

JACOB SETS UP A SACRED PILLAR

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Genesis 28:1–22;
33:17–20; 35:1–7

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel. (Gen. 28:18–19a)

Daily Bible Readings

M	June 23	Gen. 35:1–7	Purify Yourself before God
T	June 24	John 15:1–8	Abide in Christ, the True Vine
W	June 25	Jer. 29:8–14	Seek God with All Your Heart
Th	June 26	Matt. 18:15–20	Christ Is among His Gathered People
F	June 27	Matt. 28:16–20	Christ Is with Us Always
Sa	June 28	Ps. 16	Fullness of Joy in God's Presence

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

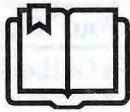
This lesson's Scripture readings place us in the middle of the Jacob story, the core of Genesis 12–50, Israel's origin story. It represents a crucial transition from the earliest generations of the family of Abraham (Abraham and Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael, Rebekah and Isaac; Gen. 12–26) to Abraham and Sarah's great-grandchildren, Joseph and the other offspring of Jacob (Gen. 34; 37–50). Action shifts from the land of Canaan to Egypt at the beginning of the book of Exodus.

Many biblical scholars believe that the book of Genesis was composed and edited during or soon after the Babylonian captivity in the sixth century BCE. The Israelite community living in Babylon or recently returned to Jerusalem had a difficult and tenuous relationship to their home. They longed for the holy city about which their parents and grandparents had told them, but even when they returned that dream seemed out of reach amid the rubble of a city devastated by invasion and war.

This background helps us understand the stories of Israel's origins recorded in Genesis, including today's readings about Jacob. Origin stories are important because they show us who a people are (or at least who they want to be) by telling us how

their family, community, or nation began. They offer potent glimpses into the life of the group at particular points in time, especially the historical moments when those stories are recorded in writing. Jacob's journey takes him, like the later Israelites, to a far country. Many years and much disappointment will come and go before he can bring his family back to Canaan. God's promise is to always be with him (and them), and to direct their steps back to the land of promise.

God of journey and destination, guide and guard us as we travel this world and lead us safely to find our life's goal in you. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Genesis 28:10–22

28:10 Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹²And he dreamed that there was a stairway set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring, ¹⁴and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." ¹⁶Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" ¹⁷And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

¹⁸So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. ¹⁹He called that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first. ²⁰Then Jacob made 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 clothing to wear, ²¹so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, ²²and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house, and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you."

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

GOD'S PROMISES TO JACOB

When one of the characters in Genesis engages in an act of worship (usually constructing an altar, as Jacob does in chapters 33 and 35), it is in response to the goodness, blessing, or call of God. Jacob's vision in chapter 28 is a vivid example of this pattern. Jacob responds to a vision and message containing promises that God made to Jacob's ancestors and other promises made specifically for Jacob. The context follows Jacob's theft of the blessing his father, Isaac, had intended to give to Jacob's brother, Esau. Combined with Jacob's prior swindle of his brother's birthright and Esau's volatile personality, Jacob's act of generational thievery has made home a dangerous place for the trickster. When each of his parents come to him separately to suggest that he go live with his maternal uncle Laban for a while, Jacob decides discretion is the better part of valor and takes off.

Chapter 28 finds Jacob on the way to his uncle's home, alone, and in the vicinity of a place called Luz. When the sun goes down, he takes a rock for a pillow, falls asleep, and sees in a dream a ladder (or staircase) reaching from earth to heaven. Divine messengers are making their way up and down the ladder. God comes to stand beside Jacob, and in verse 14 issues the same promises made to both Abraham and Isaac: to give Jacob and his family the land of Canaan, to multiply his descendants, and to bless the world through them. In verse 15, God adds promises that we've not heard before. First, God promises the blessing of presence in Jacob's life. This promise will be repeated often in Scripture, most notably in Matthew 1:23 with the promised coming of Jesus, who is "Emmanuel, God with us." Next, God will "keep you wherever you go." The verb translated "keep" can also be rendered as "guard." Jacob can expect God's protection as he journeys into an uncertain future. Finally, God secures the future by promising that "[I] will bring you back to this land" promised to Jacob's grandfather and father, and now to Jacob.

These are remarkable words to a young man on the run from the consequences of his own cleverness. Notice what God does not say: that Jacob will receive these blessings because he deserves them. Jacob is exemplar *par excellence* of God's decision to bless us, neither because of our righteousness nor in spite of it, but simply out of the abundance of the divine generosity.



When in your life were you blessed (fortunate or lucky)? At the time, did you think about whether you deserved it?

JACOB'S RESPONSE TO GOD'S PROMISE

A professor once gave the best explanation of the Bible's message I've ever heard: "The Bible," they said, "is a divine book because it is such a human book." There are many of ways to unpack this statement, but one of them has to do with the warts-and-all humanity of the Bible's characters. Simply put, the Bible does not have unblemished heroes. Every major character, with the exception of Jesus, displays characteristics and behaviors that you would not want your children to emulate. In addition to being a murderer on the lam, Moses' whiny excuse-making when God calls him at the burning bush renders him a poor choice for the liberator-of-the-year award. David, "the man after God's own heart," behaves so shamefully in the Bathsheba and Uriah story as to merit immediate removal from office. Peter commits an act of stunning betrayal when he denies Christ three times. These are flawed people through whose lives God chooses to bless the world because that's what God does.

