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Sermon Notes

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The Stairway to Heaven

Genesis 28:10-22, John 1:45-51

Christmas: A Season of Dreams Come True

- Children dream of special gifts and sometimes they get what they wish for
- Families dream of happy reunions and they sometimes happen
- Christmas is a time when expectations run high for happiness and lasting joy... the excitement of childhood is not soon forgotten
- Yet, Christmas can for that very reason be a time of great disappointment when Christmas dreams are dashed... when lonely people can feel their loneliness the most acutely
- YET I believe Christmas is ultimately the story of a dream fulfilled... I refer to the Dream of Jacob at Bethel... the dream of a stairway to heaven

I. The Need for a Stairway to Heaven

A. Jacob's Flight and Nathanael's Unbelief

1. Jacob = "He grasps the heel"...

a con-artist, a deceiver

took advantage, swindled his brother Esau out of his birthright when he was famished

with his mother Rebekah, swindled the blessing of the firstborn from his blind and dying father... a COLD-HEARTED LIE

he was fleeing for his life from a brother who wanted to kill him

Jacob's bigger problem: his own sin, which made him in danger of hell

Genesis 28: 10-11 Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. 11 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.

Michael Card: "A stone for a pillow as hard as his head... he lay on holy ground."

The real problem with Jacob was not his hard head but his hard heart... a sinful heart unfit for heaven

2. Nathanael: a true Israelite, BUT not a deceiver

“Israel” became Jacob’s name: he wrestles with God... struggles with God, rather than yielding wholeheartedly to God

Nathanael was a true Israelite... his heart was true, his standards high; unlike Jacob, he was no deceiver... Jesus spoke of him, saying

John 1:47 "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."

Greek: dolos = guile, trickery, falsehood

How different Nathanael was from Jacob... Jacob was not what he appeared to be; Nathanael was everything he appeared to be... no deceit in him at all

BUT he was skeptical, closed, cynical, a little jaded and unbelieving:

John 1:45-46 Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote-- Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." 46 "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip.

Nathanael represents the best Israel had to offer, and still he needed a savior... he still needed a stairway to heaven

WHY?

B. God is Exalted and Lives in a High and Holy Place

Isaiah 57:15 For this is what the high and lofty One says-- he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place..."

1. “High and lifted up” = a measure of God’s majesty and greatness, it towers above us, far above us, unreachable no matter how skillfully you climb... He is exalted far above us

Isaiah 6:1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple.

- a. exalted far above all other gods, who are false

Psalms 97:9 For you, O LORD, are the Most High over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods.

- b. exalted far above all nations of the earth

Psalms 113:4 The LORD is high above all nations; His glory is above the heavens.

Isaiah 40:15-18 Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust. 16 Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings. 17 Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing. 18 To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to?

He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. 23 He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. 24 No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff. 25 "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One. 26 Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

c. He lives in a high and holy place

Illus. Marco Polo traveled to the summer palace of the greatest empire in land area the world had ever seen... the summer palace of the mysterious Kublai Khan. The palace was magnificent, built in the northern Chinese province of Shang-Tu, better known to us as XANADU. Marco Polo described it as:

"a huge palace of marble and other ornamental stones." There were "fully sixteen miles of parkland well watered with springs and streams and diversified with lawns." Within the parkland grazed "animals of all sorts, such as hart, stag and roebuck" which the khan kept "for recreation and sport."

The khan's summer palace had halls to accommodate six thousand guests. Kublai would sit on a pedstal with a table laid out before him bearing food and wine. Musicians would play and entertainers and dancers were laid on for the enjoyment of guests when the feasting was over. The palace halls were richly adorned with gold, silver and silks.

The khan's summer palace was romanticised by the English poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his poem, Xanadu. He is said to have written it after a dream he'd had having read Marco Polo's book of travels.

*In Xanadu did Kublai Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river ran
Through caverns measureless to man,
Down to a sunless sea.*

*So twice six miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding spots of greenery.*

The summer palace of Kublai Khan may have been among the most magnificent human royal dwellings ever built, but it cannot even be compared with God's heavenly home

Isaiah 57:15 For this is what the high and lofty One says-- he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place..."

