

- The way the preaching schedule turned out, this week was not the best week to begin a new series of messages. Next week will be *Survivor Sunday*—the day we celebrate how God has gloriously shown himself **to and in** a bunch of young people with the rest of the Body helping them focused on serving him by serving others in His name. The definition of “the rest of the **Body**” is again, wider this year with folks from other churches joining in.
- So, when I have just a single week like this one in the middle of stuff, I usually talk briefly about the **values** of FBC (*biblical, free grace and missional*) or sometimes a subject that is front and center in my ruminating on Scripture and what God is up to in FBC.
- This time, the focus of the daily Bible teaching for *Survivor* is “*taking note of what God is up to.*” As Mary has been working on the 9 lessons she will teach, she has asked a number of folks from the Body to reinforce that in different ways. I think I am supposed to have an opportunity to help in one of the interview sessions.
- So, the idea of, “**noticing**,” has been bubbling about in our minds, our discussions and also in many current circumstances of our life.
- It is an idea that readily connects, in a **positive** way, with the Apostle Paul’s more negative admonition for the Ephesian Church *to wake up to see what God is really doing on His redemptive mission* beyond their limited earthly plans and purposes in the church of *Ephesus*.
- Of course, *Mary’s* lessons will all be reinforced with **positive** illustrations and **positive** exercises around paying attention—**noticing**—in order to see God working while walking around in life.
- On the other hand, like the Apostle in the letter to the *Ephesians*, my thinking usually sends me in a more **negative** direction so that I think about a **deficit of noticing** that needs repair and the need to call God’s people to that deficit.

- Of course, that is not because I am a **negative pessimist**. It is because I am an **optimistic realist**. I should always admit to you I am a **realist** because the person whose life I know best, no matter his good intentions, still tends to be imperfect.
- This reality means that one of the things I like best about many OT narratives is their *"tell-it-like-it-really-was"* honesty.
- The OT topic of **Noah** came up in a discussion this week. *"Oh, wasn't Noah so wonderful in how he trusted God and was saved from the flood?"* My reply: *"Before you make Noah into the moralistic example of a perfect hero, read the rest of his story. He had a bit of an issue with the 'sauce.'" The Word of God does not hide his imperfection. In fact, there is a big theological point to notice about God being at work even in spite of or because of that imperfection.*
- My favorite honest OT character portrayal is that of **Jacob**. That's the Jacob as in Abraham, Isaac **and** Jacob—as in the third of the great **Patriarchs** of God's OT chosen people. That's Jacob, who ultimately is renamed **Israel** which becomes the name of God's chosen people.
- This is the same Jacob who is a *deceiver, a trickster, a schemer, even a slick liar* to his vulnerable old father and his own twin brother.
- Jacob's nickname became *"heel-gripper", i.e., "tripper-upper of others"* remembering when he grabbed his twin's heel at birth as if he were trying to be born first and be the *winner*.
- Jacob is **no example** of a man of **perfect virtue** that God chose to use, and then did use, in his plan because Jacob was so naturally a *good and godly* man. Scripture is very honest about Jacob and his human flaws. *(Thank you, LORD for your Word that is truth-telling, and reality revealing so that we don't have to make things up in a fake manmade religion of self-righteousness to cover for you).*

- Because of his relational sins—his lying, his scheming, his selfishness—Jacob experienced the God-given *consequences* of a messed-up relational life even as he became a Patriarch of God's OT people.
- BTW: In the NT from **Romans 1**, we can see that this resulting, painful **mess** is likely an example of **God's temporal wrath on all unrighteousness** Dix preached about a couple of weeks ago.
- **NOW**, I should say that I have emphasized Jacob's imperfections as a Patriarch not so we can go, *"Whew! I guess it doesn't matter how sinfully I live my life, God can still use me."*
- That is true. God can still use you even if you live like Jacob, but it does matter. God can use my life and bless me with the **rewards** of a life that reflects him or He can use my life while, at the same time, expressing his **redemptive wrath** toward my sin. It is my choice.
- That way God works parallels what he told his OT people and had them teach it by shouting from two mountain tops. Choose my **blessings** or choose my **"cursings."** You will be my people either way. Either way, I will use you in my plan, **but** your life experience will be very different based upon your choice of how you live that life.
- ***I bring Jacob to our attention, not as an excuse to live sinfully. Rather, Jacob is in focus as my go-to example about paying attention, or "noticing," what God is up to even when life is a mess—and even when life is a mess because of our own choices.***
- ***In Genesis 27, beginning at verse 41***, Jacob's life is indeed in a big mess because of his sin. However, it is a mixed-mess because he also still seems to want to do what his Father Isaac says—*sometimes*.
- At different times, that **inconsistency** could describe my life. My sin has made it a mess but I still desire to do what my **Father** wants me to do.

