

GOD'S PROMISE TO JACOB

CORE PASSAGE: GENESIS 28:10-22

Context: Genesis 25–36 depicts God’s ongoing faithfulness to Abraham’s descendants, seen first through his son Isaac and then through his grandson Jacob. Despite manipulative and deceitful schemes to obtain both his brother’s birthright and his father’s blessing, from the womb, Jacob was the one chosen by God to receive the covenant promises passed down from Abraham and Isaac. God’s work in and through Jacob’s life reminds us that God uses and works through sinful people and unfavorable circumstances to accomplish His will.

Key Concept: God is present with His people, faithful to His promises, and deserving of our worship.

DAILY READINGS

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| ☐ Day 1: Genesis 28:1-22 | ☐ Day 4: Genesis 32:1–33:20 |
| ☐ Day 2: Genesis 29:1–30:24 | ☐ Day 5: Genesis 34:1–36:43 |
| ☐ Day 3: Genesis 30:25–31:55 | ☐ Day 6: Psalm 25 |

The Lord is faithful to His promises, even when we are not (Genesis 28:10-15).

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ He reached a certain place and spent the night there because the sun had set. He took one of the stones from the place, put it there at his head, and lay down in that place. ¹² And he dreamed: A stairway was set on the ground with its top reaching the sky, and God's angels were going up and down on it. ¹³ The LORD was standing there beside him, saying, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your offspring the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴ Your offspring will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out toward the west, the east, the north, and the south. All the peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵ Look, I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go. I will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

God Appears in Unexpected Places

A lot has happened in the years since Esau sold his birthright to Jacob in Genesis 25. At that time, Isaac was 80 years old. Now he is perhaps 100 years old (Gen. 27:1). Since then the family had experienced a few things: a famine that caused them to relocate to the Philistine city of Gerar, which ended badly when Isaac deceived the king (26:1-11); a rather nasty conflict with the Philistines over wells and water rights (vv. 12-22); another forced relocation to Beer-sheba (vv. 23-33); a bitter relationship with Esau's two pagan wives (vv. 34-35); and Jacob's stealing—under the influence and scheming of his mother, Rebekah—the blessing of

Voices from CHURCH HISTORY

“There is no need to pass through years of penance, of hard labor, and of trial; the gospel is as free as the air you breathe.”²

–Charles Spurgeon
(1834–1892)

his old, blind father, Isaac, that was intended for his brother (27:1-40).

This later event caused such resentment that Esau swore he would kill his brother Jacob (v. 41). This caused Rebekah to hurriedly send off her favorite son to live with her people in Haran (vv. 42-45). So after Isaac blessed his son, Jacob headed off for Paddan-aram (28:1-9).

The statement in Genesis 28:10 that “Jacob left Beer-sheba” begins the story of Jacob in his own right. He was headed “toward Haran,” following in reverse the route his grandfather Abraham had taken over a century earlier. Jacob was headed to his mother’s brother, Laban, on a journey of several hundred miles that would take him several weeks.

How have you experienced separation and isolation on account of sin and circumstances?

Jacob, probably on his second night out based on the distance traveled, “reached a certain place.” He happened to camp for the night in the hill country right where his grandfather Abraham had pitched his tent, built an altar to the Lord, and called on the Lord’s name many years earlier (12:8). Jacob was unaware of the connection and merely stopped for the night “because the sun had set” (28:11). The threefold repetition of the word “place”—“a certain place,” “from the place,” and “in that place”—foreshadows that there is something more significant going on. In fact, this significant word “place” will occur three more times in verses 16-19.

Jacob fell asleep and “dreamed.” In the Bible, God often communicated His revelation through dreams. Jacob had not been seeking God; in fact, he was flee-

ing from his home where the true God was worshiped. But God took the initiative, and in the midst of Jacob's scheming and deceptive way of life, God showed him an alternative future.

What Jacob saw in his dream involved three things—"a stairway . . . set on the ground with its top reaching the sky," "God's angels . . . going up and down on it," and "the LORD standing there beside him." Each of the clauses becomes shorter and shorter and narrows the focus from the setting, to the participants, to the Lord.

