Experiencing the Presence of God

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Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. 11 He came to a certain place
and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the
stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. 12
And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it
reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending
on it. 13 And the LORD stood beside him and said, "I am the LORD, the God of
Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will
give to you and to your offspring; 14 and your offspring shall be like the dust of
the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the
north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you
and in your offspring. 15 Know that 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 promised you." 16 Then Jacob woke 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 So Jacob rose early in the morning,
and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar
and poured oil on the top of it. 19 He called that place Bethel; but the name of
the city was Luz at the first. 20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be
with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat
and clothing to wear, 21 so that I come again to my father's house in peace,
then the LORD shall be my God, 22 and this stone, which I have set up for a
pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-
tenth to you." (Genesis 28:10-22)

1. The Kempters' Concert

Last Thursday, Christine and I went to Bourne UMC for the Kempters' concert. We saw five young men and women on stage. We really enjoyed their gospel music. But I was so saddened when Nathan shared the story of their parents. Teresa, their mother, began her battle with cancer in 2016. She passed away on March 10, 2017. She was 56 years old. Chaz, their father was a guitarist and singer. He taught his children to give their everything to shine the light of Jesus in this world. He passed away suddenly of a heart attack on March 10, 2019 two years later on the same day that their mom passed away. After their deaths, the five children remember their parents by singing with faces filled with joy as they spread the Good News with music. The title of a song they sing is "where do you see God?" That is the theme of my message today.

2. Jacob's Journey

Today's Old Testament lesson Genesis 28:1 says, ***Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran****.* Genesis tells us that the purpose of Jacob's departure was to take a wife from among the daughters of Laban, his mother's brother. But Jacob is fleeing from his brother Esau who wanted to kill him because Jacob stole his brother's birthright and blessing. Jacob walks alone out into an unknown world. Behind him was an aging father who failed to recognize him. Behind him was also a mother who favored him so much.

While traveling, Jacob reaches a place and stops for the night. He rests his head on a large rock. In a dream, Jacob sees a ladder that reaches from earth to heaven. He sees God's angels going up and down on it. God is standing beside the ladder and says, ***"I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; 14 and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, … and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. 15 Know that 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 promised you"*** (Genesis 28:13-15).

God promises Jacob that the Lord will protect him wherever he goes and that God will return him safely to the land of promise. Jacob thought he was alone, but the Lord was with him. He might not have expected such an extraordinary spiritual experience that night. But after that experience, Jacob realizes that God is going to use him to bless others and that Jacob is under God's protection. God promises Jacob the land of the Canaanites. The land is not only for him, but also for his descendants. God promises that "***all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring****"* (verse 14).

When Jacob wakes up, he says, "***Surely the Lord is in this place - and I did not know it****!"* (verse 16) How does Jacob respond to the unexpected experience? To remember the event, he takes the stone he placed under his head and sets it up as a pillar and pours oil on top of it. Then Jacob renames the place "Bethel." Bethel means "house of God." Since then, Bethel has been a holy place for the Israelites.

Jacob then makes a vow, saying, ***"If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, … 21 so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, 22 and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you****."*

Jacob vows to express his profound gratitude for what God has already done, for God's undeserved favor. He promises to tithe to the Lord. Jacob's tithe is a voluntary response as a sign for his gratefulness to God.

3. Lazarus Becomes Sick and Dies

Today's New Testament lesson John chapter 11 tells us that Lazarus and his two sisters experienced the power of Jesus when Lazarus became sick and died in Bethany. Bethany is about two miles from Jerusalem. Lazarus has two sisters, Mary and Martha. When Lazarus grew very sick, the two sisters sent word to Jesus who was in Perea (10:40), probably 20 or 30 miles away. Jesus loved this family and knew their pain, but did not come immediately to save Lazarus.

Jesus says, ***"This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it"*** (verse 4). Why does Jesus say this? It is because Jesus knows God's ultimate purpose for the illness of Lazarus. Although Jesus loves Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, he stays where he is for two more days. The two sisters would have been disappointed and upset. However, Jesus' delay has a specific purpose. Lazarus dies so that Jesus' power over death could be shown to his disciples and others. The raising of Lazarus is an essential display of Jesus' power and would also foreshadow Jesus' own resurrection.

4. Experiencing God's Presence

When have you experienced God's presence in your life? One of the most challenging times in my life was when I was in Fairfax, Virginia. At the time, my family was planting a church. I didn't know how to plant a church. I didn't have a great passion to share the gospel that many church planters often have. However, God knew me and led me to a book, "Experiencing God" by Henry and Richard Blackaby. The book was written to help church planters. The book tells church planters not to ask God to help them to plant the church. Rather, it suggests them to think that God already has planted the church and they are just helping God with the planting.

Up until that point, I thought I was the one who was responsible for the new church. But the authors reminded me that God is the one who is in charge of the church and that I was just participating in His ministry. When we have a sense of responsibility, we can easily become stressed. However, when we know that someone else is in charge and that we are just the ones helping that person, our approach becomes more focused on being part of what is going on.

What about our lives? To what extent do we have control over our own lives? As adults, we eat more or less what we want. We sleep when we are tired. But we know as followers of Christ, that in many ways, we can't control our own lives. God is in charge of our lives. As Christians and part of a local church, we need to make it clear who is in charge of our church and our lives. We each have our part, but God is ultimately the one who is in charge.

5. The Purpose of God's Presence

As the mother of children keep watching over their children, God would do the same being present with God's people. Jacob's story tells us that God appears to Jacob in his dream and promises that God is with him and will keep him wherever he goes. God promises that He will not leave him until God has accomplished what God has promised him. God promises to Jacob that "***all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring***" (verse 14). This is what God promised to Abraham (Genesis 12:3). Through these sayings, God reveals himself to be the same God who spoke to Abraham. This statement confirms that Jacob is the chosen line. The purpose of God's presence with Jacob is to make sure that Jacob would be a blessing to all the families of the earth including you and me.

6. Conclusion

Jacob's and Lazarus' stories tell us that God is present with us. Our Lord knows what is going on, guides us, directs us, and protects us. God gives us the assurance that everything will be okay. God will take care of Jacob, Lazarus, you and me.

Mary and Martha might have been upset when Jesus did not come right away to help their brother, Lazarus. But when Jesus arrives, everyone experiences the miracle of Lazarus being risen from the dead. Lazarus' death and coming to life again gives hope not only to the two sisters, but also to everyone since that time. Through Lazarus' death and resurrection, everyone would know of Jesus' power over death.

7. Application

How do we know the presence of the Lord in our lives? For a long time, I wanted to write down the details of my life's story. I wanted to write my autobiography. Last week, I wrote down the stories from my time in elementary school. The time to reflect reminded me of how God has been leading me throughout the years. When I wrote down the stories of my life, I noticed that God was the one who had a plan for me and had been leading me from the beginning.

As we fill in the pages, we would give thanks to God for his presence and guidance. We would praise the Lord for using us to be blessings to others. When our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren read our stories, they would see God's presence and guidance in our lives. I do not know when, but I am going to finish my writing soon. Would you try to write your stories? The readers of your stories would be amazed when they notice how God has been taking care of you and using you for His glory. Thanks be to God for being with us and for using us to be blessings to others. Amen.