

Let us begin with a word of prayer.

Loving Heavenly Father, we thank you for the Lord's grace. Thank you for gathering us together this morning. We ask that you bless this space. Please fill us with your Holy Spirit. Please help us to understand your will well. We give thanks for all things and pray in the name of our beloved Lord, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Good morning.

Good morning.

Yes, today we will begin with chapter 28, verse 10.

In our last session, the decision was made for Jacob to go to the land of Haran.

To recap the original story, Jacob received the blessing that was meant for Esau, and as a result, Esau planned to kill Jacob. Rebekah, learning of this, sent Jacob away to her hometown of Haran, under the pretext of finding a wife, so that he could find a spouse there. Then, his father Isaac blessed Jacob and sent him away.

Today's passage is the story of what happened after Jacob actually departed.

Today's passage can be broadly divided into two parts.

The first part is from verse 10 to 15, and the second part is from verse 16 to 22.

First, let's look at the first part. Verses 10 to 15, and we'll begin by reading verses 10 to 12.

"Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. 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. 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."

Please try to imagine Jacob's situation.

I believe Jacob's situation was a very lonely one.

As I mentioned earlier, Jacob receives a blessing. And even before that, Jacob held the birthright.

However, his current situation is far from such blessings, and considering his birthright, it's a situation that makes one wonder if this is truly the right path. The birthright is the right of the firstborn son, but one might think, "Why, if I have the firstborn's right, am I leaving the land of Canaan and going so far away?"

Also, consider the words of blessing.

This blessing was spoken by Isaac to Jacob.

Let's look at Genesis, chapter 27, verse 29.

"May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you. May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed."

This is a word of blessing that makes it seem as if Jacob stands at the pinnacle of his brothers and his family, with everyone bowing down to him.

However, what is Jacob's actual state? It is not like that at all; he is walking all alone. The situation within his family is not good. And he is walking alone to a place called Haran, a place he has never been before.

He is walking in a way that seems completely contrary to the promise, to the blessing of God.

And, as we now know, if he goes back to his family home, Esau, who wants to kill him, is there. And at his destination in Haran, there is a master who will subject him to what we would today call workplace harassment. It is a difficult situation no matter which way he goes. It was in these circumstances that Jacob was walking.

This situation of receiving a promise but being in a completely opposite reality was also true for Abraham. Abraham, too, received the word of blessing that he would be given descendants, but for 25 years after that, he spent his life without being given a child. During that time, Abraham also had doubts.

In just the same way, Jacob was also in a situation where he had the promise of a blessing, but his reality was completely different.

In the midst of this, God meets Jacob. It happens in the form of a dream.

If you look at verse 12, a ladder appears in the dream. A ladder was set up, connecting heaven and earth, and the messengers of God, that is, angels, were ascending and descending on it.

The word translated here as "ladder" is a rare word with few examples of use. If you look at the notes in the 2017 Shinkaiyaku (New Japanese Bible), it gives an alternate translation: "stairway." Whether it's a ladder or a stairway, it's an unclear word, a word that can be taken either way.

Many people here think of it as a "stairway." When you say stairway, what comes to mind is what is known as a ziggurat. A ziggurat is a pyramid-style temple from ancient Mesopotamia. Previously, when I spoke about the Tower of Babel, I mentioned that the Tower of Babel was in fact a ziggurat. That ziggurat, though shaped like a pyramid, has a stairway, and that stairway was considered a presence that connects heaven and earth.

It can be thought that Jacob saw something similar to the stairway of that ziggurat in his dream. That is one interpretation.

In any case, it is a presence that connects heaven and earth, meaning it is a sacred place.

Let's look at what follows. I will read just the beginning of verse 13.

"And behold, the Lord stood above it and said..."

When I read this, I thought, "This is different from what I remember."

In my memory, Jacob is sleeping, and in his dream, in that same sleeping posture, he suddenly opens his eyes, and there is a ladder with angels ascending and descending. And beside it is God, and the Lord speaks. I had always had that image.

However, if you look at verse 13 here, it says "the Lord stood above it and said," which gives the image that the Lord is on top of the ladder.

I thought this was completely different from my memory, so I looked it up. The New Interconfessional Translation Bible, which I had used for a long time, translates it this way: "The Lord stood beside him and said."

It's completely different, isn't it? Is the Lord standing above it, meaning on the ladder, or is the Lord standing beside Jacob? The translation is completely different.

When I wondered why, I found that the original word can be interpreted either way.

