

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

We human being are masters at blaming others, aren't we? We have all perfected the art of finding the fault in someone else so we can pass off our poor behavior on them. But every once in a while, something happens in our lives that is so obviously our own fault, we can't blame someone else. It's impossible. We did it, and now we suffer for it. There's no one to blame but ourselves.

To a greater or lesser degree, we commit such sins daily. Some are better than others at finding excuses for the wrongs we do, but if we're honest with ourselves and with God, we are ultimately to blame. And whatever negative consequences we face, we shouldn't really be too surprised, should we? We're getting exactly what we deserve. But it's a bitter pill to swallow.

- Kids, if your parents tell you to do something, and you disobey them, and then they ground you, or take away computer, video games or TV... those are negative consequences, but not surprising considering your actions.
- If you don't apply yourself at school, you get poor grades. Because of your poor grades, you don't get a scholarship or job offer. Negative consequences, but certainly not surprising!
- You're late for an appointment, so you're speeding. You know you shouldn't be, but you keep driving too fast. Then, sure enough, the police cruiser with lights on shows up in your rear view mirror. You get a ticket, AND you're late for your appointment. Negative consequences, but certainly not surprising.
- If you're dishonest at work, or goof off... you're caught and fired. Negative consequences, but certainly not surprising!
- If you are harsh, angry and unfair with your kids, they no longer respect you. When they grow up, perhaps your relationship with them is distant. Negative consequences, but certainly not surprising!
- You lose your temper and say things you never should say. You do serious damage to a relationship, and the person doesn't trust you any more. Negative consequence, but certainly not surprising!

I think you get the idea, right? Today we're talking about that category of sin where we disobey God. We know we've disobeyed God. And we suffer negative consequences for it. And we can't even really be that mad about it because we know we deserved those negative consequences. There's no one to blame but ourselves.

But now what? It's easy to conclude that the negative consequences we are experiencing are not only well-deserved, but also an indication of how God feels about us. "I'm getting punished. I deserve it. God is unhappy with me." We feel very lonely. We can fall into a depression. We hit bottom.

How can we recover from our stupid, sinful mistakes? How can we regain confidence when it comes to our standing with God?

Today in our Bible lesson, we will meet a man who was in that situation. Let's look at a story about Jacob. The text is Genesis 28:10-17. But before we read it, let me get you up to speed.

I'm going to give a super brief overview. Why don't read the details yourself this week? The story is in Genesis 27.

Jacob had just done something stupid and sinful. His father, Isaac, was dying. Isaac wanted to bless his sons before he died. Isaac intended to bless his older son, Esau. This blessing not only meant a larger portion of the estate, but the line of the Savior was also at stake here. God had said Jacob was supposed to receive that blessing. So Jacob felt justified in deceiving his father. He tricked his aged father into giving him the blessing. Esau was so angry he wanted to kill Jacob. So Jacob's mother, Rebekah, decide he had to go away. She was sending him to his relatives that lived to the north of Israel... an almost 500 mile journey.

Now we pick it up.

Genesis 28:10-17 Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep.

The full consequences of Jacob's sins must have been weighing heavy on him. He was alone. He left his family. He didn't know it, but he would never see his mother again. And the worst part was, Jacob had no one to blame but himself. He disobeyed God and deceived his father, and now he was suffering for it. And what did God think of all this? Had God abandoned him too? Would God curse him and forsake him? Were all the promises God had made to this blessed family now null and void? With the ground for a bed and a rock for a pillow, Jacob fell asleep. Here's what happened:

He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord, and he said: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac."

When Jacob was at his lowest point, Jacob did not receive what he expected from God. For his sin, lack of trust and deceitfulness, God would have been right and just to appear to Jacob in a dream and say, "That's it! You blew it! We're done! Those promises I made to you and your family... you forfeited them all. I'm finding someone else to bless. You are cursed! Be gone!" But God did something completely unexpected. To this sinful, but broken man who had hit rock bottom (literally, his head on a rock... rock bottom!), God gives a vision.

