

Jacob Sets Up a Sacred Pillar

Devotional Reading: John 15:1-8

Background Scripture: Genesis 28:1-22; 33:17-20; 35:1-7

Genesis 28:10-22

¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran.

¹¹ 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. ¹² 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.

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. ¹⁵ 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.”

¹⁶ When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” ¹⁷ 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.”

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz.

²⁰ 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 ²¹ so that I return safely to my father’s household, then the LORD will be my God ²² 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.”

Key Text

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, —Genesis 18-19a

Sacred Altars and Holy Offerings

Unit 1: The Genesis of Altars and Sacrifices

Lessons 1–5

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Locate on a map the geographical locations mentioned.
2. Analyze Jacob's if-then statement in Genesis 28:20-22.
3. Make a plan to commemorate a particular time when God's presence and work was evident in his or her life.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Common Experiences, Different Paths
- B. Lesson Context

I. Jacob's Journey (Genesis 28:10-11)

- A. Itinerary (v. 10)
- B. Stopover (v. 11)

II. Jacob's Dream (Genesis 28:12-15)

- A. Seeing Angels (v. 12)
- B. Hearing God (vv. 13-15)
Dusty?

III. Jacob's Reaction (Genesis 28:16-19)

- A. Interpreting the Dream (vv. 16-17)
- B. Renaming a City (vv. 18-19)
Memorials, Then and Now

IV. Jacob's Vow (Genesis 28:20-22)

- A. "If" Condition (vv. 20-21a)
- B. "Then" Promise (vv. 21b-22)

Conclusion

- A. God's Surprises
- B. Prayer
- C. Thoughts to Remember

Introduction

A. Common Experiences, Different Paths

Those who work with people may often find themselves traveling in unexpected (and perhaps unwanted) directions. This is true spiritually as well as physically, and one may result in the other. In the process, people find themselves taking roads much less traveled by others. The temptations of envy, pride, contempt, and indifference are common to all, but their intensities and timings threaten to derail our travels at our most vulnerable times. Moments of despair and a sense of defeat can overtake us as we search for that exit ramp that will lead to something different. When we go through painful experiences, we may think we are unique. But we are not unusual in that regard; we see it often in the Old Testament descendants of Abraham.

B. Lesson Context

Genesis 12:1-3 begins the account of a family chosen to be a conduit of blessings to all nations. The text does not explain why God chose this family. The sins and various foibles of the members of that family line may sometimes leave us astonished.

All that is no less true regarding a grandson of Abraham known as Jacob. The book of Genesis presents him as a deceitful person who schemed to take advantage of others. He swindled his brother, Esau, out of his birthright (Genesis 25:27-34). He deceived their father, Isaac, in taking Esau's blessing (27:1-40). Later, Jacob was tricked by his father-in-law, Laban (29:15-27). Jacob tricked Laban in return (30:37-43), with even more deceit following (31:17-21).

Indeed, in the journey he was on in today's lesson, Jacob was on the run from trouble—trouble of his own making. In conspiracy with his mother, his trip was one of self-exile so his brother wouldn't kill him because of a deception (Genesis 27:41). Such a character would hardly seem to be a key person in God's plan to bless all nations!

Yet God worked his will through Jacob nonetheless. Ultimately, Jacob's story is not about his search for God but God's search for him. When

found on a physical journey, Jacob began a spiritual journey as well.

I. Jacob’s Journey

(Genesis 28:10-11)

A. Itinerary (v. 10)

10. Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran.

Beersheba, a town in southern Canaan, was where Jacob’s father, Isaac, eventually settled, following a series of disputes with the Philistines over the ownership of certain wells (Genesis 26:15-33; compare 21:22-34). Expressions regarding the distance between Dan and Beersheba are used 10 times in the Old Testament to mark the extremes of Israel’s boundaries north to south (Judges 20:1; 1 Samuel 3:20; 2 Samuel 3:10; 17:11; 24:2, 15; 1 Kings 4:25; 1 Chronicles 21:2; 2 Chronicles 30:5; Amos 8:14).

Jacob’s destination of *Harran* is where Jacob’s grandfather Abraham (named Abram at the time) lived before he left for Canaan (Genesis 11:31). A journey from Beersheba to Harran, where Jacob’s relatives still lived (27:43; 28:1-2; 29:11-14; 31:21), was about 550 miles. Walking at a pace of two miles per hour would require a trip that would have taken over a month to complete!

What Do You Think?

How should prayers differ, if at all, when moving mainly away from an old situation rather than toward a new one?

Digging Deeper

What Scripture passages best help you answer that question?

