

**Genesis 27:46-28:22**  
**Jacob's Encounter with God**

Isaac had been resting contentedly and sleeping off a good meal. He felt his work was done and now he could rest with his fathers. The burden had been lifted and the torch had been passed. Esau had returned home from his hunt tired, hot, and sweating but proud of his kill. He had cleaned himself up after seeing to it that the meal was being well prepared. Perhaps he even noticed some of his clothing were missing, but he probably thought nothing of it until later. After all, he anticipated only the best. He had no reason to be worried or on his guard. His father had been grooming him, and the time had come for Esau to come into his own.

However, Rebekah had been listening. And she had heard. Having put her plan into action, now she was trying to look busy while again she listened, this time for news from Jacob, whom she had sent into her husband's tent smelling and feeling like Esau in the hopes of stealing the patriarchal blessing. When Jacob emerged, he told her of his success. They both breathed a sigh of relief that they had accomplished their goal, but both of them must have known that the act of Jacob stealing Esau's blessing would eventually be discovered. For the moment they were satisfied, but they both knew that sooner or later, both Esau and Isaac would realize what had been done.

**Rebekah Changes the Subject**

Rebekah tried to preempt the confrontation. Hoping to change the subject and distract Isaac from an unwelcome conversation about how Jacob knew Esau was about to be blessed, and where Jacob had procured the meal and why it was that he felt and smelled like Esau, Rebekah complained to her husband, "I am tired of living because of the daughters of Heth; if Jacob takes a wife from the daughters of Heth, like these, from the daughters of the land, what good will my life be to me?" (v. 46).

Rebekah may have even believed that such a complaint might be helpful in justifying why Jacob deserved the blessing she had helped him to steal. It also provided a convenient excuse for sending Jacob away to Paddan-aram to find a wife from Rebekah's brother Laban. Abraham had sent only a servant to acquire a wife from his extended family, and yet Rebekah wanted to send Jacob, himself, on the journey. Having just received the blessing, Jacob was now the more valued member of the next generation, and no doubt Isaac would have been reluctant to part with him so that he could undertake a potentially dangerous expedition. The purpose of Rebekah's complaint was intended to convince her husband that no mistake could be made in the selection of a wife for Jacob.

All involved understood that the future of the family would be determined by the wives these twin boys choose. From these wives would come the next generation of the family. Esau had already chosen Hittite wives (Genesis 26:34), and that choice had not endeared him to his parents. Now Rebekah used those women as an excuse to justify sending Jacob away, so that his choice of a wife would be appropriate. After all, Jacob was now the one who possessed both the birthright and the blessing.

### **Jacob Leaves and Esau Marries**

Convinced, or maybe simply resigned (it seems Rebekah had no small measure of control over her husband), “Isaac called Jacob and blessed him and charged him, and said to him, ‘you shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan’” (v. 1). The language used to describe Isaac calling in Jacob replicated that of his earlier calling in of Esau (Genesis 27:1). Curiously, Isaac said nothing about Jacob’s stealing of the blessing. Perhaps Isaac recognized the event as the will of God. Perhaps he just knew nothing could be done about it.

Moving quickly to his point, Isaac said “arise, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel your mother’s father; and from there take to yourself a wife from the daughters of Laban your mother’s brother” (v. 2). Isaac was familiar with the process. His own wife had come from there. Jacob, too, understood what was being asked and why. To take a wife from a near relation was not at all unusual in these times. Indeed it would later be commanded in the Law under certain circumstances (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). And Jacob was to take a wife from his mother’s family, not his father’s. He was marrying his cross-cousin, not his parallel-cousin. This meant that the the endogamy practiced was not so close a relationship as to cause undue concern.

Having given the command, Isaac then renewed the blessing. “<sup>3</sup>May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. <sup>4</sup>May He also give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your descendants with you, that you may possess the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Abraham” (v. 3-4). Isaac recognized here his role as transmitter of the divine promise and blessing. The God of Abraham had revealed Himself to, and promised to be with, Isaac (Genesis 26:24). Now that same promise was passed on to Jacob.

Isaac invoked the name of God Almighty, *El Shaddai*. This was a reminder of Abraham’s encounter with God (Genesis 17:1), when God changed Abram’s name to Abraham and inaugurated the covenant of circumcision. Surely Isaac had been told the story many times as he grew up. Now he reminded his son, Jacob, of that particular name of God.