The Hebrew word translated "stairway" occurs only here in the Old Testament and can refer to a ladder or to a flight of stairs, as in the approach for climbing a ziggurat.¹ In the pagan cultures of that time, a stairway symbolically was pictured as enabling the dead to ascend from the underworld to heaven. The bottom of this stairway "was set on the ground" and "its top reaching the sky." This recalls Genesis 11 and the Tower of Babylon, or Babel, when humans tried to build "a tower with its top in the sky" (11:4). The difference is that the humans at Babylon tried to build a tower into the heavens, whereas here the stairway comes down from heaven to earth. Revelation always comes down from God and not from humans trying to reach the heavens.

The angels Jacob saw in his dream are first stated as ascending the staircase before descending it. But the imagery pictures the traffic as two-way. The imagery suggests they were bringing information from earth to heaven and then descending to implement God's plan on earth (cf. Zech. 1:8-17).

Jesus alluded to this account in John 1:51 when Jesus surprised Nathanael by saying He had seen him

CHRIST Connection

Jacob dreamed of a stairway connecting heaven and earth with angels ascending and descending upon it. Jesus declared that He is the connection between heaven and earth, God and humanity (John 1:51). Jesus is the way to the Father, and for those who believe in Jesus, the Father is present with us.

Voices from THE CHURCH

“The Bible’s covenantal story leads us to [Christ]. Christ alone can secure our salvation, and in him alone are the covenants fulfilled.”⁴

–Stephen Wellum

when he was under a fig tree. Jesus told Nathanael, “you will see heaven opened and angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” Jesus’s point was that His greatness as the promised messianic Son of Man was far greater than the patriarch Jacob’s. In fact, He is the new Bethel, the true “House of God.” Further, Jesus is the new and true Israel, to which Jacob’s later name change pointed as a type of Christ. And Jesus is the true stairway to God—“the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

The third element of the vision was the Lord—the covenant God, Yahweh—who “was standing there beside” Jacob. The word “beside” here in Hebrew could mean that the Lord was standing “above” the stairway, thus stressing His exalted sovereignty and the One the angels were reporting to and returning from. On the other hand, the expression may also mean “beside” or “nearby,” as in Genesis 18:2 and 24:13, expressing the intimacy of the situation. This third image—the Lord’s presence—is what is most important.

God Reaffirms His Promises

When the Lord addressed Jacob, He said, “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham, and the God of Isaac” (28:13). The first phrase identified the Lord as the covenant God, Yahweh. Next, the Lord promised Jacob that He would indeed fulfill the blessing Isaac stated in 28:4 and which God had first promised to Abraham: “I will give you and your offspring the land on which you are lying” (v. 13). This reassured the unmarried Jacob that Isaac’s blessing upon him would come to fruition. Indeed, the word “offspring” occurs three times in verses 13-14.

God’s elaboration on His promise in verse 14

repeats His promise to Abraham in 12:3. First, Jacob's offspring "will spread out" to all four points of the compass—"the west, the east, the north, and the south." There will be so many of them that they "will be like the dust of the earth."

Even more poignant was the Lord's words "all peoples of the earth will be blessed through you and your offspring" (v. 14). The man who craved a blessing and practiced deceit to obtain it would himself become a source of blessing, not only to his own family but to "all the peoples on earth"!³ God's plan, which would involve universal significance (12:3; 28:14), was not to be defeated by human action.

The Lord concluded by making four specific promises: to be with Jacob, to protect him on his journey, to bring him back to his homeland in Canaan, and to not leave him. The initial words "I am with you" is the promise upon which all the others are based. The promise made to his father, Isaac, in 26:24 is now made to Jacob. It is the promise that has sustained, strengthened, and encouraged God's people throughout the ages (Gen. 26:3; Ex. 3:12; Pss. 23:4; 46:7,11; Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23; 28:20; Heb. 13:5). The words also reaffirm to Jacob that it was not up to him to fulfill God's promise—this was the Lord's doing.

