

“Visions of Sugar Plums?”
Genesis 28:10-22
December 25th, 2016

A certain lady had a circle of friends for whom she really wanted to buy Christmas presents. Time slipped away and it was so busy at work for her she just wasn't able to get to the store to purchase those gifts. Time was running out.

So shortly before Christmas she decided to give up on the gift idea and just buy everybody the same beautiful Christmas card. She went to the local gift store and hurriedly went through the now picked over stack of cards and found a box of 50, just exactly what she wanted. She didn't take time to read the message, she just noticed a beautiful cover on it and there was gold around it and a floral appearance on the front of the card and she thought, "That's perfect." So she signed them, "With all my love."

As New Year's came and she had time to go back to two or three cards she didn't send from that stack, she was shocked to read the message inside the card she had mailed to more than 40 friends. It said, in a little rhyme, "This Christmas card is just to say, a little gift is on its way."

“’Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house,
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there;
The children were nestled all snug in their beds,
While visions of sugar plums danced in their heads...”

So begins what could be the most well-known description of Christmas Eve outside of the pages of the Holy Bible, *'Twas the Night before Christmas*.

Clement Moore's famous poem, which he named "A Visit from St. Nicholas," was published for the first time on December 23, 1823.

Clement Clarke Moore was born in 1779 to a well-known New York family. He was an author and a noted Hebrew scholar. In fact, he spoke *five* languages. Despite his accomplishments, Clement Moore is remembered only for "'Twas the Night before Christmas." Legend has it that he wrote this poem on Christmas Eve 1822 during a sleigh ride home after buying a turkey for his family.

Moore read the poem to his wife and six children the night he wrote it, and supposedly thought no more about it. But a family friend heard about it and submitted the poem to *the Sentinel*, a newspaper in upstate New York, which published it anonymously the following Christmas. Moore's poem immediately caught the attention and imagination of the state, then the nation, and then the world.

As I reflected upon the dream Jacob experienced one night on his way to Haran, I thought of children sleeping Christmas Eve; "Visions of sugar plums," Clement Moore would call them.

I'm not one who remembers his dreams often. As soon as I wake-up, whatever I was dreaming is gone – *flush!* My mind fills with the schedule of activity for the day. Yet, it's my observation that many people remember their dreams (*maybe you?*) even vividly so sometimes. We are often affected powerfully by dreams because they have happened to us; we've *felt* them even. In such instances, it can be extremely difficult to subordinate our subjective experiences to

the objective standard of God's Word. And, that is how we must function if we are to live lives pleasing to God. We must conform our experiences – our dreams – to the Bible. We must fight the temptation to let powerful personal experiences dictate how we understand God and His Word. Rather, we must understand what happens to us from the grid of sacred Scripture.

We've been working our way on Sunday mornings through the second section of the Bible's first book, Genesis, since May of this year. That section began with Genesis Chapter 12 and God's promise to Abraham and his descendants. We've made our way to the time where we completed our study of Genesis Chapter 28 today. Jacob is Abraham's grandson – Isaac's second born, and Scripture records in today's text a life changing event for him. In so doing, we also see God continuing to unveil His purpose for His people.

Genesis 28:10-22:

¹⁰ Now Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ So he came to a certain place and stayed there all night, because the sun had set. And he took one of the stones of that place and put it at his head, and he lay down in that place to sleep. ¹² Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder *was* set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ And behold, the LORD stood above it and said: "I *am* the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. ¹⁴ Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. ¹⁵ Behold, I *am* with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you."

¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know *it*."
¹⁷ And he was afraid and said, "How awesome *is* this place! This *is* none other than the house of God, and this *is* the gate of heaven!"

¹⁸ Then Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on top of it. ¹⁹ And he called the name of that place Bethel; but the name of that city had been Luz previously. ²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, ²¹ so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God. ²² And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You."

Let's jump right into the text. ***Why was Jacob leaving Beersheba for Haran? Genesis 27:41*** sheds some light on the fugitive Jacob. He was fleeing from an angry brother, Esau, who sought to kill Jacob because Jacob schemed to take both Esau's birthright and his blessing.

Jacob was headed to Haran because his mother (Rebekah) sent him to see her brother, Laban (**Genesis 27:43**). Jacob was getting out of Dodge to save his skin! Jacob must've felt alone; abandoned; forgotten. *Wasn't he the heir to God's promises? Weren't the promises actually his? Why should he be the one running then?*

Nightfall causes him to find a place to rest. He finds a big stone (probably not to use as a pillow, but rather to protect his head). As Jacob sleeps, God gives Jacob a message via a dream. Verse 12 teaches Jacob sees a ladder ascending into heaven. Some versions of Scripture call this a stairway reaching to heaven. Ladder or stairway, it goes between heaven and earth, and Jacob sees angels going up and down on it.

As he gazes to the top of the ladder/stairway, Jacob sees the Lord, who speaks what have become very familiar words to us in verses 13-15: “I *am* the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. ¹⁴ Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth... and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. ¹⁵ Behold, I *am* with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you.”

