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How God Begins With Us

Genesis 28:1-22

By

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Genesis Lesson 53

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Harold Ross started The New Yorker magazine years ago in small offices and with little equipment. They operated on a shoe-string budget at first. One day in a restaurant downstairs he met Dorothy Parker, one of the magazine's first writers. "What are you doing here?" he asked. "Why aren't you upstairs working?"

"Somebody was using the pencil," she explained, "so I came down for some coffee." ("Bits & Pieces," 6/84.)

Great things often start with humble beginnings. Ross Perot launched his multi-billion dollar fortune with a \$1,000 investment. McDonald's worldwide hamburger chain began with one little stand in San Bernardino. Apple Computer started in a garage with a couple of young guys who had an idea.

It's often the same way spiritually. If we each could share how God began with us, we'd probably marvel at the ways He broke into each of our lives. Years ago, a Sunday School teacher walked into a Boston shoe store and spoke about Christ to a teenage boy who worked there. That boy accepted Christ but was so ignorant of the basic teachings of the Bible that he was refused membership in a church for a year and a half until he could gain that knowledge. His name was Dwight L. Moody; he went on to become the most powerful American evangelist of the nineteenth century.

God's beginning with Jacob (Genesis 28) was like that. If you look at Jacob at the start, you can hardly imagine that here is the great patriarch, the father of the 12 sons who became the 12 tribes of Israel. He was a 77 year-old mama's boy, a cheat who had to flee for his life from his angry brother. And yet by His grace, God began to work in Jacob's life. There weren't quick changes; the process took a lifetime. But God's breaking into Jacob's life made the difference.

The chapter raises a question we all need to face: How can God break into my life and begin a work in me? Some of you may not yet have trusted Christ as Savior and Lord. You wonder, "Is

there any way God can begin with me, with all my problems and sin?" Thank God, there is! Those who are Christians need to ask the same question. If you have trusted in Christ, then God has already begun a work in you. But it's easy to grow complacent in your relationship with Him. Your spiritual life is on auto-pilot. You need a new beginning with God. How can that take place? Genesis 28 shows that ...

God begins at my point of need with His
grace, and I should respond to Him.

1. God begins at my point of need (28:19).

In problem solving, the first step is to recognize and define the problem. Often our problem is that we don't clearly see the problem. We aren't aware of our great need, so we aren't open for God to move into our lives to begin working on the problems. Many times it takes a crisis, where we are brought to the end of our own abilities and schemes, for us to be able to see our need and be open to God's breaking into our lives.

This is a helpful principle when you're dealing with others, whether you're trying to share the gospel or give counsel of some sort. Before a person will be receptive to the solution, he's got to be deeply aware of his problem. If he's not aware of his great need, he's going to resist any intrusion into his life. So you have to build your relationship with the person and wait for the time when God yanks the rug out from under him and he recognizes his need. Then he'll be ready for God's solution.

You don't have to read too much between the lines to see that Jacob has just had the rug yanked out from under him. Put yourself in his sandals: You've just lied to your blind, old father to cheat your brother out of his family blessing ("inheritance"). Your brother is so mad that he's threatening to kill you. Even though you're "early middle age" (Jacob was 77, but lived to 147), you've never been out of sight of mama's tent. Your idea of adventure is trying out a new recipe.

But now you're being sent off alone on a 500-mile journey through dangerous, foreign territory to a pagan city to try to find your mother's relatives. You don't know whether you'll even make it there safely. Your brother would be much more suited for this

kind of adventure. He's spent many a night in the wild, stalking game. But you've never even camped out in your own back yard. But now you're alone, on the road, with no motel. The sun has gone down, so you find a rock for a pillow and lay down under the canopy of the stars.

As you lay there listening to all the strange sounds of the night, you think about your past. You're confused. You finally had finagled your way to get what you'd always wanted—your brother's birthright and blessing. You thought that once you got that, you'd have it made, but here you are on the run, with nothing but meager supplies (32:10) and a very uncertain future. So you're confused.

You also feel guilty. You cheated your brother. You lied to your blind, old father, used the name of his God, and even kissed him in your deception. And then, in spite of all that, he has sent you off with the true spiritual blessing of your grandfather, Abraham (28:3-4). At this point, God is the God of Abraham and He is the God of your father, Isaac (27:20). But He is not yet your God (28:21). And yet the burden of the blessing of the God of Abraham is on your shoulders. As one of the "Peanuts" cartoon characters says, "There's no greater burden than having a great potential." You're loaded with guilt and anxiety about the future.

Do you see how Jacob must have felt? Until now, he has always schemed his way out of tight spots. But now he's fresh out of schemes. He's on his own for the first time, wrestling with a guilty, confusing past, and facing an anxious, uncertain future. It's significant that God begins working with Jacob at this point in his life. It's the first time the Lord got Jacob's attention. Jacob saw his great need.

