

We are kicking off each Sunday in November with a generosity moment, talking about why we give and what happens when we give. Last week we said *giving brings joy*. We have regrets about lots of purchases and investments we've made, but when we look back at giving to God, to advancing his kingdom, and to helping others come to know Jesus, rather than regret, there is great joy! Today we want to focus on the fact that *giving brings gratitude*. This is Thanksgiving week, so focusing on giving thanks could not be timelier. When you give, it leads to people giving thanks. We read about this in 2 Corinthians 9:11: "Your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God." When you give to your church, kids grow up learning about Jesus, individuals and families in our community place their faith in Jesus, and we support mission work around our city, the country, and the world to tell people about Jesus. When that happens, whether right away or years down the road, there is thanksgiving to God. People not only thank God, but they also thank God for you! Look at 2 Corinthians 9:14: "In their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you." Not only do they thank God that someone gave to help them, but they also thank God for the people who helped them.

I have been the recipient of so much generosity throughout my life. My parents were generous to me. People in my college town were generous to me. When I moved for my first ministry with what could fit in my Toyota Corolla, people in that church were generous to me. People in this church have been generous to me. I am so deeply grateful. On a regular basis I look to those who have been so generous with me to say, "Thank you." When I am on my knees, talking to God, I am constantly thanking God for these people, and all the ways he has loved me through their generosity and kindness. God, thank you, thank you, thank you.

I know I'll never do this perfectly, but I hope to live my life in such a way that one day others can say the same thing about me in their prayers. "God thank you for loving me, thank you for blessing me. I have felt your love and your kindness through the generosity of Dan and his family." Wouldn't we all want to live that kind of life? Giving brings gratitude!

I love being a pastor, but there are a few occupational hazards that come with the job. One of those has to do with wearing a microphone. Even when it's not turned on for you to hear it out here, it's constantly sending a feed to the folks backstage and they can hear what's going on. A few years ago, after the sermon, I was in a truly worshipful moment. I was backstage, all by myself, singing with passion from the bottom of my heart. As I was leaving the building that day, one of the tech guys came up to me and said, "I loved your sermon, it spoke right to me. But, ah, next time we do an audition night for new singers on the worship team, no need for you to show up." That person is no longer on staff! Sometimes being watched is embarrassing; other times, it's life-saving. I have a friend who does security for a big-box store. He sits in a backroom, watching all the shoppers, making sure no one is stealing. One normal day at work, he was watching customers when the store was mostly empty, and a customer he was watching fell down and hit the floor. He was having a heart attack. Because he was watching, he called 911 and paramedics came and saved the man's life.

As we continue our study of the book of Genesis, we'll see that on several occasions, Jacob, who thought he was going through life all alone, discovered that he was not, in fact, all alone. God was with him, near him, watching him, providing for him. We'll also see the same is true in our lives. Last week, in Genesis 25, we learned about Esau and Jacob, twins who were wrestling and struggling

against one another, even in the womb. When they grew up, Esau, the older brother, who was ruled by his appetites, sold his birthright to his deceitful, opportunistic younger brother, Jacob. In Genesis 27, we see the continued struggle that exists in the relationship.

Their father, Isaac, was old, nearing his death, no longer able to see. This was 4,000 years ago. There was no cataract surgery back then, no Lasik, no glasses. He was basically blind. He knew his time was short, so he called his oldest son, his favorite son, Esau, and said to him, “Now then, get your equipment—your quiver and bow—and go out to the open country to hunt some wild game for me. Prepare me the kind of tasty food I like and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my blessing before I die” (Genesis 27:3-4). Esau went on his way, but Rebekah, their mother, who loved Jacob more than Esau, and was told by God when they were still in her womb that the older would serve the younger, told Jacob his father’s request, and they came up with a plan for Jacob to deceive his father and inherit the blessing.

So Jacob, with his mom’s help, prepared the sort of meal his father asked for, put on his brother's clothes, impersonated his brother as best he could, and because his father could not see, tricked his father into blessing him with the blessing of the firstborn. He stole his brother’s blessing! When Esau finally came in from hunting, his father realized that in his blindness he had been tricked. Genesis 27:33 says, “Isaac trembled violently.” He was shaking, because he knew the blessing could not be undone. Esau began plotting his revenge: “Esau held a grudge against Jacob...He said to himself, ‘The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother’” (Genesis 27:41). As soon as his father was dead, he would be out for blood!

