

I don't know how far **you** go on your holidays: perhaps you like to get away from our country and jet off to America, or Australia; perhaps you like to stay in Europe and see the sights of cities like Paris; perhaps you prefer the scenery of the Rhine valley in Germany, or the fjords in Norway; perhaps you're happy to stay close to home with a week in Bognor or Hastings.

I must admit, when I've gone abroad, the hassle of going too far takes some of the enjoyment of the holiday away for me, although the destination is usually worth it. No, at the **moment** I'm happy to have holidays in this beautiful country of ours – there are so many lovely destinations so close to us, aren't there? Perhaps we should all sing 'Land of Hope and Glory' at this stage – no, perhaps not!

About five years ago we went to Cheddar, not because of its cheese, but because of its Gorge. I don't know if any of you have seen it, but it **is** impressive – a steep-sided valley gouged out of the Mendip Hills. There are some brilliant caves to go down and explore, with all their beautiful rock formations and tremendous caverns, the biggest and most stunning of them's called 'the Cathedral'. So we went deep underground, under the Cheddar Gorge.

But we also went up high; we climbed up one of the steep sides of the Gorge and we had to climb up 274 steep steps, straight up. Fortunately there were resting places on the way. At the top the views stretched for miles and were breathtaking, although our breath had already been taken away by the climb!

Why am I reminiscing about my holidays, with the fear of boring you on this lovely summer's evening? Well, the steps up the side of the Gorge are called 'Jacob's Ladder', and I want us to look at the passage in the Bible that gives us the origin of the name, 'Jacob's Ladder'. We're going to read from Genesis, chapter 28, and beginning at verse 10. [Read Genesis 28:10-22].

I'm going to mention the names of two of the most recent additions to our church family during this talk; so to make sure none of the children feel left out, at this stage I'd just like to say hello to Caleb and Taleeya and Mauri who may listen to this later. Hello! I try to please!

Jacob [hi, Jacob] The Jacob of the Bible has an important place in history, because of our great God's purposes and dealings with him.

Jacob himself, as we shall see, was just a man, with all his strengths and weaknesses. He **tried** to please God, but often fell short. Remind you of anyone? He was just like you and me, but God had a part for him to play in the working out of his eternal plans for mankind.

Let's look tonight at Jacob himself, at his condition as he lay down to sleep; then let's look at the encounter he had with God; and finally let's look at the difference it made to Jacob. And all along the way we'll see the significance of these things to us today.

Whenever we come to read the Bible we have to be aware of what's gone before and where the particular passage fits into the overall scheme of things. Otherwise it's like starting watching a crime film half way through – you know who did it, but you don't know what they've done! So, first things first.

Who was Jacob, and what brought him to this place? You'll remember, Jacob was the second son of Isaac and Rebekah [hi, Rebekah], his older twin brother being Esau. We know there's going to be trouble when we're told in Genesis 25 that the 2 jostle around in Rebekah's womb even before they're **born**, and God tells her, *'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.'* So we know this family is not going to be a normal happy family. Isaac loves Esau, but Rebekah loves Jacob. Oh, oh!

And, sure enough, we read that one day Esau came in starving from the fields, and when he smelled the lentil stew Jacob was cooking, he was so eager to get some of it that he sold his birthright – his rightful inheritance as elder son – to Jacob. You've got to be pretty hungry to give up your inheritance for a bowl of stew. You'd have to give me the **inheritance** before I'd eat lentil stew!

But there's more. Jacob lived up to his name a little later on. Jacob means 'he grasps the heel', but also 'he deceives'. In chapter 27 we find Isaac getting old and he's lost his sight. He calls for Esau to prepare a meal for him and then come and receive his blessing. It was tradition in those days for the father to bless his eldest son, in effect making him lord over his brother and servants. But **Rebekah** hears this and gets Jacob to pretend that he's Esau. And in this way Jacob deceives Isaac and receives the blessing that should have gone to Esau. So Jacob has robbed his brother **twice**.

Of course, Esau isn't best pleased by this chain of events, and he says to himself, *'The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will **kill** my brother Jacob.'* Gn 27:41

Scheming Rebekah learns of Esau's anger and hatches a plan to get Jacob away from that place by sending him to her relatives in Haran, some 600 miles north, and asks Isaac to let him go to find a **wife** from there.

So here we have the situation we find in our passage. Jacob is walking the equivalent of John O'Groats to Lands End, through hill country and wilderness, probably in hot temperatures to spend some time with people he's never even met. He's got a lot of time on his hands, a lot of thoughts are going through his mind.

'Will I ever see my father again – he's close to death **now**.' As it turns out he **did** see his father again, but he wouldn't see his mother Rebekah again.

'Why am I leaving everything and everyone I hold **dear** behind?'

'What am I doing here? Going all this way, for what?'

'Why did I trick Isaac and Esau? The birthright and the blessing were Esau's by right – I wish I'd left them alone.'

And 'Why haven't aeroplanes been invented, my feet are **killing** me!'

