

## Jacob and the Ladder to Heaven – Fear, Claim, and Blessing

*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all!*

Dear brothers and sisters!

The topic of my sermon is: Jacob and the Ladder to Heaven – Fear, Claim, and Blessing. The biblical story is generally well known. In my sermon I am not only focused on the historical-traditional consideration of the biblical text. I am also concerned with the question of what meaning it has for ourselves, individually. However, I am even more interested in the question of what current and, indeed, political significance this biblical story has for me.

Out of the deep blue space of heaven, the ladder approaches Jacob. It reaches from the earth up into the Golden Yellow of an angel, the same size as Jacob. Angels climbing up and down the ladder and even fly beside the ladder. Jacob dreams. His head slightly tilted to the side. His hands folded together. His figure entirely painted in red. Since 1930 and until after the war, *Marc Chagall* was engaged for several decades with this biblical motif: the connection between heaven and earth, His conviction: The relation and communication between God and us, human beings does never break off. Despite all entanglement, passion, and guilt. Jacob's dream is also Chagall's dream of a new beginning—despite everything. A longing for peace and fulfillment.

What about our dreams and longings? Our yearning for love and the feeling of security. No longer fleeing from ourselves. Arriving finally. Coming to rest. Our longing that the heaven is standing open for us. That God's angels accompany and protect us. That God answers our prayers. The dream of a place where heaven and earth meet.

*Marc Chagall* merges in his paintings dream and reality, the conscious and the unconscious. Out of a deeply religious source of power. Its name: love. God's love and also human love.

For Jacob, the ground on which he dreams is holy ground. "*This is nothing else than God's house*"—in Hebrew: *Beth-El*. Seventeen kilometers north of Jerusalem. Equally distant from the West Bank, occupied by Israel since 1967. In the Bible, *Bethel* is the second most frequently mentioned place after Jerusalem. At that time, a junction of important routes running north-south and also east-west. The Bible reports that Abraham, on his way into the "Promised Land" of Canaan, pitched his tent and rested at this place. In the midst of foreign land which already a thousand years before Abraham has been a Canaanite settlement with the name *Lus*.

For more than three thousand years, unrest and wars have prevailed in the Near East. Similar to later times in the Caucasus or the Balkans. Here, again and again, a clash of cultures has erupted in dramatic ways. A collision of ethnic and religious interests. Egyptians, Phoenicians, Syrians and Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians and Romans—and in the middle of it all: Israel. To say that Israel "immigrated" into this region around 1200 BC is an harmless expression of what really happened. The land was not empty—nor North America was when the European settlers intruded there. The land had to be conquered and defended, piece by piece. And that is still the case today.

This region has always been a stage of bloody conflict, of war and displacement. A place where fear ruled: the fear of perishing. Ethnically, culturally, and religiously. A constant struggle to preserve one's own identity. The Israelite intruders in this region justified their claim to settlement by underpinning it with religion. It was no longer only about settling land, but about "Holy Land." And accordingly, about Israel as "God's people."

Anyone who questioned this claim was not just an opponent but a blasphemer, one who sinned against God. This is the very argument made today by the far-right settlers in Netanyahu's government. However, remember that long before the Israelites entered the region, Gaza was settled by the Phoenicians—the biblical "Philistines." The far-right settlers and the members in the Netanyahu coalition claim that the *West Banks* belong to what they say the "Greater Israel". They dream themselves back into the time of an Israel under King David and King Solomon when this region was named *Judea* and *Samaria*.

War again and again. Struggling to survive. Never again being defenseless. Never again delivered over to the mighty. But by now, Israel's politic is also about belonging to the mighty themselves, and about keeping others small and weak. About seizing the land of others, destroying their livelihood, and driving them out of their homeland. The Palestinian people regard themselves as victims of the Holocaust victims. *An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth*. Violating international law and human rights in order to fight terrorists. Terrible terrorists, indeed! Israel is still surrounded by people who are eager to destroy and extinguish Israel. Of course, Israel has the right to defend itself. And, yes with the help of the US. But can Israel rely on it? Everyone knows, even in Israel, that violence only creates new violence, and that terror will continue into the next and the next generation. "*Revenge is mine*," says God.

Is reconciliation possible at all? Yes. It is! And also peace is possible. But perhaps not possible only by limited human means. Because we are entangled in categories of violence and counter-violence. Because we are trapped in our fear of being among the losers. The Bible tells us that reconciliation and peace are only possible thru trusting in God. So to speak, with God as the moderator—or more precisely: as the “reference point”. As the third party to whom we can turn in our inability to enable reconciliation and to keep peace. God, as one who is greater than our irrationality. Translated into the current political situation: God as a *reference point* is greater than presidents and rulers in their delusions of grandeur.

More than ten years ago, I traveled to Kharkiv in Ukraine. In search of my father’s grave, who was killed in battle right there in 1943, almost in the same month I was born. Indeed, I found my father’s grave. On the edge of a small village. An old man sits on a bench. I sit beside him. I tell him why I came here. He is of the same birth year as my father. When we part, I say to him: “I ask you for forgiveness for all the suffering we Germans caused you.” He looks at me for a long time, nods his head, and replies: “And I ask you for forgiveness for the suffering we caused you.” At that moment, I knew what I had longed for my whole life: for this very moment, and in this very place. All who had traveled with me together with this old man and his wife, embraced each other and wept together, deeply moved by what had taken place. For me, it was a divine, a spiritual moment.