B. Stopover (v. 11)

11a. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set.

The name of this *certain place* where Jacob *stopped for the night* is the town of Luz (Genesis 28:19; see commentary below). It was about 60 miles north of Beersheba, so it took Jacob a few days to reach that point in his journey. With no streetlights or flashlights available to illuminate

the way, travelers of that era had to stop when the *sun had set*. Even if the moon were full, continuing onward would be problematic.

11b. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep.

We may wonder how Jacob got much *sleep* with *stones* for his pillows! We will understand the significance of this later in today’s lesson (see Genesis 28:18, below). And this will be no ordinary night of sleep in any case.

II. Jacob’s Dream

(Genesis 28:12-15)

A. Seeing Angels (v. 12)

12. 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.

Jacob’s dream is either the second or third dream mentioned in Genesis. Another dream explicitly labeled as such is in Genesis 20:3-7. There is a potential dream in 15:12-16, although the terms “dream” or “dreamed” are not explicitly used. Dreams initiated by God become very important in the remainder of Genesis; they involve Jacob, Laban, and people in the days of Joseph.

The exact meaning of the word translated as *stairway* is not clear. Because this Hebrew word appears only once in the Old Testament, there are no other instances for comparison. Some students propose that it is something like an ancient *ziggurat*, a building that resembles a pyramid and includes steps that reach a platform at the top. An altar or shrine may be there, used by pagan worshippers for sacrifices or other religious rituals.

What he sees on it is probably more captivating to Jacob than the structure. *Angels* are God’s messengers. That description fits well with the fact that they are *ascending and descending* to take God’s messages to *the earth*. Angels would play an important part in the account of Jacob’s life, particularly from the standpoint of his spiritual pilgrimage (Genesis 32:1, 24).

B. Hearing God (vv. 13-15)

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.

At least one ziggurat was built for a pagan god to descend from Heaven to earth to receive offerings and prayers from the people. What Jacob sees, however, is different: *above* the structure *stood the Lord*, making no move to descend. Neither does God send one of the angels to deliver his message—he does it personally.

From that position of authority, God began with a self-introduction. He made a promise regarding *the land* and Jacob’s *descendants*. The fact that the land would be given to Jacob’s descendants meant he would have a wife and at least one child. Such an affirmation was likely intended to provide, among other things, much-needed assurance to Jacob. After all, he was leaving the territory of the land of promise on his way to Harran—the exact reverse of the trip *Abraham* took!

We may wonder why God applied the word *father* to Abraham instead of to Isaac since Abraham was Jacob’s grandfather. The issue is resolved when we realize that the word *father* is used in the Bible also to describe “ancestor,” as in “forefather” (examples: Genesis 17:5; 19:37-38; Luke 3:8).

As the Lord spoke to Jacob, there is no record that he said anything about Jacob’s deceptive actions toward his father and brother. Instead, God reaffirmed Jacob’s position in the lineage of covenant promises made to his forefathers.

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.

The Lord clarified the extent of the promise regarding Jacob’s *descendants* in both a physical and a spiritual sense. God had used the phrase *like the dust of the earth* before when Abraham was promised all the land he could see (Genesis 13:14-18). Jacob may have heard about this from his grandfather, for Jacob was age 15 when Abraham died (computed from 21:5; 25:7, 20, 26).

The portion of the message regarding the blessing for *all peoples on earth* was initially mentioned

in Genesis 12:3. That was when Abraham was leaving Harran (the place toward which Jacob was headed). This part of the message is, therefore, not a new element either. It had been God’s stated plan all along, but it bore repeating.

What Do You Think?

What is one way to make yourself more available to God to be a blessing to the world?

Digging Deeper

Considering 2 Corinthians 12:9, how might God use your weakness to bless the world?

Dusty?

I was on a mission trip to Haiti in 2003. We were traveling a road between two cities about 90 miles apart. This drive would have taken an hour and a half in the United States, but it took more than four hours in Haiti. The road was only partially paved and had potholes everywhere; the rest of it was just dirt and dust. Riding in the back of a truck, we quickly realized the dust was a problem. So we tied bandanas around our mouths and noses, using sunglasses to shield our eyes. By the time we reached our destination, even the non-exposed parts of our bodies were caked in dust!

Dust is pervasive in both negative and positive ways. It is referenced more than 100 times in the Bible. In the positive sense, it is how God described the descendants of Jacob. There are uncountable grains of dust in the world, and God was going to make Jacob’s descendants like that.

