

FIRST THOUGHTS

In her book *The Hiding Place*, Corrie ten Boom wrote of a strange vision she experienced as the Germans invaded her homeland. She saw a farm wagon pulled by horses lumbering across the city square of her hometown. Corrie recognized her whole family sitting in that wagon, along with some strangers, moving toward a place they didn't want to go. As she and her sister, Betsie, discussed the dream, Betsie reminded Corrie that God sometimes gives His people a glimpse of the future to reassure them that He is in control.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

Genesis 28 begins the account of Jacob's departure for Paddan-aram (modern-day Syria), the home country of Rebekah's relatives. One of its main cities was Haran. Rebekah had recognized the need to send Jacob away lest Esau murder Jacob in a fit of rage for stealing the patriarchal blessing from their father. However, Rebekah did not want Jacob's departure to look like the flight of a fugitive. So, she devised a plan to gain Isaac's approval for sending Jacob away.

KEY DOCTRINE *God*

To God we owe the highest love,
reverence, and obedience.
(See Exodus 15:11; Psalm 100.)

The stated purpose of the journey was for Jacob to find a wife from among their kin rather than from among the Canaanites. Esau's Canaanite wives had been a source of vexation to both Isaac and Rebekah. Plus, Isaac had met Rebekah because his father, Abraham, had sent a servant to Haran for the same purpose (Gen. 24).

In sending Jacob on this journey, Isaac blessed him with a standard patriarchal blessing that God would multiply his descendants. When Esau realized that his father disapproved of the Canaanite women, he married Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael, in addition to his other wives.

DREAMING (GENESIS 28:10-12)

•**Haran:** This significant city in northern Mesopotamia is located on the Via Maris, an ancient caravan route from Mesopotamia to Syria, biblical Palestine, and Egypt. Abraham's father, Terah, moved to **Haran** with his family (Gen. 11:31-32). The place remained a home for Abraham's relatives, including Bethuel, the father of Rebekah and Laban. Haran also served as a major center for the worship of the moon god.

A certain place: Later, the text reveals that Jacob spent the night in Luz, a city whose name could be translated "almond tree." The location seemed like a suitable place for Jacob to spend the night, so he took one of the stones from the area and used it as a pillow.

Stairway

The Hebrew word translated **stairway**, appearing only here in the Old Testament, derives from a verb meaning "to lift up." Other translations render the term as "ladder" (KJV; ESV). However, some Bible scholars compare the structure to a ziggurat, a stepped platform raised from the ground to the sky. If so, the structure in Jacob's dream may have looked similar to the Tower of Babel.

Angels: The Hebrew word translated angels can designate either human or supernatural messengers. The text clarifies that the messengers in Jacob's dream were God's angels. Angels are created beings and not divine. In the Old Testament angels served various functions, including providing protection (Ex. 23:20; Ps. 91:11), executing judgment (2 Sam. 24:17), and bringing deliverance (Gen. 19:12-17). By their very presence, they call attention to God's glory (28:12-17). Their primary function is to worship and serve the Lord.

PROMISED (GENESIS 28:13-15)

The land . . . This land

The Hebrew term translated **land** most commonly refers to either the earth as a whole or to a particular territory, especially the promised land. The Lord first identified the boundaries of the land promised to Abraham and his descendants in Genesis 15:18-21. These geographical boundaries have only been realized twice, during the reigns of David and Solomon and later during the intertestamental period.

Offspring: This Hebrew word, sometimes translated “descendants,” literally means “seed.” Many descendants was one piece of the Lord’s promise to Abraham that was renewed with Isaac and Jacob. Other parts were land and a name (see Gen. 12:1-3).

God’s presence

God’s most immediate promise for Jacob involved His presence. Jacob could go forward knowing that God would protect and provide for him. God’s presence is still vital for believers. His presence provides comfort during difficult times and correction as we acknowledge that nothing escapes His notice.

GATE OF HEAVEN (GENESIS 28:16-17)

House of God: The Hebrew term house can convey various meanings. It can refer to dwelling places that range from ordinary homes to the temple. It also can be used to designate a household or a family. In this context, Jacob apparently did not apply the phrase to a particular building because he slept outdoors with a stone for a pillow.

Still, because of God’s presence, Jacob recognized the space where he slept as holy. The patriarch changed the name of the place to Bethel, which means “house of God.” Years later after parting ways with Laban, Jacob sanctified himself and his family and returned to Bethel. On that occasion, he built an altar there according to the Lord’s direction (Gen. 35:1-7).

For Jacob the spot where he dreamed of a stairway with angels ascending and descending marked a symbolic boundary between heaven and earth. In a similar way, both Job (38:17) and a psalmist (107:18) referred to “the gates of death,” symbolically designating the boundary between life and death.

Heaven: The usage of this Hebrew word falls into two large categories: (1) the physical heavens (the same Hebrew term is rendered “sky” in verse 12) and (2) the heavens as the dwelling place of God. In Genesis 28:17 the expression “the gate of heaven” parallels the phrase “the house of God.”

THE VOW (Genesis 28:18-22)

Stone: Stones abounded in biblical Palestine. City walls, dwellings, palaces, and temples were often built of **stone**. The people piled up stones to commemorate significant events (Gen. 31:46-47; Josh. 4:20-22). Single stones might cover the openings of wells, cisterns, and tombs. They also marked boundaries and functioned as memorials to God as did the stone that Jacob set up at Bethel.

Tenth: Jacob promised to give the Lord a **tenth** of all the Lord gave him in return for the Lord’s provision and protection. This vow calls to mind Abraham’s offering of a tenth of what he had captured in battle to Melchizedek (Gen. 14:20). The tenth part, or tithe, later became a definite obligation under the law of Moses (Num. 18:20-32; Deut. 14:22-29).

Next Week: Believe! – John 20:1-17