- Let me read a long section of God's Word **beginning at Genesis 27:41** and on into the verses that have more to do with noticing God even in a mess—yes, even in a mess of one's own creation.

Genesis 27:41 **Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob."** (You probably know the backstory of all of Jacob's brotherly cheating and deception to steal this valuable blessing)

<sup>42</sup> **When Rebekah was told what her older son Esau had said, she sent for her younger son Jacob and said to him, "Your brother Esau is consoling himself with the thought of killing you. <sup>43</sup> Now then, my son, do what I say: Flee at once to my brother Laban in Haran. <sup>44</sup> Stay with him for a while until your brother's fury subsides. <sup>45</sup> When your brother is no longer angry with you and forgets what you did to him, I'll send word for you to come back from there. Why should I lose both of you in one day?"**

<sup>46</sup> **Then Rebekah said to Isaac, "I'm disgusted with living because of these Hittite women. If Jacob takes a wife from among the women of this land, from Hittite women like these, my life will not be worth living."**

(It seems Jacob may have had an experienced teacher of deception and scheming in Rebekah. His mom hid her own schemes behind the manipulation and deception of her husband. She manipulated God's good desires using them to get her own selfish desires)

**28 So Isaac called for Jacob and blessed him and commanded him: "Do not marry a Canaanite woman. <sup>2</sup> Go at once to Paddan Aram, to the house of your mother's father Bethuel. Take a wife for yourself there, from among the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother. <sup>3</sup> May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. <sup>4</sup> May he give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may**

**take possession of the land where you now live as an alien, the land God gave to Abraham.”<sup>5</sup> Then Isaac sent Jacob on his way, and he went to Paddan Aram, to Laban son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, who was the mother of Jacob and Esau.**

**<sup>6</sup> Now Esau learned that Isaac had blessed Jacob and had sent him to Paddan Aram to take a wife from there, and that when he blessed him he commanded him, “Do not marry a Canaanite woman,”<sup>7</sup> and that Jacob had obeyed his father and mother and had gone to Paddan Aram.<sup>8</sup> Esau then realized how displeasing the Canaanite women were to his father Isaac;<sup>9</sup> so he went to Ishmael and married Mahalath, the sister of Nebaioth and daughter of Ishmael son of Abraham, in addition to the wives he already had.** (Brother, Esau already had two *Canaanite* wives against his dad’s desires and warnings from God. He was going to fix that by adding another wife in a manipulative way. What a family!)

- There is already a whole bunch of appropriate sermon applications from this text. However, so far, we are only looking at the *setting*—the *mess* in which Jacob finds himself because of his own doings.

Now we come to a familiar story which is the point for this morning...

**<sup>10</sup> Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran.<sup>11</sup> When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep.**

- I’ve been trying to buy a comfortable pillow from Amazon. I bet some of you may have received one of my many returned pillows if you are also shopping for a pillow. They may have used rocks for pillows, but I don’t think Ancient Israelites had harder heads than we have now. The point is that Jacob’s mess means he is in a wilderness without much comfort—not even a nice, comfortable pillow.

**<sup>12</sup> He 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>**

**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. <sup>15</sup> 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."**

- Some of you more *charismatic* folks might be excited about this dreaming part. I dream sometimes. Mine are never this well-defined or very spiritual. Can God speak in dreams? Sure! God could turn off gravity if that were his will.
- Does God speak in dreams to us? Probably not nearly as much as people like to claim.
- You know that my contention is Jacob did not yet have the Word of God that he could *"nail to his door posts and teach to his children when they got up and when they went to bed"* as Moses will later record as a command to the Israelites.
- We **DO** have the Scriptures. Properly interpreted and applied they tell us more than we could think or imagine on our own—more than we could dream. But let's move on since this is not a sermon on dreams...

<sup>16</sup> **When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, *"Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it."*** <sup>17</sup> 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."

<sup>18</sup> **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.** <sup>19</sup> He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz.