From this side of the cross, we know that the “dust” God promised has multiplied and spread in all directions. This is important because Abraham is the father of all Christians, so we are that dust (see Romans 4:12; Galatians 3:16). How should you live in light of that fact? —C. S.

15a. “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land.

God’s promise “I am with you” is one of the most reassuring statements in Scripture (see Genesis 26:24; Isaiah 41:10; 43:5; Jeremiah 1:8, 19;

15:20; 42:11; 46:28; Haggai 1:13; 2:4; Matthew 28:20; Acts 18:10). For Jacob, these words provided encouragement as he embarked on life as a fugitive sojourner. Although he was moving away from the land promised to his grandfather and father, he was not moving away from the presence or protection of God. In pagan thinking, gods were local, not global. They were limited to the territory or country they supposedly ruled (examples: 1 Kings 11:33; 20:28; 2 Kings 17:26-27). But finding a place outside of God's "jurisdiction" is impossible (Psalm 139:7-12).

15b. “I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

The word *until* does not imply that the Lord would abandon Jacob at some future date. Since the promise was that Jacob's descendants would bless all nations, and that blessing was ongoing, it must be that God will always be present. God works constantly to bring humanity to the position and place we need to be.

What Do You Think?

What should you do to ensure that the promise of Hebrews 13:5 overrides any feelings of being forsaken by God?

Digging Deeper

Which Bible personalities serve as the best examples of this to you? Why?

III. Jacob's Reaction

(Genesis 28:16-19)

A. Interpreting the Dream (vv. 16-17)

16. When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.”

Jacob seemed to have awakened as soon as the dream ended, while it was yet night. His amazement that *the Lord is in this place* was probably because the spot seemed very ordinary. There appeared to be nothing especially holy about it. Jacob learned that God could make the most ordinary location holy by his presence. Moses will realize this same truth in his day, centuries later (Exodus 3:5).

17. 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.”

Fear kicked in. The word translated *awesome* is derived from the same Hebrew word as the one translated *afraid*. The word *said* indicates that Jacob expressed his anxiety out loud, although he was alone! There is no indication that Jacob desired or expected an in-person discussion with God. But he got one anyway!

The phrase *the house of God* is considered in Genesis 28:19, below.

What Do You Think?

What do the personal encounters with God in the Bible teach you about seeking such an encounter yourself?

Digging Deeper

Which of those encounters speak to you most strongly in this regard? Why?

B. Renaming a City (vv. 18-19)

18a. Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar

Standing stones were common in the ancient world. In Canaan, such objects were the focus of pagan worship at open-air sanctuaries, as archaeological excavations at various sites have revealed them. Because of this idolatrous use, some suggest that Jacob's actions in the verse before us conflict with what Moses stressed in Leviticus 26:1 centuries later—that the people of Israel were not to set up sacred images or stones, for the Lord hated them. Later, Israel was instructed to smash the stones of the Canaanites (Exodus 23:24; Deuteronomy 7:5; 12:3).

The resolution of this supposed conflict is simple. If an erected stone involved the worship of other gods, then the Lord's commands applied. However, a stone erected as a memorial was an entirely different matter (compare Exodus 24:4; Joshua 4:1-9; 1 Samuel 7:12).

Memorials, Then and Now

Rising to a height of 555 feet, the Washington Monument is the tallest obelisk in the world. It commemorates George Washington, the most

*Remember what God
has done for you.*



Visual for Lesson 5. *Have this visual on display as you pose the discussion questions that are associated with Genesis 28:22.*

famous of all of the founders of the United States. The monument is an impressive acknowledgment indeed!

In contrast, Jacob's "pillar" seems almost insultingly small. Its size in no way reflected the magnitude of what God promised to do (and did do) for Jacob and his descendants. But the size of the monument in no way lessened the significance of that monument for Jacob. When he returned to this area years later, we wonder if he found that stone still standing. Even assuming he did not, he doubtlessly carried the memory of that monument and what it represented.

Monuments help remind us of episodes of God's grace. Jacob and others of his day had to settle for monuments of two types: physical (like the stone itself) and mental (memories of that stone). Today, we are blessed to have a third type of monument available: video recordings. In addition to seeing the words "Established on . . ." chiseled into a concrete block of a new church building or recalling memories of having taken part in its construction, we can pull out pictures and videos of the event.

Can you name some grace-of-God memorials of that kind in your home? Or are your photographs, etc., only of family vacations and parties? —C. S.

18b. and poured oil on top of it.

The *oil* Jacob poured *on the top* of the memorial stone served to consecrate it. Oil was often used

to anoint priests and kings (examples: Leviticus 21:10; 1 Kings 1:39). But oil would also be used on objects (example: Exodus 30:22-29).