Jacob finds himself alone, surrounded by a bleak, barren landscape. He's lonely. He feels vulnerable. There's no-one to talk to. He can't go on Facebook. The sun's gone down, it's got colder. He's hungry – he misses his lentil stew. And as he lays his head on a stone – even though it's probably a very **nice** one – he wishes he was at home in his own tent and bed. In chapter 35 verse 3 Jacob refers to this day, as the day of his distress. He's at rock bottom, literally. What **has** he done?

And this is where he has an encounter with God. He's in distress, all alone, facing the unknown and an uncertain future. And **God** reveals himself to him.

But before we look at the encounter, let's pause and think awhile.

You know, **everyone** needs to encounter God. Unfortunately some people, even **most** people put it a long way down their 'To-do list'. Some people never get down to thinking seriously about God – there are so many **other** things that seem to need doing first: eat, drink, go to work, check emails, go out with friends, see the latest film, download the latest music, buy a house, dig the garden, feed the cat ... ?think about my relationship with God? Nah, leave it 'til tomorrow. And somehow, tomorrow never seems to come where God is concerned.

Everyone needs an encounter with God. He is our Creator. We **need** to **meet** him, find **out** about him, **think** about him, **talk** to him.

Our relationship with God needs sorting out one way or another. Of course we're all different, and the way we meet **God** can be different: some consider God for only a short time and everything just fits into place straight away – they're **ready** to meet God. Others take a **longer** time to become convinced that God wants them to meet him. **Some** just put it off. But everyone **will** have an encounter with God, sooner or later. For some **tragically** it will come too late for them to change their course for eternity. There will come a day, make no mistake, when God says 'You're too **late**, you must live without God forever.' How **dreadful** that encounter will be.

Jacob was fleeing from his brother: if we're honest with ourselves, before we meet God we're **all** in that same condition – we're running away from him, we're **avoiding** him, **ignoring** him, we're turning our **backs** on him. Jacob gets to this point where he knows he's done wrong, he needs God's help. And that's where each one of us, **every one** of us, needs to come to – the Christian knows he's done wrong, and relies on God's help. Have you reached that point yet? You **need** to. Don't put it off.

We all need to encounter God. This is **Jacob's** encounter with God that night. We know it's a special time and occasion because it takes place at **Bethel**; only **Jerusalem** is mentioned more times in the Old Testament than Bethel; it's where his grandfather Abraham had offered up sacrifices and called upon God in chapters 12 and 13; it was an important centre of worship, so we know this is an important event in Jacob's life, and in the history of God's people.

So let's look secondly at **God's revelation of himself here to Jacob**.

God came to him in a dream. **What did he see?** Verse 12: '*He had a dream in which he saw a stairway [or ladder] resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.. There above it stood the Lord,.*'

I don't know if you've had the same experience, but sometimes when I've watched a thrilling film that's really caught my imagination, when I've gone to sleep afterwards, I've found myself in that film **setting**, or in a similar situation. Jacob's surroundings with towering rock formations were probably taken into this dream he had – the ladder was more of a rocky stairway, rock steps.

The stairway goes between earth and heaven, it bridges the gap between where he is **now**, and heaven, where he **needs** to be. There are angels, God's messengers on the stairway, there to help him, guide him, protect him. Jacob's not alone. This vision speaks **directly** to his need.

And even better, even greater is that **God's** there – the words translated 'at the top' can also be translated as 'beside him' – how great is **that** for Jacob! God's **beside** him. God's **committed** to Jacob, to his relationship with him. God in heaven wants a relationship with Jacob, a man who deserves **none** of it – he's deceived his own father and brother. His brother wants to kill him. Yet God wants to stand beside him, and to be his God.

And this is stressed further by what Jacob hears. **What did he hear?** He heard what God **needed** him to hear. Jacob heard what he needed to hear at that time, in that situation. God **knows** our needs, he's beside us, he wants to be our constant companion and friend. Have **you** found that?

What does God say to Jacob? Verse 13: *'There beside him 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. 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 will be blessed through **you** and your offspring."* ‘

This message from God was **exactly** what Jacob needed to hear in the circumstances he found himself in: he was away from his family, but the God of his father and grandfather was **speaking** to him; he was going through a country he didn't know, but God promised that this land would belong to **him**; as yet he hasn't even **met** his wife, but God promises that he will have numerous **descendants**, implying of course that he **will** find a wife. **Exactly** what Jacob needs to hear.

But something even more tremendous to Jacob will have been the **words** and the promises here – I'm sure his father Isaac and Abraham before him would have said similar words to him over and over again, because these words contain the promises God made to **Abraham**, which we read in chapter 12:2 *'I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you ... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through **you**.'* In chapter 15, God asked Abraham to look at the stars at night and said his descendants would be as **numerous**, and he promises to him and his descendants the land he was on. These promises would have been very familiar to Jacob, I'm sure.

But up until now, God has been the God of his **forefathers**, not **his** God. That's why Jacob needed this encounter, that's why **we** each need our **own** personal encounter with God. God is God of his people, he's God of his church, but only through being God of **each** and every individual person in his people and church.

We can't rely on our **parents'** relationship with God to make us right with God. This is an **individual** thing, a **personal** thing. A personal encounter. From now on, God is the God of Abraham, Isaac **and** of Jacob. We have to have an individual and personal relationship with God. We have to know he is our God, that he's **my** God.

