

SHIFT Sermon Series: WEEK TWO
By Rev. Malcolm Smith

LEAVING HOME

In the reading for this week we find Jacob hastily leaving home and heading on his way to stay with his uncle for a while. As he was traveling we can imagine him experiencing a range of emotions—fear of Esau chasing after him to kill him; annoyance and frustration about having to leave (he was “was a mild man, dwelling in tents” (Genesis 25:27) and so probably didn’t like having to leave home); and anxiety and excitement about going to a new place and maybe finding a wife.

When we set off on the journey of trying to change our lives we can experience a similar range of emotions. After really looking at ourselves we know that it won’t work for us to stay in the thought patterns and behaviors that we’re currently in. Though part of us is excited about the possibilities of what lies ahead of us, another part of us would rather stay right where we are—where it’s comfortable. And, like Jacob, though we know why we need to leave, we can feel not particularly clear on where we’re heading or what we’re going to do when we get there.

HARAN / PADAN ARAM

Jacob is heading to Haran in Padan Aram. He thinks that he’s only going to be there for a short while but (spoiler alert) he ends up being there for twenty years. In our inner landscape Haran is a place of knowledge and learning. It’s where we have to go if we want to change our lives and it’s where we stay for a long time.

PADAN ARAM / HARAN / SYRIA

Describe where this is in modern times. His trip was about 550 miles. How many days would it probably have taken? Maybe 10? (See the map on page 140 of the SHIFT workbook.)

It’s tempting to think that all we need to change our lives is some profound insight that we just haven’t thought of yet. This week we are going to be looking at those sorts of insights and their role but, when we look at where Haran is on a map, we get an indication of the main kind of learning that we need to do to change our lives. Haran is

[To be regenerated a person] must first of all be born like a young child again, learn what evil and falsity are, and learn what good and truth are, for without knowledge or awareness of these he is unable to have any good conferred on him. Indeed of himself he does not acknowledge anything else as good except that which is evil, nor anything else as truth except that which is false (Secrets of Heaven 3701:3)

Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it (Mark 10:15)

way up North, outside of the land of Canaan. It’s not a place of deep insight in the heart of the Holy Land; it’s a place for learning the basics about right and wrong. “You shall not murder.” “You shall not commit adultery.” “You shall not steal.”

However, on his way to Haran, before he has made it out of the land of Canaan, Jacob eventually has to stop for the night because it’s dark enough that he can’t go any further. In the dark, he gathers some of the stones that are around, lays his head

on them, and falls asleep. And while he's asleep he has a dream.

JACOB'S DREAM

Up to this point in the story, from Jacob's perspective, God has not had any role in his life and his life hasn't had any particular direction to it. That all changes when he has this dream.

In the dream God speaks to him. He gives him the same blessing that he gave Abraham and then 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 spoken to you" (Genesis 28:15). Now Jacob knows that God is looking after him and that He has a plan for his life. God doesn't outline all the details of what's going to happen to Jacob but He assures him that he will eventually return to Canaan and also gives him—and us—an inspiring vision of his overall plan for each person's life.

[L]o, I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20)

A STAIRWAY SET UP ON THE EARTH

Jacob sees a stairway that's set on the earth and reaches all the way up to heaven. Angels are going up and down on the stairway and God is at the very top. There's so much mercy represented by the stairway being set up on the earth. It's the Lord coming all the way down to our earthly level. He doesn't just sit up in heaven and expect us to figure out what we're supposed to be doing on our own. He takes all of his infinite wisdom and brings it down to a level where we can understand it. "You shall not murder." "You shall not commit adultery." "You shall not steal."

The primary way that the Lord brings His wisdom down to our level is in His Word. Sometimes the statements and stories in His Word are so much in the dirt and grime of natural life that we can struggle to get anything out of it—like Jacob we feel like we're fumbling around with stones in the dark. And yet within those statements and stories is a whole world of higher truths and insights that connect us to heaven and the Lord—a world that we can occasionally get a glimpse of.

As you read this you may or may not feel like you've had an experience like this.

Hopefully this program will provide the opportunity for you to spend enough time with

The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, And He delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; For the Lord upholds him with His hand (Psalm 37:23-24)

the Jacob story that you have a Jacob's dream experience with it—feeling, "Wow! There is so much more in here than I realized!" And hopefully, like Jacob, you will also get a clearer sight of the journey ahead of you and the plan that God has for your life.

The further we get in the Jacob story, the higher we are going to be looking on the stairway. When we get to the end of the story, when Jacob is reunited with Esau, we're going to be talking about the top of the ladder. And, nothing personal, but the higher on

the ladder that we're talking about, the less likely it is that any of us have experienced that state yet. Nevertheless there is tremendous value in having some understanding of the stairway in front of us—though we're not there yet, we can still know where we want to get to. Like Jacob, our lives can be forever changed by our vision of God's plan for our lives.

THE NEXT MORNING

The next morning Jacob wakes up and says with fear and awe, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." Everything isn't all better now that he's had this experience: he still can't go home and he's still focused on working the system (even though God promised that He was going to be with him and look after him, Jacob says that the Lord will be his God only if God actually looks after him). But there has been a significant shift in his perspective. God is now part of his picture of life.

In a similar way, as we continue on our journey, despite the times of darkness and uncertainty about the future, we can try to remember that the Lord has a beautiful vision for our future and is quietly helping us along, even now before we've arrived at where we think we should be by now. And He says to us as He said to Jacob, "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 spoken to you" (Genesis 28:15).