

## Jacob Sets Up a Sacred Pillar

Is it Clifton or Charles?" asked the woman behind the banker's desk.

"Clifton." He was at the bank to see why his business loan was turned down—again. Clifton had scraped together what little money he had and borrowed from a few friends and family to lease the location to open "Clifton Burgers." The restaurant would offer some of the best burgers and walking tacos in the area, or so he hoped.

"Mr. Miller, do you know how many restaurants fail in the country every day?" Alice asked, cutting into the thoughts.

"Well, mine won't," Clifton replied. However, he had run into so many roadblocks before even opening his doors. Clifton wanted to show everybody—and himself—that he could be just as successful as his brother Charles.

"Why do you want to open a restaurant?" his mother had asked. "Did you pray about it?"

"Mom, you don't have to pray about everything!" had been his response.

"But starting a business is a serious step," Mrs. Miller had said. "Why wouldn't you go to God first? You need to seek God's wisdom and direction. Baby, you've always been a little headstrong."

Clifton sat staring at—what was her name again? All he could see was problem after problem.

**1. Describe a time when you've found yourself making plans without consulting the Lord.**

**2. How are things better when you ask God for wisdom and direction in your plans?**

**3. How can we learn to trust God when it seems the door is shut on our plans?**

## A Dream

*Genesis 28:10–15 KJV*

10 And Jacob went out from Beersheba, and went toward Haran. 11 And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep. 12 And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. 13 And, behold, the LORD stood above it, and said, I am the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; 14 And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. 15 And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.

*Genesis 28:10–15 NIV*

<sup>10</sup> Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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."

Jacob, whose name means “trickster,” has managed to deceive his father, Isaac, by impersonating his older brother, Esau. Isaac favored his older son and planned to give a blessing to Esau, but Jacob received this blessing instead. Instead of a glorious blessing, Esau hears, “You will live by the sword and you will serve your brother” (Gen. 27:40). The revelation of this deceit fuels Esau’s hatred toward Jacob, driving him to contemplate murder (Gen. 27:41). Thus Isaac and Rebekah send him to Harran to find a suitable marriage partner and to escape Esau’s wrath.

Despite his father’s blessing, which invited God to give prosperity, wealth, and the service of surrounding nations (Gen. 27:27–29), Jacob is not presently experiencing any of that. He ventures alone into a desert wilderness. In a desolate place, he spends the night outdoors, with nothing but stones to use as pillows.

In verse 12, Jacob experiences a profound dream, composed of three distinct elements, each symbolizing a theological theme. First, the “ladder” (KJV) reaching toward heaven is more like an ancient stairway. People of this time would sometimes build square pyramids called zigurats, and these were intended to invite the gods of heaven to come down to receive worship and give blessings. In Jacob’s dream, the stairway serves as a bridge between heaven and earth, showing that God is not too distant.

Second, “the angels of God” traversing these steps show God’s active involvement in the earthly domain. God is at all times sending servants to carry out His wishes.

Finally, Jacob’s dream concludes with an appearance of God Himself, standing above the walkway (v. 13). From heaven, God speaks words of blessing to Jacob. He reiterates and extends the covenant promises to Abraham and Isaac. Like his father and grandfather, Jacob will receive land, many descendants, and blessing from other people on the earth (vv. 13–14). To those other promises, God adds the words of verse 15. God will be traveling with Jacob as he goes to Harran. While Jacob is leaving the land of promise for now, God shall bring him back safely.

4. *Why does Jacob leave his father's house?*
5. *What does Jacob's dream mean?*
6. *What does God promise to Jacob?*

## A Dedication

*Genesis 28:16–22 KJV*

16 And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not. 17 And he was afraid, and said, how dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.

18 And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it. 19 And he called the name of that place Bethel: but the name of that city was called Luz at the first.

20 And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, 21 So that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the LORD be my God: 22 And this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee.

*Genesis 28:16–22 NIV*

<sup>16</sup> When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." <sup>17</sup> 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."

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

<sup>20</sup> 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 <sup>21</sup> so that I return safely to my father's household, then the LORD will be my God <sup>22</sup> 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."