God carries on in verse 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.'* God says in effect, 'I'm **your** God, I'll be with you, I'll protect you, Jacob, and all my promises **will** be fulfilled.' Despite Jacob's deceitful past, God will stand by the promises he made to his forefathers and now to Jacob himself, because of his grace and mercy. God is 100% **committed** to his relationship with Jacob.

Let's apply this to us today. God is **committed** to his relationship with you. He's right there beside you, he's wanting to make that relationship **right**, to get you heading the right way. We don't need to go to Bethel in Israel to meet with him. **My** 'Bethel' was a place called Langthwaite in the beautiful Dales of Yorkshire – God's own country! That's where I had **my** encounter with God, one Easter Sunday. That's where I realised that God was committed to his relationship with me. How?

Well just turn with me to the first chapter of John's gospel in the New Testament, verse 51 where Jesus calls Philip and Nathaniel, two of his disciples, to follow him: we read, *' "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.'*

Jesus recalls Jacob's dream of the stairway to heaven and he identifies **himself** as that stairway, bridging heaven and earth: as angels descended and ascended on the stairway in Jacob's dream, Jesus says angels will descend and ascend on the Son of Man, a name he gives to himself. **Jesus** is where we encounter God. **Jesus** is where we meet God. We don't need to meet God in a specific religious or holy place, the **place** isn't significant. But we only meet God through Jesus, the One who loves us and gave himself **for** us on the cross. Through Jesus alone, no other, we can have an individual and personal encounter with God. **Jesus**, the stairway to heaven.

God is totally, fully, 100% committed to a relationship with each of us. How committed are **we** to **him**? Have you known that first encounter? Has God revealed himself to **you**, to **you**, as your personal God, Saviour and Lord? You need this more than **anything** in your life – don't put it off. Find out how you can know God, or come to know him better. Do it **now**.

We come finally to **the difference it made to Jacob**. In the remaining verses of our passage, we see Jacob's **response** as he wakes up, and it's an encouragement, I think, for **each** of us, no matter how far we are on our Christian journey.

Jacob's spiritual awareness has been aroused, but he doesn't understand everything fully straight away. He wants to commemorate the event by setting up his stone pillow as a **pillar** and anoints it with oil. He reckons that this must be a special **place**, and in one sense it **is** because it's where God met him. But he gives it the name 'Bethel' which means 'house of God' and we know that God can't be confined to one special place, just like there's nothing special about **these** four walls, it just happens to be a place where God's family meet.

So it's **encouraging** because God doesn't **expect** us to know it all. He doesn't expect us to be **perfect** – that's his **purpose**, making us perfect, but it'll take **time** as the Holy Spirit enlightens and changes us. Some things we **won't** get right, we'll make mistakes, but the important thing is that we've **met God**, he's made us new creations, our hearts are **changed** and fortunately God is gracious, patient, long-suffering.

Jacob doesn't get it right, and like **most** of us, I guess, he wants tangible evidence of God's presence with him, and so in verse 20 we read, *'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, so that I return safely to my father's house, **then** the Lord will be my God.'* In this respect he reminds us of Jesus' disciple Thomas, who wouldn't believe that Jesus had risen from the dead until he saw and felt his wounds. Some of us are **like** that – we need tangible evidence.

The Lord is patient, he meets us where we **are**, he meets us in a way which will **convince** us. We need, though, to **keep** coming to him. We need constant **reassurances**. We need to encounter God **continuously**. We've not arrived as soon as we set **out** with God. Jacob still had 540 miles to go to Haran, to meet a wife, Rachel [hi, Rachel], to have 12 children and then walk the 600 miles back **home**. And you think **you've** got it hard!

We know that Jacob will return to Bethel in chapter 35. God then speaks to him and gives him **further** reassurances. He **repeats** the promises of chapter 28 and he gives him a new name, **Israel**. And from him will come the twelve tribes of Israel, bearing the names of **his** descendants.

We need to **keep** meeting God, these encounters with God need to **keep** happening until that day when we meet him for the **last** time, when Jesus comes again to take us to be with him **forever**. How is it with **you**? Is God **your** companion? How **is** your relationship with him? Are you meeting with him **regularly** and frequently? Without meeting God, how will you get to know his **will**, how will you know you're on the right **track**?

What difference did it make to Jacob? It **changed** his whole **life**. God became **his** God. He committed himself as fully as he knew – even affecting his **purse** – he promises to give a tenth of his wealth and possessions to God – we haven't got time to talk about how much of **our** wealth we should give to God, **Jacob** gives a tenth. Jacob's life **changed** from that night when he encountered God.

This passage should serve as a great encouragement for all of us, because no matter where we come from, no matter what misdemeanours lie in our past, no matter how **lost** we feel we are, when **God** meets us and takes us under his wing, we can achieve great things because we know then that God in his grace and mercy has a **purpose** for us; he'll be **with** us, he'll watch **over** us, he'll **never** leave us, he'll **fulfil** his promises to us. We encounter **God**, and our lives are changed **forever**.