Isaac also reminded Jacob that he was an alien, a sojourner in the land. Like his father, and grandfather, Jacob had been promised the land in which he now dwelt, but he had not yet come to possess that land fully. That Jacob was still referred to as a sojourner, is made more meaningful by realizing that he was the second generation of Hebrews born in Canaan.

The blessing renewed, “Isaac sent Jacob away, and he went to Paddan-aram to Laban, son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, the mother of Jacob and Esau” (v. 5). It is difficult to imagine the emotions at their parting. Rebekah, so anxious to save her favorite son Jacob, is not recorded in Scripture as ever seeing him again. Isaac must have still been somewhat bitter the treatment he had received at the hands of his wife and his son, but still Jacob was his son and now the bearer of the birthright and blessing, and thus the hope for the future. What Esau thought of Jacob’s departure we can only speculate, but surely he had mixed feelings at best.

So, after Jacob left, Esau pondered his options. No longer the son to whom the blessing would be given, he had to consider what he was to do. Jacob was gone, but it was expected that he would return within a few months with his new wife. Hence, Esau brooded. “<sup>6</sup>Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan-aram to take to himself a wife from there, and that when he blessed him he charged him, saying, ‘you shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan,’ <sup>7</sup>and that Jacob had obeyed his father and his mother and had gone to Paddan-aram. <sup>8</sup>So Esau saw that the daughters of Canaan displeased his father Isaac” (v. 6-8).

First let us notice, by the way, that Esau was not concerned that his marriage displeased his mother; it was only his father’s feelings that mattered. And one might wonder if, only now, Esau recognized that his ill-chosen marriage partners had displeased his parents. It is difficult to believe that the conversation had never come up in the presumably many years since Esau had brought his wives home. Nevertheless, in an attempt to try to redeem himself, “Esau went to Ishmael, and married, besides the wives that he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham’s son, the sister of Nebaioth” (v. 9).

Esau married the daughter of his paternal uncle, Ishmael. Thus, Mahalath was his parallel-cousin, again in contrast to Jacob, who was being sent to find a wife from among his cross-cousins. It seemed as if Esau was trying to make things right by choosing a wife from a close family relation. In his mind, selecting a wife from his father’s brother must have been no different than Jacob finding a wife from his mother’s brother. But he had misjudged. Scripture is clear that it was Rebekah who was first displeased at Esau’s choice of marriage partners, not Isaac. Therefore, Rebekah was the one who needed to be mollified, not Isaac. By trying to please his father, Esau only further antagonized his mother. Isaac, and Jacob, it seems, were rather weak minded individuals who were guided by Rebekah. We do not know whether or not Isaac was pleased, and Scripture does not say, but we can safely assume that Rebekah was not.

### **Jacob Encounters God**

Jacob prepared himself for the journey. When he was ready, “Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran” (v. 10). While Scripture makes no mention of others accompanying him, it is unlikely that Jacob traveled alone. The distance from Beersheba to Haran is some six hundred fifty miles and would have taken several weeks. Surely he would not have set out on such a journey without servants to attend to him and protect him on the road. Also, Jacob was not a young man. His twin brother Esau was forty when he married, and some years had passed since then, though it is not possible to know how many. But it was a least long enough for Rebekah and Isaac to have learned to dislike Esau’s wives. So Jacob may have been in his fifties or sixties.

About fifty miles into his journey, “he came to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place” (v. 11). The language of the text emphasizes the randomness of the selection of that particular place to spend the night. He had not mapped out the location in advance. Daylight was fading, and the place seemed suited to break his travels. He had been on the road for only a few days. There must have been water or a nearby well to service the animals, and enough deadwood to make a fire for the evening meal.

Jacob had no more expectation of finding God in this spot than Saul did as he headed down the Damascus road.

But find God he did, or rather God found Jacob.

“<sup>12</sup>He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. <sup>13</sup>And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, ‘I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. <sup>14</sup>Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

<sup>15</sup>Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (v. 12-15).