Heaven is a pure place, a place of magnificent sights, sounds, and companions... there the glorious angels dwell, cherubim and seraphim... spiritual beings whose existence and nature defies adequate description... and all they can do is cry to one another

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty... the whole earth is full of His glory

Jacob dreamed of angels ascending and descending a stairway to heaven

The angels themselves were magnificent... awesome in appearance

BUT HOW MUCH MORE WAS GOD HIMSELF:

Vs. 12-13 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. 13 There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac."

c. He lives forever and His name is HOLY

This is the big reason why we must have a stairway to heaven... our sins have cast us down into the dust and we are unfit for that high and holy place

God lives forever and His name is HOLY... like Jacob, we sleep on the dust with a rock for our pillow compared to the perfection of heaven... and our future is like the dust of the earth

C. Heaven is Closed to Sinners

1. God will not accept us just as we are
2. So we can dream all we want of a stairway to heaven, but it would remain nothing but an unfulfilled dream if Christ hadn't descended to the earth

II. The Deceptive Stairway to Heaven

A. False stairway #1: Human Religions

- The Temple of Kukulkan, the Feathered Serpent God (also known as Quetzalcoatl to the Aztecs) is the largest and most important ceremonial structure at Chichen Itza. This ninety-foot tall pyramid was built during the eleventh to thirteenth centuries directly upon the multiple foundations of previous temples. The architecture of the pyramid encodes precise information regarding the Mayan calendar. Each face of the four-sided structure has a stairway with ninety-one steps, which together with the shared step of the platform at the top, add up to 365, the number of days in a year. Priests would ascend the 91 stairs with human sacrifices to the sun god and to the feathered serpent god.
- In Rome, Roman Catholic pilgrims ascend the *Scala Sancta*, the "Holy Staircase" on their knees and obtain an indulgence from the pope applicable to the sins of anyone in purgatory. This staircase was supposedly the very one which Christ ascended to be tried by Pontius Pilate and to go to the cross. It is twenty-eight steps of white marble, and it has been called by some popes "the holiest place on earth." In the early 16th century, before understanding true salvation through faith in Christ, an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther ascended step by step on his knees, praying rote prayers as he went. In 1817, Pope Pius VII declared that a pilgrim ascending this stairway on his knees would lose nine years in purgatory for every step he ascended.

1. Most human religions are monuments to human pride... a desire to earn our way to heaven by building a stairway from good works

2. We form a god of our own making, and worship him in our own way, applauding our own efforts in keeping the man-made religious regulations
3. Step by step we ascend higher and higher in religions, little realizing how much God hates these efforts... and how the step by step ascent is really a step by step descent to hell, paved by good works

B. False stairway #2: Human Achievements and Acquisitions

- In 1898, “Golden Staircase” in the Chilkoot Pass during the Klondike Gold Rush in Alaska... 1500 steps cut into rock and ice, with a mere guide rope to stabilize the gold stampedees against the blizzards that threatened their very lives... step by step they climbed with heavy packs of supplies on their backs, braving sub-zero temperatures, frostbites, and slippery stairs made of ice in the hopes of striking it rich

"It was a super-human effort to transport those thousands of pounds up that narrow, slippery, rocky trail of the Pass, through boulder-strewn canyons, across swampy bottomlands."

- *Martha Louise Black, Stampeder*

- Most famous of all is the ascent of human technology begun at the Tower of Babel: after discovering the key to making stronger bricks, men discovered they could build a stairway to heaven for their own glory:

Genesis 11:4 Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

1. “Climbing the ladder of success”... achievement through financial and business success
2. Achieving the “perfect life”, ascending to a different kind of heaven... an earth-bound life of pleasure and comfort... all with a marvelous view!!
3. Building a perfect system of scientific and economic knowledge... becoming ever higher in our own estimation
4. Acquiring a perfect life of “self-actualization”

Illus. Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs: first physiological, then safety, then love, then esteem, then “self-actualization”

The need for self-actualization is "the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming." People who have everything can maximize their potential. They can seek knowledge, peace, esthetic experiences, self-fulfillment”

C. False stairway #3: Human Experiences

1. Ascending to heaven by experiencing life to its fullest, living a life of love and service to others
2. Eastern mysticism, meditation, Zen
3. OR simply tourism, “Been there, done that”
4. Having loving family relationships

D. The Builder of False Stairways: The Devil Himself

- All of this ascending is patterned after the ultimate ladder-climber with soaring ambitions: the devil Himself

Isaiah 14:13-14 You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High."

