

In 1857, there was a young man named George Gordon and his wife, Ellen, who lived on Prince Edward Island, Canada. They had committed to go to the South Pacific, to an island called Erromango. This island had a history of murdering missionaries, yet they were determined to bring the gospel to this heathen people. George endeavored to learn the local language, used his medical skills to serve the people, and spent a large amount of time translating the Bible.

But as time grew on, so did the opposition to the gospel and to those who were heralding it. However, George and his wife Ellen were determined to stay and see a church planted. 4 years after arriving on the island, on May 20th, 1861, George and his wife Ellen were murdered.

News of George and Ellen's martyrdom reached Prince Edward Island, and when George's mother heard of her son's death, she cried out, "my son, my son!" George's brother James, who was also studying to become a minister, heard the news and quickly submitted his application to the mission's board to be sent to the island of Erromango to take his brother's place, and to preach the gospel to the very men who had killed his brother and sister-in-law.

James would arrive on the island of Erromango, 3 years after his brother's martyrdom and would reap fruit that his brother had sown previously. James would serve for 8 years on the island of Erromango and translate the book of Genesis and the Gospel according to Matthew into the Erromanga language. But in 1872, James too would be murdered, joining his brother in martyrdom.

News of James' martyrdom reached Prince Edward Island, and those that held the news were scared to tell James' mother. But after his mother was told of her second son's death, she is recorded saying, "I wish that I had another boy to send, that the heathen may receive salvation."

Some of you might be wondering if you, as a parent could have the same response as George and James' mother. Could you say, "I wish I had another boy to send?"

What would compel a young couple to sail to the South Pacific with full knowledge they could be killed? What would compel that same couple's young brother to take their place upon hearing the news of their martyrdom? What would compel this mother to see past this world and to the world to come?

I would argue that behind all of this, all of the death, all of the martyrdom, all of this mother's sacrifice were the promises of God. This mother, and her children believed God and his promises. They believed God's promises in Isaiah 43 when God tells his people that he will be with them through the waters and through the fires.

They believed Jesus' words in Matthew 16 when he tells his disciples that he would build his church and the gates of hell could not stand against it. They believed God's promises.

In our passage this morning, Moses, the author of Genesis, is writing to his people, who are on the cusp of entering the promised land. The same land that is still filled with the same scary giants and the same big

walls as their parents faced. But their parents cowered in fear and were judged as a result. Yet God has promised to give them this land. What would God's people do?

How would they respond? Would they see God's promises as too good to be true and disbelieve like their parents? Would they be unable to believe God would fulfill his promises like Jacob does?

Or would they trust God and his promises like George, Ellen, James, and their mother did?

You see we often think the pages of the Bible are just descriptions of what happened in the past; that applied to them then. But God's promises didn't stop at a certain point. They are still binding to his people now, as we'll see in this passage.

And if they still apply to you, and they are still true, then that means something to you today. You cannot be unchanged by the promises of God.

So the question I want all of us to ask ourselves this morning is this: are God's promises unbelievable or true, or both? I hope to answer this question for you by the end of this sermon.

And this will be our main point I will argue to you this morning: God's promises are unbelievable and true. We are going to see this in 2 points. First, we will see God's unbelievable promises, and then we will see Man's unbelievable unbelief.

If you remember from last week, Isaac, the father of Jacob, blesses Jacob and sends him north, to the land from which Abraham, Jacob's grandfather originated, to find a wife, the same land that Rebekah, Jacob's mother, came from.

Additionally, all of this was to flee from the wrath of Esau, Jacob's brother, after Jacob steals Esau's blessing through deceit and trickery.

Now Jacob is on his own, on his way to Haran, which is in modern-day Turkey, and verses 10-11 tell us that he comes to a certain place to stop and sleep for the night. He finds a stone to rest his head on and begins to sleep and have a dream.

Verses 12 tells us the details of this dream. And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!

Unfortunately, the English doesn't quite capture the language that the Hebrew does. In Jacob's dream, the ladder is more like a staircase that would've been made of something like stone. And Moses uses the word *ro'sh*, which means top, to indicate that the top of this stone staircase reaches to heaven.

I want you to think back to our time in Genesis, and think about the last time Moses talks about a staircase that was trying to reach to heaven. If you thought of Genesis 11 and the Tower of Babel, you would be correct!

In Genesis 11, Moses writes, ⁴ Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens. That same phrase, "with its top in the heavens" is the same phrase Moses uses in Genesis 28 when referring to Jacob's dream.

