

Unit I: The Genesis of Altars and Sacrifices

Jacob Sets Up a Sacred Pillar

DEVOTIONAL READING: John 15:1-8

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURES: Genesis 28:1-22; 33:17-20; 35:1-7

PRINT PASSAGE: Genesis 28:10-22

KEY VERSES

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. (Genesis 28:18-19a, KJV)

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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 28:18-19a, NIV)

Lesson Aims

As a result of experiencing this lesson, you should be able to do the following:

- Discern God's interaction with Jacob during his life's journey.
- Experience inexplicable joy in God's presence.
- Celebrate your God encounters in praise and worship.

*Key Terms

Descendants (verse 14)—Hebrew: *zera* (zeh'-rah): posterity; children; offspring; “seed” (KJV).

Dreamed (verse 12)—Hebrew: *chalam* (khaw-lam'): dreamt; imagined; beheld; “had a dream” (NIV).

Give (verse 13)—Hebrew: *nathan* (naw-than'): to put, set; add; bring; confer; distribute.

Land (verse 15)—Hebrew: *adamah* (ad-aw-maw'): ground; country; dirt; earth; soil.

Pillar (verse 18)—Hebrew: *matstsebah* (mats-tsay-baw'): a stump, monument; an obelisk.

Stayed (verse 11)—Hebrew: *luwn* (loon): lodged; passed the night; abided; remained; “tarried” (KJV); “stopped” (NIV).

***(Word Study Supplement—Refer to page 2)**



The Biblical Context

Genesis 12–50 is identified as the patriarchal history of God's chosen people, Israel. These chapters provide narratives of the lives of Abraham (see Genesis 12–25:11), Isaac (see Genesis 25:19–28:9), Jacob (see Genesis 27–50), and Jacob's son Joseph (see Genesis 37–50). God used each of these men to continue His redemptive plan for humanity, ultimately fulfilled through His Son, Jesus. Genesis 28, this lesson's focal chapter, is the account of Jacob leaving home for Mesopotamia. The context of Jacob's flight from his home is Esau's pledge to kill him for cheating Esau out of their father's blessing (see Genesis 27:4). Isaac yielded to his wife Rebekah's appeal to send Jacob to her brother's household in Paddan-Aram to find a wife to avoid marriage to a Canaanite woman (see Genesis 28:1-2). This was Rebekah's plan to save Jacob's life. Isaac blessed Jacob again before he left, but this time included the Abrahamic covenant's promises (see Genesis 28:3-5). Genesis 28:10–22 describes Jacob's experience on the road to Haran in Mesopotamia. Forced by nightfall to stop and sleep, Jacob used a stone for a pillow and dreamt of a stairway connecting earth and heaven with angels ascending and descending it. It is here that God gave him the promises He gave Abraham and to be with him until he returned home. Jacob responded by erecting a memorial, consecrating it, and vowing to make God his God. Jacob worshipped Him and gave Him a tithe for all he acquired. Genesis 28 is rich with practical principles that believers can apply to their relationship with God, including continuous access to Him, God's omniscient awareness of His own, and His faithfulness to His promises.

Introduction

A *ritual* is a sequence of activities involving gestures, words, actions, rewards, or objects. Most of us probably engage in some personalized ritual daily, like following a self-prescribed order of preparing for the day, beginning a task, or celebrating a special occasion. Rituals are significant for humanity because they help bring a sense of structure and meaning to our lives psychologically, socially, culturally, and spiritually. For example, group rituals like family reunions help foster connectivity, thus producing a sense of belonging and preserving meaningful family traditions. Engaging in cultural rituals handed down from one generation to another helps maintain cultural identities, heritages, and connections to a group's ethnic roots. Rituals also provide an avenue for spiritual growth when spiritual disciplines like prayer, solitude, reflection, and meditation become daily practices. Finally, rituals are significant because they often mark important events, a change in direction, or some transformative life experience. An example of this purpose during the patriarchal period in Genesis is Jacob's response to God's reaffirmation of the Abrahamic covenant. God spoke to Jacob during a dream when Isaac sent him away after wrongfully receiving his blessing. Jacob marked this life change the morning after this encounter with God by performing a memorializing ritual. Jacob took the stone he used as a pillow and anointed it with oil—symbolizing consecrating himself and the site to God.

ANALYSIS OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

A Gracious Vision (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.

NIV

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.”

Genesis 28 introduces the second phase of Jacob's life and an extraordinary demonstration of God's grace—His unmerited favor toward him. After leaving home and traveling throughout the day, Jacob stopped for the night, secured a stone for a pillow (headrest), lay down to sleep, and experienced his first encounter with God during a dream (**verses 10-11**). In this dream, Jacob saw a ladder or stairway extending between earth and heaven, and angels ascending and descending upon it (**verse 12**). As God was standing at the top of the stairway, He introduced Himself as the God of Abraham and Isaac, and confirmed the blessings Isaac bestowed on Jacob and the promises of the Abrahamic covenant (**verses 13-14**). Then God graciously added His personal promise of perpetual presence, protection, provision, and guidance until these promises were fulfilled (**verse 15**). Jacob's “gracious vision” or encounter with God provides significant practical applications for believers. First, this unexpected encounter