From my perspective, a core problem in the powder keg of the Middle East is Israel’s claim to be different from its neighbors. To be the “people of God.” To be chosen by God. Remember, only in this way could the Jewish people survive the countless pogroms in their history. Assimilating into the social and cultural environment and simply being like everyone else, was never a real option. Mere assimilation is still perceived by the majority in Israel and among Jewish people worldwide as a threat to existence. Israel as a religious-Jewish state is for them a guarantee of survival. But how does this match with a democratic system?

No “earthly power” can meet Israel’s claim to be chosen by God. The normal rules of politics no longer apply here. This is also justified by the biblical story of Jacob and his dream of the ladder to heaven. In the midst of foreign land, Jacob declares the piece of land on which Yahweh’s angels directly appeared from heaven as “holy ground”. From that on this holy ground was claimed by the following generations and effectively declared off-limits to everyone else. For all who are born into Jewish tradition and culture, into Jewish faith and history, this is nothing less than identity-giving and essential for survival.

How then, against this background, is peaceful, equal coexistence with others possible? Whoever can give the right answer holds the key to lasting peace in the Middle East.

Back to Jacob, the deceiver and dreamer, who in the story of the ladder to heaven and at this place Bethel becomes the blessed one. *“He took one of the stones of the place, put it under his head, and lay down to sleep. Then he had a dream...”* And then the story of the ladder to heaven is told. It ends with Yahweh’s blessing: *“I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants. Your descendants shall be as numerous as the dust of the earth. You will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south, and through you and your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed...”*

Then Jacob awakes and realizes that God himself has appeared to him in the dream and blessed him. Jacob is not only a dreamer but also his own interpreter of dreams. And Jacob makes a vow: *“If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey... and I return safely to my father’s house, then the Lord shall be my God...”* What an incredible presumption! Jacob has just received an unconditional blessing from God, and immediately he begins to negotiate some kind of deal with God. A contract of mutuality. One might even say: a contract on equal terms. A breathtaking thought!

In the Hebrew Bible, especially in the Psalms, it is God who shows his favor to humans on the condition that humans follow his commandments and trust his promise. But Jacob reverses this: **he** is the one who sets conditions for God. *“If I return safely to my father’s house...”* Jacob proves himself not only to be a liar and deceiver, who tricked his dying father and cheated his brother out of inheritance and blessing. He also has the audacity to impose conditions on God, when saying: I will recognize you as my God only on the condition that you are at my side and that I return home safely!

This very unusual and entirely one-sided contract is truly outrageous. But Jacob gets away with it. Just as he gets away with almost everything. He is bold, but also cheeky. He is clever, but also cunning. He dreams, but is no idle dreamer. He quickly grasps situations and interprets them on a deep level. And above all, he thinks of himself. - How is it that God loves someone like him and showers him with his blessing? Because God is free to give his blessing to whomever he wants.

And how is it that Jacob plays such a central role in Jewish tradition? Perhaps because of this *Chupze*. Because of this mixture of fearless, confident, and assertive behavior—without being disrespectful or aggressive. At the same time, this reveals a special relational dynamic between God and humanity,

expressed most clearly in Psalm 8: "... *What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You have made him a little lower than God and crowned him with glory and honor...*" Without God's love, human beings cannot live. And in many texts of the Hebrew Bible, it seems that God, in turn, needs the love of us, the human beings.

A remarkable correspondence, and one might almost say: a mutual dependence. Just as a child can hardly get along in life without the love of her or his parents, so too parents can hardly bear it if their child breaks off the relationship with them.

It is also remarkable that the blessing Jacob receives from God is not only a blessing for him and his descendants, but a blessing for all humanity: "... *Through you and your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*" Striking is in terms of grammar the indicative: Through you all the people of the earth will be blessed. There is no "shall," and no "conditional promise". Instead it is almost as if this blessing of Jacob is already spreading over the whole earth.

The idea that Israel is the "chosen people" of God, above all others, has always been offensive to others throughout history. The implicit devaluation of all others stirs up envy, anger and hatred. A provocation and a challenge. This is seen right at the beginning in the biblical story of the two brothers *Cain and Abel*. Later with *Jacob and Esau*. With *Joseph and his Brothers*. To love and to be loved – more than you. This is a good reason for drama on the interpersonal level and just as much a major intercultural, interreligious and political issue. How can hostile brothers become reconciled brothers? How can hostile nations become good neighbors?

As present-day politics show, peace and reconciliation seem hardly imaginable between Ukraine and Russia. And also hardly imaginable between Palestinians and Israelis, between Muslim Bosnians and Orthodox Christian Serbs, between Kurds and Turks, between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, and in many other places in the world. And yet: we have no other choice than to try again and again to seek peace and reconciliation among ourselves. Reconciliation between France and Germany after three terrible wars made it possible that in the entire Europe peace and prosperity could be accomplished. Also the entire Near East could flourish if people and nations stopped acting like masters over others and the fear of each other would end. If this is not possible through political will and wisdom we have no other choice than to trust in God, who gives us his love and plants within us the love for one another. It is up to us to nurture this hope and let love and peace flourish.

*Worship Service at Hannover International Worship, 21.09.2025 – Sermon Text: Jacob and the Ladder to Heaven, Genesis 28:10–19*

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