

From Stairway to Altar

Topic

God's presence

Theme

God is present in the lives of those He works in and through to accomplish His will.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will consider how God's presence should impact his life.

Materials

- Resources 1, 7, and 13
- Paper and pencils

Scripture Focus

Genesis 27:41–33:20

Summary

Jacob left home to escape Esau's revenge and to find a wife in Haran. Along the way the Lord promised to be with Jacob, to prosper him, and to return him to his home. Jacob prospered in Haran in spite of deceptive treatment at the hands of his uncle, and after leaving his uncle's ranch to return home, he encountered the Lord. The Lord wrestled all night with Jacob and subdued him. Then Jacob encountered Esau, but instead of facing Esau's wrath, Jacob received his favor. The two brothers reconciled.

Outline

I. Jacob Journeys to Abraham's Homeland (27:41–28:22)

- A. Jacob leaves the Promised Land (27:41–28:9)
- B. God assures Jacob of His presence and promises (28:10–22)

II. Jacob Dwells in Abraham's Homeland (29:1–31:10)

- A. God blesses Jacob with a family (29:1–30:24)
- B. God blesses Jacob with wealth (30:25–31:10)

III. Jacob Journeys back to the Promised Land (31:11–33:20)

- A. God protects Jacob from Laban (31:11–55)
- B. God wrestles with Jacob (32)
- C. God protects Jacob from Esau (33)

Memory Verse

"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 28:15).

GETTING STARTED

Cellphone Presence

ASK: How might you finish this sentence: If I don't have my cell phone with me for a day I would feel . . .

We have come to rely heavily on our cell phones because they can do so much for us. We feel deprived or even lost when we don't have them.

ASK: How might you answer this question: If I didn't have God with me for a day I would feel . . .

Perhaps we are living with knowledge of God but without a daily reliance on Him. Jacob learned that God was with him all the time and that he could rest in God's grace. God's dealing with Jacob helps us understand God's presence with us.

World's Best Security System

Have the learners get into groups of three or four. Give each group a couple pieces of paper and a pencil. Have them work to create the world's best security system for a house. Give them five minutes to work. Have a few of the groups share their ideas.

If you have time, conduct a web search for safe houses that are over-the-top secure. There is one in Los Angeles that even includes a helicopter pad for a fast escape. Share some of the house's security features with your learners.

ASK: What do you do to secure your house at night? (Q1)

ASK: How do you feel when you get up in the morning and realize you left the garage door open all night? (Q2)

Security is important for all of us. Jacob felt the need for security as he faced his fears and a lot of unknowns. God was patient with Jacob, teaching him to rest in His presence. God's dealing with Jacob helps us understand God's presence with us.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. Jacob Journeys to Abraham's Homeland (27:41–28:22)

A. Jacob leaves the Promised Land (27:41–28:9)

We cannot excuse Jacob for deceiving his father to obtain his blessing, but some of the blame must fall on Esau. Having sold his birthright, he was not entitled to his father's blessing, and his hatred of Jacob was surely unjustified. He planned to kill Jacob after his father's death, which he wrongly thought was near at hand (Gen. 27:41).

Rebekah learned of Esau's threat, and she lost no time in urging Jacob to escape to Haran, where her brother, Laban, lived. She was afraid that Esau would kill Jacob and that Esau, in turn, would be killed. Rebekah told Isaac that she was disgusted with Esau's pagan wives, and she urged Isaac to send Jacob to Haran to obtain a believing wife (27:42-46).

ASK: How would you describe Jacob's relationship with God at this point? Remember that he lied to his father about God's leading in his life (27:20). (Q3) *Distant; Jacob lacked trust in God; Jacob tried to control the circumstances in his life.*

ASK: How would such a relationship affect Jacob's confidence as he started on a journey that would take him far from the Promised Land? (Q4) *He would have been unsure and fearful and counting on himself for success.*

Esau overheard Isaac's charge to Jacob and thought he saw a way to gain favor with his father. He would marry Ishmael's daughter (28:8, 9). But God had rejected Ishmael.

Isaac blessed Jacob and charged him not to take a wife of the daughters of Canaan but to find a wife among the daughters of Laban in Padan Aram. Then he pronounced the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant on Jacob (28:1-4).