The original phrase is "above it," but "it" can refer to an object or a person. And "above" also

has meanings other than literally "on top of," such as "in contact with something" or "beside something." So, this can be understood as "on the ladder" or "right beside Jacob."

Which is better? I believe it is better to understand it as the Lord standing beside him, right next to him, and speaking.

This is because in Genesis, chapter 18, verse 2, where the Lord appears to Abraham, the same expression is used.

However, in the case of 18:2, it is translated to mean right beside or facing him. Let me read 18:2.

"He looked up and saw three men standing nearby."

This phrase "standing nearby" uses the same wording as in 28:13.

In 18:2, the three men are facing Abraham. Because it is expressed this way, I believe 28:13 also describes the Lord standing right next to Jacob, facing him. Furthermore, when God is in heaven, the expression used is not often "says," but rather "calls out."

That is also a factor.

So, I think of it this way: Jacob, in his dream, suddenly wakes up. He is still in a dream, but in it, there is a ladder with God's messengers ascending and descending. And as he thinks, "What a mysterious sight," the Lord is right beside him, and the Lord speaks. That is the situation.

The point is not that God is far away, but that He is near, and I think that is a very important point here.

After that, the Lord speaks words of blessing. I will read verses 13 and 14.

"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."

Yes, he is lying down.

"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."

This word of blessing is something we have encountered many times before. It is the same as the blessing given to Abraham. I will read from chapter 13, verses 14 and 16. Genesis chapter 13, verses 14 and 16.

"After Lot had parted from him, the Lord said to Abram, 'Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted.'"

In other words, the dust cannot be counted, and He will multiply them to be just as innumerable. And to those multiplied descendants, He will give this land forever. Look to the north, south, east, and west. There, your descendants will increase like the dust of the earth—that is the promise. And to those descendants, He will give this land. That promise was made here.

Also, chapter 12, verse 3. Genesis 12:3. I will read it.

"I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Yes, this. The content of chapter 28, verses 13 and 14 is a combination of chapter 12, verse

3 and what we just read from chapter 13. Chapter 28, verse 13: to give this land on which you are lying to you and your descendants. And those descendants will increase like the dust. Also, through those descendants, all the tribes of the earth will be blessed. That is the content.

Regarding what we just read, chapter 12, verse 3, the word of God's blessing to Abraham: "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

This is slightly different from today's context, but since it has become a major topic recently, I will mention it.

Have you ever heard of Dispensationalism?

This is a theological viewpoint that is very widespread among Evangelicals in America today. It is a theology that was born in the 19th century.

To put it simply, it is a way of thinking that divides the Bible into several eras, with each era having its own promises. The promises and commandments of the Old Testament are exclusively for the Jewish people, while the promises and blessings of the New Testament are for Christians.

This Dispensationalism becomes particularly problematic concerning eschatology (the study of end times). The eschatology of Dispensationalism is very unique. I won't go into much detail about that today, but this Dispensationalism has spread among American Evangelicals, and it is this belief that serves as the basis for their support of the modern state of Israel, a basis found, in fact, in Genesis chapter 12, verse 3.

"I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse."

Here, "you" is Abraham.

They consider this Abraham to be equivalent to the modern state of Israel, and believe that God blesses those who bless the state of Israel, and curses those who curse it. This is the thinking of modern Dispensationalism.

Therefore, American Evangelicals support the modern state of Israel. It leads to actions of supporting it no matter what cruelties it commits.

Here, while I consider Dispensationalism to be one of the heresies that appeared in the 19th century, the reasons I believe it is mistaken, concerning chapter 12, verse 3, are twofold.

First, "you" here is, of course, Abraham. However, at this time, Abraham does not yet have a child. And who are the children of Abraham who will be born? Broadly speaking, there is Ishmael, and there is Isaac. And Isaac's children are Esau and Jacob.

If you include all of Ishmael's descendants and Esau's descendants, it encompasses almost all the peoples living in the Middle East today.

Therefore, when it says in chapter 12, verse 3, "I will bless those who bless you," it should be considering not just the modern state of Israel, but all the peoples throughout the Middle East.

But instead of doing so, they equate the state of Israel with Abraham at this time, which I believe is an interpretive error.

Another point, and this is a problem for Christians, is whether Christians should accept chapter 12, verse 3 in that sense.

Regarding that, I believe the understanding of Dispensationalism is fundamentally mistaken.

Please look at Galatians chapter 3, verses 7 to 9.

Galatians chapter 3, verses 7 to 9.