First, Jacob saw a ladder. Much has been made of the symbolism of that element of the vision. Early Christian writers suggested it was a symbol of Christ, the God-Man Who bridged the yawning gap between heaven and earth in His incarnation. Others have pointed out that a ladder is not an appropriate translation for this text, since ladders are not normally used for two-way traffic, and the text states that angels “were ascending and descending on it” simultaneously (v. 12). They suggest that a ‘staircase’ would provide a better rendering of the text. To that we might wonder why angels needed either a ladder or a staircase in the first place to come a go from their heavenly abode. A further comparison has been made with the Tower of Babel. But that does not seem to work either, since this ladder/staircase is the work of God, not of man, and the purpose was to communicate a blessing not to serve as an example of man’s pride. It was the angels who went up and down, not man trying to ascend into heaven.

Whatever device is described, while the angelic host was present, it was God Who spoke. And the revelation God gave is worth attending to. To begin, we must note that God said nothing about Jacob’s past behavior. His actions with regards to his father, Esau, or the theft of the blessing are all unnoticed in the conversation. As He had done in His revelations to Abraham and Isaac, God was not interested in the past but rather the future. He had not come to Jacob to chastise him for what he had done, but to remind him of what he would do. This is in contrast to the appearances of God prior to the patriarchs. Adam, Cain, the contemporaries of Noah, and the builders of the Tower of Babel were all held accountable by God for their wicked actions. In the age of the patriarchs, though, God had another agenda.

The language God used was reminiscent of the language He had used when He revealed Himself to Abraham (Genesis 17:1) and to Isaac (Genesis 26:24). He titled Himself “the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac” (v. 13). Here, God emphasized the importance of the family heritage which Jacob had inherited. This was, perhaps, an indirect rebuke, or at least a reminder to Jacob that while he might be able to deceive his brother and father, he would not be able to do so with God. Instead, it was expected that Jacob would take his place in the line of descendants whose task was to pass along the divine blessing. As he eventually did. “God, furthermore, said to Moses, ‘thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, “the Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.” This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations” (Exodus 3:15).

Land, seed, and blessing continued to be the main themes of God's revelation. To begin, God informed Jacob that "the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants" (v. 13). To occupy the entirety of Canaan would naturally require a vast progeny, so God continued, "your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south" (v. 14). Finally, in a repetition of the original promise to Abraham, God said, "in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (v. 14). This last promise is compelling because until now, Jacob had been interested in getting the blessing, not in being one.

Also, to Jacob God promised divine guidance and protection. The language of the Hebrew makes God the subject of the promise six times in a single sentence, "I am with you and [I] will keep you wherever you go, and [I] will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (v. 15). Surely there could be no clearer evidence that this is the work of God. Jacob is merely the recipient of God's promises of presence, protection, and guidance.

This promise of the presence of God took on increasing importance in Israel's history. Moses (Exodus 3:12), Joshua (Joshua 1:5), Gideon (Judges 6:16), Solomon (1 Kings 11:38), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:8), and even the nation of Israel itself (Isaiah 41:10) were all promised and received the presence of the Lord. Such a promise was a stronghold in times of trial, whether those difficult times happened to an individual or to the nation as a whole. Certainly, as Jacob prepared to leave Canaan for Haran, the promise of God's presence was very welcome.

The last part of God's speech has been misinterpreted as meaning that God would abandon Jacob after God had done what He proposed to do. But both the entirety of Scripture and the personal experience of believers in the patriarchal age and today precludes such a notion. God does not leave us when He is finished using us for His purposes. Quite the contrary is true, in fact. God stands by us when we are faithless and wicked. And He finishes the work He has begun in us (Philippians 1:6). And when He is done with us, it is then that He brings us home to Him in glory.

### **Jacob Worships**

Drowsy though he may have been, upon waking from this revelation, Jacob fully understood what had occurred. "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it" (v. 16). Jacob knew that he had been in the presence of God. The accounts he had been given by his father and grandfather now made sense to him. Now he knew what they had been talking about. What the evening before had been only stories, was, in the morning mist, a reality for Jacob.

And Jacob's response was typical of others who encountered God in a dream. "He was afraid and said, 'how awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven'" (v. 17). While it is true that God is a God of transformation, and that this is an example of Him transforming an indiscriminate place in the desert into a holy place, yet there was misunderstanding here. Jacob believed that God was in *this* place. He understood the place to be holy, and not the God Who came to him. And he seemed to be embarrassed that he had not recognized that God would be found there. He knew God was in Beersheba, for that was where both his father and grandfather had worshipped Him. But Jacob had not thought God could be anywhere else, it seemed. Had he known this

was a holy place, no doubt he would have erected an altar and worshipped prior to taking his night's rest. Not having known that God was in this place, Jacob feared he had inadvertently transgressed some spiritual boundary.

