

*Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. <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." (Genesis 28:10-17)*

### What do We Need When We're in Trouble?

"If there's anything I can do, please let me know." Have you ever said that to anyone? Why? Chances are, something difficult was happening in that person's life and you wanted to help. But you didn't know what to offer. You were trying to say that you were willing to do whatever they needed, but they needed to tell you what they needed. You know what? Counselors will tell you that people rarely take you up on that kind of an offer. It's too general. They say that it's better to offer something specific – to bring dinner over or to watch their kids – than make an offer that's so general that they have to figure out what you can do for them.

But it's hard to know what someone needs. You want to help. You want to do something useful. You want to make them feel better, but you don't know how. You don't know what they need. It's even worse when we're talking about ourselves. What do we need when we hurt? Sometimes, we're not even sure – which is part of the reason that those general offers to do whatever you need are hard. Now, every situation is different. But our Old Testament lesson for today does point out that in every situation of life, there are certain needs that are always there. My friends, **what do we need when we're in trouble?**

**I. We need Jesus.**

**II. We need the gospel.**

#### I.

Who is in trouble in this reading? Jacob, the grandson of Abraham. Jacob was fleeing from his brother, Esau. They were twins but they couldn't be more different. Their parents had played favorites. Dad loved Esau. Mom loved Jacob. Jacob had cheated his brother out of his inheritance and Esau wanted to kill him. Now their mother had arranged for Jacob to go hundreds of miles away, back to her family supposedly to look for a wife. But Jacob took off, alone and with very limited resources and apparently no real planning. He was running for his life.

He had probably been on the road for two or three days. He had traveled about 70 miles when he just stopped by the road and slept under the stars with a rock for pillow. As he drifted off to sleep, he had to be thinking about how much trouble he was in. He was a rich kid apparently with no money. He was leaving his home and family with no real hope of returning. He was going to a country he had never visited in hopes that relatives who had never seen him would take him in. All that had to be on his mind as his bone weary body drifted off to sleep. So it wouldn't be at all surprising that he had strange dreams. We often do when we're under stress.

But the dream Jacob had was no ordinary dream. It was the first of seven times that God came and spoke to him. In the dream, Jacob saw a staircase or maybe a ladder extending all the way up to heaven. Angels were going up and down on that ladder. God himself stood at the top and he said, "**I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac.**" He went on to promise this broke and lonely man that his descendants would inherit the land and that they would spread out and fill it. God promised that he would be with Jacob as he fled into the unknown. God promised to bring him home and again and he commanded

Jacob to worship him on that very spot. His exile would not last forever. Now it would last for twenty years, but I bet Jacob thought about that promise many times as those years went by.

What did Jacob need when he was in trouble? He needed God. And God met him on the way. God gave him this tremendous vision. What does it mean? Well, think about why we have problems. It's because we live in this world. Sin reigns here. This world is broken and full of pain and sorrow: illness and old age, financial problems and stress at work, family problems and hurt in our relationships with other people. How often don't we sinners make those problems worse? Guess what? Everybody that lives down here has problems. Everybody hurts sometimes. But when we get home to heaven that won't be true. So Jacob saw a ladder connecting this life to heaven. He saw something bridging the gap between us and God, between pain and sorrow down here and paradise up there.

He saw the angels going up and down on that ladder or staircase. Why? When God bridges the gap between us, he creates channels of communication between us and him. You could think of those angels as carrying our prayer to God and his answers back to us. Those angels represent all the ways that God reaches down to us from heaven and all the ways that God brings us up there to him. Notice, it takes a miracle to do that. God doesn't say to us, "Reach for the stars! Find your way here!" God reaches down to us. God closes the distance between him and us. God raises our needs and even our prayers up to heaven so that he can address them and then he sends his angels back here to guard us and help us.

What more do we need when we're in trouble than that? When I visit you in the hospital, I always offer to pray for you. It's not that my prayers are better than yours. They're not. It's not that my faith is better than yours. It isn't. The truth is, I often marvel at the faith of God's people. But I pray with you because God answers our prayers. I pray with you because you need God when your life hurts. And I pray with you because your pastor coming to you when you're in trouble reminds you that Jesus is listening.