I will read it.

"Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.' So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith."

Amen.

As it is written here, Paul says that the part about "all nations will be blessed through you" is about faith.

By faith, God justifies; that is the blessing.

And being justified by faith is not only for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles. Paul says that the basis for this is found in Genesis 12:3.

"Those who live by faith," as we see in verse 7, "are the children of Abraham."

It has been said many times in the New Testament, I believe. Not the Israel of the flesh, but the Israel of faith; or not the children of Abraham by flesh, but the children of Abraham by faith is what is important. The New Testament says this everywhere.

What Paul is writing in chapter 3, verse 7 is also that the descendants of Abraham are not about a connection by flesh, that is, a connection by bloodline, but about faith.

And Paul also says that by faith alone, both Jews and Gentiles are saved without distinction. For example, Romans chapter 3, verse 22.

"This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile."

Without distinction between Jew and Gentile, everyone is saved by faith.

And the church that Paul speaks of is a community where Jews and Gentiles, men and women, are all united by Jesus Christ without distinction.

Christians preach that we are saved by faith in this way. It doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile. Everyone is saved by faith.

However, Dispensationalism holds that Jews are saved by observing the laws of the Old Testament, the Torah, while Christians are saved by faith, considering them as completely separate.

That is not the Christian faith.

Therefore, I believe this Dispensationalism is an error, or rather, a heresy.

Yes, I mentioned the blessing in Genesis 12:3 because it is treated as such a topic today. Yes.

Returning to Genesis 28. Chapter 28, verses 13 to 15 are God's words of blessing to Jacob, but what is most noteworthy among them is verse 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."

Here is the promise to Jacob.

The preceding verses 13 and 14 could be said to be merely a repetition of the promise made to Abraham.

But verse 15, this is a promise concerning Jacob.

God intended to bless Jacob. Not in a general sense, but He gave a promise specifically to Jacob.

This is a very important point.

We often hear this, I think. In the world of politics, for instance.

There are things one agrees with in general terms, but cannot agree with on specific, individual matters.

One agrees with the general principle but opposes the specific application. Such things are said.

God, as a general principle, loves all people. Of course, God loves. But God also loves each and every person individually.

This is the God of the Bible.

We humans often tend to say, "I love everyone."

But when a specific person is here, we might think, "Well, I can't quite love you." We humans are prone to that.

However, God is not like that.

He loves everyone. And of course, He loves you. That is what God is like.

And He gives a promise to Jacob.

Why does He do this? It is because God is a being who seeks to have a personal relationship with humans.

Please look at Exodus chapter 6, verses 6 and 7. Exodus chapter 6, verses 6 and 7.

Here, God is writing to Moses.

It is, in a sense, Moses's commission.

That is the content.

I will read chapter 6, verses 6 and 7.

"Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.'" Amen.

Here, God makes a promise to the people of Israel through Moses.

He will lead them out from the hardship in Egypt. He will save them from their suffering.

And why is that? What will be the result? As it says in verse 7,

"I will be your God."

You will become my people, and I will be your God, it says.

Through this act of salvation, God becomes the God of the people of Israel.

The Lord becomes the God of the people of Israel.

God intends to do this for Jacob at this stage in Genesis.

God was the God of Abraham, and also the God of Isaac.

However, He is not yet the God of Jacob.

In that context, to become Jacob's God, as an intervention for that purpose, He performs the act of saving Jacob.

By saving the people of Israel from the hardship in Egypt, the Lord becomes the God of Israel. In the same way, here, Jacob is in a truly difficult situation. Through the act of saving Jacob, through the work of salvation, He becomes Jacob's God. That is what is being said here.

It is the same for us as well.

God appeared to us, and we came to believe in God.

We heard about Jesus somewhere, and as we came to know about Jesus, we came to believe in Him.

The reason Jesus intervened in our lives in such a way is because Jesus seeks to have a personal relationship with us.

That is because God desires for us to see Jesus as Lord, and for us to become Jesus's people.

Yes, let's move on to the second half.

The second half is from verse 16 to 22.

First, I will read it.

"When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, 'Surely 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.'

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 have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.'" Amen.

Waking from sleep, Jacob, driven by fear, took the stone he had laid as a pillow and made it into a pillar.

"This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

The gate of heaven. This truly means it is a very sacred place that connects with God, who is in heaven.

At the beginning of this sermon, I talked about the Tower of Babel. The place of the Tower of Babel, Babylon, its name itself means "gate of God."

