

Jacob: God's Blessing and Covenant

Genesis 28

Focus Verse

"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." – Genesis 28:14

- Jacob's Departure – Genesis 28:1-9
- Jacob's Dream – Genesis 28:10-22

Engage

Jacob reaped painful consequences from his deceitful scheme to receive his father's blessing. He got the blessing he wanted but also a lot of hardship he did not want. Jacob was forced to flee from home because he feared that his brother, Esau, would pursue and murder him. However, the One who most intensely pursued Jacob was not Esau, but God. God did not pull away from Jacob because of his deception. **God sought fleeing Jacob; He drew near to the man who found himself far from everything secure.**

Sin brings consequences. The good news is that God meets us where we are and calls us forward. God extends grace to the undeserving. Jacob's failure was not final. God sought Jacob in ways that captured his heart. Perhaps the lonely and discouraging place where Jacob found himself prepared him to welcome and respond to God's nearness. God appeared to him, renewed His covenant and led him to worship. **God draws near and shows grace to undeserving sinners.** When you yield to Him, God works good through your difficulties, even messes of your own making. How has God pursued you, even when you faced the hard consequences of your choices? How is God drawing near in a personal way to invest in your spiritual growth?

Jacob's Departure – Genesis 28:1-9

Isaac Instructed Fleeing Jacob – 28:1-2

Isaac failed in his self-willed attempt to change God's plan and bless Esau, not Jacob. Through the turmoil of that scene, God awakened Isaac to His mercy, and Isaac submitted to God's will. Isaac knew God had chosen Jacob as the next heir of the covenant blessing. **From this point, Isaac exercised spiritual leadership and took responsibility for Jacob's welfare and future.** As Jacob prepared to flee, Isaac instructed him to seek a wife in Haran from among his mother's family. Jacob was not to marry a Canaanite woman.

Isaac Conferred God's Covenant to Jacob – 28:3-5

Isaac acknowledged Jacob's privileged place in God's promised plan. With great dignity, Isaac echoed

the words of God's covenant blessing first given to Abraham, then to Isaac.¹ At last, Jacob received the heart of the patriarchal blessing – the promise of a Messiah, the land and the glory of the people of Israel.

Esau's Response – 28:6-9

God continued to offer Esau opportunities to face his sin and turn to Him. Esau learned Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away from Canaan to find a wife from their family. Esau realized his two Canaanite wives displeased his parents. But rather than seeking their counsel or God's direction, he went to the family of Ishmael and married a third wife. Did he do this to seek his parents' approval or to spite them? **Whatever his motive, Esau's marriages reveal his lack of spiritual understanding.** Esau's behavior fulfilled God's prophecy, yet he was entirely responsible for rejecting God's grace and choosing his own way.

Two Brothers, Two Paths

Jacob and Esau were twins, born to the same parents on the same day, yet their destinies were incredibly different. God declared their separate futures before they were born.² God foretold a dramatic separation between the two boys who shared their mother's womb. He reversed human thinking to proclaim that the older would serve the younger. The course of their separate lives confirmed God's decree.

God did not base his choice of Jacob on his worthiness. Esau made wrong choices, but so did Jacob. Both had strengths; both had flaws. God's predetermined plan did not remove responsibility for their choices. What do we learn from the divergent paths of these two brothers? What made the difference in their response to God? Jacob ultimately faced his sin and yielded to God's discipline. Jacob surrendered to God's molding of his character. Esau persistently rebelled against God, choosing self-determination and self-will over surrender. **One brother turned to God; one brother turned away from God.**

What does daily life reveal about your response to God? Do you struggle against self-denial and surrender to God? Are you quick to humble yourself and yield to God? Luke 9:23 says, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." **When faced with a choice between self-reliance or surrendering to God, choose surrender.**

Jacob's Dream — Genesis 28:10-22

Jacob's Need – 28:10-11

Jacob's story connected with Moses' original audience who first read the account recorded here. The Israelite people experienced God's redemption from Egypt and understood the challenges of wandering in the wilderness. They recognized God's presence and provisions as they prepared to reenter the land He promised. God's promise of a homeland to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob gave them hope. The community of God's chosen people related to Jacob, who met the God who redeemed his past and restored him for a glorious future.