B. God assures Jacob of His presence and promises (28:10-22)

Jacob went from Beersheba and journeyed toward Haran (28:10). He was heading in the right direction even though he was running away from Esau. The Lord overruled for good in Jacob's race to escape death.

Jacob traveled sixty miles from Beersheba to Bethel (28:11, 19), a three-day trip. If ever Jacob felt uncertain and insecure, he must have felt that way the first dark night away from home. All the props had collapsed under him, and an unknown future confronted him. For the first time, Jacob was on his own. It was time for him to grow in his relationship with God.

After falling asleep, Jacob dreamed. He saw a stairway on which angels were ascending and descending, and he saw the Lord standing nearby (28:12, 13). The angels were God's messengers, apparently going to and coming from His bidding. They showed that God was busy and active, not distant and inactive. While Jacob was gaining his father's blessing through lies and deception, Jacob had essentially viewed God as a bystander.

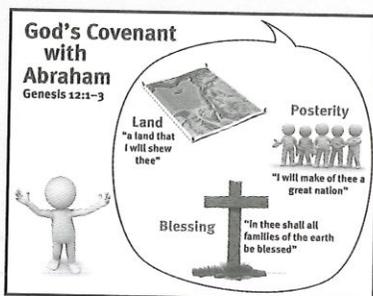
The Lord spoke to Jacob, calling Himself the Lord God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and extending unconditional promises to Jacob (28:12-15). Since he had recently deceived Isaac, the mentioning of Isaac's name had to be somewhat alarming to Jacob. God was no longer Someone out of sight and distant; He was standing before Jacob.

RESOURCE: Display resource 7 to review the Abrahamic Covenant.

READ: Genesis 28:15. **ASK:** Who is doing all the action in this verse? (Q5) *God.*

ASK: Why would it be particularly important for Jacob to hear all that God would do to make sure His promises to Jacob would come to pass? (Q6)

The original word translated "above it" in Genesis 28:13 is better translated "beside him." The Lord then was most likely standing at the bottom of the ladder next to Jacob.



Jacob was focused on himself and his abilities to make sure God's promises came true. He was fearful of what Esau might do to him. He was facing a lot of unknowns by leaving the Promised Land.

God made clear to Jacob that He was with Jacob and would continue to be with him until Jacob died. So God's commitment to Jacob was a lifetime commitment.

Awaking from sleep, Jacob recognized that God was present in that place (28:16). He said, *How dreadful is this place* (28:17). The Hebrew word for *dreadful* means that *which excites reverence and awe*. Jacob trembled in awe of God. God's promises and presence were becoming real to Jacob. He named the place Bethel, meaning *house of God*, because God was there. And he set a stone for a memorial of his experience and made a vow to God (28:18–22).

Jacob's vow showed his dependence on God. The last phrase in verse 21, *then shall the Lord be my God*, is not meant to suggest that Jacob was putting conditions on whether he would choose God. He wasn't bargaining with God. Rather, Jacob was imploring God to be with him. Jacob's recent antics with his father didn't make him a strong candidate for God's choosing. Yet that is exactly what God did.

Jacob's vow also revealed his concern with his immediate needs of bread, clothing, and safety. He desired for God to meet his needs because he was so vulnerable and could not be sure of his immediate future. If God provided for Jacob's needs, then he would recognize God for doing so by tithing to God (28:22).

The last phrase in 28:15 means that God would stay with Jacob until Jacob died.

II. Jacob Dwells in Abraham's Homeland (29:1–31:10)

A. God blesses Jacob with a family (29:1–30:24)

Then Jacob went on his journey (29:1). Arriving at the well outside Haran, he saw some shepherds who were unable to roll a stone from the well's mouth so they could water the sheep. Jacob learned from them that Laban was in good health and that his daughter, Rachel, was approaching the well to water her sheep. As an act of courtesy, Jacob rolled the stone away and watered Laban's flock. With a kiss of greeting and tears, Jacob told Rachel who he was. She immediately ran to tell her father the news. He was delighted to see Jacob and entertained him as his guest for a month (29:1–14).

READ: Genesis 29:11. **ASK:** What would be some reasons for Jacob's tears? (Q7) *He is at the end of a 400- to 500-mile journey. God had answered his prayers immediately upon his arrival. The pressure of wondering if the journey would be profitable was off.*

Laban offered to hire Jacob. Knowing that Jacob would ask for Rachel in marriage, Laban allowed Jacob to set his own wages. Jacob agreed to work seven years to obtain Rachel as his wife. Seven years is a long time, but Jacob's love for Rachel gave him so much happiness that the days flew by (29:15–20).