Jacob had to literally run for his life. While he was on the run, he laid down and put a rock under his head to sleep at night. That evening, God spoke to him.

Jacob had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. 13 There above it stood the Lord, and he said: “I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. 14 Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. (Genesis 28:12-14)

In other words, “Jacob, you may be running for your life at this moment, but I am sovereign over your life and have plans for you. “You may have made a mess with your family, but I am sovereign over your family and am going to use your family to bless the world.” I love the way God concludes his message: “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (Genesis 28:15). “Jacob, no matter what happens in your life, no matter where you go or what you do, I will be with you and will watch over you!” What an incredible promise.

“When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, ‘Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.’ He was afraid and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven’” (Genesis 28:16-17). When Jacob woke up, he came to a profound realization: “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” This became a defining pivot point of Jacob’s entire life, when he discovered the nearness, the presence, and the goodness of God. No matter how difficult life got, no matter how alone he felt, God was always there, God was

always with him, whether I was aware of it or not. This dream from God was so important to him that “Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel (house of God)” (Genesis 28:18-19). That place had become sacred to him, so he consecrated it and gave it a new name so he would remember it always!

When Jacob made it to his destination, he found his uncle, a man named Laban, and fell in love with his daughter, Rachel. He asked to marry her. Laban said, “Yes, but first you need to work for me for seven years.” This is the first of many ways the conniving and deceitful ways Jacob acted toward others would be revisited upon himself. Jacob’s brother was driven by his overwhelming desire for food. Jacob said, “It’s yours, just give me your birthright.” Esau was out of his mind, so he agreed. Jacob was also driven by his appetite, by his overwhelming desire for Rachel, and his family member Laban, someone he should have been able to trust, exploited his vulnerability and said, “Sure, she’s yours, just give me seven years of your life!” Jacob did, and he was so passionate about Rachel that those years felt like days. When the wedding day finally came, they had a huge party, probably including a lot of alcohol, then it was dark because there were no lights in the ancient world—and just like Jacob deceived his father when he couldn’t see by pretending to be his brother, Jacob couldn’t see, and he was deceived! Under her father’s direction, Rachel’s older sister, Leah, pretended to be Rachel. Leah went into the tent and slept with Jacob on his wedding night. When sunrise came, he was in the fobby stages of a hangover: he had a headache; he was a little dizzy and nauseous. “When morning came, there was Leah!” (Genesis 29:25). He rubbed his eyes, did a double take, and then Jacob literally invented the phrase, “Lord, what did I do last night?!”

This set off a chain of events that would ripple through the next thirteen years of Jacob’s life. He eventually got to marry Rachel, but he had to work for seven more years! Just as there was sibling rivalry in his household, because he was always struggling with his brother, the sisters he was married to did the same thing, always struggling against one another, specifically over who could have the most children, which was how women in the ancient world found their identity and worth. Like Jacob’s grandmother Sarah, they had their servants sleep with their husband. This led to Jacob having twelve sons, who eventually became the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. This large family had constant strife, drama, and conflict. This portion of Jacob’s life was filled with constant disappointment and injustice. In that place of frustration, after years and years of hardship, God spoke to Jacob again in a dream at night. In that dream God reminded him: “Jacob, I am the God of Bethel” (Genesis 31:13). In other words, “Jacob, remember, you are not alone. Your eyes may not have seen it, but I’ve been with you every step of the way. No matter where you may go, no matter what you may do, whether you realize it or not, *I am with you.*” This is a stunning, revolutionary discovery about God’s heart for us. God is not distant. God is not disengaged. God doesn’t only show up for the highpoint of our lives. He is always there!

As I think about what this passage means for us today, there are three theological truths I want to draw attention to and three practical steps we can take.

First: *God’s presence is always with you.* When Jacob woke up from his dream he said, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it” (Genesis 28:16). This is the discovery God wants all of us to come to in our lives, that no matter where we are, God is in that place; he is with us! Most of us are not consciously aware of the Wi-Fi signals present in this room right now. But if you open the settings on your phone, you become aware of them, and can even access them. God’s presence is like that: always there. If we lift our eyes off our devices, off ourselves, off our busy calendars, off our

carnal way of viewing the world, we'll be alerted to his presence all around us. "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast" (Psalm 139:7-10). God's presence is with you everywhere! He's with you in your cubical nine to five. He's with you at the 3 a.m. feeding. He's with you in the school pickup line. I know some of you are tuning into church right now from your hospital room. He's with you there! CS Lewis says it like this: "We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade, the presence of God. The world is crowded with Him. He walks everywhere incognito. And the incognito is not always hard to penetrate. The real labour is to remember, to attend...In fact, to come awake. Still more, to remain awake." The world is crowded with God; we need to come awake and stay awake!

