

## Surely, the Lord Is In This Place!

A sermon for week 2 of the "Shift" program

By The Rev. Kenneth J. Alden

1. "And Jacob awoke from his sleep, and he said, Surely Jehovah is in this place; and I knew it not." (*Genesis 28:16*)
2. From before birth, Jacob had clashed with his twin brother, Esau. (See *Genesis 25:22*)
  - A. He was given a name meaning "Supplanter" when he was born with a hand seizing the heel of the firstborn twin. (See *Genesis 25:26*)
  - B. As a young man, he took advantage of Esau's moment of weakness, and secured from him his birthright in exchange for a mere stew of lentils (See *Genesis 25:33-34*)
  - C. After Esau took two Hittite women as wives, at age forty, Rebekah, their mother, put Jacob up to stealing the blessing their father, Isaac, had intended for the firstborn son. (See *Genesis 26:34-27:29*)
  - D. Thus through cunning and deceit, Jacob obtained the birthright and blessing that belonged to the firstborn son.
    - 1 Clashing with his brother to obtain these came with a cost.
    - 2 Esau's hatred was aroused to the point of intending to kill Jacob.
      - a. So Rebekah arranged for him flee, leaving behind his future inheritance and all the things promised in the blessing he had stolen.
      - b. Thus all that he had gained by his conflict was his in name only, as he fled for his life.
      - c. As the story continues, we find him past sunset, assembling stones for a pillow to pass the night.
        - 1) Although we could dramatize the setting, viewing him as traveling alone, sleeping in a strange and uncomfortable place, it is likely that he had servants with him—for he came from a very wealthy family--and that he did what any person would do and placed a blanket or spare garment over the stones to soften them.
        - 2) Such details, however, are not included because they have nothing to add to the spiritual meaning.
          - A) It is the meaning of "passing the night" and using stones for pillows that is significant to the spiritual narrative.

- 3 From this much of the literal sense of Jacob's flight we can reflect on times when we may have been in a similar situation.
  - a. We may have fought for something we wanted—
    - 1) Perhaps getting our way in a family matter;
    - 2) Or securing an advantage for ourselves or our company in a business or legal matter;
    - 3) Or in a conflict within ourselves, justified our right to do something, think something, or cherish an attitude that is out of order or unjust.
  - b. Although we have gotten what we wanted in name, we have stirred such bad blood amongst family, colleagues, customers, or our own core values that we must abandon our gains or risk perishing socially or mentally.
    - 1) We find ourselves in a dark place, our head on a stone, without the enjoyment of our gains, and having an uncertain path ahead while things settle down.
3. During the night, Jacob had a remarkable dream.
  - A. He saw a stairway from earth to heaven, with angels going up and coming down, with Jehovah at the top. (See *Genesis* 28:12-13)
    - 1 The God of his fathers spoke to him from there, renewing the promise made to them and assuring Jacob that He would be with him and guard him wherever he went. (See *Genesis* 28:13-15)
    - 2 When Jacob awoke he expressed his amazement: "Surely Jehovah is in this place and I did not know it." (*Genesis* 28:16)
      - a. What an amazing shift in his perspective: from not knowing Lord was present to being certain of it!
    - 3 Might we find in our dark nights—in times when we have made a mess of our lives in order to secure the things we coveted, and our spiritual life seems on the verge of extinction—might we find that the Lord is actually present, though we did not know it?
      - a. Might we find that His promise for our future is undiminished and His assurance of the guidance of His Divine providence is unabated?
      - b. The Lord's love for our salvation, indeed, never ceases.

- c. His end of bringing us to heaven is never set aside.
  - 1) No matter what we have done, or what others intend to do to us, He does not forsake us.
  - 2) Even of those who crucified Him, He said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." (*Luke 23:34*)
  - 3) The Lord is even in this place, although we may not know it.
4. Turning now to the spiritual sense of this story, we find some remarkable contrasts between the literal meaning and the meaning the angels get when we are reading it.
  - A. In fact, there are multiple spiritual narratives, for there are three heavens, and the Lord speaks to each heaven in accordance with the love and wisdom of the angels there.
  - B. So the Jacob we know from the literal sense is not thought of at all by the angels of the highest heaven, but the truth in the Natural level of the Lord's mind when He was on earth and glorifying or making Divine His Humanity. (*See Arcana Coelestia 3657*)
    - 1 To the angels of the middle heaven, "Jacob" becomes the truth in the natural level of our minds as the Lord regenerates us to give us an angelic character. (*See Arcana Coelestia 3656-3657, 3659*)
    - 2 We will be following this level of the spiritual sense because it relates more closely to development of our spiritual life, which is the goal of the program the church is presently engaged in, called "Shift."
5. In the literal sense, Jacob fled because Esau had threatened his life.
  - A. In the spiritual sense, Esau represents goodness which bears no ill-will toward the truth that Jacob represents, but rather wishes only good towards it. (*See Arcana Coelestia 3605, 3607, 3610*)
  - B. But when we first start out in life, the truth we learn is influenced by the self-centered and worldly-minded loves into which we were born. (*See Arcana Coelestia 3610*)
    - 1 We learn truth to make ourselves smarter than others, to gain advantage over them, to secure the things we want for ourselves, and many other things that put ourselves and the world ahead of the neighbor and the kingdom of the Lord.