God had first made this promise to Abraham (**Genesis 12:1-3**). He also spoke these words to Isaac (**Genesis 26:24**). Jacob is now the third patriarch, and God has become the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

God appeared to Jacob to show that He (God) was with Jacob, and would be with him wherever he should go.

As we look at Jacob’s experience, you must also see that God is with you. You may be on the verge of a mental collapse; but although you cannot sense it, God is with you right now. You may be quite ill. You may be misunderstood by your friends. You may be abandoned by a husband, or a wife, or your children. Even the church may have turned its back on you. You may have lost a job. You may be discouraged. You may have so little self-worth that you feel that no one will ever care for you again. Listen to God speak to you through His Word today. Where you are now can be a gate of heaven.

Jacob awakens a changed man. He’s a man who trembles before a holy God; He now acknowledges God’s holiness and comes to grips with his own sinfulness! Much like when Jesus came to Saul as Saul traveled the Road to Damascus, and he wasn’t looking to make a decision for Christ, God comes to Jacob. Brothers and sisters, this is all of God’s grace! “Jacob, the conniving believer who was outcast and alone due to his own sin, who merited nothing from God, was met by God in his misery with an unparalleled revelation of God’s care and assurance for the future. Jacob was not seeking God – he was fleeing the consequences of his deception. He was not expecting grace. But grace was unleashed upon his soul...” (Hughes, 360)

That God would make Jacob a blessing is simply amazing. We saw what he did to Esau and his father. He deceived Esau twice, dishonored his father, and disparaged God while doing so. If anyone was undeserving of God’s favor, Jacob would be it.

But, if that’s how we are thinking about him, then we need to step back and take a look at ourselves. *WE* are Jacob! We have had conflict with our siblings or other family members. We have deceived our parents or children. We have mocked God by blaming Him for our self-imposed miseries.

“This passage demonstrates that no matter how badly we have behaved in the past – and however ashamed we may be of it – God is always able to begin with us where we are and use us as a channel for blessing in the lives of others. *Are you ashamed of the past? Are you devastated by something you have said or done?* If you are, God is able to start over for with you right where you are. Nothing is too hard for God. Nothing causes Him to give up. Simply confess the sin that troubles you, allow God to forgive and cleanse it, and then go in whatever

direction He sets for you. He is far more ready to give blessing than you are to receive it.”
(Boice, 769)

Jacob’s response is how God’s people are to respond to His grace in our lives. Jacob worships God (verse 18). He renames the place Bethel, which means “House of God” (verse 19). Then, in verses 20-22, he vows before God. “If God will be with me,” in verse 20, can also be read “Since God will be with me...” Like Abraham who tithed a tenth (10%) of his wealth to Melchizedek (**Genesis 14:20**), so Jacob vows to give 10% of his income to the LORD. This is still a valid baseline goal to guide God’s people in giving of their finances to the ministry of the local congregation today.

There’s a reference in the New Testament to Jacob’s dream. In **John 1:45-51**, Philip takes Nathanael to Jesus. Jesus speaks with Nathanael, and Nathanael declares his belief that Jesus is the Son of God and the King of Israel. Listen to how Jesus applies **Genesis 28** to Himself in **John 1:50-51**– “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” And He said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Jesus says that He is the Ladder; the Stairway to heaven. He is the Bridge that came from heaven to earth, the only bridge by which it is possible for men and women to pass from earth to heaven. Clement Moore’s illustrations of this in *‘Twas the Night before Christmas* are a chimney down which St. Nicholas descends, and a sleigh by which he soars to the heavens.

Dear ones, are you on the Ladder who is Jesus Christ? Are you on the stairway to heaven that is the Son of God and Savior of Sinners? If you are, what about your family, or your children if you have them? What about the youth and children in your church? Will you perform the vows that you’ve made before God and this congregation to be faithful in seeking to live a Christian life and in ministering to each other? Put that challenge in your Christmas stocking and wear it out!

I’ll close this message with a Christian variation on Clement Moore’s *‘Twas the Night before Christmas*:

‘Twas the night before Christmas, the eve of Christ’s birth;
Many people were resting all over the earth.

The shepherds were watching their sheep by night,
When all of a sudden they saw a bright light.

And what to their wondering eyes should appear,
But a beautiful Angel, high up in the air.

His face was all shining; his garments so bright,
That the shepherds began to tremble with fright.

But as he came nearer, the words that he said
Soon gave them to know there was nothing to dread.

He told them of 'Peace' with no fear or danger,
For their Wonderful Gift they would find in a Manger.

So leaving their sheep they went into town,
To seek for the Gift; they would look all around.

They came to the stable, the covers they lift,
And there in the Manger, God's Wonderful Gift.

So pure and so holy, so full of God's love,
They knew it was Jesus, God's gift from above.

And so as we think of this Savior again,
May our worship this Christmas not be in vain.

Let us love Him; there's none that's too small;
May the Lord bless you. Merry Christmas to all!