

Messages From Genesis
“Jacob’s Ladder and Jacob’s Vow”

We are continuing this series of messages from the Book of Genesis. In my last message we saw how there wasn’t much peace and harmony in Isaac and Rebekah’s family. Chapter 28 begins with Jacob leaving home, because his twin brother Esau threatened to kill him for cheating him out of his father’s blessing. So, Jacob, whose name means, “heel grabber”, “the one who supplants” (cheat!), is now a fugitive – and heads to his mother’s family in Haran.

Genesis 28:11 say, “He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set.” It’s dark. He’s alone. Perhaps he's feeling guilty for what he's done. He uses a rock as a pillow and falls asleep. You might say he's spending the night at the “Hard Rock Motel”! Then he has a dream. He dreams of a ladder (a staircase) reaching from earth to heaven, with angels going up and down. The Lord God appears in the dream. And an incredible thing happens! God reaffirms to Jacob the promise God made to his grandfather Abraham. "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, 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. 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 again renews the promise of a land, and numerous descendants, through whom the whole earth will be blessed. God assures Jacob that He will be with him – this cheat, this heel-grabber!

Jacob wakes up – scared! “Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it” (Genesis 28:16). Perhaps you've sung that quiet chorus, “Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place”, but for Jacob, the Lord’s presence in that place created a sense of awe and fear. “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Genesis 28:17). He takes the stone that’s been his *pillow*, and sets it up as a *pillar* and memorial – to be a place of worship. He calls the place “Bethel” – “house of God”.

Jacob then makes a vow, a promise to God: "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, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, 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 28:20-22). Jacob promises that if God will be with him and provide his basic needs, this God (Yahweh, or Jehovah) will be his God, and that the stone and spot he is standing on will be set aside as God's house. Actually, this place, Bethel, later did become the religious center for the northern kingdom, Israel. Jacob also vows to give God a tithe, or one-tenth, of all that God gives him. This is one of the earliest references to tithing in the Bible.

In today's message I'd like to concentrate on the third part of Jacob's vow: *that he will give a tithe of all that God gives to him.*

If you think about it, doesn't it seem a little strange that in that particular setting, as part of the

vow Jacob makes, he would mention tithing! You know what the tithe is: giving 10% of our income back to the Lord. But, this represented a tangible way Jacob had of dedicating himself to the Lord. It was a way of responding with gratitude to what God was doing in his life, and of acknowledging that everything God gave him really belonged to God and was a gift.

So let's look at *tithing*, and Jacob's promise to give a tithe to the Lord.

Tithing is the basic measure for giving in the Bible – giving 10% for the Lord's work. In the Old Testament period, the ancient Israelites would give the first *tenth* of their crops or produce to the Lord. Leviticus 27:30 says, "A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord. It is holy to the Lord." Theirs was an agricultural economy. Giving the first tenth of their crop was a way of thanking God for food and the harvest. It was also a means of acknowledging that *the whole crop, everything*, belongs to God.

What was done with the tithes the Israelites gave? *For one thing, it supported the Levites.* The Levites were descendants of Levi, charged with care of the sanctuary. Numbers 18:21 tells us: "To the Levites I have given every tithe for a possession, in return for the service they perform, the service in the tent of meeting." The tribe of Levi was given no allotment of *land*. They had to depend on peoples' giving for their livelihood and support. In a way it's akin to our giving tithes to provide salaries for church staff members today.

The tithe also provided help for needy people. Every third year, tithes were given over to the needy. "Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year and store it within your towns; the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake" (Deuteronomy 14:28-29). When we give of *our* tithes to the church or a charity, certainly some of that should be used where there is human need.

It's good to remember that the Israelites gave in other ways besides the tithe, or one-tenth. There were all kinds of sacrifices and offerings commanded under the law: the offering of animals, other kinds of produce offerings, freewill offerings, peace offerings, thank offerings. In addition, Israelites were often reminded to give to the poor, to orphans, to widows. So, giving the tithe (a 10th) was just *one* of the ways the Israelites were to give to support God's work!

What about tithing in the New Testament? Very little is said! It's kind of assumed that if the Israelites under the Law were to tithe, Christians, living under grace, would do at least that. Love and grace never requires less than the Law!

There is one interesting verse to look at, some words of Jesus: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith" (Matthew 23:23). In Jesus' time, Jewish religious leaders were so meticulous in keeping their religious rules and regulations that they tithed little garden herbs. But, Jesus said they ignored the more important matters, like justice,

mercy, and faith. Jesus said they need to focus on these, *without neglecting to tithe*.