Jacob faced a difficult and dangerous journey. Almost 600 miles (about 950 kilometers) separated Beersheba from Rebekah's family in the city of Harran in Paddan Aram (Mesopotamia). Jacob would have known that his grandfather Abraham's servant had traveled this route to find his mother as a bride for Isaac. Now, Jacob was alone in a foreign, desolate region when darkness and weariness led him to stop for the night.

Genesis 25:27 tells us Jacob loved the comforts of home. This man who enjoyed the familiarity of his people and surroundings, took a stone he found and, "put it under his head and lay down to sleep." With a stone for a pillow, he laid down to sleep under the vast expanse of the starry night. Did he feel small, weak, needy and vulnerable? He knew God had promised great things for him – a future nation and impactful life. God led Jacob to this exact place with complete knowledge of everything going on within him. **Though Jacob was far from his people, he was near to his God.** God met him at the point of his need. God often takes us to places where our only option is to depend on Him. When you come to the end of yourself, you stand ready to see God work.

Jacob's Covenant – 28:12-15

God does many things to draw people to Himself. He makes Himself evident in a variety of ways out of His kindness. Creation offers a wordless witness to His Person and provision. The sun rises everywhere and the rain falls on all people as a gracious provision of God.³ Here, God directly intervened to reveal Himself and show grace to undeserving Jacob. God took the initiative; Jacob was asleep! **God gave Jacob a dream that spoke deeply in both symbol and word.** Jacob saw what appeared as a physical stairway reaching from heaven to earth. God's angels were going up and down the stairway.

The term "angels of God" here refers to God's creatures. Angels are spiritual beings that influence and interact with people and creation. The Hebrew and Greek words translated "angel" can also mean "messenger."⁴

The Lord did not send a messenger, but personally delivered the covenant promises to Jacob. He communicated His certain promises of:

- Identity – "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac."
- Authority – "I will give you..." He had the power and right to confer His covenant to Jacob.
- Territory – He promised Jacob and his descendants the land on which he was lying.
- Progeny – He promised Jacob descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth, spread in every direction.
- Legacy – He promised Jacob "all peoples on earth" would be blessed through his offspring.
- Intimacy – He promised His personal presence and care. "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go."

- Security – He promised Jacob safe passage “back to this land.”
- Certainty – He would not leave Jacob until “I have done what I have promised you.”

God demonstrated His intimate knowledge and unconditional love for Jacob by speaking specific and timely encouragement to him. God pursued fleeing Jacob and spoke in an intensely personal way; God spoke “Jacob” to Jacob. The promises given to Abraham and Isaac became his own. As Jacob left a familiar past and moved toward an uncertain future, God offered His guiding presence and personal care. His needs were known to God. As he prepared to leave the promised land for Haran, God comforted Jacob with timely reassurance that he would return to the land God had promised. Jacob may have felt alone, but he was not alone.

God loves the whole world, but His love is extended to individuals. **God loves and reaches out to individuals in intimately personal ways.** He understands how to reach rebel hearts. Though God is exalted above us in every way, He deliberately comes near.⁵ Those who respond to His loving pursuit find in God a beautiful and safe refuge they will enjoy forever.

God’s plan to bless the world moved forward by His command. The Lord chose Abraham first to receive His great promise. Abraham died, and God’s promise passed to Isaac. Isaac’s story occupies only a few chapters of Genesis and provides many important lessons. God pronounced His choice of Isaac’s son Jacob to carry on His promise before Isaac’s twin sons were born. God confirmed His choice of Jacob by overruling Isaac’s plans to bless Esau. God Himself chose Jacob, an important Old Testament character, as the recipient of His blessings. **Through Jacob, God would continue the revelation of Himself to humanity.** Jacob’s story continues to the end of Genesis.

