



TIME OF GRACE®

Flawed but Blessed: Is God Here?

Study Notes

Summary

After his lies, deceit, and dishonor, Jacob fled for his life and found . . . a forgiving God. Jacob's dream teaches us a classic truth—there is a way for sinners to be with God. Jesus' words prove that the same is true for "Jacobs" today. He is the true stairway to heaven!

- A Life-Changing Sentence: _____ !
- **Genesis 28:10,11:** ¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. 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.
- **Genesis 28:12,13:** 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."
- **Genesis 28:13-15:** ¹³ "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."
- **Genesis 28:16,17:** 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."
- **Genesis 28:18-22:** 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 household, 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."
- Three Tips:

1. Believe in _____. **Isaiah 6:3:** Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.
2. Believe GOD is. **Psalm 23:4:** I will fear no evil, for you are with me.
3. Believe GOD is _____. **John 1:51:** He then added, “Very truly I tell you, you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man.”

Points to Ponder

1. Do you believe in god, God, or GOD? In other words, is GOD the most exciting, thrilling, interesting, comforting, and loving person you have ever met? If so, how did you come to believe that? If not, who tops him on your list?
2. Read **Philippians 4:4-13**, one of the Bible’s most inspiring sections about joy, peace, and contentment. Where do you see the power of God’s present presence?
3. Reread **Psalm 16**. Find at least four connections to today’s message.

Homework for Next Week

Read Genesis 29–31.

*“Peace comes not from the absence of trouble, but from the presence of God.”
—Alexander MacLaren*

Time of Grace Ministry
Flawed but Blessed: Is God Here?
Genesis 28
July 18, 2021

Pastor Mike Novotny

There is a single sentence that is changing everything about my life. I know it sounds like an exaggeration and I know we pastors tend to exaggerate a little too much, but in this case it's true. There's one sentence that is changing everything for me about everything. It is a life changing sentence and I can't wait to share it with you.

But before I do, I have to tell you about one thing and that thing is the power of presence. I'm not talking about birthday presents or Christmas presents; I'm talking about the power of the right person's presence. When the right person is here with you, when they're present, that has the power to make you forget your problems, it has the power to change your emotions, it has the power to give you peace and happiness. Would you agree with me? The right person's presence has power? Which brings me back to my sentence. Three words, nine letters, one sentence to change everything. Here it is. Are you ready for it? My sentence is, "God is here." God is here.

And if you're not smiling just yet, I don't think you heard me right; I think maybe the homonym messed with you a little bit. I didn't say, "god," like lowercase "g." I didn't say "God," you know, officially the big guy upstairs. I said, "GOD!" Like, caps lock GOD. Just so you get it, I want you to write this down, that GOD is here. That is the simple sentence that if you believe it and if you remember it, it will change everything about everything. But I've got to warn you, this sentence is not so simple.

Actually, to believe all three of those words at the same time is one of the most difficult spiritual things that you'll have to do. To actually believe in God - bright and glorious and beautiful and thrilling - a God who is more creative, wiser, more interesting, who sparks more happiness and peace than the person you thought of a few moments ago. That kind of God is hard to envision. And to believe that he is here - not that he was here before you did that one thing or he will be here one day when you die and go to heaven - but is; his presence is actually present. And to be here - not up there, not over there with those people - but right here in the average places where you live, to actually believe all three of those words at the same time is so hard. But if you can and if you do, I guarantee you it will change everything about everything.

Four thousand years ago, there was a man from Jesus' family tree who stumbled across that sentence. He didn't know it before but God gave it to him on a silver platter and it instantly changed him. It changed his emotions, it changed his heart, it changed his soul. And today as we study that story, I hope that you can come to the same realization that God is not there; that GOD - a big, beautiful God - is actually right here. So let me take you back about 4,000 years to one of Jesus' most famous relatives; a man named Jacob. If you're familiar with the Bible, you might know that God, way long ago, chose this one family from whom the Savior himself would come, Jesus Christ; a man named Abraham, who had a son named Isaac, who had a son named Jacob.

And we're going to jump into the middle of Jacob's story right now in Genesis 28. So, if you have a Bible with you or a device, let's jump in right away until verse ten. Genesis 28 says this: "Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran." Now that's not a very exciting sentence of the Bible, is it?

Until you remember why Jacob is leaving Beersheba and setting out for Haran. Do you remember the story? Jacob has just done something very, very bad. If you've read Genesis 27 before, you might know that Jacob dresses up, he impersonates his older brother Esau so he can lie and deceive his aging and blind father, Isaac, so he can steal the family blessing; the power and authority over all their family members for himself. And his older brother Esau, when he finds out, he's obviously not too happy with the plan; he's furious. In fact, he's so red-faced, he's murderously angry and he wants to kill Jacob and so Jacob runs. He runs from Beersheba to Haran; southern Israel all the way up to the modern border of Turkey and Syria. Six hundred miles by himself; looking over his shoulder in fear because he is not a good man. And on that long, long journey, he gets to his first rest stop for the night and something amazing is about to happen.