Jesus is the greatest lesson of Jacob's dream. What bridges the gap between us and God? Jesus. How did God come down here to lift us and our needs up to heaven? His Son took on flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary and God became man. Lest you think I'm stretching the point, when Jesus called Nathaniel to be a disciple in John chapter one, the Lord gave him a glimpse of his power. Nathaniel was impressed. And Jesus said, **"You shall see greater things than that. I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."** Jacob saw Jesus rescuing him from all his hurts and all his fears. Only when he saw a vision of Jesus, did God make all those promises of protection and children and return home. Because for all those promises to come true, Jacob needed Jesus. My friends, **what do we need when we're in trouble? We need Jesus.**

## II.

You see, every promise that God makes depends on Jesus. God hears our prayers because Jesus has bridged the gap between us and God. What is the gap? It's not the physical distance between the earth and the sky. It's not the fact that we can't see heaven from here. The real distance is the divide that sin opens up between us and God. Isaiah says that sin separates us from God so that he does not hear our prayers. It's not that he can't hear them. God sees and hears everything that happens. But he will not listen to the prayer of an unbeliever. Sin builds a wall between us and God. It digs a ditch a hundred miles wide and we can't even shout across it.

So sin keeps all God's love and all his help and care and protection away from us. But Jesus bridged the gap that sin creates. He did that by coming down to this earth and living our life. He lived it perfectly. He faced all our temptation and all our hurt and he never sinned. So he built that staircase that carries us and all our needs to God. Jesus endured all that sin does to us. He hurt. He got hungry. He mourned the loss of people he loved. He endured the taunts of his enemies and the lack of love from his friends and family. He watched richer people than him live the high life while he depended on the charity of others. Then in the Garden of Gethsemane, he endured our fear of death. On the cross, he felt all the pain of the nails and the loss of blood and the agony of hanging there while his lungs filled with fluid. Worse than all that, on the cross, God the Father left him. He abandoned him to suffer hell itself. Then Jesus gave up his spirit and he died. Jesus suffered what sin does to us in our place. He paid all that we owe. Then he rose to set us free.

That's how Jesus bridged the gap. That's how Jesus tore down the wall. Now our prayers flow uninterrupted to God. God sends his angels to watch over his children. He sends them to protect us from the devil and from more harm and danger than we even know. We can't see those angels, so who knows how many

car accidents they've prevented and how many temptations they've kept away? They do all that because of Jesus.

But how do we get Jesus? By faith, obviously. But how do we get that faith? Through the gospel, the good news of Jesus. When we hear it, God works. That's how Jacob got him, too. The dream itself pointed to Jesus. But just in case he didn't get the message, God himself stood at the top of that ladder and made all those promises. And he made one more that I didn't mention before. He said, "**All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.**" This is the core promise that God gave to the patriarchs, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Now, in other places in the Old Testament, he gives this same promise in different ways. But to these founders of the nation of Israel, he said it this way. And it is a promise of Jesus. All peoples on earth are blessed because Jesus came and bridged that gap. He didn't just do it for Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He didn't just do it for the Jewish people who would descend from them. He did it for all of us.

My friends, we are truly blessed because we have a Savior. When I come to you in the hospital and you're scared because a doctor is going to take a scalpel and cut your body open, you need to know that God is watching and that he will hear your prayer. Guess what? You do know because Jesus bridged that gap. The angels carry the prayer that we say that morning to the throne of God and then they come back to do the work he sends them to do right in that very operating room. When we gather here because someone you love has died, you need to know that they have gone home to heaven. You need to know that God will heal your broken heart. When you lose your job, when finances and worry keep you up at night, when the people you love most are the cause of worry or pain, you need to know that God does hear your prayers and he does answer. When anxiety and fear haunt your every step, you need to know that God is listening and he will act. You do know because Jesus came and suffered hell itself for you. He endured all that life does to us here for you. He died for you so that your sin will not condemn you to hell. He loves you that much. He will not abandon you in your pain. He rose from the dead for you. He defeated the devil and sin and all that hurts us here. There is no power in the universe that can stop him from doing what is best for you.

God showed Jacob all that in a dream. When Jacob woke up, he was afraid. He said, "**Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.**" He went on to name that spot Bethel, which means the house of God. Now, that particular spot of earth is no more precious to God than any other. But it was the spot that God chose to show Jacob his Savior and to make all those promises. And the effect was deep and lasting.

My friends, this house is our Bethel. This is our house of God. This is where we come to see Jesus who bridged the gap and does all things for our good. This is where we come to receive his body and blood to forgive us again and strengthen our faith. This is where God comes to us in word and sacrament. That changes us. The effect is deep and lasting. My friends, **what do we need when we're in trouble? We need the gospel.** That message is the very power of God. It heals us and strengthens us to trust what God is doing. It carries us through this life and it will bring us home to heaven. Come to this Bethel and hear that message. Amen.