- a. Because we are using truth to *look* good and not to *be* good, this state is one in which truth is said to be in the first place and good in the second.
  - b. It is a state represented by Jacob's having the birthright unjustly and the blessing by deceit.
- 2 The goodness of the natural mind represented by Esau finds these self-centered ends repugnant and wishes them to be inverted and made heavenly. (See *Arcana Coelestia* 3605, 3607, 3610)
  - 3 To love the neighbor more than oneself, however, seems like death to the love of self that fired up our learning of the truth, and so the love goodness has for truth-that-is-properly-ordered is expressed in the literal sense by Esau's threat of murder. (See *Arcana Coelestia* 3610)
    - a. In reality, goodness wishes to bring real life to natural truth by bringing it under the government of a heavenly love. (See *Arcana Coelestia* 3610:3)
6. In the literal sense, Rebekah counsels Jacob to flee for his life, but in communicating with Isaac, the reason for his journey becomes to take a wife from among the daughters of her brother, Laban. (See *Genesis* 27:46, 28:1-2)
    - A. Spiritually, Rebekah and Isaac have to do with the higher, rational part of the mind. (See *Arcana Coelestia* 3619)
      - 1 Their desire for Jacob not to marry the daughters of Canaan pictures a desire for the truth represented by Jacob not to be united to affections for truth that are not heavenly. (See *Arcana Coelestia* 3620, 3662)
    - B. Isaac's ordering Jacob to "rise up" and go to Padan Aram where Rebekah's relatives live means a spiritual rising up to knowledge that is in parallel with what is represented by Rebekah—the Divine Rational truth . (See *Arcana Coelestia* 3663-3665, 3619)
      - 1 This knowledge or cognition, we are told in *Arcana Coelestia*, is the kind found in the stories of the Word.
        - a. We need to learn the stories of the Word because they parallel the truth within, which is Divine.
      - 2 We read: "These are cognitions which contain the Divine and which receive spiritual and celestial goods and truths into themselves because they represent and mean these." (*Arcana Coelestia* 3665:5)
      - 3 So what in the literal sense appears as Jacob leaving his family, his

comfortable life and his future inheritance while he flees for his life to a distant land and marriage to women he has never met, spiritually represents the next leg in our upward journey from earth to heaven that the Lord intends for each of us.

- a. So when things seem to be getting darker for us, the Lord is guiding us on an upward track, even though it has not been shown us that the Lord is in that place.
7. When Jacob found himself in an unnamed place after sunset, and gathered stones for pillows, the spiritual picture is of a state on an upward slope, but still in the obscurity represented by “night.” (See *Arcana Coelestia* 3691, 3693)
    - A. Although we may feel distant from the Lord when the spiritual sun has set on us and spiritually we are in the dark of night, the 139<sup>th</sup> Psalm reminds us,
      - 1 “If I ascend up into the heavens, Thou art there; and if I make my bed in hell, behold Thou art there. If I lift up the wings of the dawn and I inhabit the hindermost parts of the sea; even there shall Thy hand lead me, and Thy right hand shall seize me. ...Even the darkness is not too dark for Thee, and the night gives light as the day....” (*Psalms* 139:8-10, 12)
      - 2 The fact is, the Lord’s being Omnipresent means that there is no place we can be that He is not present in some way, and in fact, fully present, because He is Infinite and Eternal.
        - a. *True Christian Religion* assures us: “The Lord is present with every man, urging and pressing to be received....” (*True Christian Religion* 766)
        - b. Still we speak of the Lord as being more or less present, which is really only a reflection of our state of awareness and reception or non-reception of Him. (See *Apocalypse Explained* 815:12)
          - 1) So the Lord says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me.” (*Revelation* 3:20)
  8. One way in which the Lord is present with us, whether we ascend into heaven or make our bed in hell, is in our freedom.
    - A. We read in *True Christian Religion* “The Lord is present with us through our human freedom, in that freedom, and with that freedom, constantly urging us to receive him but at the same time never removing or taking away our freedom....Therefore you could say that our freedom is where the Lord dwells with us in our soul.” (*True Christianity* 498)

9. Another way in which the Lord is present, no matter what our state, is in His Word.
  - A. We can always pick it up and read it, or fall back on a verse or story that we learned long ago.
  - B. In fact, in explaining the words, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock," *Apocalypse Revealed* says,
    - 1 "This symbolically means that the Lord is present with everyone in the Word, and He presses there to be received." (*Apocalypse Revealed* 217)
    - 2 All we need to do is exercise our freedom, read the Word, open our minds to be inspired by heavenly life, and open our hearts to be moved to live according to the truth there.
  
