

Jacob's Vow – Being Thankful
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Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that I come back to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God. And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God’s house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You. Gen. 28:20-22

One of the most enjoyable states of mind that a human being can feel is that of being thankful or grateful. It is a most wonderful feeling. It comes from realizing that someone has gone out of their way to care for us. It comes from realizing that some event went far better than it easily could have. A feeling of thankfulness comes from looking at what has happened. Can you remember the last time that you felt a strong sense of gratitude to another person? What prompted it? Can you remember the last time you felt a strong sense of gratitude toward the Lord? And what prompted it?

The focus of this sermon is on Jacob’s vow as he traveled from his home to visit his distant relatives. He was, in reality fleeing for his life. His older brother Esau had promise to kill him as soon as their father died, and they had finished mourning his passing. He was apparently traveling alone, with almost nothing to call his own. This is part of the context of his vow. In this vow he makes the promise to accept the Lord as His God and to give a tenth of all that he gains.

A cynical view of this vow would be to focus on it as a lopsided deal or bargain made by an individual with the infinite God of the universe. From this perspective, the vow seems to be saying, “Here is what I’m going to do for you God if you’ll help me.” I think we can all imagine the clutter of prayers that must go up to heaven along these lines. How many people have made similar promises, “God, if you let me win this lottery, I’ll give a portion of it to my church, or to care for the poor and needy.” We can imagine the possible deals. “Lord, I’ll give a tithe, ten percent.” The more enterprising person, recognizing the competition might try to offer a better deal, “God, let me win this five million dollars, and I’ll give you half.” If such deals with God really worked the way some seem to picture them, why stop here, most of us would be grateful for the benefits of keeping just 25% or 10% of a huge lottery prize.

While the Lord certainly cares about our financial welfare and what it allows or prevents us from doing, this, of course, is far from His primary concern. And it is His hope that wealth and riches won’t be our primary concern either. He calls us to reflect on higher and more lasting priorities, when we consider the needs and issues that we face in our lives.

Jacob’s vow, rather than being seen as an opportunistic deal with God, reflects something that each of us is called to do in our own prayers and life. When seen as a parable of each of our lives, his words become a powerful statement of an idea that can be a central part of a prayer or vow that each of us can make to the Lord. And through making this vow and living according to it, we do our part in cooperating with the Lord to receive the blessings that we desire. We do our part of the necessary process for us to feel grateful to the Lord.

Jacob made a vow as he contemplated his future. We too are called to think about what we want to have happen in our lives. The Lord asks us to reflect on what we are aiming at, to consider where we are going in life. We are invited to ask, “What do I want from the Lord?” We are invited to consider “What will be my part in receiving what I want?” There is a part of many people that dislikes this sort of reflection. It would rather keep us busy “doing real stuff” rather than spending time on this apparently ethereal thinking business. It says, “Do, do, do.” and isn’t particularly interested in a long-term perspective. It doesn’t like definition of goals and fundamental purposes. The Lord calls us to rise above this tendency. If our request of the Lord is, “Just do it.” His response is, “Can you be a little more specific?”

It is important that we define what we really want. And when we have defined it, the Lord invites us to keep it very near our conscious thought in daily life. It should stand as a guard or judge as we face the countless decisions of daily life. Our primary goal should screen and test the choice that lie before us, reminding us of our top priorities, lest we inadvertently work directly against our own long-term wants due to the illusory attractiveness of a short-term opportunity.

Definition of the highest priorities in our lives isn’t easy. The more natural and tangible a goal is, the easier it is to define and measure. By their very nature intangibles are harder to define--both in themselves and also the means of attaining them. If I say that I want to get a new car by this time next year, that is a broad tangible goal. I can then start mapping out the steps to achieving it. I can consider the financial requirements, the different models I could choose from and the different dealers at which I could make the purchase. But if I say that I would like to be more content with my lot in the future than I tend to be now, what are the steps to achieving this goal? Do I know what events most often arouse thoughts of discontent? Am I aware of the fundamental motivations that snatch up those events to produce discontent? What is the train of thought with its half-truths, mis-perceptions and downright falsities that give life and strength to discontent? Do I know what the primary battle will be to allow the Lord to bring about this change in my heart, mind and life? If we don’t seek these insights, the Lord will have difficulty bringing them to our conscious thought, and we will have difficulty do our part to bring about change.