From God's presence, the Lord secondly turned to His protection: "[I] will watch over you." And that protection would extend "wherever you go." The words must have been meaningful to Jacob, not knowing what lay ahead. This did not mean that Jacob would not experience conflict, trials, or difficulties, as his experiences with Laban will bear out in chapters 29–31. But it did mean that God would watch over him and be with him in all his coming situations.

Third, the Lord promised, “I will bring you back to this land.” Ironically, the Lord promised the man fleeing from his land that He would give him that very land. Indeed, in chapters 32–33 and 35, the Lord did bring Jacob back, just as He had promised.

Finally, the Lord promised not to abandon Jacob: “I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (28:15). These words were an assurance that the promises God just made would be fulfilled. Surely Jacob felt abandoned that dark night, alone, fleeing from his home and family. What a comfort this word from the Lord must have been to him.

The promise of the Lord to His children is that they have One who declares, “I will never leave you or abandon you” (Heb. 13:5)—and that this is true even if we have been responsible for creating our own messes.

Why is it significant that God bookends His promises with assurances of His presence?

The Lord’s goodness toward us deserves our worshipful response (Genesis 28:16–22).

¹⁶ When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he said, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.” ¹⁷ He was afraid and said, “What an awesome place this is! This is none other than the house of God. This is the gate of heaven.” ¹⁸ Early in the morning Jacob took the stone that was near his head and set it up as a marker. He poured oil on top of it ¹⁹ and named the place Bethel, though previously the city was named Luz. ²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow: “If God will be with me and watch over me during this journey I’m making, if he provides me with food to eat and clothing to wear, ²¹ and if I return safely to

my father's family, then the LORD will be my God.²² This stone that I have set up as a marker will be God's house, and I will give to you a tenth of all that you give me."

Worship Is the Right Response to God's Presence

When Jacob woke up from his dream, it was a stark awakening—"surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it" (v. 16). What had seemed to Jacob, in his ignorance, a simple and ordinary place to camp for the dark night, actually turned out to be "the house of God."

While God is omnipresent—in all places at all times—there are certain places where He is present in a special way. Moses learned this in Exodus 3:5, as did many others in Scripture.

Realizing he was camped in "an awesome place" that was "the house of God" and sleeping at "the gate of heaven," Jacob rightly "was afraid" (Gen. 28:17). This is the first reference to "the house of God" in the Bible and occurs hundreds of years before Israel arrived at Mount Sinai and received instructions to build the tabernacle (Ex. 23:19; 34:26). But the phrase here does not refer to a physical building, a literal house, nor to a place where God lives. Rather, it speaks of the close relationship between the physical and spiritual dimensions.

Based on the vision in his dream, Jacob also called this place "the gate of heaven" or "the gateway into heaven." He saw this place—again note the threefold repetition of the keyword "place" in verses 16-19—as a portal where heaven and earth opened to each other. God's realm and the human realm, while separate from each other, are not closed off from one another.

This is the only time this phrase “the gate of heaven” occurs in the Old Testament.

Jacob’s reaction to this encounter with God was that he was afraid. Abraham and Isaac did not react in fear when God revealed Himself to them (Gen. 12:1; 17:1; 22:1; 26:2), but fear was Adam’s reaction to God’s presence after he sinned (3:10). Jacob already was afraid of what his brother planned to do to him. He probably was afraid of what lay ahead in Paddan-aram. But now he was afraid because he had encountered Someone to fear even more.

The biblical term “fear,” however, is two-sided. On the one hand, it refers to terror; on the other hand, it refers to reverence or worshipful fear (Ex. 3:6; 19:16; Ps. 2:11). The latter is what the writer of Hebrews felt necessary to remind Christians to express in their service to God (Heb. 12:28-29).

To mark this place as a shrine, Jacob took the stone he had placed near his head, set it up as a pillar monument, poured oil on it to anoint and consecrate it (Lev. 8:10-12; cf. Ex. 25-29), and named the place “Bethel,” or “house of God.” Jacob will repeat the consecration and reaffirm the name of this place on his return journey more than twenty years later in Genesis 35:14-15. The standing stone would stand out to any passerby because it would have been purposely placed that way for a specific reason.

