

# God's Grace Reverses Our Place

## 2) From Possessing Nothing to Possessing Everything

Genesis 28:10-17 • 2021-02-28 • Series for Lent



In the early 1840s a family set out on a journey to travel to America from their homeland in Germany. The ten of them boarded a large sailing vessel and made their way to New York. But their journey wasn't over yet. They were headed hundreds of miles west. Their destination was in what was then called the Territory of Wisconsin. Before they could continue their sailing voyage up the Great Lakes, they made their way up the Hudson river. They then traveled a few hundred miles west across the Erie canal. They made a stop at Rochester, New York. There they purchased a flute. With that flute they wrote a note indicating the hardships of their voyage. "We purchased this flute in Rochester, New York. Making music with it has brought us joy after the losses of our journey." Out of the ten who set out together only three now remained alive. Seven of ten had died on the voyage over.

Travel was far more dangerous in the past than it is today, but there are still many things which leave us facing dangers and uncertainty about the future. Car accidents and plane crashes can occasionally bring a sudden and tragic loss of life. And so can the dangers of war, crime, and illness. Our lives do not come with any guarantee of safe passage. Or do they? How can we be sure that even if we lose everything, we will end up safely at our destination? Today we look at Genesis 28 and read about a man, Jacob, who was on a journey to a faraway land. God promises Jacob that he will have a safe journey. And as we look at his journeying, we will see how our God in grace brings us to our goal. God's grace reverses our place, from possessing nothing to possessing everything.

Jacob wanted everything. He came from a family of nomads who had settled in the southern portion of the land of Canaan. His grandfather and father had amassed large flocks and had influence over several sections of land. They dug wells and made alliances. They lived fairly well. But Jacob wanted it all. So, he used an opportune time to get his older twin brother, Esau, to concede to give him the birthright. Then, years later when he feared his brother wouldn't follow through on the bargain, he deceived his father into giving him the blessing that his father meant for Esau. It seemed like he now had everything. By his cunning he held it all. But on top of all those blessings, God directed Jacob's father to give Jacob even more. Jacob was told his offspring would be great, they would possess the land they were living in, and all nations on earth would be blessed through his offspring. Now he had everything!

But Jacob wasn't able to hold onto everything for long. He discovered a plot by his brother to murder him. Jacob had to flee from his brother to a faraway land. Under the counsel of his mother and father he left his homeland. It was the land he was supposed to possess. It was the inheritance he was supposed to get. But he was about to leave behind that land, leave behind his family, and set out on a journey to a place he had never been. As he traveled it became clear that the man who had lived by his cunning and wit was now at wit's end. His life was in danger. His possessions were gone. He had nothing, absolutely nothing. No family. No flocks. No inheritance. He was alone and on the run. He traveled for about 70 miles and then laid his 70-year-old head down on the ground to sleep. He had nothing but a rock he found in that place to use as a pillow during the night. Would those grand promises from God still hold true?

Maybe we aren't operating under deception like Jacob to obtain all we have. Maybe we work like Jacob did in later years and learn the value of hard labor. Or Maybe, like Jacob did, we consider ourselves on the right side of good fortune or luck. But we have much to lose in this life. Do you ever worry about the loss of home and possessions? What would happen if a fire made its way to Payson? Most experts agree that our town is not fire wise or ready to face a major fire disaster. Some can lose everything in a flood or a hurricane. It can be gut wrenching when you first learn about a major health complication, can't it? And who doesn't fear facing what Jacob faced, the feeling of loneliness and being left without friends or family?

The truth is that Jacob deserved to be without possessions and without everything he longed for. Instead of relying on God and operating on truth, he used manipulation and deception. Jacob's father and grandfather were men of prayer. But Jacob? Up to this point he is 70 years-old and there's no mention of any active life of faith. It's all passive. There's no mention of his requests or thanksgiving to God. Only his schemes with men. Jacob deserved to have God say, "I'm leaving you. I will not watch over you. You are on your own now." He deserved to be abandoned by the Lord and left without anything. The only thing he deserved was God's justice for greedy liars who dishonor their parents and fight with their brothers.

Can we make the case for deserving anything more ourselves? The blessings promised to Jacob flow to everyone who trusts in the Lord. He makes that clear. But what do we spend our lives doing? Isn't it often trying to secure everything for ourselves so that we can have whatever we desire? We desire comforts, wealth, and possessions. We desire to secure safe passage throughout life. But for what? We will all end up like Jacob. The only place the people of this world have guaranteed safe passage to is the grave. All our toiling ends up for nothing. No matter how much we might strive to possess things we will end up possessing nothing. Naked we came into the world and we will go out of life naked. Maybe if we're lucky we might end up with something. But it will be nothing more than the stone which lies above our heads.