Now why is this important? How does understanding Genesis 11 help us understand what's going on with Jacob's dream?

As a refresher, Adam and Eve had been sent out of the Garden in Genesis 3, and the way back to God was guarded. Their sin had separated them from God. We then get to Genesis 11, and it's all about man trying to build a tower or staircase-like structure that would reach the heavens.

And remember that this is in direct violation to God's command to be fruitful and multiply and spread over all the earth. They rebelled and said 'no.' Instead, they decided to band together and try to break into heaven. All of this was an attempt to get back to the Garden.

But we know that man fails at doing this, and God judges mankind by forcefully spreading them over the earth by changing everyone's language.

Additionally, in Genesis 11, Moses tells us that God had to come down to see this tower that was an attempt to get to heaven.

Now we come back to Genesis 28, our text, and we see this same staircase from Genesis 11, but something is different. First, this staircase isn't just an attempt to build to heaven, instead, this staircase actually leads to heaven and to God.

Then, verse 12 tells us that angels are ascending and descending from this staircase, and verse 13 tells us that standing above this staircase is God, himself.

But this odd dream has angels ascending and descending, not Jacob, nor any other man. Man still cannot get to heaven or to God. So, what does this dream mean?

We are essentially seeing a reverse of Babel. In Genesis 11, man tries to build a staircase from earth to heaven and to God, but fails. In Genesis 28, God gives a staircase from heaven to earth.

Yet this doesn't solve the problem of how man can climb this staircase.

In order to get context on what's happening in our passage we looked back to Genesis 11. Now to understand how man can climb this staircase we look forward in Scripture. Turn with me to John 1.

In the beginning of John's gospel, Jesus begins to call his first disciples. After calling Andrew, Peter, and Philip, Philip goes to his friend Nathaniel, and tells him that he has found the Messiah that Moses, the Law, and the prophets spoke of. Nathaniel then goes to see this Jesus of Nazareth and John records the conversation between them.

⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" ⁴⁸ Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." ⁴⁹ Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" ⁵⁰ Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹ And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

Look at Jesus' words. Jesus is making a direct reference back to Genesis 28. He says that the angels are ascending and descending, not on a ladder, but on the Son of Man.

In other words, Jesus is saying that he IS the staircase to God and to heaven. It is only through Jesus that man can have relationship with God.

Now how do we put this all together? Remember the context to our text. This isn't Jacob trying to build a ladder or staircase, this is a dream, a dream given to Jacob by God.

As I was preparing to write this sermon, my wife asked me what the text was and I simply said, 'Jacob's ladder.' She knew what I meant and didn't correct me, but how wrong I was. This isn't Jacob's ladder; this is God's ladder!

Jacob didn't put this dream together by himself. No, Jacob was simply the recipient of this dream. He was the recipient of God's grace, just as we once were.

We don't often want to be associated with Jacob and all the things that he does, but the truth is that we are more like him than we want to be. And in this passage, the greatest news in the world is that we are Jacob.

We didn't ask for salvation, we didn't ask for Jesus. We were happy and ignorant in our sins. But God, in his great mercy saved us.

And as those who have been rescued by his sovereign grace can testify, he did that very thing, he rescued us. In Romans 3, Paul quotes from Psalm 14 and says, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God."

In other words, we could never respond to God's grace towards us until he unblinded us and showed us our sin.

Or in Charles Wesley's words from the hymn 'And Can It Be?',

"Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray, I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose, went forth and followed Thee."

Brothers and sisters, let us not rush by this text or what was done for us in Jesus, as we're so prone to do each day. For just as Jacob was given this dream by no merit of his own, we were given this great salvation through no merit of our own either.

If this vision wasn't enough, God then gives Jacob a promise. God says in verse 13 and following, "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 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 in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth 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 promised you."

There are two parts to this promise. First, God grounds his promise in who he is.

God is so kind to us. When God makes a promise in the Bible, especially when we look at the Old Testament, God follows a pattern. The pattern goes like this: This is who I am or what I've done, therefore I give you this promise or this command.

For instance, the most famous example that most people know is Exodus 20 when God gives Moses and his people the 10 Commandments. People often read the 10 Commandments as a simple set of rules. But

in reality, God is showing his great love for us. Pay close attention to the pattern because the order matters.

“And God spoke all these words, saying, I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.”

Did you see the pattern? God says I am the Lord your God, the one who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the one who brought you out of the house of slavery. THEREFORE, you shall have no other gods before me.