God’s direct communication to Jacob prepared him for the future. **The New Testament adds insight to help us with the symbolism in Jacob’s dream.** About 2,000 years later, Jesus spoke convincing proof that He was the Messiah to a skeptical potential disciple named Nathanael. In this encounter, Jesus identified Himself as the stairway from Jacob’s dream. He told Nathanael he would see “the heavens opened and angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” (John 1:45-51). Jacob could not understand the full meaning of his dream. We can now understand that Jesus Christ, fully human and fully divine, is the bridge between God and man illustrated in Jacob’s dream.

Jacob’s Response – 28:16-22

Fear of God – 28:16-17

People who rightly understand the majesty of God are not filled with pride, but humility and worship. A glimpse of God’s glory reveals how small,

Bethel in History

Bethel was originally the royal Canaanite city of Luz, about 10 miles north of Jerusalem. When Moses wrote Genesis, he identified this place with the name his audience knew – Bethel, meaning “house of God.” **Abraham built an altar near Bethel when he entered Canaan.** There he “called on the name of the LORD.” Likewise, Jacob encountered God there twice during his journeys. Jacob also built an altar, worshipped God and gave Bethel its name.⁶

Centuries after Jacob’s journeys, Moses brought God’s people to reenter the promised land. **The book of Judges records that the generations that followed sought God’s counsel at times in Bethel.** Samuel, a prophet and judge, held his court of justice in Bethel.

However, 1 Kings 12 shows that after Solomon’s kingdom was divided, Israel began to worship golden calves in Bethel. In time, God’s prophet Hosea condemned these practices. He gave the place a new name, Beth-aven, meaning “house of wickedness, house of idols” (Hosea 4:15). God punished the people’s idolatry through the king of Assyria – and then an act of redemption took place in Bethel. **Judah’s faithful king Josiah cleansed Bethel of its idolatrous practices as recorded in 2 Kings.** God’s people were free to fill Bethel with holy worship again. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah record that a faithful remnant from Bethel answered God’s call to resettle Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple near the end of the biblical record of the history of God’s people.⁷

frail and limited we are before Him.⁸ Those who know God as He truly is humbly bow before Him. Luke 18:9-14 describes the contrasting responses of two men (a Pharisee and a tax collector) who came to encounter God in the Jerusalem temple. Humility before God provides evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit.

The majestic and merciful God sought and spoke to Jacob. Jacob rightly responded with humility, reverence and awe. He “was afraid.” Jacob woke up certain of God’s presence, though he had not been before. Jacob expressed the reality he now embraced, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”

The memorial stone – 28:18-19

Jacob wanted to commemorate the place where God met him. He took his stone pillow, set it up as a pillar and anointed it with oil. In Scripture, oil often symbolizes the seal of the Holy Spirit on a life consecrated to God. Jacob changed the name of the

place to *Bethel*, which means “house of God.” Many years later, God called Jacob to return to Bethel with his family. God again appeared to Jacob at that time, and he consecrated himself and his family to God. Bethel represents an important place in Jacob’s story.⁹

Vow to God – 28:20-22

Jacob made a vow to God in response to his encounter. Some people see Jacob’s vow to God as grasping or bargaining with God. A sort of, “If you will do this for me, then I will do this for you.” Others see a new character of dependence on God forming in Jacob. It is as though Jacob was saying, “*Since* God proves Himself faithful to me and has promised to bring me back here, one day I will return here. In gratitude, I will make this pillar a sanctuary to worship God, and I will give a tenth of all I possess to Him.” Tithing was a voluntary and noble practice long before God gave laws through Moses.

Only God truly knows the motives within the human heart. Jacob met God and started on a path of growth. **Perhaps Jacob revealed growing dependence on God but also a remnant of self-dependence and immaturity.** Jacob’s natural human tendency was to use self-effort and performance to obtain what God had promised. His life story reveals God’s continuing discipline and Jacob’s gradual growth. Children learn to walk by taking wobbly first steps, experiencing new

freedom, falling, getting up, trying again and growing stronger. We cannot accurately define the state of Jacob’s heart at this point in his journey. God knew where he was, met him there and Jacob responded. God knows exactly where you are as well. Will you believe that?