But what we see in Genesis 28 is that our safe passage has nothing to do with our own cunning and nothing to do with luck. It has everything to do with God's grace. God's grace reverses our place. We have a guarantee of safe passage through life to the goal we desire. God's grace brings us from possessing nothing to possessing everything.

Jacob had a dream that night in which he saw a stairway that reached up towards the heavens. The angels of God were traveling up and down on it. And at the top he saw the Lord who spoke to him. "I am the God of your father Abraham and of Isaac." Jacob knew of the Lord. And he knew the Lord had made great promises to Abraham and Isaac. Now the Lord is about to assure him, "I am also your God, Jacob."

God then repeats the three-fold promise he had made to Abraham and to Isaac. This three-fold promise is that 1) God will give him and his descendants the land of Canaan. 2) the people born to Abraham's descendants would be as numerous as the stars of the skies and the dust of the earth 3) all nations would be blessed through his offspring.

Then came God's guarantee of safe passage. "Now, I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back again into this land. Indeed, I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised to you." Jacob now had everything. Possessing nothing, but at the same time not without a promise from God to have it all. God's presence, God's protection, and God's faithful promises. All given to him in grace, undeserved love.

Many have tried to speculate on the meaning of the dream with the stairway to heaven and the angels going up and down. Some have gone so far as to say that the angels of the land of Canaan were ending their shift and God was sending down the angels of the next region to take their shift and watch over Jacob. That's a foolish speculation. The meaning is clear: there remains a connection between heaven's throne and us. God is not disinterested or uninvolved in the affairs of the lives of his people. He establishes a connection between himself and his people. He orders the affairs of this world and sends his angels to carry out what he desires. For Jacob this clearly told him that though he was leaving his homeland, he wasn't leaving the jurisdiction of the Lord. And though he had left behind everything he still carried the promises of God. It was a dream which guaranteed safe passage to the goal which God had promised.

My parents live right along the shore of Lake Michigan. And it's striking that within only a few miles of their home there are at least three known shipwrecks. They all sank between the 1830s to 1860s as they carried passengers, cargo, and crew along the coast. One ship is only a mile out from my parent's home. On a clear day I've been able to see deep under the water the remains of what looks like the hull of a sailing vessel. One day they were visiting a neighbor and noticed a picture in her home of a ship that had caught fire. It was the Phoenix which sank just a few miles away sometime around the 1860s. Many people died on that voyage. But as the last lifeboat was leaving the ship a couple tossed their baby to the lifeboat. That baby was the last survivor to escape the sinking vessel. It was the great, great grandmother of the lady with the picture in her home along the shore.

That lifeboat was the bridge between a dying group of people on the ship and a safe journey to the shore. The stairway which leads to heaven is like that. It is the sole connection we have to rescue us from a certain destination of death and fire to safely reaching the shore. Jesus said, "I am the gate" and "I am the way." And in John chapter 1 he also indicates, "I am the stairway to heaven." He is the one who spoke to Jacob all the promises of safe passage. And he is the one who has spoken to us his promises of safe passage.

Jesus is the connection between the throne of God and the people of this world. He is the mediator, the means by which we reach our goal. It is Jesus who came down from heaven and told us, "I am with you always." And just as he promised to Jacob, he tells us, "I will watch over you wherever you go." And as surely as he promised to bring Jacob back to the promised land, he tells us, "I will come back and bring you to be with me, that you also may be where I am." And as surely as he promised to Jacob, "I will not leave you." He tells us that he will never leave or forsake us.

He journeyed on this earth to set aside all he possessed. He emptied himself of all his divine glory. And possessing nothing but the cloak on his back he travelled to his goal. His goal was to suffer and die and have his head placed on a rock in the tomb. He did this to take what we deserved. And his promise never fails. After rising to life, he ascended back to the right hand of God the Father. He now assures us that we will reach our goal. He will take our bodies out of the grave and give us everything he has promised. We will reach heaven and with the new creation enjoy the blessings promised through Jacob. We will be blessed. We will possess everything.

This safe passage is guaranteed. It is given to us as a gift of God --not by luck, or mere cunning, but his gracious undeserved love for us. No matter how much it seems like we might lose in this life, our journey will end according to the Lord's promises for all who trust in him.

That family which traveled from Germany in the 1840s and lost seven out of ten family members was not deterred. They made their way across the Great Lakes. Despite all the dangers they safely arrived on the shores of Lake Michigan in the Territory of Wisconsin. They had more than that flute, of course. They had the promises of God to bring them safely to their heavenly home. Those promises were passed on from generation to generation. And they are still held by their great-great great grandchildren, including one who traveled to Payson Arizona with his family of nine which is now ten. And they know along with all of us at Rock of Ages and all the Church that God's grace reverses our place. He takes us with Jesus from possessing nothing to possessing everything.