10. Although the Lord is present in our freedom, we appreciate and feel His presence when we use that freedom to think according to the truth of the Word, will according to the goodness in it, and speak and act from that truth and goodness.
  - A. This is the basic meaning behind the Lord's saying, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them." (*Matthew* 18:20; *Arcana Coelestia* 2009:11)
  - B. The Heavenly Doctrine explains that "two" has to do with goodness, because of the idea of conjoining, and "three" with truth, while gathering in His name has to do with the worship of living a good life in keeping with the Lord's qualities. (See *Apocalypse Explained* 411:16, 696:3, 815:12)
    - 1 You could also think of the "two" who gather in the Lord's name as being our thoughts and intentions, our understanding and will, or our rationality and freedom.
      - a. When these are joined together in the Lord's quality, He is especially present.
    - 2 Add to these the speaking or acting according to such thoughts and intentions, and you have three gathered together.
  
11. Jacob's dream of a stairway was prophetic of where the step by step path of the Lord's Divine providence leads those who are willing to follow—to unreserved heavenly blessing. (See *Arcana Coelestia* 3698-3701, 3712)
  - A. Although we are not likely to be given such dreams in *our* states of darkness, *the Word* can open our minds to the fact that the Lord intends heavenly happiness for each of us.
  - B. Jacob's waking from his dream represents a state of enlightenment.

- 1 It is in such a state that we recognize what was there all along:
  - a. The presence of the Lord in our freedom
  - b. His presence in the Word,
  - c. And the promise of His presence when we hear Him knocking and open the door, gathering together our will, understanding, and deeds in the qualities of the Lord taught in His Word, that He may be in our midst.
  - d. When we allow the Word to shift our perspective, and especially as we begin to open the door to the enlightenment provided in the Word, we can exclaim with Jacob,
  - e. "Surely Jehovah is in this place; and I knew it not."
  - f. *Amen.*

Readings: *Genesis* 28:10-22; *Matthew* 18:15-20;  
*AC* 3701:2,4,5, parts.

***Arcana Coelestia* 3701.** [2] ...It is well known that a person is born into the same disposition as his parents, grandparents, and great grandparents, going back for centuries, and so into hereditary evil gradually accumulated by all those before him, so much so that there is nothing but evil in what he does when he acts from himself. As a consequence both his understanding and his will have been totally spoiled and of himself he does not will anything good at all and therefore does not understand anything true at all. That which he calls good, indeed believes to be good, is in fact evil, and that which he calls the truth, indeed believes to be the truth, is in fact falsity. Take, for example, loving himself more than others, wanting things to be better for himself than for others, desiring what belongs to someone else, and considering only himself and not others unless he himself will benefit. Because he desires these things of himself he indeed calls them good and also true. And what is more, if anyone harms or tries to harm these things which by him are called good and true, he hates him and is also filled with thoughts of revenge. He desires and also seeks that person's ruin, and

takes delight in this insofar as he actually strengthens such intentions in himself, that is, as frequently as he actually puts them into effect....

[4] To make a person new, cognitions are instilled into him such as are not completely contrary to those he has already - for example, the idea that all love starts in himself; the idea that one should consider oneself first and others only after that; the idea that those people who are outwardly poor and wretched should be helped irrespective of what they are like inwardly; and that similarly widows and orphans should be helped solely because they are called such; and at length the idea that enemies in general should be helped irrespective of who they may be; and also the idea that by acting in these ways one is able to merit heaven. These and other ideas like them are the cognitions proper to the early childhood of his new life. They are such that because they derive to some extent from his previous life, or the disposition belonging to his previous life, they also derive to some extent from his new life into which he is being led in this way. They are consequently such as allow into themselves things that contribute towards the formation of a new will and of a new understanding. They are the lowest forms of good and truth, and it is with these that people who are being regenerated start out. And because these lowest forms of good and truth allow more interior truths into themselves, that is, truths closer to Divine truths, falsities which a person had previously believed to be truths are also rooted out.

[5] People who are being regenerated however do not learn such things simply as matters of knowledge but as matters of life, for they practice those truths. But their practice of them has its beginnings in the new will which the Lord is instilling, though they are totally unaware of it. And to the extent they welcome that new will they also welcome those cognitions, put them into practice, and believe them....

### **Through The Week**

#### Recall the Story

- ◆ Fleeing Esau, Jacob camped after sunset.
- ◆ In a dream God, atop a stairway, promised to bless Jacob.
- ◆ When Jacob awoke, he said "Jehovah is in this place."

#### Reflect on the Message

- ◆ When truth rules good, it must change to serving it. This seems like killing it, so it flees for its life.
- ◆ In dark states, the Lord is still present, in our freedom and in the Word, pressing to be received.
- ◆ The promise of blessing the Lord holds out helps us realize that the Lord is present, though we did not know it.

#### Take Action

- ◆ Use the Lord's presence in freedom and in the Word to choose to read it, understand it, love it and obey it.
- ◆ Hear the Lord's voice and open the door.
- ◆ Gather two or three together by uniting the understanding of truth and the will of goodness and applying them to life.