Despite his fright, Jacob knew what ought to be done. He made two religious responses to the theophany. First he set up a stone to mark the place. Second, he made a vow to the Lord. As Scripture relates it, he “<sup>18</sup>rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on its top. <sup>19</sup>He called the name of that place Bethel; however, previously the name of the city had been Luz” (v. 18-19). Though Scripture does not state so explicitly, the act of pouring oil indicated that Jacob was consecrating the stone as a memorial of his experience. There was no sense at this time that the stone itself was a part of a cultic tradition. And such a practice was often employed by the patriarchs, and even until the time of Moses (Exodus 24:4).

The purpose of such stones could be to commemorate a meeting with God, as in this case, or even to serve as a witness to a treaty or mark a boundary (Genesis 31:44-46), or even at a tomb (Genesis 35:20). Later, however, the practice was disallowed, perhaps because of its association with certain Canaanite cultic practices (Exodus 23:24; Deuteronomy 7:5). That is, these stone pillars that once marked an encounter with God eventually became idols, and the stones themselves were objects of worship.

The naming, or rather renaming, of the site also requires comment. It is the narrator who informs us of the previous name of the site, so perhaps Jacob did not know of the place as Luz. Or perhaps, Luz was the name of the local village. It would not have been unusual for Jacob to stay near, rather than in, a small village as he traveled. He could then take advantage of the well that provided water to the city without needing to get involved in any local concerns. And we should not be confused by the fact that Bethel was mentioned as the name of this place during the time of Abraham (Genesis 12:8). Again it is the narrator who was drawing our attention to the place, and naturally used the name with which his readers would have been most familiar.

Sadly, like the pillar itself, Bethel, too, would become associated with wickedness. It was there that Jeroboam began the rebellion that resulted in the Divided Kingdom of Israel (1 Kings 12:26-33). The altar he built there was condemned by both Amos (Amos 3:14) and Hosea (Hosea 4:15) and was not destroyed until the time of Josiah (2 Kings 23:15).

Having erected his makeshift altar, “<sup>20</sup>Jacob made a vow, saying, ‘if God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, <sup>21</sup>and I return to my father’s house in safety, then the Lord will be my God. <sup>22</sup>This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God’s house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You’” (v. 20-22). In making his vow, Jacob seemed to ignore the more long-term aspects of God’s promises. He did not speak of land or seed but focused only on the blessing. And, even here, Jacob thought short-term rather than long term. Jacob simply wanted to have a successful journey. He coveted the divine presence that he might be fortunate in his undertaking to find a wife and return to his inheritance safely.

Therefore, some commentators have read this passage as another example of Jacob's less than admirable character. Jacob, they argue, seems to be making a bargain with God (v. 20-22). Ever the negotiator, Jacob proposed his vow conditionally, "if God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, <sup>21</sup>and I return to my father's house in safety, then the Lord will be my God" (v. 21). Whereas God tested Abraham, here Jacob tested God. Whereas Abraham left his home country before he received the blessing, here Jacob imposed conditions on God. Others argue that this interpretation undermines God's sovereignty in the selection of Jacob to carry on the promises of land, seed, and blessing.

The vow to pay a tenth reminds the reader of Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek. Jacob speaks to God directly, to emphasize his vow. This is evidence that Jacob is serious and willing to put himself on the spot, so to speak, with regards to keeping his vow. Yet, it can also be argued that Jacob's devotion to God is proportional to his being blessed. That is, Jacob is reminding God that the more blessing he receives, the more he will give in return. Despite Jacob's motives, God proved ever merciful and gracious, and He continued to bless the unworthy Jacob.

### **Takeaways**

The events in this passage again proclaim the truth that God works His sovereign plan and extends His saving grace despite the behavior of fallen, sinful individuals. God had chosen Jacob and, God would bring about the fulfillment of his plan through him. May we be reminded that the same is true for believers today, and may we be diligent in being useful and productive tools in the hands of our ever active God.