III. The True Stairway to Heaven

A. Understanding Jacob's Vision: An Unfinished Dream

Vs. 11-15 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. 12 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. 13 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. 14 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. 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."

1. Jacob's Lowliness

- having offended his father
- running for his life from his brother
- corrupt character
- laying on the ground
- a rock for a pillow

2. Jacob's vision: a staircase reaching to heaven

- resting on earth... it started near where he was laying
- successfully reaching all the way to God
- angels ascending and descending: moving from the hidden heavenly realm to the lowly earthly realm
- the Lord Himself at the top of the ladder... looking down at him!!!

3. God's promise:

- identifies Himself as the God of Abraham and Isaac... the God of the covenant promise

b. promises vast number of descendants:

vs. 14 *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.*

c. yet even here, there is a hint of the lowliness of Jacob... "dust of the earth" is a mark of utter lowliness before the perfection of heaven

Genesis 3:19 *By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.* "

Psalms 90:3 *You turn men back to dust, saying, "Return to dust, O sons of men."*

Ecclesiastes 3:19-20 *Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. 20 All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return.*

d. finally, God promises to be with Jacob on all his journey

4. Unfinished dream: to ascend and be with God

a. the dream was awesome and moved Jacob deeply

16 *When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." 17 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." 18 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. 19 He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz. 20 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 21 so that I return safely to my father's house, then the LORD will be my God 22 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."*

b. BUT it also made Jacob feel his unworthiness... he was not fit for heaven

c. the only hope was the future... the same blessing God intended to give the world

vs. 14 *All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.*

The only true stairway to heaven was yet to come... a descendent of Jacob, the dreamer

B. Understanding Christ's Statement: A Self-fulfilling Prophecy [John 1:46-51]

1. Jacob's Seed, but Greater than Jacob

2. The Messiah of Promise, but Raised in Obscurity

a. Nathanael had utter disdain for Nazareth

John 1:45-46 Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote-- Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." 46 "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip.

b. not ready to accept the concept of a humble Messiah

3. Supernatural knowledge

vs. 47-48 When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false." 48 "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

4. Nathanael's premature conclusion

49 Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." 50 Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that."

5. Christ's astonishing promise

vs. 51 He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

- a. first: "You shall see"... this was a promise to all disciples of Christ... the Greek is plural
- b. "heaven open"... now heaven is closed, invisible, inaccessible, barred from us sinners... Jesus Himself came into the world to open the way into heaven
- c. the angels of God ascending and descending: the exact same image of Jacob

Seen to some degree the night Jesus entered the world:

Luke 2:9-15 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." 13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

The angels descended that night to announce and celebrate Christ's birth

The angels descended during Christ's life to minister to Him in the time of His weakness: after Christ fasted in the desert and while He suffered in Gethsemane

The angels descended and appeared to the disciples to announce Christ's resurrection from the dead

The angels also descended and spoke to the disciples when Christ ascended back into heaven

NOTE: Christ's remarkable claim: I AM Jacob's Stairway!!!

vs. 51 He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

"Son of Man" is Christ's favorite title for Himself

Christ was clearly harkening back to Jacob's dream and was making a simple association:

The Son of Man IS the stairway to heaven... I can take you to heaven

C. Christ's Credentials: Heaven-Descended, Heaven-Ascending

1. Nathanael believed too soon... Christ was eager to give more proof

vs. 50 Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that."

2. The greatest proof of Christ's Messiahship was yet to come
3. His credentials: Heaven-descended

John 6:38-40 For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. 40 For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

- a. the great miracle of Christmas is that God descended to earth
 - b. the lowly babe in the Manger was God in the flesh
 - c. Christ is the heaven-descended Savior of the world
4. Heaven-ascended

Acts 1:9-11 After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. 10 They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 11 "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

D. Christ's Achievement: Building a Stairway to Heaven

1. Christ IS Jacob's Ladder... the only Stairway to heaven

John 3:13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven-- the Son of Man.

2. The great sign to us: we will see heaven open... what was closed to us sinners is open to all who trust in Him

Hebrews 4:14-16 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-- yet

was without sin. 16 Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Hebrews 10:19-22 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

3. Christ alone made a way for us to enter heaven itself

Romans 5:1-2 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

Revelation 4:1 After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here"

IV. Application

- A. Trust in Christ, Not Your Own Stairway to Heaven
- B. Focus on Christ's Promise: You will see heaven opened
- C. Worship Christ as the Angels Constantly Do