

Jacob was still not one who was won over to showing the same kind of blind faith that his grandfather Abraham had shown, or the obedient faith of his father Isaac. He wanted proof that God was going to look after him well beyond the one night near Luz! He therefore made a vow. It sounds a very holy thing to do, and to some extent it was, but it was still a contract that worked on the principle of proof; 'if You, O God, do what you have promised for me, then I will do ...' This kind of vow might be helpful in circumstances when we are unsure of the Lord's will, but in this case, God had spoken to Jacob directly, so Jacob was starting from the premise that God might not fulfil his promise! His scepticism was not yet removed!

Jacob promised that as his side of the bargain which he tried to arrange with God, he would accept the Lord as his God, if the Lord provided for him and kept him safe until he returned. Again, this is proof to us that at this point in time; Jacob did not fully accept the Lord as his God! Still, Jacob also promised that he would build a temple of some kind to the Lord at Bethel, and would 'give one tenth to you' the tithing principle of offering to the Lord that was exemplified by his grandfather Abraham (14:20).

The physical journey that Jacob was about to embark upon was far more extensive and challenging than he knew, but so was the spiritual journey that he had started. He had begun a path of faith, but it would be a long time before he was in a position to fulfil the vow; though in God's providence, he would.

Application

The dream of Jacob is a fascinating story in Scripture, and one that reminds us in a graphic way of God's desire to break into our world in order to achieve His purposes. In Old Testament times, this happened only occasionally as God appeared to great people; forefathers, kings and prophets, and led them through their lives. He did this most frequently to those who were of His chosen people, but not always. In New Testament times, God broke into the world through His son Jesus Christ, and then more extensively by His Holy Spirit through the Christian church which now extends the realm of the Kingdom that Jesus has begun on earth, as a foretaste of the glory of Heaven. The angels ascending and descending was an Old Testament foretaste of the connection between heaven and earth that exists for us now in Jesus Christ.

Possibly the most important part of this text is the description of what can only be called the beginning of Jacob's journey of faith. Some people are like Abraham, and find blind faith easy or natural. Some are like Isaac, and exercise faith quite happily through being faithful and obedient. Yet others are like Jacob; they need to test God out and travel an extensive road of spiritual experience before coming to the place where they will accept the call of God. Initially it seems as if they are asking for God's attention on their own terms, but as we shall find out, God accepts this starting point, but he never accepts a relationship with anyone on this basis. It was something Jacob would have to discover, and it is something many people have to discover today. Jacob's life story is one that many people could learn from today!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What was your understanding of the vision of the angels ascending and descending before reading this study? What do you believe it means now?
2. If you have access to a Bible Dictionary or Concordance, look up the town Bethel, and try to find out some more about its history in the life of Israel.
3. Is making a vow a helpful way of dealing with our journey of faith today? What can we learn about this kind of 'bargain' with God, if anything?

Discipleship

Measure yourself against the categories of faith that have been identified in the Bible study as belonging to Abraham (blind faith) Isaac (faithful obedience) and Jacob (sceptical faith which needs proof). Also, ask yourself if you have any prejudice against anyone who has a different experience of faith to yourself? This can be very damaging within the church, yet God worked through all three within the forefathers, to bring His people into existence!

Final Prayer

Help us, in the midst of all that happens to us each day, to stop and give thanks to You, Lord God, for your sustenance and power; Your spiritual and physical sustenance, and the heavenly power by which everything we hold dear is embraced by Your love and care. AMEN

Prayer

Jesus, we worship You. May our words honour You, and may the way we speak together with our mannerisms and movements, convey to others the eternal values of love, integrity, hope and charity by which others know we are people to be reckoned with because we follow You. We ask this not for our own gratification, but for the sake of the eternal Gospel of truth. Help us we pray, Lord Jesus; AMEN

Further Suggestions for Prayer

Weekly Theme: The world of Advertising

Please pray today for the role that advertising places in all our lives. We wish to sell something, so we place an advert in the paper, for example, or on the internet.

Pray for all who are caught out by dishonesty because of the way that some use this facility for evil in our midst, and pray against the use of advertising for so called 'sexual services'.

Meditation

Lord God and Father, Creator and Lover of all Creation,
Show us the truth about the troubled world in which we live;
What are its prospects? what is its future and destiny?

Jesus Christ, unique and unsurpassed Saviour of the world,
Uncover the truths hidden within our minds and unlock our souls
Why is our strength so weak, our hearts so hard, our minds so fixed?

Holy Spirit, powerful wind and comforter divine,
Blow away the filth and reveal the truth to those who seek You;
Come sweep away the greed which keeps the world entrapped,
Destroy the enemy's strongholds in us and within the church
And show the world that God is love, is strength, is authority,
Is miraculous power, is life's eternity and everlasting hope!