One way or another, God has to bring each of us to that point before He breaks through in our lives. Often, as was the case with Jacob, it's when we first leave the shelter of home. I remember that even though I trusted Christ as a young child, God didn't begin to work in my life in a significant way until I was in college. I was still living at home, but being in the environment of a secular university, where the Christian faith was under attack, made me realize that either I had to make my parents' faith my own or I needed to discard it. It was only at that point that my relationship with Christ began to develop.

If you're in high school or college, you're at a critical point in life. If you realize your great need before God and turn to Him, your life will go in the right direction. But if you ignore your need for God and choose the human wisdom that is offered to you at school or in the world, you will start down the path that leads ultimately to destruction. If you've been raised in a Christian home, it's vitally important for you to recognize your own great need for God and to begin to make your parents' faith your own.

Esau never did that. He's a pathetic figure in many ways. His mother favored his brother. His father loved him because he liked the game he hunted (25:28). Now he's been tricked out of his father's blessing. When he hears Isaac send Jacob off to find a wife from his mother's relatives, he realizes for the first time (after 37 years of marriage) that his two pagan wives were not pleasing to his father.

Isaac was the classic passive father. Why hadn't he instructed his sons concerning the proper marriage partners when they were young? Why hadn't he talked openly to Esau years before, when he was considering taking these women as wives? And now, when Esau discovers that his marriages weren't pleasing to his dad, he goes to Ishmael's descendants and takes a wife, thinking that he might earn his father's approval by marrying within the descendants of Abraham. How sad! Esau had a need, but he went about meeting that need in a worldly way, instead of seeking the Lord. And God never broke through in Esau's life.

How about you? Are you at a place where you see your great need for God? Are you, like Jacob, out of schemes? Are you, like Esau should have been, but wasn't, out of worldly solutions? Are you at a place where you're confused and guilty about your past, anxious and uncertain about your future? Then maybe you're at a place where God can break through into your life. He won't give you magical, instant solutions, but He will begin to work when you come to the end of yourself and admit, "Lord, I have a need I can't deal with by myself. I need You!" That's the place where grace—God's unmerited favor—can take effect. You're at Bethel, the house of God, where God comes down to earth and earth's problems are carried up to heaven.

2. God begins with His grace (28:10-15).

At Jacob's point of need, God gave him a strange dream. God often has used dreams to communicate with people, but we need to be careful not to put too much stock in our dreams, because they are open to so many subjective interpretations (as you'll discover if you read a few commentaries on Jacob's dream!). In the dream, a ladder, or stairway, went from earth to heaven, with angels going up and down on it. How should we understand this? I'm using two guidelines: (1) How would Jacob have understood it, especially in light of what God said here? (2) How is it interpreted elsewhere in the Bible?

Jacob understood this dream as God breaking into his life: "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it" (28:16). Jacob had not personally encountered God until this point. But now this ladder into heaven, with the angels going back and forth between Jacob and God, showed him that the God of Abraham and Isaac could be his God, too. God was concerned about him in his place of desperate need, and there was a bridge of access to God to seek His help and from God to receive His help. God specifically applied His promises to Abraham and Isaac to Jacob. That's how Jacob must have understood the symbolism of this dream.

We can gain further insight into the meaning of this ladder because of an incident recorded in John 1:45-51. Philip reported to his friend Nathaniel, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Nathaniel sardonically replies, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Philip wisely replies, "Come and see." Jesus saw Nathaniel coming and said, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" Also, Jesus revealed that He had seen Nathaniel under the fig tree before Philip called him. This supernatural knowledge was enough to convince Nathaniel that Jesus was the Son of God, the King of Israel.

Jesus went on to say, "You shall see the heavens opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (John 1:51). Jesus knew supernaturally that Nathaniel had been meditating on the meaning of Jacob's ladder as he sat under that fig tree. Jesus is saying, "I am that ladder, the promised Seed of Abraham!" Jesus is the bridge between God and man. He is the one

who opens the way for man, in his desperate need, to have access to God in heaven. As He would later say, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6).

So we can understand something Jacob may not have been able to grasp: That Jesus, the Seed of Abraham, is the Mediator between God and man. Christ is the bridge between us in our desperate need because of our sin, and God with His abundant mercy. The angels, who bring God's help and protection to those who are needy, come to us through Christ.

In Jacob's dream, the Lord stood above the ladder and applied the promises given to Abraham and Isaac to Jacob (read 28:13- 15). What fantastic words! Can you imagine how those words must have hit Jacob? If you had done what Jacob had done, what would you have expected God to say to you? If He had said anything, I would have expected God to have said, "Steve, I had planned to use you in My purpose of blessing all nations through the seed of Abraham. But because you're such a deceiving crook, I'm going to have to change My plan. I can't use you." At the least I would have expected a severe rebuke. But God doesn't say a word about Jacob's failure. Instead, He assures Jacob about his future and promises him that He won't leave him until He's done everything He's promised. Jacob thought he had to use manipulation and scheming to gain God's blessing, but here God freely gives him everything while he's asleep. That's grace—God's unmerited favor!