challenges us to be aware of God's omniscience and omnipresence, thus encouraging us to trust *His* plans for our lives. Despite Jacob's unawareness or lack of understanding of God's plans for him, God was faithful to His promises and showed up to ensure their fulfillment in his life. Jacob's encounter is also a testimony to God's multigenerational faithfulness to those He chooses to use to accomplish His will. Second, God promised to be with Jacob from this point onward as his protector and provider wherever Jacob was. Consequently, knowing that God is all-knowing and everywhere present should encourage and motivate us to persevere through adversity and unexpected life challenges with the awareness that He is always available and accessible to guide, provide, and protect us when we stay in His will. Finally, we are challenged to strive obediently to demonstrate our trust in God as examples for the generations following us.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

What attributes of God are revealed in Jacob's encounter with Him that provide assurance and encouragement for believers?

A Grateful Vow (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.

NIV

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.”

Jacob’s initial response upon awakening was fear and surprise, affirming his not having developed a relationship with Abraham and Isaac’s God (verse 16). Jacob voiced his unawareness that God was in this place. Consequently, Jacob declared this place awesome and named it Bethel, meaning “the house of God” and “the gateway to heaven” (verse 17). Designating this site as “the gate to heaven” signified Jacob’s recognition of God’s presence, thus reminding us that God is not confined by time and space but is everywhere present. Often, believers fail to grasp that God is present wherever a sacred space has been dedicated to Him and should be reverenced and respected. Jacob arose early the following day and commemorated the sacredness of this place by taking his stone headrest, erecting it as a pillar, pouring oil on its top as a memorial and act of reverence, and renaming the place previously called Luz, Bethel (verses 18-19). After memorializing this sacred space, Jacob acknowledged the unconditional blessing God bestowed on him by making a vow. He declared that *if* God promised to do all these things for him (see verses 13-15), he would affirm his faith in Him, designate Bethel as a sacred meeting place, and gift God with a tenth of all God gave him (verses 20-22). Jacob’s vow was his “mark,” acknowledging God’s faithfulness and commitment to serve God faithfully and live according to His will. Jacob would return to this site in the future, and centuries later, it would play a significant role in his descendants’ spiritual lives. Jacob’s response to this life-changing encounter provides an example for believers. The assurance of God’s presence should motivate every believer to respond by dedicating themselves and sacred spaces devoted to worshipping Him in gratitude for His grace, striving to remain in His will, offering Him proportionate financial gifts, and committing to serve Him faithfully and obediently because of His great faithfulness.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

How do you mark significant experiences with God, and why is doing so essential to your spiritual growth and witness?

A Closing Thought

This lesson should remind us that God often shows up in unexpected places and circumstances in our lives. Consequently, Jacob’s encounter with God challenges us to cultivate awareness of His presence in our lives and His universal omnipresence so we can respond reverently with hearts of gratitude like Jacob. Jacob’s experience also reminds us of the need to be in God’s will for our lives to have the assurance that we can trust His faithfulness to fulfill His promises to us and the importance of submitting to the Holy Spirit’s filling daily. Finally, Jacob’s

response to God's demonstration of grace challenges us to maintain a lifestyle that honors His presence and holiness by worshipping and committing ourselves to follow Him faithfully and wholeheartedly.

Your Life

Jacob "marked" God's faithfulness by setting up a pillar as a memorial to commemorate and remember this life-changing experience in his life and to symbolize committing himself to God totally. Therefore, this week and in the future, identify the most significant encounters you have experienced with God and "set up" memorials to symbolize your gratitude and as a reminder of your commitment to serve Him faithfully.

Your World!

Jacob's journey to Haran and subsequent encounter with God on his way were not accidental events in his life. They were essential parts of God's multigenerational purpose to position Jacob to fulfill His redemptive plan and continue the faith legacy established by his grandfather Abraham and his father, Isaac. Now the faith community is responsible for erecting "pillars of faith" as memorials and examples for the generations following so that they will experience God for themselves and commit to following and serving Him.

Closing Prayer

Dear God, thank You for encountering us and graciously accepting us into Your family. In gratitude, we praise and worship You and dedicate ourselves to You and Your will wholeheartedly and faithfully. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Conclusion

(Preparing for Next Week's Lesson)

Next week's lesson challenges the faith community to prioritize contributing to children's and youth's spiritual development. Read Luke 2:41-52 in preparation for this study.

Home Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY, June 30	"Living in God's Presence"	(Psalm 27)
TUESDAY, July 1	"Anointed by the Holy One"	(1 John 2:20-28)
WEDNESDAY, July 2	"Remember Israel's Redemption"	(Deuteronomy 16:1-10)
THURSDAY, July 3	"Rejoice before the Lord"	(Deuteronomy 16:11-17)
FRIDAY, July 4	"Judah Has Become God's Sanctuary" (Psalm 114)	
SATURDAY, July 5	"The Father and I Are One"	(John 10:22-30, 34-38)
SUNDAY, July 6	"Jesus Learns in His Father's House" (Luke 2:41-52)	