Come, great Spirit, Come, Lord Jesus,
Come Almighty Father, Come!

Bible Study - Genesis 28:10-22

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and set out for Haran. ¹¹ He came across a place marking a boundary at the side of the road and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. He took some of the boundary stones and placed them around his head and lay down there to sleep. ¹² He had a dream in which there was a ladder standing on the earth and with the top reaching into heaven; and the angels of God were climbing up and down on it. ¹³ And the LORD stood beside him and said, 'I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; I will give the land on which you lie to you and to your descendants; ¹⁴ and your children will be as plentiful as the dust on the ground, and you will spread out to the west and the east and the north and the south; and all the families of the earth will be blessed in you and in your children. ¹⁵ Look, it is I who am with you and will look after 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.'

¹⁶ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it!' ¹⁷ He was afraid, and said, 'This place is awesome! This is no less than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!' ¹⁸ So Jacob got up early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and mounted it as a pillar and poured oil over it. ¹⁹ He called that place Bethel (meaning 'house of God') but the city's name was previously Luz.

²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow and said, 'If God will be with me, and will keep watch over me wherever I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear, ²¹ so that I return to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, ²² and this stone, which I have mounted as a pillar shall be God's house; and out of everything You give me I will certainly give one tenth to you.'

Review

This is a well known passage, and it is one of those scriptural texts which are both immensely human and spiritually awesome. Jacob's vision of angels ascending and descending is unique in Scripture and has inspired artists for thousands of years. Jacob had been sent away by his parents to find a wife from the family of his great-grandfather Terah, and been instructed to find the house of his mother's brother Laban (27:43; 28:2). At this point of his own spiritual journey, Jacob was doubtless aware of the faith of his father Isaac and the Covenant of which he was the guardian, but his own faith was under-developed; as when he spoke to his father about 'your God' (27:20). Although a man of nearly forty years of age, he had not yet accepted the faith of his father and did not appear to have a relationship with God. His father had prophesied the Lord's Covenant blessing on him (28:3,4), but whilst Jacob had deceived his father to obtain his blessing, he gave no indication of understanding the spiritual significance of the Covenant.

This did not stop God working powerfully in Jacob's life! Immediately he left his parents home, the Lord began his work of bringing Jacob to a place where he would be worthy of the Covenant blessing! As Jacob came one evening to a place where a boundary was marked (a detail we will examine later on), he re-arranged the stones to protect himself. As he slept, he had a vision of angels ascending and descending on a ladder. This was remarkable, for thus far in Scripture we have only ever met one or two angels going about the Lord's business (16:7f.; 19:1f.), but here, Jacob saw many of them, and then the Lord addressed him personally!

God said to him 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac ...' awe-inspiring words given only to a few such as Isaac (26:24) and Moses (3:4,16f.). God then gave Jacob his personal guarantee of the Covenant (28:13,14), but it remained a promise. Jacob would have to learn how to accept, and the last part of what the Lord said indicated that Jacob would have to travel some distance before He would complete his side of the bargain and fulfil the Covenant blessing (28:15).

Upon awakening, Jacob was immediately aware of the significance of the dream, and set up one of the stones he had used as a marker not of a boundary, but of special experience. He made a vow that if God fulfilled his promise and gave him safety in his travels, then he would build a temple there ('God's house' – see v22). This shows that Jacob was still not wholly committed to the Lord, but testing Him. He did not respond to the revelation with obedience or worship, but a bargain. Jacob was only prepared to accept the Lord if He did what he wanted however reasonable that was! This was the start of a long a complex relationship between the Lord and Jacob through which Jacob would have to be broken before he would truly be the Lord's servant worthy of the Covenant. It is a reminder to us that we often treat the Lord in the same way; yet the Lord is always drawing us, like Jacob, to deeper obedience.

Going Deeper

There are plenty of details within this text which are of great interest. Going deeper we will find out about the meaning of the boundary stones and the angels going up and down the ladder; none of this was co-incidence! The Covenant Promise itself was also extended by the Lord, and the bargain that Jacob asked of the Lord is very important for the future of Israel.