God grounds his command of obedience to his people in who he is and what he has done. God doesn't demand obedience without first making a way first.

How much more then shall God's promises be to us in our passage when God grounds his promises in who he is! Look again to our passage.

God says, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac.” These are not just facts. These are the reasons the promises to follow have weight.

If you've bought a home before, you know what earnest money is. It's the deposit that you put down when you put an offer in on a house that says, ‘this is good-faith money that says I'm serious about buying the house, and that if I break the offer for non-valid reasons then I will lose that deposit.’

When God declares who he is, and that he is the God of Abraham and Isaac, I want you to read this as earnest money. God is saying, “I am who I am, and you can take that to the bank. My promises will never bounce.”

Think back to all that we have read and seen in Genesis. This is the same God who protected Abraham and Sarah after all their foolish choices. This is the God who brought a barren womb to life twice; first to Sarah and then to Rebekah. Isaac and Jacob are both products of God's promises.

Therefore, when we look at the specific promises that God is about to give to Jacob, read it in light of who God is and what he has done.

Now the second part of the promise is the specific details of the promise. This promise from God is a mash-up of sorts, for the promise contains promises that were previously given to Abraham and Isaac. You have promises from chapters 12, 13, 15, and 26 in Genesis.

You might be familiar with the phrase that goes, ‘everything but the kitchen sink.’ Well Jacob is getting everything AND the kitchen sink.

God is promising everything: the land, innumerable offspring, Jacob's family will be a blessing to all the earth, and the assurance that God will bring him back to this land.

And if this wasn't enough, God promises himself and his presence. Look again, he says, “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 promised you.”

Now I don't want to downplay any of God's promises to Jacob, but the last promise, that he will be with Jacob wherever he goes and he will not leave until he has fulfilled all of his promises, makes all the other promises pale in comparison.

Yes, the land flowing with milk and honey is great, yes offspring is great, yes being a blessing to all nations is great; but there is something about this last promise we as believers cannot rush by.

Every single one of our lives play out exactly as they should, meaning, nothing ever happens by chance. The parents you have, the spouse you married or didn't marry. The job you have, the kids you have. All of this can be categorized under the umbrella of God's providence. But what is God's providence?

The Heidelberg Catechism gives a worshipful definition of providence.

Question 27 asks, "What do you understand by the providence of God?"

Answer: "Providence is the almighty and ever present power of God by which he upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty—all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from his fatherly hand."

So what does providence have to do with our passage? I think we often have a have a wrong view of providence. It's a doctrine that we throw out there sometimes to describe situations in our life going a certain way, but underneath the providence of God is God's promise in verse 15, that he will not leave us until he has done what he has promised.

In other words, as our lives unfold, we ought to remember that these circumstances and events in our lives do not come to us by chance. Instead, they come to us from the loving hand of the Father.

Therefore, whether rain or shine, richer or poorer, sickness and health, life or death, whatever may come your way, God says in verse 15 that it's all mine and I will accomplish my will, and I will be with you through it all.

You see God's providence is never detached from his promises. He governs the world and our lives, but he is not some clockmaker that sets the world in motion and then lets the world do as it wills.

He is intimately tied to the world he made and governs because he has promised to be with you through it all. Therefore, when life hits us in the face, and we are dizzy and, in a tailspin, let us not forget that as the Lord's providence plays out in our lives, that his promises are there under it all, ready to catch us, for he is with us, always.

A natural next question we should ask this text is: how do you know that these promises in Genesis 28 is for us? Do these unbelievable promises apply to us?

This specific promise is given to Jacob and to all the children of Jacob. But this is where we let Scripture help us interpret Scripture. Paul, writing to the church in Galatia says in chapter 4, that we as believers, are like Isaac, we are the children of promise.

In other words, just as Isaac was born as a child of promise because his parents were both almost 100 years old, we as believers now are children of the promise because we have been supernaturally born-again by the Spirit of God in Christ Jesus.

Therefore, Paul argues that the promises of God are no longer to the children of ethnic Israel, the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The promises of God are given to the children of God through the blood of Jesus Christ.

And to further strengthen the case that these promises are ours, Jesus gives this same promise to his disciples at the end of the Great Commission, before he ascends into heaven at the end of Matthew's gospel.

Jesus says in Matthew 28, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

So, what does this mean for us today? What does it mean that God promises to be with us, always, until to the end of the age? This means that this promise from God is ours as we live to glorify God with our lives and as we endeavor to make disciples of all nations.