Look at verse 11. It says, "When he," Jacob, "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 he lay down to sleep." Jacob reached a certain place. And actually, that's going to be really important to understand this Bible story. The word "place" appears six times in the original version, the original Hebrew, of just these 12 or 13 verses. And it says "certain place" in this verse because it's not really a special place. Just your backyard, just your driveway, just your nursing home which doesn't feel much like home. Just the soccer field, just the parking lot where you're waiting for your kids to get out of school. These aren't amazing, interesting places; they're just certain places. Like you're "here" isn't anywhere special. Except we're about to find out that in not so special places, someone very, very special likes to show up.

Look at verse 12. It says, "Jacob had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth with its top reaching to heaven. The angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord and he said: 'I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac.'" Oh, that's so good! I hope Led Zeppelin gives like royalties to the author of Genesis because this is the original stairway to heaven, right? Jacob has this dream and he sees this stairway connecting heaven and earth; connecting Jacob to God. And I want you to think about that for a second. What does the stairway do? Why do you have staircases or ladders in your home? And the answer is because it connects to otherwise disconnected places. Unless you have incredible upper body strength and a good vertical leap, if you don't have a staircase, you couldn't get upstairs to your bedroom, right? A staircase makes people who are down here accessible to places up here.

And in this case, Jacob sees this stairway, this ladder, and what's it connecting? God and him. This glorious place called heaven with this certain place called Luz. And I want you to notice who's up there - it's the LORD. Like, all capital letters. This is a big deal in the Bible; this is the sacred name of God. The name of Yahweh. This isn't just a dinky God, this isn't an average idol. This is the one, true, glorious, holy creator God. This is the great I Am; the God in whose

presence the angels can't do anything but worship and praise. This is a big deal God and if you could see him face to face, it would mess with you in all the most beautiful ways.

That kind of God shows up and he speaks to Jacob. And I want to tell you what he says because it's amazing. Let me jump to verse 13 and 14. God says, "I will give you Jacob 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 and to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. 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've promised you." Now, packed into those verses are five really good things that God says to a not so good man.

I was thinking about that because last Sunday after church, I met a couple of women who told me that they were raised in a church that taught them that God is an angry God. Were any of you kind of raised with that impression? Like they thought God was about rules and commandments and sins and you better not sin and you better repent or you're going to go to hell or else and they lived with like this fear and judgment hanging over their head. And if that's your impression of what God is like, you've got to remember this story. Because here's Jacob who's not better; he hasn't fixed it. He hasn't turned around his life. He doesn't have this amazing testimony of, "I used to be a sinner and then I met Jesus and look at these amazing," - like, the first conversation God has with him while he's still on the run, what does he do? He blesses, he forgives, he saves. He proves that he is a patient, loving, merciful, gracious God.

Does God take sin seriously? Absolutely. Sin hurts people. Does God want us to repent of our sins? To change our mind about it? Absolutely. Is hell a real place where real people go? Absolutely. But God's greatest desire is not to judge or to condemn or to separate or exclude. His greatest desire is to draw near and love and save.

"When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, 'Surely the Lord is in this place and I was not aware of it.'" I just need you to highlight that little sentence there and stick it in your mind. "The Lord is in this place and I was not aware of it.' 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.'" I love those words so much; like, "I thought this was just a place. I thought I was just stopping for the night. I had no idea that God was in this place. This is the house of God! This is a connection that a guy like me can have to the gates of heaven."

In fact, Jacob says how awesome is this place? Like, we kind of overuse the word "awesome" in our culture, don't we? Like chicken nuggets are awesome and World Cup soccer is awesome. But do you know what the word "awesome" actually means? There's some awe in it. Like, "awe." Awe. And wonder. Like jaw-dropping, "Oh, my goodness. How awesome is this place?" Like, I didn't see him before, I wasn't thinking of that, but how amazing is this place right here because there's a stairway that connects me to him; a messed-up person like me with a merciful God like that. And when this sentence gets into Jacob's heart, he doesn't want to forget it. Look how the story ends in verse 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. He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz. 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 household, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I've set up as a pillar will be God's house and of all that you give me, God, I will give you a tenth.'

Jacob, who would later have his name changed by God to Israel, he changes the name of that place. Like Luz, Luz? I don't even know how to pronounce it; that's no place. We're going to call this place Bethel and Bethel is two Hebrew words put together - "Beth" means house and "El" means God. This is the house of God. This is where God is. This is not just a certain place; this is the presence of God. That sentence changed Jacob's journey and it changed Jacob's life.