While very little is said in the New Testament about tithing, a lot is said about *how* we are to give. We are to give regularly and consistently, in proportion to how God has blessed us, and we are to give sacrificially. Jesus pointed to a poor widow as the example of true giving - she gave sacrificially, all she had. *Many Christians today agree that feel if the tithe was required under the Law, at least we should do that much under grace!*

So, very early in the Bible the practice of tithing is mentioned, way back as early as Jacob, as we've seen. But why do this? *Why should we give?*

One reason is: God commands us to give! God commands tithing as part of the Old Testament law. The prophet Malachi said if we withhold the tithes, we are *robbing God* of what's rightfully His! "Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, 'How are we robbing you?' In your tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing" (Malachi 3:8-10). So, it's not like we should pray and ask God, "What's your will, Lord? Should I tithe?" Don't even ask, because He's commanded it!

But there are other reasons why we should give a portion of our income back to the Lord's work. *We give because God has provided our physical and material needs.* Jacob made a "deal" with God. It's pretty presumptuous of him, isn't it! This "cheat" – arranging a deal with the Almighty! But Jacob tells God, if you give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, then You shall be my God – and I'll give a tithe back to You. Has God given us bread to eat and clothing to wear? Any of us here have nothing to eat? No clothes to wear? I know – some of us may be struggling financially. But have we gotten to that point where we have no food or clothes?

I'm thinking of my mission trips to Kenya. On Sundays, many children were at the church, as many as 200. As part of the Sunday School each child was given a cup of porridge. We were told that when they had a dry spell in that region, food was scarce, and for some of the children, that was the only food they got that day. Well, that puts things in perspective for me.

We give because God has been generous to us, and we want to say "thank you", and share some of our material blessings with others.

We also give because God has provided our spiritual, eternal needs in Christ. Jacob was a miserable failure. A cheat. A fugitive on the run. Yet God treats Jacob with incredible mercy and graciousness. He renews the promise He made to Abraham and passes it on to Jacob – who in no way deserves it! That's *grace!* Grace means God treats us with a kindness and generosity that we don't deserve and cannot earn.

God has shown us His unbelievable mercy and grace in Jesus Christ. God loves us – we can't

earn His love. God forgives our sins in Christ – we don't deserve such kindness. God offers eternal life through Jesus – instead of His wrath and judgment. This is the backdrop for our giving! We give because God shows His grace in Christ

There are people in our churches who get upset whenever you talk about giving or tithing. I've run into some of them over the years! I've had people walk out of a service when I've started my sermon on giving. I've had people leave the church when I've preached on giving and tithing. And I can't help but ask them: Don't you want to hear what's in the Bible? Do you just want to leave out the things in the Bible that may challenge you, or annoy you?

I remember a call I got from an angry parishioner when I sent out a stewardship letter asking people to give. He called the night before Thanksgiving. He was upset. He never attended church, but he was angry that we would ask the members to consider their giving to the church and to God's work. I couldn't help but wonder: Has this man never experienced the goodness of God, and the grace and mercy of Christ? I can understand if a person is not saved that he or she would not be motivated to give money for the work of the gospel. But if one is a Christian, why would you be offended if you are asked to give? We give, because we've experienced God's grace in Christ, and want to get the message of salvation out to the world through the church!

So, we give because God has provided our physical, material needs, and because God has shown His mercy and grace in providing for our eternal salvation in Christ.

We also need the discipline of regular, generous, sacrificial giving to keep us from being selfish and getting too attached to our material possessions. Materialism is a big deal in the U.S.! Regular giving, generous giving, tithing, is one antidote to our desire for more and more "stuff". That's why it's important to give!

I've been talking about tithing. There are questions often asked regarding tithing.

Question: Should I figure the tithe on my gross income, or my income after taxes? Answer: The Bible doesn't say. I heard one pastor say we each have to decide for ourselves on this matter. Some might feel it's OK just to tithe on the after-tax amount, since we never see the portion held back in taxes. But I heard another person say that if we have to even ask the question, what does that say about our attitude? I do think, however, each of us will have to decide for ourselves on this question.

Question: Must all of my tithe go to the church? No. There are many worthy charities that do the work of God, and that bless people. I would say, however, that if we are active in a church and we believe that the church is helping believers grow and getting the gospel into the world so people can come to Christ, this church is deserving of a significant part of our tithe and our giving.

I realize that many people today are struggling financially, what with inflation and the rising costs of just about everything. But remember that in good times and in hard times we have God's

promise to provide our needs if we put Him first. Hear again what God promised through the prophet Malachi: "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing" (Malachi 3:10).

Jesus also promised that if we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, that all of our needs would be met (Matthew 6:25-33).

Are you a tither? Will you consider tithing? If you don't have enough faith to tithe now, are you willing to increase your giving in steps - by 1% or 3% - moving toward the full 10%? I have never in all my years talked to someone who tithed who regretted doing that!

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