So, I think this is quite close. The gate of God, here the gate of heaven. It was such a sacred place. But I didn't know it, and so I was afraid, he says.

And this place is called Bethel. Bethel. It's also written at the bottom, it means "house of God."

Then, after that, Jacob makes a vow.

"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."

At this phrase "so that I return safely," what do you all think when you read it?

Doesn't it feel like he is setting a condition here?

It can indeed be read that way.

If God is with me, protects me on this journey, gives me bread and clothes, and I can return safely, then the Lord will be my God.

When said this way, it sounds like if that doesn't happen, the Lord will not be my God.

Doesn't it feel like something like that is implied?

It does feel a bit like that.

And in this setting of a condition, there might be an interpretation that suggests a lack of faith on Jacob's part.

In reality, the sentence here translated as "so that I return safely," while translated as "if" in English, the original Hebrew word can be translated as "if" but also as "when." It's a word that can be either.

In Japanese, we have the expression "shitara" (when/if one does). I think it's quite close to that.

When you say, "When you get home today, let's go to a delicious restaurant," in this case, "when you get home" is not a condition.

If you phrase it as "if you get home," it implies that there is a possibility you might not get home.

So, in this case, it's not "if" but "when."

But in Japanese, that distinction can be a bit ambiguous. "Shitara" can be used to mean both "if" and "when."

I believe the Hebrew here is something like that.

And considering which is better, I think it is "when" here.

When God is with me, protects me on my journey, provides bread and clothing, and I am able to return safely to this land of Canaan, at that time, the Lord will be my God. That is what I believe the story is.

So what does "when I have returned" mean?

Thinking about it that way, it seems like until then, the Lord was not my God. But that is also a bit different.

If you read on, even before he returns, Jacob is following the Lord's word. So the Lord is still the Lord, and Jacob is following Him.

So why does it say, "when I have returned, the Lord will be my God"? I think this is like a marriage.

I think it's like a wedding ceremony.

It is only after the wedding ceremony is held that one becomes a wife and a husband. And it is then that they are publicly recognized as a married couple in everyone's eyes.

So, during the time before the wedding, be it a few months, a year, or several years, did the two not love each other? That's not the case at all.

They love each other and become a couple. And when they become a couple, it is recognized by everyone. But even before that, they have already built a similar relationship to some extent.

I believe something similar is being said here.

The Lord is my God. For Jacob, the Lord is my God.

That relationship exists even before he goes to Haran and returns. But it is after the actual work of salvation is performed that it becomes clear to everyone that truly, this Lord is my God.

Therefore, the content of verses 20 and 21, which at first glance seems conditional, is not about a condition but about the temporal sequence of before and after. And I believe that verses 20 and 21 show Jacob's trust that God will absolutely do what He promised.

It is simply a matter of sequence.

To summarize this story of Jacob, Jacob said that when the work of salvation had been accomplished and he was able to return, "the Lord will be my God."

I believe this is the same for us.

Our lives are also a life of confessing, "The Lord is my God."

I believe that up to now, God's work of salvation has been carried out in my life.

That will continue from now on as well.

And as it continues, each time we will believe and walk, saying "The Lord is my God."

Even at times when the work of salvation has not yet been accomplished, we think and act, saying "The Lord is my God." That is, of course, true. However, when the work of salvation is actually accomplished, we confess, so that not only ourselves but everyone else can understand, "The Lord is my God." And that becomes our testimony.

The Christian life is truly this: "The Lord is my God," a walk of believing in God personally.

It is not something we do because it is a tradition handed down from long ago, nor because there is a set form to follow, but it is about continuing to build a truly private, personal relationship with God, always confessing "The Lord is my God" and walking in that. This is the Christian walk.

I believe we have been on such a walk until now. Let us continue to do so from now on.

Let us pray.

Loving Heavenly Father, we thank you for the Lord's grace.

Today, we saw how God met Jacob when he was at a loss.

God makes a promise to Jacob to save him. And Jacob, in turn, responds.

Thank you that such events have also happened in our lives.

The reason we came to believe in Jesus is because Jesus first intervened in our lives and performed the work of salvation for us. Thank you.

From now on, you will continue to guide us.

From now on, you will guide us to salvation and save us.

At each of those times, please help us to walk, confessing that you are "my God."

And not only that I myself believe that you are God, but that those around me also realize that God exists, that God is at work. May our walk become a testimony to that. Please guide and use our walk.

We give thanks for all things and pray in the name of our beloved Lord, Jesus Christ.

Amen.