When the seven years was up, Laban sent Leah to Jacob without Jacob realizing it. The next morning, Jacob demanded his wife, referring to Rachel (29:21). (Apparently Jacob was already married to Rachel but had not consummated the marriage.) Laban said it was not customary to give the younger daughter in mar-

riage before the older daughter. So Jacob agreed to seven more years of labor as the price for Rachel. Laban gave Rachel to Jacob at the start of the seven years of labor. Jacob loved her more than Leah (29:21–30).

Nevertheless, Jacob started a family with Leah. God opened her womb because she was unloved, and she ended up with six sons and a daughter. Leah also gave Jacob her maid, who bore Jacob two sons. Rachel, being barren, also gave Jacob her maid, who bore Jacob two sons. Finally God answered Rachel's prayer, and she bore him a son named Joseph (29:31–30:24). Jacob had eleven sons total with another son yet to come.

B. God blesses Jacob with wealth (30:25–31:10)

After Joseph's birth, Jacob started thinking about returning to the Promised Land. He told Laban to let him go. And Laban asked Jacob what he should give him, since Jacob had been instrumental in the exponential growth of Laban's wealth (30:25–30). Joseph asked for the irregularly colored goats (black and multi-colored) and sheep (speckled and spotted) that would be born from Laban's flocks.

Laban agreed, giving Joseph charge over only the regularly colored animals, yet the regularly colored animals bore irregularly colored animals. When Laban changed his agreement, the opposite happened, and Jacob still prospered (30:31–43).

Jacob's prosperity didn't make Laban's sons very happy. They reported to Laban what was happening. As a result, Laban became unfavorable toward Jacob (31:1, 2).

READ: Genesis 31:3–9. **ASK:** Whom did Jacob credit for his gain in wealth? (Q8) *God.*

III. Jacob Journeys back to the Promised Land (31:11–33:20)

A. God protects Jacob from Laban (31:11–55)

God then appeared to Jacob in a dream, calling Himself the *God of Bethel* (31:13). God reminded Jacob that Jacob had made a vow to Him at Bethel. God had shown that He was with Jacob in Padan Aram. But it was time for Jacob to return to the Promised Land. Rachel and Leah agreed. So Jacob set his wives and children on camels, packed up his goods, and left town with his flocks. Rachel took Laban's family idols without Jacob knowing. Three days later, Laban discovered Jacob had left. He set off to track down Jacob and his idols (31:14–22).

Before Laban was able to confront Jacob, God appeared to Laban in a dream and told him not to threaten Jacob (31:24). Laban heeded God's warning.

READ: Genesis 31:29, 30. **ASK:** Compare Laban's gods to Jacob's God. (Q9) *Laban's gods were helpless and lifeless. They were unable to help themselves. Jacob's God went before him and protected him.*

Jacob, not knowing Rachel had taken the gods, told Laban he could search the tents for them and kill the person who took them. Rachel hid the idols in a camel's saddle and then sat on them. Laban didn't ask her to get up. When the

idols didn't turn up, Jacob rebuked Laban and reiterated how he had so faithfully served Laban for twenty years even though Laban had been unfair with Jacob. Jacob credited God, the One of Isaac Who causes fear, with keeping him from losing everything at Laban's hand (31:32-42).

Laban asked for a covenant with Jacob, who then indulged Laban. Laban got up early the next day and left for home (31:43-55).

After the covenant with Laban, Jacob offered a sacrifice and called his kinsmen to eat together (31:54). Jacob probably had his vow to God in mind as he shared the meal with his kinsmen (28:20-22; cf. 31:13). God had been with Jacob and had richly provided for him while he was out of the Promised Land.

B. God wrestles with Jacob (32)

In the far distance lay the hills of home, however, Jacob felt the chilling tension of fear when he thought of meeting Esau. For this reason God's angels met him. Seeing them, Jacob exclaimed, *This is God's host [army]* (32:2). Then he named the place *Mahanaim*, meaning *two camps* or *two hosts*, probably a reference to Jacob's camp and God's camp.