Second: *God's presence is based only on grace!* Jacob did nothing to deserve God's presence. Jacob did not earn or merit God's presence. Jacob was not moral, ethical or righteous, either before his dream or after his dream. He was a deceiver, a conniver, a self-promoter. He divided his family, he harmed other people, his own brother wanted to kill him. And yet God still pursued him, spoke to him, and promised to use him. None of that was based on Jacob's character. It was all based on God's character and based on grace. That's how God works. The Bible says God chose Jacob before he was born, as a simple way to prove to us that God's kindness is not based on works, but based on grace. Think about Peter: he stumbled again and again. He denied Jesus three times. When Peter saw Jesus again, he expected Jesus to reject him, but Jesus restored him. Not by work, but by grace! We can't earn salvation, and we can't earn God's presence! His presence is a gift.

Third: *God's presence is here through Jesus.* God allowed Jacob to see his presence through that dream. Heaven was opened and there was a portal to earth where the angels were making their way up and down, showing God's activity and involvement here in the world and here in our lives. When Jesus began his ministry, when he was calling his first disciples, he said: "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man" (John 1:51). In other words, Jesus was saying: "The ladder Jacob dreamed about was always pointing to me. I am now the portal between heaven and earth. I am the ultimate and final way that God has entered the world, to fill the earth with his presence." Every other religion in the world is based on what we can do to climb up the ladder to heaven, but Christianity is based on what God has done to climb down the ladder to come to us. Jesus is the ultimate way that heaven has broken into this world, and he is the only way from this world to heaven! "Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'" (John 14:6). Jesus is the ladder, the way God's presence has come to us, and the way we can come into God's presence.

Those were three essential theological truths; now let's look at three practical action steps.

*Look around*—Name your current situation honestly. Jacob was exiled from his family, running for his life, alone, and laying down in an open field in the middle of nowhere. Look around and take note of where you are. Are you in a season of abundance? Is your body healthy? Is your marriage healthy? Are your kids healthy? Are your heart and mind healthy? Are your relationships healthy? Maybe you are not in a season of abundance but a season of scarcity. Maybe you're in a drought, experiencing depression, or debt, or a diagnosis, or a divorce. I know several of you have lost someone you love recently; you're feeling the sting of death. No matter what season you may be in, look around to take note of where you are.

After looking around, *look up*. Ask God to open your eyes to the ways he is presently at work in your life, where heaven is open and he is active, where God is speaking and moving. He wants to meet you if you are single and he wants to meet you if you are married. He wants to meet you in your infertility, he wants to meet you in raising your kids, and he wants to meet you with struggling kids. He wants to meet you if you have millions of dollars in the bank and he wants to meet you if you have millions of dollars of debt. No matter where you are, he wants to meet you! After Jacob woke up from his dream he said: “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven” (Genesis 28:17). No matter where you are in life today, God wants you to be able to say, “God is in this place! This is the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.” That is the reality, we just have to open our eyes to see it! Colossians 3:1-2 says, “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.” We want to ask God to train our hearts and our minds to be less focused on the superficial and increasingly sensitive to the sacred. God, show us where you are and how you are at work.

After we look around and look up, we must *look back*, building memorials so we don’t forget God’s faithfulness. After Jacob saw the ladder and became aware of God’s presence and activity in his life, he picked up the rock, set it up as a pillar, poured oil on it, and named the place Bethel—the house of God. He set up a stone not only to celebrate and commemorate what God had done, but also to remember what God had done. Later in his life, when he was in a moment of trial again, what did God say? “Jacob, I am the God of Bethel” (Genesis 31:13). “Remember that Rock? I am the God who is closer to you, who is more aware of you, and who cares more for you, than you can even imagine.” Don’t forget God’s grace. When he shows up in your life, mark it, commemorate it, and memorialize it, so that next time you get disoriented by life, you have a landmark, set in concrete, firm and secure, to remind you of God’s goodness and grace.

The ultimate landmark we look back to is the cross. Jacob saw a ladder where God came down. We look to the cross, the ultimate portal between heaven and earth, where Jesus descended to the ultimate depths, to the lowest of lows, so that our sins could be forgiven, so that we could be saved, and so that we could be near to God, not just in this life, but for eternity.