

① 【There are many plans in a person's heart, but only the Lord's will is fulfilled】

Today, let's talk about Jacob, the elder who appears in the Old Testament. He is the grandson of Abraham and the son of Isaac. Jacob is called James in English. Isaac had twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Esau was the older brother, and Jacob was the younger brother. When he was born, he came out holding his older brother's heel, so he was named Jacob. The name Jacob comes from the word "heel." In other words, he was a competitive and proud person who liked to pull others down. Although they were twins and looked alike, their physical characteristics and personalities were completely different. The older brother became a strong hunter, while the younger brother was a gentle person who worked around the house. The father loved the strong older brother, while the mother loved the younger brother. Despite his gentle nature, Jacob harbored a fierce competitive spirit toward his older brother. One day, when his older brother returned home tired from hunting and asked for some of the stew his younger brother was cooking, Jacob bluntly said, "First, give me your birthright" (Genesis 25:31). The older brother replied, "The birthright is of no importance to me," and traded his birthright for the stew. It seems that the older brother valued worldly possessions more than God's blessings, perhaps because he was confident in his physical strength. Eventually, their father Isaac grew old and lost his sight. He called his eldest son Esau to inherit the estate and sent him out hunting. During this time, Jacob disguised himself as his older brother and deceived his blind father, stealing the inheritance. It was Jacob's mother who gave him the idea. Reading this part of the story, it's clear there were issues in this family. Even though God had foretold before the twins were born, "The older will serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23), the father ignored God's will and tried to bless the older son based on his own preferences, while the mother schemed to have the younger son receive the blessing. However, in the end, the lie is exposed, the brothers come to hate each other, and the trust between husband and wife is destroyed. Proverbs 19:21 states, "There are many plans in a person's heart, but the Lord's purpose prevails." Humans, unable to wait for God's work—that is, unable to trust in God—attempt to advance matters through their own schemes, but this only leads to confusion, and ultimately, only God's will is fulfilled.

② 【A dream of stairs reaching to the sky】

Jacob, who could no longer stay at home, fled to his uncle Laban (his mother's brother) in Haran. Jacob, who had always been spoiled, was now separated from his parents for the first time and had to embark on a long journey alone. He had no mother to protect him and no one to rely on. Behind him was the fear of his

brother, and ahead of him was uncertainty, making it a very lonely journey, I imagine. When he arrived at a certain place, the sun had set, so he decided to camp there for the night. He lay down with a stone as his pillow and had a dream. It is written, "There was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (Genesis 28:12). This is a highly symbolic dream. What does it mean? When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it. ... How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." (28:17) From his words, it seems that he was surprised to realize that the stairway to heaven was a means for God to descend to earth, and that he was in the closest place to heaven, the closest place to God, standing before the gate of God's house. He saw God's house in his dream. Even his grandfather Abraham or his father Isaac had never seen such an amazing dream. Such mystical experiences or encounters with God are not something one can simply choose to have. He must have had a religious sensibility, so God revealed Himself to him. People cannot encounter God while they are among others, but when they are alone, in the wilderness of life, they encounter God.

③ [Who are the people who inherit blessings?]

Furthermore, he heard God standing beside him and speaking these words: "I am the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I am the Lord. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are now lying. Your descendants will become as numerous as the grains of sand... All the nations of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants." (28:13-14) These are the same words of blessing given to his grandfather Abraham. Because he was to be the one to inherit Abraham's blessing. Furthermore, God promised, "Behold, I am with you. Wherever you go, I will protect you and bring you back to this land. I will never abandon you until I have fulfilled what I have promised you." (28:15) God is with him, God protects him, and God will surely bring him back to his homeland. He is never alone. Though he had sinned and been driven from his family home, God welcomed him into His own house. Though the door to his family home was closed, the door to God's house was open, and he realized that God warmly welcomed him. What Jacob needed was to recognize his sin and to know God's grace. Thus, Jacob was gradually transformed into the believer Israel.

Normally, Jacob, who committed a grave sin against God by deceiving his father and brother to steal their blessing, should not have been blessed. However, God blesses Jacob anyway. This teaches us that blessings are given unilaterally by God's mercy and are unrelated to human righteousness or sinfulness. It also teaches us that blessings are something that humans cannot obtain no matter how much strategy or power they use.

●At the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Ceremony on August 6 this year, Hiroshima Prefecture Governor Hidehiko Yuzaki clearly declared, “Nuclear deterrence is a fiction.” I think that's wonderful. Among politicians, there are foolish people who say, “It's cheaper to arm ourselves with nuclear weapons.” I can't believe they can say such things so casually. It's because they don't understand the depth of human sinfulness. Governor Yuzaki also stated, “Overconfident leaders, excessive ego, and the pressure of an excited populace. Or misunderstandings and errors have led to the breakdown of deterrence.” This is the sin of humanity. Those who experienced war have experienced the ugly sin within humanity to the point of disgust. That is why they know how foolish it is for humans to possess nuclear weapons. Knowing one's own sin—this is what is lacking in modern people. Even in seminaries, sin is not taught. In parishes, the concept of sin is no longer discussed. Those who do not know sin cannot understand grace and do not need Christ. The leaders of the world today are trying to obtain blessings through strategy and force, but they will achieve nothing.

This stairway connecting heaven and earth was a prototype of Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus said to his disciple Nathanael, "You will see greater things than these. ... You will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. (John 1:51) He was telling him that he would see that he himself was the staircase connecting heaven and earth. He is the only staircase leading to heaven because he is the one who came down from heaven to earth. He is the only one who can forgive our sins. Through this Christ, all blessings come down to us, and through Christ, we draw near to God. The church still has the stairway to heaven and, as God's house, accepts all sinners and bestows blessings upon them. When you come to the church, you are standing at the gate of God's house, in the place closest to heaven, closest to God. And the church, the new Israel, has inherited the same promise as Jacob: the Lord is with us, protects us from evil, and will surely bring us back to the eternal kingdom.