<sup>20</sup> Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear <sup>21</sup> so that I return safely to my father's house, then the LORD will be my God <sup>22</sup> and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth."



- ***Ah! The uncomfortable stone had another purpose all along.*** What Jacob thought was a *last-resort rock-pillow* was, in fact, an altar of worship to the LORD of all creation. Funny how we see things often isn't how they really are. Funny, that often in our human *hubris* we are certain that we are seeing things correctly when we are not.
- *"That's a pillow. No, it isn't a pillow it's an altar to God!"* That's a cursing—that's a failure! No, it is actually an altar to God. We just don't see it...we don't **notice** that reality.
- The pillow in the story is just a hint at the message—i.e., the theology here for Jacob—for Israel—and for us. It is Jacob's own exclamation that best teaches the clear lesson.
- ***"Surely the LORD is in this place and I was not aware of it."***
- There. That's my message. That's my sermon. That's my point. Even in the messy life of Jacob—made messy by his own fault, the Lord was still faithfully working his redemptive plan.
- The Lord was making promises that he would keep perfectly to work through *messy, imperfect* Jacob in accomplishing His perfect, eternal redemptive plan.
- At this point in his journey to becoming ***Israel***, Jacob the *heel-gripper* hadn't often **NOTICED** God working in the self-made mess of his life. But none-the-less God was indeed working to accomplish His plan—not *Jacob's* plan not *Rebekah's* plan not even Father *Isaac's* plan or even grandpa *Abraham's* plan.
- ***Jacob hadn't noticed that uncomfortable rock-pillows were sometimes actually the altars of worship in his life.***
- For those of us who might have **FOMO**—or the "*fear of missing out*," this story might only serve as a sad commentary on how much God is doing that we can still miss out on in life simply because we don't **notice** he is there working in spite of our messes.
- For those of us who know the rest of the story of ***Jacob who becomes Israel***, we know that this story is actually a positive, pivotal

point in the torturingly winding journey of a *heel-gripping* Jacob to a *God-gripping* Jacob-become-Israel.

- This supernatural nudge from God, through a dream, begins the awakening of Jacob to **NOTICING** that God is indeed working and keeping his promises even when life is a mess—AGAIN, maybe even by his own fault—and even when rocks feel like bad pillows instead of Holy altars.
- Believing what I believe about how God will supernaturally work most always through his living word—*Scripture*—in our day, I believe this particular part of *Scripture* can be a *supernatural nudge* for some of us to begin **NOTICING** God more—or maybe **NOTICING** better.
- By “*better*” I mean by noticing God at work even if what we see is not always easily identified as God’s work—even if our *noticing* is clouded by our own messes we can make in our lives.
- ***On a very positive note***...It was this *noticing* that, for Jacob, began to shift his trust from his own schemes to a trust in the promises of God. It was a long halting journey for Jacob, but eventually, in *Genesis*, we find him leaning on a staff, an old man knowing God has always kept his promises and always been at work the whole time.
- Of course, Jacob would have enjoyed the whole journey more had he trusted God *perfectly* along the entire path—but which of us humans can profess to do that *perfectly*?
- So, as Mary teaches **NOTICING** to the *Survivors* this week, maybe we can all be inspired to do some more or better **NOTICING** of God at work.
- Maybe rather than so often exclaiming ***“Surely the LORD is in this place and I was not aware of it...”*** after the fact, we can proclaim we believe God is present and keeping all his promises perfectly in the midst of our circumstances—even messy ones.
- In other words, we will recognize that the uncomfortable *rock-pillows* of our lives are actually often *holy altars of consecration* of



our lives—of worshipping God by trusting God—by **NOTICING** He is at work.

- Fact of the matter is, if I had the time, I think I could show us that **ALL** rock-pillows are actually potential altars of worship.
- I know this because, for example, some of the closing words written to believers in the church of *Thessalonica* are brought to mind speaking this truth...as he closed his that letter, Paul prayed for them things such as the following...

<sup>5:16</sup> Be joyful always; <sup>17</sup> pray continually; <sup>18</sup> **give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.** <sup>19</sup> Do not put out the Spirit's fire; <sup>20</sup> do not treat (the) prophecies (the revealed and taught truths) with contempt. <sup>21</sup> Test everything. Hold on to the good. <sup>22</sup> Avoid every kind of evil.

<sup>23</sup> May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> The one who calls you is *faithful* and **he will do it.**