For some of you that might mean you remembering this promise as you consider sharing the gospel with a family member, as you consider starting a Bible study at your school or workplace, as you consider walking across the street to your neighbor's house to share the gospel.

This also might look like trusting God's promises like George, Ellen, James, and their mother, as you consider forsaking everything that you know so that Christ might be proclaimed to the ends of the earth, even unto death.

Brothers and sisters, this promise is for you. God will not leave you until all of his promises are fulfilled. Therefore, we can go with confidence knowing that the same God who utters his voice and the earth melts, the same God who brings barren wombs to life, the same God who died, was buried, and was raised on the 3rd day is always with you.

And this God will not forsake you. So, cling to him now and every day until we see him face to face.

Now I want you to pretend you've never read this passage before.

What would you expect to happen next? I hope you would say that you expect Jacob to fall on his face in wonder and awe. That he would wake from his dream and worship the living God in praise and song. Let's read what happens next in verses 16-19.

This will be our second point this morning, the Unbelievable Unbelief of Man.

Jacob awakes from his dream, and Moses says that Jacob responds in fear. He exclaims that this is the place of the Lord and that he had no idea.

While on first glance this seems harmless, Jacob's statement about this place being the place of the Lord seems odd.

This is the first recorded interaction between Jacob and the Lord in the book of Genesis. God introduces himself and gives him the promises given to his grandfather and father, and Jacob responds with almost disbelief that the same God of his father extends to the physical place that he is in now.

In other words, it seems that Jacob had taken an almost Canaanite pagan view of God. Canaanites, the inhabitants of the promised land, worshipped their gods and idols, but they were regional.

For instance, the Philistines and the Moabites would have two different gods. Throughout the Old Testament you encounter these different regional gods like Baal, Chemosh, Dagon, Ashteroth, Molech, and Asherah.

Jacob appears to think that the God of his father only had jurisdiction in his land, but certainly not in the place he's in now, much less where he's heading to in Haran.

Jacob has compromised his faith for the world around him, and he has completely missed the point.

Look again at Jacob's words in verse 16. He says, "surely the Lord is in this place," and then look back at verse 15. The Lord says, "I will keep you wherever you go."

In other words, God promises to be with him, no matter the place, no matter the situation, and Jacob responds in disbelief that the Lord could actually be in this place.

Then Jacob shows he is truly missing the point again when he says, "How awesome is this place!"

God did not give Jacob this dream to show him how awesome the place was, he was showing him how awesome He is!

Jacob has completely blown it. He is so infatuated with this place, and all that this place will provide instead of seeing the all-sufficient God who will be with him always.

As frustrated as I can get with Jacob in this passage; the longer I sat in this text, I kept seeing myself in this mirror.

How often do I miss the point? How often do I look for what I can gain from a certain situation or person?

How often does God's providence hit me in a way that I didn't expect and instead of seeing the all-knowing and all-merciful God behind it, I begin to scramble to find a way out of the situation I'm in.

Or how often am I given a wonderful thing in my life and somehow forget the God who gave it and try to claim responsibility for it?

I'll think things like 'I did it.' I made this happen. How awesome are my skills. How awesome are my abilities. But wake up, Paul! Wake up Jacob!

Yes, this place is awesome, but not because it's physically awesome.

This place is awesome because God is there and he is with you! Friends, don't miss the point like Jacob. Instead, look to our awesome God who has given us everything.

Unfortunately, Jacob missing the point is just the tip of the iceberg, as he progresses into doubting God would keep his promises.

Jacob takes the stone that he had put his head on and sets it up as a pillar and attempts to make it holy with oil. He calls the place Bethel and then proceeds to make a vow to God.

Let's read this vow in verses 20-22.

Jacob uses two very important words in his vow. He starts with 'if' and ends with 'then.' If you do this, then I will do that.

We use these statements all the time. They are called conditional statements. One half of the statement is dependent on another.

Let's look at the 'if' half of the statement first. Jacob's list of 'ifs' include God being with him, keeping him in the way that he goes, providing him bread and clothing to wear, and bringing him to his father's house again in peace.

These would normally be pretty bold statements, except the fact that God had already promised him these things earlier.

God said that he would provide for him in the land he gives, he would return him to his land, and ultimately, as we looked at earlier, he promised to be with him wherever he went.