19. He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz.

The Hebrew word *Bethel* means "house of God." This reflects Jacob's declaration in Genesis 28:17, above. Bethel is one of the most-mentioned places in the Old Testament; the identifier is used dozens of times. It is a key location and reference point in the history of Israel. Negatively, Bethel became the site where Jeroboam, the first king of the northern kingdom of divided Israel, built one of his golden calf idols to keep the people from going to Jerusalem to worship at the temple there (1 Kings 12:25-30). That was about 930 BC, some 10 centuries after the time of Jacob. Bethel's idolatrous altar would remain for some three centuries until destroyed by godly King Josiah (2 Kings 23:15).

Archaeologists have not been able to determine the location of Bethel with certainty. A majority identify the location with a village known today as Beitin. A minority viewpoint is that Bethel is to be identified with the modern village of El-Bireh, just to the south of Beitin.

III. Jacob's Vow

(Genesis 28:20-22)

A. "If" Condition (vv. 20-21a)

20-21a. 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 so that I return safely to my father's household,

Jacob's vow presupposes his confidence in God's promises. We should not over-interpret his word *if* to mean he was unsure. His words clarify, at least to his own mind, the tangible takeaways of God's presence. Even on his dangerous *journey* to a distant place and the long years of his sojourn there, he can rest assured that somehow he will come home. He will not become a casualty on the long roads to Haran and back.

B. "Then" Promise (vv. 21b-22)

21b. "then the LORD will be my God

Jacob’s vow ought to be seen as distinct from those promises made to God during moments of crisis or emergency. This vow was based on what God had revealed would be provided to him. We also remember that this vow was coming from someone who was just beginning to understand what trusting in God meant. Jacob had a lengthy journey ahead of him, both in terms of physical miles and spiritual maturity. When Jacob promised *then the Lord will be my God*, he was, in a sense, acknowledging that his relationship with the Lord would be far deeper than what it was at that time.

22. “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.”

Jacob’s financial holdings were negligible as he made his vow. He only had what was with him. But if Jacob were ever able to return to his father’s house, then Jacob would do his best to fulfill his sincere desires to make this place *God’s house* and to *give* the *tenth* of all he had. Typically, this verse is interpreted in terms of what Jacob amassed during his time away (Genesis 30:43), but he did not know of any future wealth at this point.

In later Israelite practice, tithes were collected for temple support and feeding poor and vulnerable people. The giver also ate and shared parts of the tithe of fruit, crops, and meat, sharing them with others as a sign of gratitude for God’s bounty (Deuteronomy 14:22-29; 26:1-15). How was Jacob to distribute his tithes? The text does not say. The story may show him as a model for future Israelites, who would have both a mechanism and a purpose for redistributing their tithes.

nitide of mercy that the young man would receive in life. Although Jacob would face many future problems, often of his own making, his life went on to be marked by God’s merciful provisions. In the big-picture view, Jacob was to be a key man through whom the ancient promises to his ancestors were to come to fruition.

But in addition to that big picture, there’s a more personal one: the story doesn’t feature Jacob’s search for God, but rather it features God’s search for him. After being found, Jacob had to begin viewing his life differently, searching for the meaning of what he had experienced. That search lasted the rest of his life (Genesis 46:1–47:11; 47:28–49:33).

The same will be true for us. Though we have much more of God’s revealed will than Jacob had, we still struggle to know our place in the bigger picture of Matthew 28:19-20. On a personal level, we might hope only for survival, but we end up finding much more from the God of mercy and grace.

Regardless of the situations of life, the primary question, per Luke 17:10, is this: *What is my duty in my current situation?* When you ask that question in light of biblical precepts and principles, you won’t need to expect God to answer that in a dream.

B. Prayer

God of our ancestors in faith, we thank You for abiding with us generation after generation. You seek us when we don’t seek You. Abide with us still, and help us to abide with You. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Find your purpose, and do your duty.

What Do You Think?

What are some ways you can help your church memorialize its important milestones?

Digging Deeper

What are some proper and improper ways to use such memorializations?

Conclusion

A. God’s Surprises

God surprised Jacob with a vision of the mag-

How to Say It

Beersheba	Beer-she-buh.
Canaan	Kay-nun.
Harran	Hair-un.
Jeroboam	Jair-uh-boe-um.
Josiah	Jo-sigh-uh.
obelisk	aw-buh-lisk.
Philistines	Fuh-liss-teenz or Fill-us-teenz.
ziggurat	zigg-oo-rat.