Upon awakening from his dream, Jacob is struck by a profound realization and a sense of God's presence. In verse 16, this revelation manifests as an awe-filled acknowledgment that God is in this place. That was true before, but Jacob's dream helped him to see a reality which had been hidden from him.

His reaction to this epiphany is to be "afraid" (v. 17). Fear in biblical texts can mean more than awareness of danger. Fear of God often means a reverential awe, a sense of wonder that we might feel when experiencing a divine encounter. Jacob declares this place is "none other than the house of God" and the "gate of heaven" (v. 17).

This encounter signifies a transformative moment in Jacob's life. In verse 18, he commemorates his vision by taking the same stone he had used as a pillow and setting it as a "pillar." This sacred stone he dedicates, turning an ordinary object into a symbol of God's unseen presence. Jacob proceeds to pour oil—something he surely needs for his monthlong journey—on the pillar. This oil is an offering and demonstration of gratitude to the Lord for His promised provision. Jacob calls the name of the place Bethel, which means "the house of God." Before he leaves, Jacob vows that he shall give a tenth of everything he obtains to the worship of God, if God is willing to keep him safe until his return (vv. 20–22).

The dream and Jacob's vow foreshadow that great blessings will come to Jacob by the providential hand of God. At the very moment that Jacob is most fearful of the wrath of his brother, the God of the universe appears to him and sets his priorities in order. Jacob has no one and nothing to fear, as long as he has God with him on the way.

**7.** *When have you become intensely aware of God's presence and felt the need to respond?*

**8.** *What is Jacob's response?*

**9.** *What is the difference between the fear that Jacob has of Esau and the fear that Jacob shows to God?*

## Enduring Presence

I hadn't been to church in years. Years later, the pain of what went wrong felt as raw as when it happened. I had given up working as a pastor. In an effort to leave it all behind, I stepped into a different job and worked for the freedom of weekends with my family.

It seemed that the more I worked, the more I was discontent. My wife and kids went to church without me. It hurt to see them trying to seek Jesus while I was running the other way. Work wasn't satisfying and left me with an unavoidable pit that couldn't be filled with success.

After feeling guilt and shame as I watched my family go to church each Sunday, I finally chose to go with them one week. But it didn't go well. Fear overtook me, and I had a panic attack. But then, I started praying again. I had conversations with my wife and with wise counselors, and went back. This time there wasn't a panic attack, just a sermon. The message spoke of a God who was breathing life into dry and dead places. I knew, right then He was breathing life into me. God has never left me, and His enduring presence is with me still.

Not long after my return, the church held a special event for one of my daughters. I remember the day well. It was that day when I sensed a calling to step back into ministry. I remember praying, "Lord, if I'm going to do this, I need You to come with me." A pastoral position opened at our church, and I stepped back into what I thought I would never do again.

**10.** *When have you struggled to see that God was with you?*

**11.** *When have you looked back after going through something difficult, only to realize that God was with you?*

**12.** *How can you remember that God is there when you are hurting?*

## A Memory Stone

In today's lesson, Jacob set up a stone to help him remember that the unseen God was with him. It even made him afraid to think that God had been present all along, but he was unconscious of this reality.

► *What is an object that helps you to remember God's presence with you? (It could be a stone, a cross, an image, or something else.)*

► *Where do you need to be reminded of God's presence most?*

*Consider placing your own "stone of memory" to remind you that God is unseen but with you.*

### KEY VERSES

And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it. And he called the name of that place Bethel: but the name of that city was called Luz at the first.

—Genesis 28:18–19 KJV

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, though the city used to be called Luz.

—Genesis 28:18–19 NIV

### DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

#### Week of June 30 through July 6

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* for devotionals on these passages.)

**Mon.** Psalm 27—Living in God's Presence.

**Tues.** 1 John 2:20–28—Anointed by the Holy One.

**Wed.** Deuteronomy 16:1–10—Remember Israel's Redemption.

**Thurs.** Deuteronomy 16:11–17—Rejoice before the Lord.

**Fri.** Psalm 114—Judah Has Become God's Sanctuary.

**Sat.** John 10:22–30, 34–38—The Father and I Are One.

**Sun.** Luke 2:41–52—Jesus Learns in His Father's House.