We won't enumerate all of Jacob's con games and compromises, but we can focus on two little words in his response to God's extraordinary promises in verses 13–15. Verses 18–22 recount how Jacob, having arisen after his dream, turned the rock he'd used as a pillow into a pillar, poured oil on it, and made the following promise: *if* God would be with Jacob, guard him along his path, give him bread to eat and clothing to wear, and bring him back to his father's house in peace, *then* Jacob would make God his God, would turn the pillar into God's house, and would give God back a tenth of all God had given him. Jacob's response is conditional; he answers God's generosity with the promise to give back, *but only if everything works out okay first*.

I used to wonder why the book of Genesis spends so much time on a character who is, frankly, always working the angles and looking out for number one. Then I recognized that Jacob might just be the most universally human character in the Bible. A long tradition of Christian teaching insists that at the heart of the human predicament lies selfishness. If there is hope for Jacob, then might not there be hope for us as well?

? Why does Jacob offer a conditional response to God's generosity when God has already offered him abundant blessing in the face of his frequently flawed behavior?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

It's hard to know what to do with the story of Jacob. On the one hand, he falls firmly within the company of the matriarchs and patriarchs of the faith, someone whose story Scripture takes pains to relate in detail. His story involves personal growth as the young hustler grows into the leader of a large clan, responsible for the welfare of his family and many others. His reconciliation with Esau—who has also grown—is quite touching. On the other hand, Jacob's behavior, often toward members of his own family, is anything but exemplary. What do we take with us from this complex and conflicted individual?

First, seeing the world through the lens of “good guys vs. bad guys” usually fails to explain the full humanity of those we encounter. It is better to realize that even the worst people are carrying a great burden, and the best are often operating out of mixed motives. Jacob's story reminds us to give time before forming our opinions of others, and to hold our assessments lightly. Is Jacob a bit of a scoundrel and, at times, a jerk? Sure. Did this keep him from recognizing God's gifts to him, and seeking to do God's will? No. Did he inject a healthy dose of self-interest into that service? Of course. Being Jacob, how could he have done otherwise?

Second, Jacob's story can help us be a bit more patient with ourselves. During the early centuries of the church, a group of spiritual seekers arose known as the desert fathers and mothers. Usually, they lived in small communities of about a dozen persons, with a main teacher helping a group of disciples. One of my favorite stories from these folks involves a disciple who came to his teacher and explained that one of his brothers in the community was sick. The disciple wanted to take him some soup. The teacher said, “Of course; why are you wasting time asking me about this?” “Because,” the disciple said, “his hut is at the other side of the community from mine, and if I take him soup the brothers will see and think I'm only doing it to show off.” “What does it matter what people think,” the teacher replied, “as long as you've helped your brother?” As I remembered that story, I realized that Jacob might have been happy to show off in that situation—but he still would have helped his brother.



When have you witnessed good behaviors displayed by those you consider flawed, selfish, or troublesome? What is revealed about human complexity and God's blessing?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. The angels (messengers of God) pass through a portal to heaven on a stairway. While the Hebrew term *sullām* is often translated “ladder,” it denotes a flight of stairs like those on ancient ziggurats for the gods to descend and be worshipped in their temples. Linking heaven to earth, this stairway reminds Jacob that God intends to reside on the earth, so Jacob calls the location Bethel (God’s house). Such places were marked with temples once their position had been revealed to people living in the area.
2. When kings sought to build temples to particular deities, they asked the deity’s direction to identify such a sacred place. Thus, the “house of God” (Gen. 28:17) is linked with the “gate of heaven” (v. 17), the entry to the heavenly abode of the deity. In verse 17, Jacob identified a holy space, but there was no temple yet built to mark the spot.
3. God gives Jacob assurances (28:13–15) that his descendants will take possession of the land of Canaan and that all peoples on earth will be blessed through Jacob and his offspring. This echoes how Isaac blessed Jacob before his departure for Paddan-aram (vv. 3–4). The wording resembles God’s promises to Abraham (12:2–3, 7; 13:14–17; 17:7–8; 18:18; 22:17–18) and Isaac (26:3–4).
4. Setting a pillar (28:18) was a Canaanite practice that Deuteronomy 16:22 later forbids. Jacob continues the pillar custom at Paddan-aram (31:45, 51–52) and after returning to Canaan (35:14, 20). Yet, following his next encounter with God at Peniel (32:22–32), he constructs altars (33:20; 35:1–7), as Abraham (12:7–8; 13:4, 18; 22:9) and Isaac (26:25) did. The shift to making altars may indicate that Jacob has undergone a deeply spiritual experience.
5. In the ancient world, pillars could be considered to contain the essence of a deity or represent ancestral spirits. Others could stand as memorials of treaties or special events (see Exod. 24:4–8). Jacob set up a standing stone either to mark the “most holy place” or the place where Yahweh stood (“above” or “beside” the stairway). The standing stone could have commemorated the covenant and Jacob’s response.