What we are seeing from Jacob is not necessarily Jacob questioning whether God could do these things. Instead, we are seeing Jacob question whether God will do all the things that he promised.

We know this because of the 'then' statements that he makes. He says 'if' God will do all these things for him, then the Lord will be his God and the pillar he has set up will be God's house, and he will even tithe a tenth of everything he has.

One pastor helpfully used the relationship between a baby and his parents as an illustration for this.

Let's say your infant could talk, and the baby says, "if you'll take me home, put clothes on me, change my poopy diapers, feed me milk and food, protect me and love me, then you'll be my parents." We would never say such a thing!

This is a given when it comes to earthly mothers and fathers, HOW MUCH MORE is this true of our Heavenly Father and his care for us!

God has promised to do all these things for Jacob, and then Jacob shows that he doesn't truly believe he will do these things. He's still in the prove it to me phase.

Now it's really easy to put Jacob on trial here, but I've learned to fight thinking this way. And as I've learned to fight against judgment against men like Abraham, Isaac, and now Jacob, Genesis has become so comforting to me.

Because we're all Jacob. We make subtle, or not so subtle bargains with God. We condition whether we will believe he's good if he does certain things for us.

If we're honest with ourselves, we say things like 'I will give my full and abiding devotion to God if he will give me a spouse or a child. Or, I will start to live the holy life that God calls me to live once God does this for me.'

Brothers and sisters, may we examine our lives to see the ways in which we disbelieve God until he meets our demands. For God has already richly provided everything we need for us in Christ, and he has promised to be with us until the end of the age.

If you're not a Christian and you've been looking at the Christian faith for a while, you know that you're Jacob because you've thought all of Jacob's thoughts. I know I did before the Lord saved me.

There are two camps you can be in, and I've been in both. The first camp is that you know God is real, but you disbelieve, like Jacob that he will do the things he says he will do. The other camp says, I don't know if he's real at all.

Therefore, you might say things like:

- God, if you're real, show me how real you are, then I'll follow you.
- God, if you're real, give me a sign or an audible word, then I'll follow you.
- God, if you'll show me how there can only be one way to be made right with you when the world tells me that all religions lead to you, then I'll follow you.
- God, if you'll show me how I can continue to live my sinful life and with my sinful choices and still be a Christian, then I'll follow you.
- God, if you'll show me how I reconcile what I feel with what your Word says, then I'll follow you.

There's a 100 more questions you could ask. Yet this passage answers all of them.

Moses, writing to God's people, who are doubting the unbelievable promises of God before they try to enter the Promised Land, is showing his people that they've never been alone. Their parents doubted God and his promises to always be with them.

Moses is telling them, 'Don't be like Jacob, don't be like your parents and the generation before you.' Trust the Lord, trust the God who has brought you out of the land of Egypt by his mighty hand. His unbelievable promises are true!

And Moses isn't just writing to God's people then; he's writing to God's people now, us; and he's writing to those of you in this room who continue to reject God and his promises.

You see, the answer to doubting God's unbelievable promises is right here in this passage.

In Jacob's dream, God shows us that he is the one who will make a way between heaven and earth. He then does this through the person and work of Christ.

Jesus says in John 14 that he is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to the Father except through him. Jesus is that ladder that we could never climb.

Then in our passage, God tells us that he will never leave us until he brings us back to the land, to the Promised Land. While this is partially fulfilled in the Old Testament, we know that ultimately, God is looking to the New Heavens and the New Earth, where God will dwell with his people again.

Jesus, again in John 14, tells us that he is going to prepare a place for us in his Father's house, and that he would return and take us to the land, to the New Heavens and the New Earth.

These unbelievable promises all find their yes and amen in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the answer to whether God's promises will be fulfilled. Jesus is the proof that they do!

Therefore, brothers and sisters, let us hold on to these promises in belief. Let us trust the God of these promises in belief.

For though the promises of God seem unbelievable at times, these promises are given to us by our God who says he is with us and he will keep us wherever we go.

And one day, as we cross that river of death that has no bridge, we will finally see with clear eyes the land that he promised to bring us back to. The land where we will dwell with our savior God again.

I want to close with a chorus from a hymn called Beulah Land, which is another name for the eternal rest and peace we will have when we finally experience the perfect communion with God.

This is the unbelievable promise that awaits us.

**O Beulah Land, sweet Beulah Land,
As on thy highest mount I stand,
I look away across the sea,
Where mansions are prepared for me,
And view the shining glory shore,
My Heav'n, my home forevermore!**