Setting out for Haran

The previous Scriptures in Genesis 27 and 28 explain why Jacob was on this private and lonely journey. He had been central to a deceitful incident that had torn apart his family, and both his father and mother decided that for his own good and the stability of the family unit, he should leave and go to Mesopotamia, to Haran (28:10) where he should find himself a wife from the family of his mother's brother, Laban (28:2). Now, if this was to be the way that Isaac's son would find a wife, it stood in stark contrast to what happened when Abraham sent his most senior servant to find a wife for Isaac (Gen 24). On that occasion, the heir apparent stayed with his father, and a wise and trusted servant went to Haran with a rich and glamorous camel train to negotiate for Rebekah to become the next matriarch in Abraham's family line. Now Jacob left the family home for his own safety, alone and apparently without even a tent within which to sleep at night. He was the pampered favourite son of his mother who needed to learn something of real life if he was to become a man.

Jacob travelled north from Beersheba, and his journey to Mesopotamia in the far north and the regions of Haran would have taken many days, being several hundred miles. On his way he would have travelled through large sections of Canaan, the 'Promised Land' of the Covenant

God had made with his father Isaac and Grandfather Abraham (13:14-18). Our passage describes what happened on one of the nights of this journey, at a place we now know as Bethel (28:19) 50 miles north of Beersheba, in the middle of Canaanite territory. Jacob came across some stones that marked a tribal boundary, a common sight in those days, but because it is not something we are familiar with today, it is often translated as 'a certain place'.

Jacob had already shown that he was a somewhat irreligious man (see above) and his next actions typified this. Boundary stones (clearly referred to in the Hebrew of v11) were set up in honour of the gods of the tribes to whom the boundaries belonged, and were regarded as sacred. Jacob had the temerity to take them down and arrange them around his head as a form of night protection from wild animals. Old translations of the Bible such as the Authorised Version have 'under' his head – hence the wrong idea that he used the stone as a pillow! Nevertheless, the tribes-people who would have set up these stones in the first places would have said curses against whoever moved the stones (there are many ancient records of such treatise) and this may have been playing on Jacob's mind as he went to sleep.

The Vision

The general popular beliefs of the day were that angels protected the different tribes within their own agreed areas, and Jacob had gone to sleep on a boundary within Canaanite tribal lands after having dismantled a sacred boundary marker and (according to beliefs of the day) upset the local gods! It is in this setting that Jacob had his famous dream of angels ascending and descending to heaven on a ladder! Some believe the angelic activity represented a fearsome picture of Jacob's unsettling the local deities by his dismantling of the sacred stones. This is not in fact a negative picture, but a positive one. Unknowingly, Jacob had done something very significant; by doing this, he gave the Lord a chance to break into a small part of the Promised Land and to make an appearance to him at this very place. The angels could be the Lord's angels coming into the Promised Land from heaven and the demonic angels of the local deities departing!

In verse 13, it says 'the Lord stood beside him ...' and then spoke to him a new version of the Covenant Promise. On this occasion, God identified the Promised Land as 'the land on which you lie', He promised Jacob not just many descendants as he had done to his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham before, but more specifically, many 'children' (28:14,15). Abraham and Isaac had only passed the Covenant on to one child, and at some point, these small families had to come to an end and the inheritance pass on wholesale to large numbers of children and their generations; this was to happen to a fearful, lonely and somewhat sceptical Jacob!

In addition, the Lord's appearance to Jacob was a powerful mystery. The Hebrew word 'beside' him (28:13) could equally mean 'above', 'alongside', 'around', or 'adjacent' or anywhere 'near' him. From the point of view of the Hebrew text, the Lord was all around him, protecting him! God's very actions were a fulfilment of his promise that he would 'be with' Jacob wherever he went, the crucial Covenant blessing that God gave to his people irrespective of their deserving!

Upon waking

It was the presence of the Lord that Jacob remembered from his dream; 'Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it!' were his reported words; and it was not the details of who the angels were that bothered him, but the fact that he had seen them ascending and descending! To him it was proof that God Almighty was present at this place, and his response was to do something that was highly provocative in his own day. Setting up a cairn of stones and anointing it with oil (28:18) was a formal way of staking a claim to a piece of land. Jacob unilaterally claimed this piece of the Promised land as belonging to him and his descendants!

The first piece of the Promised Land that was owned by God's people was the field of Machpelah at Mamre which Jacob's grandfather Abraham purchased as a burial ground for himself and his wife Sarah (23:9; 25:9) from local inhabitants. Jacob's actions were far more rash; the Scriptures record for us that the place Jacob slept was near a city called Luz, and the boundary stones would therefore have been an outlying marker for the city boundaries. Jacob called the place 'Bethel' meaning 'house of God', but as happened in many parts of the Promised Land, in future years both names were used for the same place (see Joshua 16:2; Judges 1:23,26). Bethel became very important in later years to the religious life of Israel because of its association with Jacob and this famous experience (see Judges 4:5; Amos 5:5). It was the first religious experience that Jacob had, and it affected him deeply.

Jacob's vow