



Surely The Lord is in This Place

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We want our children and grandchildren to have the same faith in God we have, but throughout the generations of American history, next generations have had different experiences and priorities. Family dynasties rarely survive beyond the 3rd-generation. The 1st generation has a brilliant idea. The 2nd, much like the binding of Isaac, is convinced and convicted by struggles of survival whether they can and will carry on. By the 3rd and 4th generation, the initial passion and drive has been supplanted by administration, stock holders, acquisitions, profit margins, diversification.

Jacob was no Abraham, not even an Isaac. Abraham had been the Chosen One. Isaac the Promised One. Esau was to be the Favored One, an outdoorsman, a skilled hunter, first-born son of his father, Esau was born with a Silver Spoon in his mouth. Esau earned his father's love by everything he accomplished. But twins had been born to Isaac and Rebekah and Jacob the younger, was the one Mom liked best. Jacob often receives a bad reputation from preachers, who interpret his identity through Esau as the Usurper, Deceiver, Schemer, Devious. If anything, in these regards, Jacob reminds us of parts of ourselves. To put the best spin possible on the situation, Jacob's name means "striving" because Jacob was "self-made." The story of Genesis follows Jacob, not the first-born twin; who uses every opportunity at his disposal, all his skills, wit, ingenuity, even deception to win, forever trying to get the best of others. Jacob strives for what he desires; except he often does not receive exactly what he wanted, he receives a great deal more.

To psycho-analyze:

Isaac loved his First-born Son, his Father's favorite. But a father who could only demonstrate love for his child's accomplishments. According to Genesis, the Firstborn Esau even at age 77 was still trying to win his father's love by marrying the daughter of Ishmael, because his first wives were Canaanites, yet even marrying a granddaughter of Abraham still Esau could not get his father to love him.

Mom liked Jacob best. He did not have to do anything, he was loved just for being her favorite. Rebekah would do anything for her Jacob. She taught him to cook and kept him company. She even helped Jacob to deceive her husband in order for her favorite to win the blessing. When Jacob had both his father and brother wanting to kill him, Mama tried to protect Jacob by sending him away to live with her brother, Uncle Laban back at her family home in Haran, under the guise of finding a wife just like the gal who married dear old Dad.

Esau was a skilled hunter, with numerous trophies, but choosing between having hot soup and EVERYTHING YOU EVER WANTED IN LIFE, THE FAMILY INHERITANCE, GOD'S PROMISE? He chose Soup.

Jacob always wanted what he thought his brother had. Esau was first-born, Jacob was born clutching his brother's heel. Jacob satisfied Esau's hunger, but only if Esau give being first-born to Jacob. When their father Isaac was blind and confined to bed, Rebekah deceived her husband by dressing Jacob in Esau's clothes, gluing ram's wool to his arms and the back of his neck. As Jacob came into the bedroom, Isaac called out "Who's there?" Jacob who always wanted what his brother had, replied "I Am, Esau" and their father gave him the blessing of all he possessed. Odd, for a family to believe that a blessing, like love or grace, would be a limited commodity, that only a winner could receive. When Esau came home, and Isaac recognized the deception, he claimed to have no blessings left, and could only give Esau curses.

Family-systems repeat, with slight variation. When Grandfather Abraham was stuck between Sarah/Hagar fighting over whose son would be first-born, Abraham's wife Sarah had Abraham send Ishmael away, to favor Sarah's favorite Isaac. Now Isaac's wife, has Jacob sent away, but she does so to favor Jacob by protecting the one who had become First-born, the one with Inheritance and the Blessing. The unspoken distinction is that Abraham's life was following where God would lead, Abraham was chosen to be a Companion to God. Isaac, who faced being sacrificed, trusted God would provide. There is no indication thus far that Jacob even knows there is a God, let alone believes or trusts God.