Jacob didn't understand grace at this point. His response was fear (28:17). This was more than proper reverence; Jacob realized that he was dealing now with a God he couldn't connive against or cheat, a God who had his number, a God who had taken him thoroughly by surprise. I wonder if John Newton had this text in mind when he wrote, "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved."

God always deals with us in grace. This means that the primary reason you came to God was not because you decided to follow Jesus. Before you did anything, and knowing that you would only do evil if left to yourself, so that God alone could be glorified for your salvation, He chose you (Rom. 9:11). He is always the initiator. When He breaks into your life, it's His doing, not yours. If

God operated on the merit system, He would have picked Esau, who was a much nicer guy than Jacob. But God, based totally on His grace and not at all on anything we do, breaks through in our lives at a point of our great need and says, "I'm going to bless you!" God always begins at my point of need with His grace. It's a totally humbling experience!

What am I supposed to do when God begins at my point of need with His grace?

3. When God begins, I should respond to Him (28:16-22).

Frankly, I don't think Jacob knew what to do. He babbles on about this place being awesome, the house of God, the gate of heaven. Like Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration, Jacob felt the need to fill the dreadful silence with some kind of noise. But beyond that, Jacob responded to the Lord as best he knew how.

He got up in the morning and set up a pillar with his stone pillow and poured oil on it, as an act of consecrating it to the Lord. Then he made a vow to the Lord (28:20-22). Commentators are divided regarding Jacob's vow. Some say that it was a wonderful response of faith. They interpret the "if" of verse 20 to mean, "since." Others say that this is another instance of this self-seeking schemer trying to bargain for his own best interests. My understanding is that while Jacob's response was immature at best, at least it was a response, and God met him there.

A number of factors reveal that Jacob's response was immature (I am indebted to James Boice, *Genesis* [Zondervan], 2:296-299, who develops these in more detail). Jacob does not express any awareness or confession of his many sins. His focus was not on God and His purpose to bless the nations, but on himself and what he could get out of the deal. The translation "since" rather than "if" (28:20) doesn't fit Jacob's focus on himself here. God has just promised to do all these things for Jacob and he turns around and says, "If You'll do what You just said, then You can be my God." Jacob's vow sounds like the same old pattern he used when he bargained with Esau to get the birthright. He wasn't concerned about the other party; he was out for the best deal for himself. God isn't too impressed with such deals!

Jacob should have responded, "You alone are God! While I deserve Your condemnation for my many sins, You have shown me Your grace! I surrender myself and everything I have totally to You!" But instead, he tells God that if He will come through as He has promised, Jacob will make Him his God, set up a house for Him at Bethel, and give Him ten percent. Big deal!

Jacob's response shows that he doesn't understand God's grace. God's promises to Jacob are all unconditional; Jacob's promises to God are all conditional. Thank God that He deals with us on His unconditional terms, not on our conditional terms! But all this reflects where Jacob is coming from. He was used to working out deals, so he's responding to God by trying to work out a deal. It was immature, at best, but at least it was a response.

The significant thing is, God didn't rebuke Jacob: "You've got to be kidding! If you can't accept My word, the deal is off." Instead, God let it go and graciously kept working with Jacob. It would take 20 hard years with Laban, a night of wrestling with the angel of God, and a traumatic encounter with Esau, to knock a lot of rough edges off Jacob, but God kept at it. Though it was an inadequate response, God took it and began to shape Jacob into the kind of man he needed to be.

Conclusion

That's how God begins with you and me. He begins at my point of need with His grace, and I should respond to Him. As I think back over my experience with God, I recognize how gracious He has been to take me where I was at and work with me, in spite of my inadequate faith and my self-centered response to Him. The main thing that caused me to yield my life to the Lord was that I saw a young Christian couple who had a great marriage. I said, "Lord, if You can give me that kind of marriage, I'll give my life to You." I realized that the best deal for me all the way around would be for me to let God control my life, since He knows what is best and He loves me.

That was selfish. It was a bargain for me. It didn't have any regard for God's purpose of blessing all nations through Christ. I wasn't thinking about how my life could be used to bring glory to God. I was just out for His blessing so that I could be happy. But,

praise God, He took me there, overlooked my immaturity, and said, "It's a response." He began to teach me about His unconditional grace and that I need to live for His glory.

God will do that with you. Wherever you're at, He will begin at your point of need with His grace. He will say to you, "I am the Lord; ... I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go; ... I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." He wants you to respond by saying, "Yes, Lord! Begin your work in me."

Discussion Questions

1. What are some ways we can help a person who doesn't see his need for Christ to see it?
2. It doesn't seem fair that God would work with a scoundrel like Jacob but not with a nice guy like Esau. Your response?
3. How much and what kind of faith does a person need for God to save him? Give some Scriptural examples.
4. Should a Christian under grace make vows to God? Defend your answer biblically.

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