For everyone who follows Christ, spiritual growth is a process. Renewed trust in God exposes deeply embedded patterns of behavior. Even those who strive to believe God struggle with doubt.¹⁰ Those who are accustomed to self-effort struggle with full dependence on God. The path of growth involves God revealing truth about Himself and truth about lingering sin within us. God disciplines believers for their good, and He stimulates growing faith. Maturity does not develop instantly, but over time.

Jacob encountered God’s glory and found hope. His attempt to grab God’s covenant promises through bargains and deceit brought unintended and painful consequences. Yet God came down at Bethel to assure Jacob of His presence and promises. God freely forgives and gives purpose to those who repent and believe. God is just, gracious, merciful and good. Jacob did not find “the house of God” by his own effort, will or desires. God pursued fleeing Jacob where he was, laying on the ground, alone in the night with his head on a stone. Jacob’s reality is our hope today. **God draws near and shows grace to undeserving sinners.**

The Doctrine of Grace

Jacob did not earn or deserve God’s tender care. His deceitful pursuit of God’s promise only revealed his unworthiness to receive it. All of us, not just Jacob, stand before God flawed and needy. **This encounter exalts God’s character, not Jacob’s.** God actively sought Jacob. People like to believe they are seeking God, though imperfectly. In reality, we are not running toward God but away from Him.

The depth of our sinfulness and rebellion against God exposes a beautiful quality within God’s perfection. God is full of grace. This means He freely gives people what they do not deserve, not because they are good, but because *He* is good. God is a giver. He delights to give good and perfect gifts to His children.¹¹ **Eternal salvation from sin is only possible because of God’s grace.** Sinners are justified “by grace” through faith alone.¹² In Christ, God gives the believer what cannot be earned by human effort. If anyone could offer God anything to earn salvation, grace would not be required. In mercy, God withholds the just punishment we deserve; in grace, God gives us what we do not deserve. He credits the perfect righteousness of His Son to all who believe in Him.

God’s grace provides hope for needy souls. God’s grace is costly, not cheap. Jesus Christ paid a high price so God could freely offer grace to sinners.¹³ God offers forgiveness from sin and eternity in the presence of God as a gift we do not deserve. **God can freely give believers grace because Jesus paid the price of grace.**

Most people do not realize how much they need God’s grace. Human pride and arrogance make people believe God owes them something. Without God’s grace, you stand before God with only inadequate human contributions that will never meet His righteous standards. If God were not gracious, you would be left with no refuge from His deserved wrath. To refuse God’s grace means that your sin will face His righteous judgment without hope of rescue. To ignore God’s grace is to refuse a costly gift you desperately need.

Though indwelling sin makes you a taker, your God is a giver. God is gracious. He gives strength to the weary. He gives power to the weak. He gives hope to the hopeless. He gives light in the darkness. He gives grace to the undeserving. **To understand and believe that God is gracious provides security you could not otherwise know.** What God gives, not what you earn, puts your feet on solid ground. He will not take away what His grace gives. When you sin, and you will regularly, you can know that God extends grace and forgiveness through Christ. You can approach God’s holy throne boldly because God delights to extend grace.¹⁴ God’s grace is the source of true peace. How has God been gracious to you? Praise to the God of all grace!

Hold Fast

Isaac first resisted, then surrendered to God's will. **He recognized God could not be manipulated to serve his cause and yielded to God's higher ways.** Isaac sent Jacob to Haran with clear instructions and his blessing. Isaac was perhaps a reluctant spiritual leader. He faced the battle between self-will and God's will but conformed to God's overruling power.

Esau displayed a life that elevated earthly and material concerns over pleasing God. At every turn, Esau not only rejected opportunities for grace and repentance, but also hardened his heart against God and His people. **Esau freely made his choice, but he was not free to choose the consequences.** God uses Esau's life in the book of Hebrews as a caution. "See that no one is sexually immoral, or

is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done" (Hebrews 12:16-17).