In this vision, Jacob sees a stairway with its base on earth and its top in heaven. Angels of God were ascending and descending on it. God was telling Jacob that the connection between heaven and earth has not been severed. God's connection to Jacob was still good. The angels were still ministering. Prayers were still going up to God. God had not left him!

Then god spoke. First he identifies himself. This is not some new God or imagined voice. It's the God of his fathers, Abraham and Isaac. Then God does the unexpected. Rather than rebuking and disowning him, instead God repeats the amazing promises that he had first made to Jacob's grandfather Abraham.

"I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. [That promise was fulfilled 400 plus years later when Jacob's descendants had grown into a large nation while in Egypt.] Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth [to this day, those of Jewish descent are numerous... and those who are Jacob's children be faith are an enormous number!], and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. [God kept that promise when he sent the descendant of Jacob named Jesus. You and I are blessed through Jacob, because his great-great...grandson Jesus was born, lived for us and died for us and reconciled us to God.] I am

with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. [God had not abandoned him or cursed him. God is with him. Will watch over him. God would keep every one of his promises. Not one of them would fall to the ground unfulfilled.]

Look at Jacob's reaction: **"When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."** He named the place "Bethel" which means house of God, because there he knew God had no left him, and God still dwelled with him.

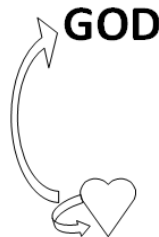
Isn't God amazing? After all Jacob had done, his lack of trust in God, taking matters into his own hands, breaking the 4th Commandment by not honoring his father, breaking the 1st Commandment by not trusting in God to do what he promises... God did the unexpected. He reminded Jacob of his love and presence. He repeated his promises. He restored to Jacob the confidence that between God and Jacob there was love and peace.

So let's bring this back to our lives. Can you think of stupid, sinful things you've done? Can you think of negative consequences you are suffering in your life because you've made wrong decisions? We don't have to think long or hard to come up with examples, do we? Out of excuses, weighed down, burdened... some of you, maybe even depressed... now what? How do you pull out of this? How do you move on? Where can you find hope?

1. **Acknowledge that you are indeed the reason for your misfortune.** I think that's where Jacob was when he laid his head down on a rock, far from family, all by himself. Are you at that point? Can you stop making excuses, passing the blame, and just acknowledge: Yes, it is me. I am the problem. I am the reason for the situation I am in.



2. **Confess your sin to God.** Now this wasn't explicitly stated in the text, but based on Jacob's behavior after the dream, and then years later when he meets his brother Esau again, we recognize that Jacob confessed his deceit and sin to God. You do the same. Open up to God and unload the guilt.



3. **See that God is present and heaven is open.** You probably won't get a vision of a heavenly staircase, but you can still open your eyes and see that God is still present and heaven is open. God didn't leave Jacob, and he hasn't left you either. The connection to heaven and earth is still open. Look to the word of God. His word is stairs that remind us God is with us. He has not broken the connection to us!



4. **Listen to his promises.** God repeated his promise to Jacob to remind him they were still valid. He repeats his promises to you too. He reminds you of his Son sent to earth in human flesh. He lived a holy life on your behalf. He died on a cross for your sin and guilt (even the stupid things you do.) You are forgiven. The blood of Jesus Christ covers all of your faults, sins and their consequent guilt! Jesus is the sole reason that the stairs to heaven have not been removed!



5. **Forgiven and refreshed, move forward in confidence!** Jacob had a new spring in his step the next morning when he woke up. His circumstances hadn't changed. He was still separate from his family, walking alone 500 miles to find relatives he had never met. But now he knew he didn't walk alone. God was with him every step of the way. And he's with you too!



Friends go with peace, and a renewed excitement to serve God in your daily living. I pray this is in your heart as it was in Jacob's: "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." Friends, his love for you endures forever. Amen.

