth of Jacob and his twin brother Esau. They are the third out of four generations in founding family whose stories fill three-quarters of the book of Genesis. Even before they were born, there was tension between the brothers; on the day of their birth, Esau came out first, but Jacob was grabbing his heel; he did not want to be second. They grew up and became very different people: Esau, a man of the field, a skilled archer; Jacob, a quiet man, living in tents. Esau liked to eat game; Jacob liked lentil stew. There came a fateful day – the first of three fateful days in their relationship – when Jacob basically swindled Esau out of his inheritance as the firstborn son. Afterward, Esau regretted selling Jacob his birthright, and felt bitterness toward Jacob.

That all happened in chapter 25. Now we're in chapter 28. We skipped some important stuff. Isaac, the father of Esau and Jacob, grows old and goes nearly blind. Knowing he does not have many days left on earth, he summons Esau, his oldest and his favorite son, to his bedside. Isaac asks Esau to go hunting and cook a nice meal for him, and then Isaac will bless Esau. Esau takes his quiver and bow and heads out. Rebekah, the mother of Esau and Jacob, hears this conversation. She rushes to *her* favorite son, Jacob, with instructions: "Go to the flock, and get me two choice kids, so that I may prepare from them savory food for your father, such as he likes, and you shall take it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies." She wants *Jacob* to receive the blessing that Isaac intends for *Esau*. Deathbed blessings were incredibly important; they functioned as *prophetic oracles*. The words that were spoken in a final blessing didn't just *invoke* the divine, or call upon divine power, the way prayers do; they also carried *divine authority*. God essentially *speaks* through the mouth of the dying father. For all practical purposes, it was a blessing from *God*. It conveyed the divine *will*, the divine *purpose*, and the divine *destiny* for the recipient. Rebekah intends for Jacob to *steal* that blessing. Jacob doesn't object to this plan – he doesn't say, "Mom, there's nothing ethical about this" – but he does point out a flaw: "my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a man of smooth skin. Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him and bring a curse on myself and not a blessing." Rebekah solves that problem by laying the goat skins on Jacob's arms and neck. She also fetches Esau's best clothes and dresses Jacob in them, so that he would look *and smell* like Esau. The ruse works. Jacob goes to Isaac, in the guise of Esau, with wonderfully cooked goat meat. Isaac thinks something is off because the man

standing before him sounds like Jacob and not Esau, but then when Isaac *feels* Jacob, and *smells* Jacob, he is convinced that it's truly Esau. He offers Jacob the blessing that should have been Esau's: "May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!"

Then Esau returns from his hunt; he prepares a nice meal and brings it to Isaac: "Let my father sit up and eat of his son's game, so that you may bless me." But Isaac asks: "Who are you?" Esau replies: "I am your firstborn son, Esau." The narrator tells us that "Isaac trembled violently." He says, "Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate it all before you came, and I have blessed him? – yes, and blessed he shall be!" Esau "cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry" and begs his father for a blessing. Isaac realizes what has happened: "Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing." Esau asks, "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?" Isaac replies: "I have already made him your lord, and I have given him all his brothers as servants, and with grain and wine I have sustained him. What then can I do for you, my son?" Esau asks: "Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, me also, father!" The narrator says: "Esau lifted up his voice and wept." Isaac tries again, and these words come out: "See, away from the fatness of the earth shall your home be and away from the dew of heaven on high. By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother, but when you break loose, you shall break his yoke from your neck." This is *not* the blessing Esau wanted to receive!

So now Jacob has swindled Esau out of his birthright, and he has also stolen Esau's blessing. Let me be clear: *don't do this!* This is *not* what Jesus wants from us! But here is a very important detail: at this point in the story, there is no evidence that Jacob had ever *prayed* to God, had ever *worshiped* God, had ever *cared* about *God*. Jacob is, at this point, *not* a spiritual man. That is about to change.

Esau, for his part, is *furiously* angry. He swears: "I will *kill* my brother Jacob." Rebekah finds out and tells Jacob: "Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice; flee at once to my brother Laban in Haran" – Haran is their ancestral homeland, hundreds of miles to the north – "and stay with him a while, until your brother's fury turns away … and he forgets what you have done to him; then I will send and bring you back from there. Why should I lose both of you in one day?" Isaac also decides that Jacob should head north for a while. He summons Jacob and says: "Go at once to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel, your mother's father, and take as wife from there one of the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother. May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and numerous, that you may become a company of peoples. May he give to you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your offspring with you, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien, land that God gave to Abraham." So Jacob runs. *This* is why he is on a journey. He's heading off to find a wife from among his relatives. He is also *running for his life*.

"Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place." He uses a stone for a pillow. "He dreamed that there was a stairway set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." The narrator doesn't interpret the dream for us; there is no explanation of what it signifies, so people have been creative. One Jewish interpretation is that the place where Jacob had the dream was the future site of the Temple of Jerusalem; it was a holy place where earth connected to heaven. Both Jews

and Christians have interpreted the dream mystically, with each rung on the ladder representing one step on the soul's journey toward union with God. There are various other interpretations. Also, Jesus seems to refer to Jacob's ladder when he says: "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (John 1:51). Jesus is one of Jacob's descendants (Matthew 1:2; Luke 3:34), and Jesus is the culmination of this entire biblical narrative.

As Jacob continues dreaming, *God* shows up and starts talking to him: "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring, and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring." God had given Jacob's grandfather Abraham a whole bunch of promises; now, Jacob *inherits* those promises. Not that he has done anything to *deserve* these promises. He's a swindler, a liar, and a thief! Jacob did not *earn* these promises. God just *gives* them to him. This is called *grace*. It's what God does for each one of us. *None* of us deserve the gifts or the blessings or the inheritance that God gives us. God just loves us so much that God gives it all to us, *despite* our sins.

God continues: "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." God is promising Jacob many *descendants*; God is promising him *land*; God is promising that *everyone*, "all the families of the earth," will be blessed in Jacob and Jacob's offspring; God is promising Jacob God's abiding presence; and God is promising Jacob a safe return. That's a *lot* of promises! And that promise about "all the families of the earth" being blessed in him and in his offspring – well, Christianity says that's what *Jesus* is for. To be a blessing – for *all* people. We need to *always* remember this. Jesus came to bless *everyone*.

Jacob wakes up and is utterly *blown away*. "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" This is the moment of his spiritual awakening. This is the moment when he realizes just how *awesome* God is. Interesting that it didn't happen when he was growing up, or living with his family. Sometimes people don't come to faith in God in even the most faithful of families. Sometimes people have to find God on their *own*. Sometimes, they need to be in an utterly *desperate* situation, like Jacob, fleeing for his life from the brother who wants to kill him, or like the prodigal son in that parable Jesus tells. Each of us has to come to know the reality and the power of God in our own unique way.

"How awesome is this place!" says Jacob. "This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." He takes the stone that had been his pillow and sets it up as a pillar. He anoints it with oil, and he makes a vow: "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house, and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you." Now *Jacob* is giving *God* promises. If he eventually returns home safely, he will be *all in*. He will worship God. He will return to this very spot and build an altar. (That will happen in chapter 35!) He will start giving God one-tenth of all he ever receives. A *tithe*.

Jacob gave that place a name; he called it *Bethel*. In Hebrew, the name was *Beth-El*. It means "House of God." It was where Jacob realized the truth: there is an *awesome* God – who *loves* him.

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