Jacob wanted the right things but sought them the wrong way. **God pursued him and called him to increasing surrender.** His path of growth incorporated hard consequences, but God continued to mold his character. Jacob did not understand everything God had in store for him, but he recognized God's awesome power and presence. He pledged his trust to God, a trust that would be tested and grown. Jacob, later renamed Israel, plays a big part in God's story of redemption for mankind.

Apply It

Jacob, the deceiver, met the Lord at Bethel, a pivotal point in his life. God could not be only the God of Abraham and Isaac. Jacob needed to personally embrace the promises and person of God. Jacob needed to grow in his understanding of God's character and promises and learn that God could be trusted. God invests in the lives of His children. Christians can reflect on specific times in their lives when God pursued them in powerfully personal ways. **The journey of faith involves specific moments of increasing surrender and growing confidence in God.** God meets His people in many ways – through victories, trials, His Word, other people and circumstances, just to name a few. Believers need "Bethel encounters," specific moments of deepening awareness of God. How have you encountered God in a significant point in your life? What pivotal moments in your life has God used to draw you to Himself? How have you moved forward in worship and faith?

Jacob responded to God's revelation and promises with a deliberate vow of surrender. His personal experience with God led him to action. He set up a physical memorial and voluntarily offered God a tenth of his possessions. Jacob experienced God's grace and received blessings he did not deserve. His desire was to give back to God. **True faith in God produces outward expressions of inward transformation.** Believers express gratitude and worship to God by giving voluntarily, not just their money but their lives. Giving to God's work and to others does not earn His favor or pay Him back, both of which are impossible. Giving back reflects God's gracious, giving nature reproduced in a believer's heart. God does not need anything you offer Him – He lacks nothing. A deep relationship with God creates a desire for others to experience the joy and peace you have received. What has God given you, just because He loves you? What

response expresses your worship of the gracious God who has given much?

God pursues sinners. God sought Adam and Eve when they were hiding in the garden. God pursued fleeing Jacob when his comfortable world crumbled because of sin. God sent His own Son, Jesus Christ, who left the glories of heaven to take on human flesh and die a death He did not deserve to redeem sinners. God seeks those who come to faith in Christ. He awakens dead hearts to hear and understand the gospel and respond in faith. **Salvation and ongoing spiritual growth depend on God's grace, His generous outpouring of love on the undeserving.** God actively stimulates growth in Christians by speaking into their lives directly through His Word and in many other ways. Do you recognize God's active pursuit of you? How have you experienced God's intentional, intimate investment in you? How does God's amazing grace lead you to worship?

Check out these footnoted references for further study of God's Word in this week's lesson.

- 1: **Abrahamic covenant:** Genesis 12; 13:14-16; 26:3-4
- 2: **God's prophecy regarding Jacob and Esau:** Genesis 25:23
- 3: **God's universal witness:** Matthew 5:45; Romans 1:19-20
- 4: **Angelic messengers:** Luke 1:11-19, 26-38; 2:8-20; Hebrews 1:14; Revelation 1:1
- 5: **The nearness of God:** Psalms 34:18; 73:28; 119:151; 145:18; Philippians 4:5; James 4:8
- 6: **Bethel:** Genesis 12:8; 13:4; Hosea 12:4-5
- 7: **Resettling at Bethel:** Ezra 2:28; Nehemiah 7:32
- 8: **Humility before God:** Exodus 10:3; 2 Kings 22:18-20; Isaiah 6:1-5; Jeremiah 1:4-10; Daniel 10:12; Romans 12:3; James 4:10
- 9: **Jacob and Bethel:** Genesis 35:1-3, 9-15
- 10: **Belief and unbelief:** Mark 9:24
- 11: **God's good gifts:** Matthew 7:11; James 1:17
- 12: **God's grace in salvation:** Ephesians 2:8-9
- 13: **Cost of grace:** Hebrews 12:2; 13:12; 1 Peter 2:24
- 14: **Confidence in God's grace:** Hebrews 4:16