



### Thought for the Week 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2021

READING Genesis 28: :1, 2,5 & 10-22

<sup>1</sup> So Isaac called for Jacob and blessed him. Then he commanded him: ‘Do not marry a Canaanite woman. <sup>2</sup>Go at once to Paddan Aram, 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. <sup>5</sup>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.

<sup>10</sup> Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. <sup>13</sup>There above it 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. <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>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.’

<sup>16</sup> When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, ‘Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.’ <sup>17</sup> 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.’

<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz.

<sup>20</sup> 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 <sup>21</sup> so that I return safely to my father’s household, then the LORD will be my God <sup>22</sup> and 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.

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There is a passage in C.S. Lewis’ writing in which he tell about his conversion experience. It reads, “I was brought into the kingdom of heaven kicking and struggling, the most reluctant convert in all England, but I knew that I was in the net.” Jacob would have understood that, and so too would many other Christian believers. Some of us will have grown up in Christian homes, but resisted the truth for a long time. Or maybe we saw something different about Christians in their work or at school, but we didn’t want to give up our lifestyle.

The story of Jacob is of a reluctant believer. It is the story of grace triumphing over human artifice. Like many of us, Jacob tried to take control over his own destiny. He stole Esau, his older brother’s birthright, and thus the blessing of his father. Because of this, he was forced to flee from home to avoid Esau’s wrath (see Gen. 27:18–46). In this context, God confronts Jacob in His grace

### **God's Grace Takes the Initiative (28:10–14).**

Jacob does two things by leaving home. First, he is effectively fleeing for his life, but as we see in vv. 1–2 he is also on an unknown journey to find a wife. For the first time in his life, Jacob is on his own (v. 11) and it's at this point of his acute need (in Genesis 35:3 Jacob calls this "the day of my distress"), God breaks through with an amazing promise. In the Hebrew, a dramatic change occurs in the text as verse 12 starts with a little exclamation — "behold!" On this night, suddenly, God breaks through in His grace to Jacob.

As Jacob sees the stairway with angels ascending and descending on it, with the LORD at the top, it creates a clear picture of God's communication with Jacob. Grace loves to encounter the fugitive. God includes Jacob, the deceiver, in the promises given to his ancestors (vv. 13–14). Do you think you are too far gone to return to God and share in His blessings? That there is no way God can forgive you and include you in His purposes? Do you think there is no hope for your rebellious family member or friend? You couldn't be further from the truth. God's grace takes the initiative; it extends to every rebel

### **God's Grace Reveals the Blessing (28:15).**

For Jacob it now becomes very personal. God says, "I am with you." Look at all the second-person pronouns in this verse. It shifts the lens from a wide-angle to close-up, taking the covenant promises, and now personalizing them to Jacob's own current situation. Jacob has been very concerned about the blessing, but he must learn that the blessing is not prosperity or wealth, but that, "I am with you," the fellowship and relationship with a personal, living God who keeps His promises.

It's true of us; the Spirit will remain in every believer (Heb. 13:5). Nothing can separate us from God's love (Rom. 8:35–39). Do you really believe that the promises made to us under the New Covenant bought by the blood of Christ are any less comprehensive or less real than that? Of course not! There's never a day or hour when His grace, mercy, provision, or working in us is not ongoing.

### **God's Grace Brings Change (28:16–22).**

The man who didn't know if God was with Him now knows there's nowhere God is not. He wakes and says, ". . . How awesome is this place . . ." (v. 17). He realizes that God should be revered and honoured. Jacob wants to commemorate this encounter and express his gratitude and commitment to God. He calls this place the house of God (Bethel) and he makes a vow. Jacob is not bargaining in verse 20, but saying, I believe this will happen, and then you'll be my God. The vow almost exactly mirrors the promise. The man who was out for self-gain changed to rely on God.

When God breaks through in our lives, two things happen: we start to worship Him as we never have before, and we decide to be devoted and committed to His purposes. Whether it's a prodigal you're dealing with or if you're wandering yourself, God's grace will triumph. Jesus is the real stairway between heaven and earth; He's our mediator who makes it possible to have peace with God (Heb. 9:15). Think of how He hung on the Cross between heaven and earth to bury our sins so we could enter into the New Covenant, sealed by His blood! Our only response is to give up our small ambitions, turning our backs on our Jacob-like ways to follow God in faith.

### **PCI Let's Pray**

Sunday 23 May

Moderator

Pray for a growing vision for outreach across the Presbyterian Church, especially that congregations will be able to speak clearly about the Good News at a time of great uncertainty about the future. Give thanks for the good resources produced by the church centrally to help with this.

## Monday 24 May

Peter & Jayne Fleming (Nepal)

Pray for the people of Nepal where Covid-19 cases have been rising sharply. Pray the government will accept the new five-year agreement for UMN and for expat staff to be able to get work visas.

Indonesia

Pray for Timor, Sumba and nearby islands which were hit by Tropical Cyclone Seroja at Easter. Pray for all affected and for our partners, the Evangelical Christian Church in Timor and the Christian Church in Sumba, as they help those who are grieving and those who suffered damage to their homes, crops, livelihoods, etc.

## Tuesday 25 May

Sharon Heron (deaconess, International Meeting Point)

Pray for the new Bible Study which has started in North Belfast. Pray for a man who has recently become a Christian and for the four/five new people who are wanting to learn more about God. Pray that they too will come to faith and for others to grow in their faith.

Mountmellick & Tullamore (Co Laois and Co Offaly)

Pray for the congregations as they enjoy meeting again in-person. Pray that they will be known in their wider communities as multi-national and welcoming churches.

## Wednesday 26 May

Csaba & Ilona Veres (Romania)

Pray for Csaba's support group providing spiritual and emotional support for the Diakonia's palliative care team. Pray for the good news club in Mera which is now meeting again. Pray that each child would hear God speak through his Word, come to know the Saviour and grow in faith.

Pakistan

Pray for the people of Pakistan where Covid cases have been rising. Pray for leaders and members of the Presbyterian Church of Pakistan as they live out their faith. Pray for those being persecuted for their faith.

## Thursday 27 May

John McCandless (community outreach worker in Mountpottinger & McQuiston)

Give thanks for recent outreach opportunities, including 'HUG IN A BOX' doorstep deliveries, connecting with church community through activities via Zoom, and providing takeaway cooked lunches for over 40 people on a weekly basis.

Naas (Co Kildare)

Praise the Lord for keeping the congregation faithful to him and each other during the past year. Pray for the members as they look at living as believers in a world hostile to Christianity.

## Friday 28 May

Social Witness

Pray for the Taking Care Department as they support our congregations in the area of Safeguarding – giving advice on routine issues, concerns and complaints. Give thanks for all Designated Persons, who provide a vital role in each congregation, especially as they begin to manage the transition back to more normal church life. Give thanks also for our volunteer Trainers, many who have continued to deliver virtual training during these challenging times.

Fostering and Adoption

Give thanks for those willing to open up their homes to care for children and young people who may require short, or longer-term, foster care, or adoption. Pray that more people would come forward to offer this support as foster carers and adopters.

## Saturday 29 May

Council for Training in Ministry

The Rev. David Leach has been appointed as Professor of Ministry in Union College. David will oversee the training pathways of ministry students, as well as teaching some subjects such as preaching. Pray that the Lord will use David as he takes up his post in August, and pray for him and his family as their time in Union Road Magherafelt and Lecumpher comes to an end.