

Sermon for July 19, 2026
"Between Heaven, and a Hard Place"

Genesis 28:10-19

"Jacob called that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at first."(Genesis 28:19) "Bethel" - it means "House of God." When Jacob had his famous dream of angels going up and down a ladder he realized that he was in a special place; a holy place. He said, "This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven."(Genesis 28:17) It was a place where the power of God dwelt in a special way. So, Jacob called it *Bat El* or Bethel - God's House.

That, however, is not what he used to call the place. He used to call the place Luz. What does Luz mean? Well, I'm not sure. The Bible doesn't identify that name as meaning anything. Although the name Luz is spelled the same as the Hebrew word for almond tree, but neither the Bible nor Bible scholars find any meaning in that. So, for all practical purposes the place's name had no meaning, and that's fine because for Jacob it had been a meaningless place.

This is significant. This story is about God taking a meaningless place and giving it meaning. It was God who sent the angels, and it was God who gave the dream, so it was God who gave the place meaning: taking Luz, a meaningless place, and turning it into Bethel, the House of God. Centuries later, that place where Jacob slept became a center of worship for Almighty God.

So where was Jacob when all this happened? Geographically he was about ten miles north of Jerusalem, but where was he spiritually? I want to say that Jacob was between heaven and a hard place.

The hard place was the situation Jacob had gotten himself into. Jacob was on the run from his twin brother Esau who probably wanted to kill him, and for good reason. Jacob had lied and cheated to get what was rightfully Esau's as the firstborn. As you might remember, Esau had sold his birthright to Jacob for a "mess of pottage." This pottage was a red lentil stew; so basically, Esau had sold his heritage for a bowl of chili. Then Jacob had tricked his father Isaac into giving him the blessing that was intended for Esau. So, Jacob was running from his brother and running for his life. It appears that he had left in a hurry because he doesn't have any food or a change of clothes.

The place where Jacob spends the night is the epitome of his situation. He is out in the woods. After literally running all day to save his skin, he stops to rest. He doesn't have a sleeping bag or a cloak to roll up under his head so he lays his head on a rock. A rock is a "hard place" to lay your head, but that is where Jacob was: on the hard ground with a stone for a pillow.

So, where is the Heaven in this situation? Well, heaven comes in a dream. In his dreams, Jacob sees a vision of a ladder reaching to heaven, and angels, messengers from God, are going up and down that ladder. Then God appears to him and says, "I am the God of Abraham your grandfather and the God of Isaac

your father. The land you are on shall be yours, and your descendants will be as many as the dust of the earth. I will bless you and keep you. I, God Almighty, will take care of you."(Genesis 28:13-15)

You can imagine the impact this had on Jacob. There he was in a wilderness, running for his life. He is not sure where his next meal is coming from or whether his brother's men will catch up with him and kill him. Then God lifts him above all that with a vision of glory. Angels, messengers from God going back and forth from heaven.

Why are they going back and forth from heaven to earth? To do God's bidding. To care for God's people. To preserve Jacob so that God's promises to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and now Jacob will come true.

Jacob was between heaven and a hard place. His situation was hard - so hard he had to sleep on a rock, but God turned that hard place into a holy place. It would be remembered, not as Luz, the place where an exhausted and desperate Jacob slept fitfully on a rock. Instead, it would be known as Bethel, the place where Jacob had a vision of a ladder from heaven and received a promise from Almighty God. Not a place of desperation and loneliness, but a place of grace and God's holy provision.

Where are you? Sometimes we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place. Like Jacob, we are just one step ahead of trouble. The doctors shake their heads, the accountants say, "You will have to pay the taxes and the penalties," the mechanic scratches his head. Sometimes we are tempted to declare, "If it weren't for bad luck I'd have no luck at all." All the options in the situation are bad options. To left is trouble and to the right is trouble, and we feel the only way to go is down. We have all felt like our lives are being crushed between the rocks, but maybe we can also go up, if someone would provide a ladder, then we could rise above the situation.

Maybe it's really Heaven and a hard place that we are between, not a rock and a hard place. You know, our God takes pride in making the best out of the worst situation. That ladder that Jacob saw with God's angels running up and down is still here. God still provides for his people in order to fulfill his promises of salvation.

God can turn your Luz into a Bethel, a holy place, if you will allow it. Lift up your troubles to God. Let the Almighty, who is bigger than any of your problems, take care of you. If you are stuck between a rock and a hard place, God can create a ladder to heaven, and as with Jacob, God will take the hard times of your life and turn them into blessings.

Jacob saw a ladder from heaven that carried angels back and forth from Glory. I see that ladder too. Every day God's angels descend that ladder bringing blessings for God's people. They come bringing strength to faithful, but weary souls. Let them minister to you when you are forced to lay your head on a rock to sleep.