Jacob, after his dream, took the stone that he had used as a pillow and set it up as a pillar and anointed it with oil. This anointed stone represents the truth that we have learned being given life and light through a desire to live a good and useful life. Reading from the teachings for the New Church:

One may see what was meant by the ancient practice when people poured oil on the top of a pillar, namely that truth should not be devoid of good but should be grounded in good, thus that good should rule, like the head on top of the body. For truth devoid of good is not truth but is a meaningless sound and the kind of thing that is reduced to nothing. In the next life it is so reduced even with those whose knowledge of truth or matters of doctrine concerning faith, and with those whose knowledge of matters of doctrine concerning love, has been superior to anybody else’s, if they have not led a good life and so have not out of a desire for good held on to truth. (*Arcana Caelestia* 3728:1)

Jacob’s vow was a tangible acknowledgement that the Lord potentially had a vital role in his future. In the internal sense this vow signifies “wishing the Lord to provide” (*Arcana Caelestia* 3732). This passage goes on to say, “within vows there is a desire and affection that what is wished for may come about, thus that the Lord may provide it.”

Jacob began his vow with the words, “If God will be with me, and keep in this way that I am going . . .” These words represent our acknowledgement that the Lord is continuously with us. We are told that He is doing millions of more things each moment of each day to care for us and best provide for our future happiness than we can possibly imagine. He is blessing us, caring for us, protecting us. Jacob spoke of God giving him bread to eat. This represents the warm heart, the sense of satisfaction, the fulfillment, the contentedness with our lot that Lord would like us to have and that He invites us to pursue. Jacob spoke of God giving him clothing to put on. This represents the understanding, insight, perception of what to do and how to do it, that the Lord would like us to have and that He invites us to pursue.

Jacob said these things are what he needed if he was ever to return in peace to his father’s house. Our father’s house, is the home of our heavenly Father, the Lord. For us returning to this home is receiving again and in far greater fullness some of the joys of heaven we have already tasted in our lives, with its sense of fulfillment and peace. Jacob vowed that if these things were provided, then Jehovah would be his God. When we have received what is represented by the bread and clothing, then we will truly know the Lord. We will feel His presence and we will be conjoined to or in a close relationship of love with the Lord in our daily concerns, thoughts and deeds.

Jacob promised if all this happened then the stone pillar he had set up would be God’s house. This stone anointed with oil represents living truth within our conscious thoughts, solid and strong, providing a foundation for all things. This is truly God’s house or the Lord’s kingdom in this world, in daily life.

Finally Jacob vowed if he received this care from the Lord then he would give back a tenth, a tithe, of all he received to the Lord. When all that is represented by this vow is fulfilled in our lives, our hearts and minds will be regularly drawn to an acknowledgement of the Lord’s role and presence in this result. We will want to give back to the Lord for all that He has given us. We will be truly grateful, truly thankful.

Jacob’s vow is a vow that we are called to make and live in our own lives. The Lord invites us to ask for the daily bread that we need. He calls us to reflect on the bigger enemies to our happiness, our usefulness and seek His help in defeating them. We have a part in receiving the daily bread and the clothing that we need to wear. As we do our part to seek first the kingdom of God we can be sure that the Lord will do His part and our hearts will be filled with the gratitude of genuine thanksgiving. AMEN

Lessons: Genesis 28:10-22, Matthew 6:19-34, *Arcana Coelestia* 3732:1

Genesis 28:10-22

¹⁰ Now Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ So he came to a certain place and stayed there all night, because the sun had set. And he took one of the stones of that place and put it at his head, and he lay down in that place to sleep. ¹² Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder *was* set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ And behold, the LORD stood above it and said: “I *am* the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. ¹⁴ Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all

the families of the earth shall 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 spoken to you.” ¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know *it*.” ¹⁷ And he was afraid and said, “How awesome *is* this place! This *is* none other than the house of God, and this *is* the gate of heaven!”

¹⁸ Then Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on top of it. ¹⁹ And he called the name of that place Bethel. . . . ²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, ²¹ so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God. ²² And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.”

Matthew 6:19-21, 25-33

¹⁹ “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also

²⁵ “Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? ²⁸ So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; ²⁹ and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, *will He* not much more *clothe* you, O you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”

***Arcana Caelestia* 3732:1**

“Jacob made a vow, saying” means a state of Providence. This is clear from the meaning of “making a vow” in the internal sense as wishing the Lord to provide; and therefore in the highest sense, in which the Lord is the subject, a state of Providence is meant. The reason why in the internal sense “making a vow” means wishing the Lord to provide is that present within vows there is a desire and affection that what is wished for may come about, thus that the Lord may provide it. Within them something of a bargain is present, and at the same time on our part something of a bounden duty to keep our side of it, should we obtain our desire. This was the case with Jacob, in that Jehovah was to be his God, and the stone which he placed as a pillar was to be God's house, and he would devote a tenth of everything He had given him, if Jehovah guarded him on the road, gave him bread to eat and clothing to wear, and he went back in peace to his father's house. From this it is evident that the vows made in those times were particular agreements, involving primarily a person's acknowledgement of God as their God if He provided them with what they desired, and involving also their repayment to Him with some gift if He did provide it.