And God wants it to change your life, too. So how do you do it? I told you that little sentence - GOD is here - is simple but it's not so simple. So let me give you three tips if you're taking notes in your program. The first thing to remember, to be like that woman, is to believe in GOD. I'm talking about a caps lock, big and glorious GOD. And I'm not sure if you grew up in church with a Christian background but I have to tell you that this is something that I did not grasp for decades of my Christian life. When I was growing up, I think I grasped the idea of grace but I had no clue about the idea of glory. Like I knew about grace, about undeserved love, that you know, I wasn't a perfect person but Jesus died on the cross as a free gift. And I didn't have to earn my way to heaven, I didn't have to climb up some ladder to get to God, I didn't have to try harder. The most amazing thing is that God is full of grace and he would love me and accept me and let me into heaven. Like, I got that and I thank the Lord for that.

But what I didn't get was GOD. Like, God is glorious. When I thought of heaven, I thought heaven is the place that you go to escape the pain of this world. I didn't really think of heaven as the place you go to get in the presence of a person. I could tell you that Jesus was amazing because he forgave my sins but I could not explain to you why Jesus was amazing to the angels who never committed a sin. Why angels would worship God, even though they had no redemption, no forgiveness, and no salvation. But they were in the presence of someone so glorious, he was worthy of all blessing and honor and glory and praise. I thank God for grace but to believe in GOD, you have to get the idea of glory.

Like, if you've ever been in the church and the pastor in front said, "The Lord be with you." And you went, "Yawn. And also with you." And he looked back at you like you were both watching the world paint drying championships. Like, wait, wait - the Lord is with us? Like, not some celebrity walked into the room, not here's your puppy, not here's a dolphin - like, GOD is with us? We forget to capitalize the name of God and that's why today we have to eavesdrop on the angels. Let me show you a great passage from Isaiah 6. The angels, Isaiah saw, were singing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of His glory.

See, in my house - and I know I teach this a lot at our church - we have this little one word saying that just catapults our heart to the bigness of God. The word is "this." Like "this" is so good. "This" is so relaxing. "This" is so exciting. "This" is so thrilling but "this" is just a small glimpse of that; of the presence of God. And every day, every day of the entire year, every good experience you had, if you don't just let that pass but you let that catapult your heart into the bigness of God, you'll leave the caps lock on and you'll believe not in God, but in GOD.

Which brings us to word number two. Don't just believe in GOD, number two, believe that God is. Not that this glorious God was or he will be but he is. I meet a lot of Christians who think the presence of God is a future blessing and not a present reality. That one day when I die because of Jesus, I will be with God, which is beautiful and true. But that's not nearly enough. Can you imagine if you had to go through life, your next decade, 20, 30, 70 years, without God? That you have to run this long race called life and Jesus is going to be there at the finish line but he's not going to run by - can you imagine going through relationships and cancer and funerals and school and all the drama and the what-ifs and the uncertainty without God?

No, it's the word "is" that gives so much joy to our hearts. It's the present tense of his presence that changes everything. I thought of this just this past week. I had this conversation that really made me concerned. One of those conversations where I was thinking, well, what if this happens? And what if those people decide this? And then what if that happens and what if I end up here? And I was driving home late at night and just my heart was so overwhelmed just feeling anxious and so I stepped out into my driveway - I remember it was about 11:00 at night - and I look up at the sky and I see the treetops and I try to think of God. Like, not this little light in the distant sky but like a God whose presence and light would just magnify everything. I thought about that God being with me and pleased with me and he loves me and he's on my side.

And I ran inside, I grabbed my journal, and I wrote down all my "what-ifs?" What if this happens and what if that - it was all the worst-case scenarios that you and I tend to think about. And then I wrote a single passage at the bottom. Philippians 4 says, "Do not be anxious about anything because the Lord is near." King David wrote about that in Psalm 23; some of you know that famous Psalm. Look at what he said in verse four. He said, "I will fear no evil for God you are with me." Not you will be. What am I going to be afraid of? God is with me. Not some dinky, impotent God but a glorious, forgiving, merciful, powerful God. He is with me right now.

And I want you to believe that. If there is something that's making you afraid right now, there's a what-if question, there's a worst-case scenario that keeps you up at night - what if this happens with my business? Or my relationship? What if I get to court and the judge says that? What if our relationship doesn't survive? What if my kid gets sick and there's no easy cure? What if I can't pay these bills? What if I lose my job? What if something happens to dad or to mom? To my husband? To my wife? My son? My daughter? What if, what if, what if. Write down all the what-if's, if you have to, but then remember this: God is. I will fear no evil for you, God, are with me.