READ: Genesis 32:1. **ASK:** What message should the sight of God's host have communicated to Jacob? (Q10) *That God was on his side and obviously more powerful than any army.*

The message of God's protection did not seem to fully get through to Jacob. He still feared Esau and tried to pacify him with a message that he would not try to acquire any of his brother's possessions. His messengers returned with no message from Esau but with the news that four hundred soldiers were marching with Esau to meet Jacob. Jacob felt utterly dismayed (32:6, 7). His fears were groundless, but he was sure the danger was real.

Jacob made a plan to salvage something if Esau fell on him in a fury. He divided his people and his animals into two companies, hoping that one group could escape while Esau was attacking the other one. He also prayed to the God of his grandfather, Abraham, and his father, Isaac. He reminded God of God's command to return to Canaan and God's promise to deal well with him. He confessed that he was not worthy of God's kindness and faithfulness; he had left home with little more than a staff in his hand but was returning with two companies of people and animals (32:7-10). God had surely blessed him, but he was still fearful. He prayed, *Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau: for I fear him* (32:11). Jacob reminded the Lord that He had promised to make Jacob's seed as numerous as the sand of the sea (32:12).

After praying, Jacob launched a plan to appease Esau. He took goats, sheep, camels, cattle, and donkeys and sent his men out with each drove as an appeasement gift for Esau (32:13-21).

Having sent all of his company across the Brook Jabbok at night, Jacob was left alone. Suddenly he found himself involved in a wrestling match with the Angel of the Lord (32:22-24, 30). Jacob resisted God throughout the remaining hours of the night; he would not submit to Him. So the Lord touched Jacob's thigh and dislocated it (32:25). Jacob had to learn that he was weak and needed to depend on the Lord.

The text gives no explanation as to why Rachel took her father's idols. The reader is left to speculate.

As Jacob clung to the Angel of the Lord, the Angel told Jacob to let him go, for the day was breaking (32:26).

Jacob knew that he was unprepared for his meeting with Esau. He begged, *I will not let you go unless you bless me* (32:26). Then the Angel of the Lord asked Jacob's name. Jacob admitted that he was Jacob, meaning *a supplanter, one who takes another's place, one who will resort to deceit and trickery*.

ASK: What did the name *Jacob* suggest about who Jacob was relying on? (Q11) Himself.

As soon as Jacob confessed his identity, the Lord changed his name to Israel. The meaning of *Israel* is unclear, but there is a definite emphasis on God rather than on Jacob. Perhaps the name means *God will rule* (32:28).

ASK: What is the message Jacob should have realized with his name change? (Q12) God's presence with Jacob was more important than Jacob's abilities.

Jacob begged, *Tell me, I pray thee, thy name* (32:29). The answer was not forthcoming, but Jacob knew with Whom he had wrestled. He exclaimed, *I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved* (32:30). The sun rose, and Jacob limped away, knowing both his weakness and his strength: he was weak in himself but strong in the Lord (32:31).

C. God protects Jacob from Esau (33)

Esau went out to meet Jacob, taking four hundred men with him. What would Jacob do? Because he had feared Esau, he had arranged his household in such a way that those he loved the most would be the last ones in line and the ones most protected. He had placed the handmaids and their children in the front, then Leah and her children, and finally Rachel and her son, Joseph. Jacob then moved ahead of them all to meet Esau. With all courtesy and respect he bowed seven times, as was customary in meeting a ruler or a king (33:1-3).

Esau was probably surprised at the flood of emotions that overwhelmed him when he met Jacob. Something happened in his heart, for which we must give the Lord credit. Jacob and Esau kissed, cried, and hugged (33:4). Esau's old resentments and bitterness had vanished. He and Jacob were reconciled.

ASK: What thoughts about God do you think went through Jacob's mind as he embraced Esau? (Q13) He probably thought of God's graciousness and patience.

Jacob had tried to buy Esau's favor and forgiveness with gifts, but forgiveness and love cannot be purchased. Having already received grace from Esau, Jacob asked Esau to receive Jacob's gifts because God had dealt graciously with Jacob (33:11). Had Esau refused the gifts at that time, it might have indicated to his brother an unwillingness to reconcile. His acceptance demonstrated that he had indeed forgiven Jacob.