Where Abraham and Sarah had left home and family in the City of Haran, following where God led over 20 years to the City of Beer-sheba; Judah went backward from Beer-sheba, north toward Sarah's family in Haran. Walking at a steady clip of a 15 minute mile, Jacob could make 4 miles per hour, over the open desert wilderness, keeping this up over 10 hours he had covered some 40 miles and was not quite half-way to Haran, when Jacob collapsed to rest for the night, with no bed, no blanket, a rock for a pillow. Jacob, the self-made man, who could use anything at his disposal to get ahead, to win, making everyone else a loser, now had nothing. He had the rights of first-born, he had the Promise and Blessing from his Father. But who are you going to win against, when you are all alone. Jacob had been in constant movement, striving throughout life; now running from everyone in his life. Alone, he has a dream. By definition, a dream happens when you are asleep, no longer controlling your conscious mind. The difficulty of a dream is that we cannot tell whether the Dream is Reality, or if our Controlled awake life is Reality. Jacob's Dream is of a ladder filled with motion of angels moving up and down.

No one knows for certain what Jacob's Ladder looked like. According to Renaissance artists, it was a ladder the top like a Snake Charmer's Rope not resting upon any solid surface. According to the Children's Toy: Jacob's Ladder is a perpetual motion machine, always extending further. According to the Museum of Science and Industry, an Electronic Arc created between two electrodes is called Jacob's Ladder. Having grown up in the 1970s, I am reminded of Led Zeppelin's song "Stairway to Heaven" the lyrics of which are about a woman who believes "Everything that glitters is gold and she is buying a Stairway to Heaven." According to Archaeologists the Capital City of Babylon was constructed as a Ziggurat with a spiral ramp extending up higher and higher around the exterior, and deeper and deeper down inside, called the Gate of the Gods. Judaism had a Spiritual discipline called MUSSAR, which arises out of this ladder to heaven, where the Rungs were Gates of Starting Out, the Gate of the Soul, the Gate of Growing, the Gate of Holiness, Gate of trust in God. While preachers tell stories and invest a great deal trying to understand symbolism, the point of every sermon illustration, every Theophany in the Bible is simply a Sign of God, something to get the attention of the person, in order to lift their eyes beyond the ordinary, to God.

Without argument, proof or winning, God offers Jacob the blessing given to his father and grandfather. Except where God had promised that through Abraham and Isaac all the nations of the world would bless themselves, and their generations would be as many as the stars in the heavens or sand in the desert; ...to Jacob, God promises your offspring will be like the dust of the earth, which is to say fertile, as well as dispersed. Rather than the Blessing of Isaac to his son; God's blessings are limitless, extended to everyone. To Jacob, Israel in Diaspora, to Judah in Babylon, to we today who are isolated and alone, far from how we want to be, God promises to be God with us and eventually to return us Home. What a powerful Blessing!

While moved by the dream, Jacob is still Jacob, God is still God, and God is not done with Jacob yet. Would you not expect Jacob to wake up and say "Wow, I better change my act!" Instead, Jacob promises this IF/THEN VOW, not unlike Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*, raising her fist in defiance "As God is my

witness they're not gonna lick me! When it's all over, I'll never go hungry again. No, nor any of my folk, if I have to lie, steal, cheat or kill, as God is my witness I'll never be hungry again!"

Jacob makes this vow that IF God does do everything Jacob wants God to do, even bringing us home again; THEN I shall worship and give 1/10th of all I have to God. Until then he believes, well he trusts that SURELY THE LORD IS IN THIS PLACE. For Jacob, I believe this is like Moses taking off his shoes at the Burning Bush, Beginning a relationship with God by recognizing this is Holy Ground.

While there are a great many places that seem to have never seen the light of day let alone the light of God, have you ever witnessed a place, and shivered to your core that "Surely, the Lord is in this place"? The whole of my life, I have always lived near water, Rivers, Great Lakes, Fresh Water Lakes, the Ocean. This Green Valley surrounded by Mountains is different. Clear blue skies. Arrid, Mountainous. Each night, I am awed by the myriad colors, the cascading images as shadows play over the face of the mountains. The heat you do not so much feel like sunburn on your skin, as deep in your bones. Forests and Farms have ever had an earthy, fertile smell, a luxurious green that sings of new life. The first time we came to this place, I had not yet heard the Choir process up the aisle, or enjoyed your Fellowship, but we searched the vista of that horizon. I have known churches that were 200 and 300 years old, churches in other parts of the world which survived World Wars, which go back a thousand even 1500 years, but this is a place of age, that confidently chants "The LORD is in this place, Surely, the LORD is in this place."