

A Study in Genesis: Bargaining for Grace?

Scripture Focus: Genesis 28:18-22 *“If God will..., the Lord shall be my God.”*

The text this week focuses on Jacob just after he declared that, *“Surely the LORD is in this place – and I did not know it!”* He further proclaims, *“How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”* (Genesis 28:16-17)

And indeed, awakening from his dream of the ladder and God’s promises, Jacob anoints the stone on which he lay and names the place Beth-el: “House of God.” But Jacob, who once bargained away Esau’s birthright with a mere bowl of soup, sets his bartering stakes even higher.

Notice verses 20 – 22 as Jacob makes a vow. It is not a vow to God of faith and trust, rather he wants to make a bargain with God. Essentially, he is saying, if God does this, I’ll do that. *“If God will be with me, if [God] will keep me..., if [God] will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace”* (v. 20) – then, and only then, will the Lord be Jacob’s God. It appears Jacob, rather than merely trusting in God’s love and grace, wants to set the terms for their covenantal relationship.

- Why do you think Jacob desires to make this arrangement with God?

Have you (or I) ever engaged in such deal-making with God. Ever prayed something like this? “If you’ll just do this Lord, I promise I’ll never do that again.” Or, “If you just let this happen, I promise I will always...”

- What is the problem with such bargaining with God? Or is it really a problem at all?
- Is making deals with God contrary to believing in God’s grace, “unmerited favor?” If so, how so?
- Reflect on the following verses. *“...give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.”* (Proverbs 30:8b-9 NIV) How might praying this to God be very different from Jacob’s prayer regarding God’s promise of blessing and keeping him?

It seems Jacob still wants to get all he can by his own devices, while God simply wants to give. Jacob attaches conditions and prices to relationship and covenant, while God offers grace. How about us? Why do we have such a hard time fully receiving God’s grace, and also fully extending grace to others?

Why?