Esau and Jacob agreed to go their separate ways since a family and herds with young don't travel at the same pace as soldiers. Jacob went to Succoth and then to

Shechem, where he encamped in front of the city. He bought a piece of land, and for the first time he owned some of the land that God had promised to him and his heirs. His purchase was no doubt a testimony of his confidence in the Abrahamic Covenant. In Shechem Jacob built an altar to God and called it *El Elohe Israel*, meaning *God, the God of Israel*. The name Israel referred to Jacob, making this altar very personal.

READ: Genesis 28:20, 21 and 33:18–20. **ASK:** How do you see Jacob fulfilling his vow? (Q14) *Jacob said that if God brought him back safely into the Promised Land, then he would know that God was his God. The name of the altar declared Jacob's confidence that God was his God.*

MAKING IT PERSONAL

God Is My God

Israel named his altar to reflect his personal relationship with God. Though we don't build altars and name them after ourselves, we do have a relationship with God that is personal.

ASK: Have you had a time in your life, perhaps even now, when you felt distant from God? Explain. (Q15)

ASK: What has helped you understand that God is your God? (Q16)

God Is with You All the Time

Jacob knew God was real; he learned that God was really with him.

RESOURCE: Display resource 13. **ASK:** How should God's presence with you affect your life? (Record or reveal answers.) (Q17) *We ought to have sensitivity to sin, a dependence on Him for strength and direction, and a desire to do His will.*

ASK: What could you do to heighten your awareness of God's presence with you? (Q18) *Memorize verses on God's presence; use moments of downtime to praise God; meet challenges with prayer; pray silently for others as you meet them throughout the day.*

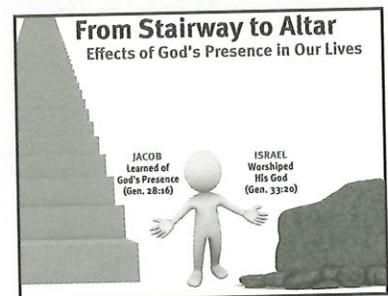
ASK: What will you do to deepen your dependence on God? (Q19)

Summary and Memory Verse

RESOURCE: Display resource 1. Add a summary statement for lesson 11 or use the following: Live in response to God's presence with you.

Encourage learners to memorize Genesis 28:15. Give them an opportunity to say the verse in class next week.

For sake of space, the events of Genesis 34 and 35 are not covered in this course. Be sure to read the chapters. They show how Jacob's faith grew as a result of the events covered in this lesson. Note especially that God directed Jacob to build another altar in Bethel (Gen. 35:1). Bethel was the place God had first appeared to Jacob. Jacob mentioned God's presence with him as important to him during his distressful days (35:3).



Responding to God & His Plan

1. Understand and enjoy God's revelation of Himself through creation.
2. Recognize Christ as the only solution to sin.
3. Take sin seriously and share God's grace.
4. Submit to God's sovereign plan for your life.
5. Be faithful in response to God's faithfulness.
6. Focus your affections on God.
7. Trust God for He knows all and can do all.
8. Fear God.
9. Expect and accept tests of your faith.
10. Seek to know and do God's will.
11. Live in response to God's presence with you.
- 12.
- 13.

Genesis
GOD'S PLAN BEGINS

Hard Times



Topic

Trust in God

Theme

God wants us to put our trust in Him regardless of our circumstances.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will determine to trust God during the good times and bad.

Materials

- Resources 1 and 14

Scripture Focus

Genesis 37; 39–41

Summary

Jacob's oldest sons envied his beloved son, Joseph. At the first opportunity to get rid of him, they sold him into slavery. His masters in turn sold him to a high-ranking military officer in Egypt, where Joseph fared well until the officer's wife falsely accused him of attempted rape. Consigned to prison, Joseph became a trusted overseer. Through the Lord's sovereign intervention, Joseph was released from prison and elevated by Pharaoh to the second highest position in Egypt.

Outline

I. God's Plan Involved Rejection (37)

- A. Joseph is hated (37:1–11)
- B. Joseph is sold (37:12–36)

II. God's Plan Involved Disappointment (39; 40)

- A. Joseph serves well (39:1–18)
- B. Joseph is imprisoned (39:19–40:23)

III. God's Plan Involved Promotion (41)

- A. Pharaoh dreams (41:1–36)
- B. Joseph is promoted (41:37–57)

Memory Verses

"Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths" (Proverbs 3:5, 6).