How have you experienced God’s faithfulness, and how might you remind yourself to worship God in response?

Giving Back to God Is an Act of Worship

Verses 20-22 seem to read as if Jacob tried to make a bargain with God—if God would cause him to prosper materially, then Jacob would make the Lord his God and worship Him. While this is the course of action we often try to take with God—bargaining—such was not the case with Jacob.

First, notice the solemnity of Jacob’s words: they are identified as a “vow.” In fact, Jacob’s vow is the longest in the Old Testament. Making a vow in the Bible was an extremely serious matter. To break a vow is a sin (Deut. 23:21-23; see also Num. 30:14-15; Prov. 20:25). Ecclesiastes 5:5 warns, “Better that you do not vow than that you vow and not fulfill it.”

Second, Jacob’s series of “if” statements in verses 20a, 20b, and 21 are based on the commitment and guarantee the Lord already had made to him in verse 15. In this context, then, Jacob’s “if . . . then” statements should be read as “given that” statements. Jacob was committing to reciprocate to the Lord in these ways for the Lord’s blessings on him. God’s revelation and promises to Jacob had changed the trajectory of Jacob’s life. He had been fleeing for his life and given an assignment to find a wife. Now he will continue on that same journey but with God’s promise of divine aid, protection, and blessing.

God had promised to watch over Jacob (Gen. 28:15), so Jacob expanded that in a very practical way in verse 20—that he would be provided with food and clothing. Then when Jacob returned safely to his father Isaac’s household, the Lord would be his God (v. 21; compare Jacob’s earlier statement in 27:20). Jacob, in fact, kept this vow. On his return, he consecrated

THEOLOGY Connection

STEWARDSHIP:

According to the Scriptures, Christians should contribute of their means cheerfully, regularly, systematically, proportionately, and liberally for the advancement of the Redeemer's cause on earth.

Bethel as a place for worship for his people and worshiped there himself (35:14-15).

At the end of his vow in verse 22, Jacob switched from speaking about God in the third person to speaking to God in the first person: “and I will give to you a tenth of all that you give me.” This is the only tangible part of Jacob’s vow. The grasper now promises to be the giver. Tithing would be part of Jacob’s worship at the Lord’s house. But this vow to tithe would only be made possible because of what God would do in blessing Jacob. Jacob would give back to God out of what God had given to Jacob. In this act, Jacob was following the example of his grandfather Abraham, who paid tithes to the priest-king Melchizedek (14:20). The particular form of the verb Jacob used may indicate Jacob’s vow referred to a regular practice and not to a one-time offering. Such a regular practice of tithing—of giving one-tenth of one’s income to the Lord—became a law under the Mosaic covenant regulations (Lev. 27:30; Num. 18:21-32; Deut. 14:22; Mal. 3:8-12; Matt. 23:23) and is still practiced by many Christians today.

Jacob experienced God’s revelation, His watchful care over him, His protective presence, and His many blessings. Because of this, Jacob responded in consecration, commitment, and devotion. Because of his encounter with God, Jacob became a different person, even though early that morning, he packed up and continued on his journey—just as we must do every morning.

How does the gospel of Jesus compare to this interaction between God and Jacob?



HEAD

What does God's covenant with Jacob teach us about God's character, His faithfulness in particular?



HEART

What in your life competes for your affections and draws you away from worshiping the God who is present with and faithful to His people?



HANDS

Because of all that God has done for you in Jesus Christ, how will you respond in worship and obedience?

Notes

References

1. John H. Walton, *Genesis*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 571.
2. Charles H. Spurgeon, "A Free Salvation," *New Park Street Pulpit Volume 4*, June 11, 1858 (Kansas City, MO: The Spurgeon Center; Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017), <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/a-free-salvation/#flipbook/>.
3. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18–50*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 242.
4. Stephen Wellum, *Dispensational or Covenantal? The Promise and Progress of Salvation in Christ*, Desiring God, February 21, 2023, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/dispensational-or-covenantal>.