Which leaves one, last, beautiful word. There's a big, glorious God. He is present and finally, I want you to believe that he is here. He's not over there with those people; he is right here with you people. You know, as I was thinking about this life changing sentence, I realized that the devil is totally okay if you believe two of the words but not the third. If there is a glorious, loving, forgiving, powerful God and he is present but he's over there with those people and not with you, the sentence means nothing. If somehow the devil can convince you that because of something you've done or something you are doing, something you struggle with and can't get past, that God could possibly be right with you like he was with David or Jacob, he's won the battle.

Which is why I love this little detail in the story that you might not know. See, about 2,000 B.C., Jacob had a dream. In that dream, he saw a stairway, a ladder, and the angels were ascending and descending on it. He saw a connection between a perfect God and an imperfect man. And 2,000 years after that dream, Jesus showed up. And he showed up in a certain place called Nazareth; a no name place in northern Israel. And he appeared as the Savior, the Messiah, the Son of God to a man named Philip. And when Philip realized that God was here with him, he freaked out and he ran and he found his friend Nathaniel and he said, "Nathaniel! We've found him!" Like, the one, the Messiah, in whom all the nations will be blessed. "We've found him! He's from Nazareth!"

And do you know what Nathaniel said? "Nazareth? Really? The Son of God is from Chilton, WI? A suburb of - really? You think that's going to happen?" And so, Jesus showed up, right, to convince him. And do you know what Jesus said? He took the passage from Genesis 28 and he tweaked it just one bit and his little tweak means everything. Look what he said in John 1. Jesus added, "Very truly, I tell you, Nathaniel, you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

Hmm. It's pretty subtle but do you get it? In Genesis 28, the angels were ascending and descending on a stairway. It was a stairway that connected Jacob to God. And then Jesus shows up and he says, "No, no, no, Nathaniel. You're going to see the angels ascending and descending not on a ladder, a stairway, but on the Son of Man. On Jesus." He was saying to Nathaniel, you might be a skeptic, you might be a sinner, but because of me, a person like you is going to have a connection to God. And to me, that's the most beautiful thing. For sinners and skeptics, for people who have messed things up, we don't have to think that God is over there with the good people or the better people or the people who don't struggle with what I struggle with. But because of Jesus and his death, that I have a ladder to God, I have instant access. The place where I am is the place where God is.

And I want you to believe that, too. When you get into your car, your 2007 whatever Toyota that needs to be vacuumed in the back, that certain place, guess who's going to be there? God. And when you go back home and it's just an average home in an average place, guess who's going to be there? God. And when you have to check into the doctor, the hospital again, you don't want to be back. Guess who's going to be waiting for you in that room? God. And when you lose your job and you're working at a place that you'd rather not be, this was not the dream that you had, guess who's going to be there? God. And in the jail cell and in divorce court and wherever you go, guess who will be there? God. God is here.

You know, many years ago, there was a British man, William Dyke, who didn't see his bride until their wedding day. William had a terrible accident where he had lost his sight and he was blind and many people thought his sight would never be restored. But it didn't stop William from meeting a girl and falling in love and asking her hand and planning a wedding. In the process, he met a surgeon who said, "I think I can get you your sight back." And so, they performed the surgery and they planned actually to have his bandages removed on their wedding day. And so, he went up to the front of the church and they took they bandages off and the first thing he saw

was his wife. But if you would have asked William, he would have told you he already saw her; he knew her. He loved her.

And it's the same thing with you. And one day when Jesus returns or you die and go to heaven, the bandages will be taken off and you will see him face to face. But I wonder, way before that, if you won't say, "I already saw him. I already knew him. I already loved him because my God, my glorious, thrilling, forgiving God, he's not somewhere out there. My God is right here."

Let's pray.

Dear God, you must be so amazing. And to think, if there are trips and there are places and there are people and there are things that make us forget about our problems and make us instantly happy, how good must you be? God, we're trying to see you, to seek you, to know you, to be captivated by your presence but without you, we can't do it. And so, we pray today for your Holy Spirit, that he would enlighten us. That he would open the eyes of our heart to realize what a glorious and good God you are.

Heavenly Father, I pray that you rid us today of all fear, anxiety, nervousness, and worry. There is nothing coming up tomorrow that you are not bigger than and that you don't know about. And so, I pray that we would not fall into the lie of the devil to think that we need to control it or fix it or understand it.

Instead, if we would just believe the simple sentence, everything else would disappear. True peace, God, is not found in the absence of trouble; it's found in the presence of you. And so, we pray, as the Psalm says, that we would be more aware of your presence. Open the eyes of our heart, God. We want to see you! We pray this all in Jesus' beautiful name, Amen.