

# Stairway

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Genesis 28

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Jacob's life was a constant struggle, starting from his pre-birth wrestling match with Esau (Gen 25:21-22). This was just the beginning of a life marked by conflicts. Yet, as we delve into Jacob's life, we should always remember God's response to Rebekah's prayer, *"Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger."*

His life evoked division in his home between father and mother. Isaac loved Esau, and Rebekah loved Jacob (Gen 25:28). The gulf deepened as Jacob took advantage of his twin brother in his moment of weakness and purchased Esau's birthright (Gen 25:29-34). This rift reaches its pinnacle when Rebekah hatches a plan for Jacob to deceive his aging and blind father into blessing him in place of Esau (Gen 27:1-40). Esau vows to kill Jacob upon the death of his father, and as a result, Jacob flees into what would be a 20-year exile.

Jacob's "cussedness" and God's repeated blessing make his story intriguing, if not inspiring. We see glimpses of ourselves in his complex story. He wrestled with almost everyone he came into contact with, especially God. Having known God's promise to Rebekah, Jacob routinely seizes control of his life in an effort to exert autonomy and manipulate his situation.

One author summarizes Jacob's life this way, *"It is in the context of the overarching dynamic of God's purposes and God's promise that we can come to understand submission. Submission to another is an idea that runs counter to the spirit of our time. For the delusion of our day is that we can live autonomous lives. We can live without constraints upon our decisions; we can be free to choose whatever serves our own purposes and achieves our own goals. Along this path, others become significant only to the extent that they promote or hinder our purposes—and rather than people, others become pawns to be played when they are helpful to us and discarded when they are no longer useful. At the altar of autonomy, obedience to another is viewed as an escape from freedom, a refusal to be responsible for our own lives, and a denial of our fundamental human dignity. But Jacob's story teaches us a quite different lesson."*

## **I. Jacob's Exile (Genesis 28:10-15)**

### **A. His Travel (28:10-11)**

1. The place of his departure – **Beersheba** – was founded by Abraham on the occasion of his treaty with Abimelech (Genesis 21:31-33). Noted as the southern tip of Israel.
2. His destination was **Haran**, approximately 500 miles to the north. Haran was Abraham's homeland, modern-day Syria or Turkey. On the first day, he traveled more than 40 miles.
3. The place of his dream – a non-descript & undisclosed location (Luz and later Bethel).
  - a) He was alone – very unusual for anyone to travel alone (animals and thieves).
  - b) He was without possessions – stones for a pillow.
  - c) He was in a "sacred" place, "*makom*" in Hebrew connotes "*a sacred site*."<sup>1</sup>

### **B. His Dream (Genesis 28:12-14)**

1. The imagery of his dream "stairway," "*sullam*" (12)
  - a) Could be a ladder or a stairway ramp. (known in other cultures for false worship).
  - b) Another explanation could be the Ziggurat and the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11)
    - (1) The Tower of Babel represents man's failed attempt to reach God.
2. The message of his dream (28:13-14)
  - a) I am the Lord – first used in Genesis 15:7 - COVENANT (13a) (Genesis 13:14-17)
  - b) Title deed to the land is affirmed LAND (13b)
  - c) Offspring as dust /offspring bless all families SEED - descendant (14)

### **C. His Promise (Genesis 28:15)**

1. God's presence – despite yourself
2. God's protection – keep you

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<sup>1</sup> Sarna, Nahum M. *Genesis*. The JPS Torah Commentary. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989. (197).

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3. God's plan – temporary exile
  4. God's promise – accomplish His purpose

## II. Jacob's Encounter (Genesis 28:16-17)

- A. God's unexpected presence (16) *"Surely the LORD is in this place"*
  1. *"Jacob's exceptional emotional response requires explanation. Undoubtedly it lies, at least partially, in his realization of the baseness of his behavior toward his father and brother. He must have been beset with feelings of complete and deserved abandonment by God and man. Having fallen prey to guilt and solitary despair, he is surprised that God is still concerned for him."*<sup>2</sup>
- B. Jacob's unprepared state (16b-17)
  1. Adam in the Garden (**Genesis 3:9–10**, *But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?"* **10** *And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself."*)
  2. Abram in Ur of the Chaldees (**Joshua 24:2**, *And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods.'*)
  3. Moses (**Exodus 3:5**, *Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."*)
  4. Joshua (**Joshua 5:15**, *And the commander of the Lord's army said to Joshua, "Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so.*)
  5. Isaiah (**Isaiah 6:5**, *And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"*)

## III. Jacob's Oath (Genesis 28:18-22)

- A. A vow is a solemn pledge, a promise to do something or to behave in a certain manner, binding promises made to God.
  1. The "If . . . then" nature. The vow is only binding if the party meets the stated plea.
    - a) If – with me; keep me; give me; bring me.
    - b) Then – The LORD shall be my God.
  2. To not fulfill a vow is sin (Deuteronomy 23:21-23). *"Don't write checks you aren't willing to cash."*
- B. The Pillar (28:18)
  1. Rachel's pillar (Genesis 35:20)
  2. Absalom's pillar (2 Samuel 18:18)
  3. **Joshua 24:27**, *And Joshua said to all the people, "Behold, this stone shall be a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the Lord that he spoke to us. Therefore it shall be a witness against you, lest you deal falsely with your God."*
- C. The Oil (28:18)
  1. A token of peace, friendship, and assumed obligation. It is a symbolic act of establishing a contractual bond between Jacob and God. (Oil was used in the Near East in international contracts and treaty relationships).
- D. The Results (28:19-22)
  1. He named the place "Bethel" meaning "house of God." (19)
  2. He vowed obedience (20-21)
  3. He gave a tenth (Gen 14:20, the example of Abraham) (22)

Many years ago, Eugene Peterson wrote a book entitled *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. The book's message is that our relationship with God is not found in a single act of submission but rather in a consistent pattern of obedience throughout our lifetime. Obedience (submission) is an act of faith that is renewed each day. It is a long obedience and in our "microwave," "giga-speed" world that is challenging to accept and it is tempting to short-change the spiritual process of growth. We must yield to the Potter as he molds, shapes, and conforms our lives to His image.

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<sup>2</sup> Sarna, Nahum M. *Genesis*. The JPS Torah Commentary. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989. (199).