

Chapter 5: The Giving of Jacob

Genesis 28:1–22

Up to this point, Jacob has been a *taker*. With two meals, Jacob took his brother's birthright (Gen. 25:29–33) and blessing (Gen. 27:1–25). In this, Jacob's fault has not been *what* he has wanted, since the text of Genesis places most of the blame on Esau, who “despised his birthright” (Gen. 25:34) and married two Hittite women (Gen. 26:34). Instead, Jacob's guilt lies in *how* he has sought after these things. Whether by cold negotiation or outright fraud, Jacob is willing to do whatever it takes to gain the inheritance and blessing of God. The consequences of his ruthlessness will be costly, as Jacob must now go into a twenty-year exile (Gen. 31:38, 41) to avoid being murdered at the hands of Esau (Gen. 27:41).

If God has indeed set apart Jacob from the womb (Gen. 25:23), how will God rein in this rebellious man? How will God work to sanctify Jacob's cunning, manipulative, scheming heart? Surprisingly, God transforms Jacob from a *taker* into a *giver* by promising to give Jacob everything he promised to give to Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 28:13–15). God is not rewarding Jacob; rather, God is building his kingdom through Jacob. Far from spoiling Jacob, God's generosity will ultimately break the power of greed in Jacob's life. God continues the same work today by bestowing the riches of Christ's kingdom upon an unworthy people in order to put our greed to death. As Genesis 28 demonstrates, *God generously blesses his people to make us into a generous blessing.*

God's Mission: To Bring Generous Blessing to the World (Genesis 28:1–9)

At the end of Genesis 26, Esau took for himself two Hittite wives (Gen. 26:34–35). Even so, Isaac then called for Esau (Gen. 27:1) in order to bless him (Gen. 27:4). Now, Isaac calls Jacob, blesses him, and forbids him from taking a wife from the Canaanite women (Gen. 28:1):¹

[1] Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him and directed him, “You must not take a wife from the Canaanite women. [2] Arise, go to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel your mother's father, and take as your wife from there one of the daughters of Laban your mother's brother. [3] God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. [4] May he give the blessing of Abraham to you and to your offspring with you, that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings that God gave to Abraham!” [5] Thus Isaac sent Jacob away. And he went to Paddan-aram, to Laban, the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, Jacob's and Esau's mother. (Gen. 28:1–5)

Even though Jacob took Isaac's blessing by deceit in the previous chapter, the prophetic word that Isaac pronounced over Jacob (Gen. 27:27–29) cannot be broken. Regarding Jacob, Isaac told Esau,

“Yes, and he shall be blessed” (Gen. 27:33). Isaac trembled in fear when he discovered that Jacob deceived him (Gen. 27:33) because he recognized his own sin in desiring to bless Esau instead of Jacob. This may explain why Isaac now blesses Jacob again (Gen. 28:1)—what Isaac previously did unwittingly, he now does willingly. Rather than digging in his heels to try to bless Esau, Isaac now obeys God by blessing Jacob. For Jacob, hearing his father bless him openly will prevent him from worrying in the future whether his deceitfulness invalidates the previous blessing that his father spoke to him.²

Finding Another Rebekah

Now, we must remember that Isaac does not decide to send Jacob away to Paddan-aram on his own. Rather, Rebekah planted the idea in her husband’s mind by complaining about Esau’s wives, and then worrying out loud about what good her life would be if Jacob took a wife from one of the women of the land of Canaan (Gen. 27:46). Certainly, Rebekah did not want Jacob to take a wife as Esau had done; however, she also wanted to ensure that Jacob left home before Esau had the chance to murder him (Gen. 27:41). Esau’s wives made life bitter for Isaac too (Gen. 26:35), so Isaac now takes his wife’s hint and makes arrangements for Jacob to leave the country.

Isaac directly forbids Jacob from following in the footsteps of Esau, saying, “You shall not take a wife from the daughters of the Canaanites” (Gen. 28:1; my translation).³ This language is very strong, using the same format as we find in the Ten Commandments: “You shall not....” Isaac’s words to Jacob are nearly identical to the words that Abraham spoke to his servant in Genesis 24:3: “you shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites.” The primary difference between how Abraham seeks a wife for Isaac and how Isaac seeks a wife for Jacob is that Abraham sent his servant to bring Rebekah back, while Isaac sends Jacob to find a wife for himself. This difference may once again underscore the passivity of Isaac.⁴ On the other hand, sending Jacob out of the country achieves Rebekah’s main objective of removing her beloved son from the threat of Esau. Isaac instructs Jacob to find for himself another woman like Rebekah by limiting Jacob’s choice to Rebekah’s own family: “take as your wife from there one of the daughters of Laban your mother’s brother” (Gen. 28:2). Ultimately, Jacob will marry two of the daughters of Laban (Gen. 29)—that is, two of his first cousins.⁵

A Fruitful Church

After specifying whom Jacob should marry, Isaac proclaims the hope for Jacob’s marriage: that God Almighty may bless him, make him fruitful, and multiply him (Gen. 28:3). Notably, the name God Almighty (*El Shadday*) last appeared in God’s covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17:1).⁶ There, God promised to make Abraham “exceedingly fruitful” (Gen. 17:6) and to multiply Abraham greatly (Gen. 17:2). Before the Abrahamic covenant, these words for “fruitful” and “multiply” also appeared in the original, creational blessing that God gave to Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:28) and to the blessing that God re-established with Noah and his family after the flood (Gen. 9:1, 7).⁷ God originally intended to create a fruitful, multiplying people to fill the earth with his glory. Adam and Eve forfeited God’s original blessing through sin (Gen. 3), and Noah and his family could only begin the process of repopulating the world—although they were never in a position for redeeming it (Gen. 8:20–9:29).

When God raised up Abraham, however, he promised to bless the world through the offspring of Abraham (Gen. 12:3). Furthermore, God Almighty promised to make Abraham himself into a “multitude of nations” (Gen. 17:4–5) in Genesis 17. The phrase “multitude of nations” seems to correspond with this final blessing that Isaac makes to Jacob in Genesis 28:3: “that you may become a company of peoples” (Gen. 28:3). This word “company” has special significance: “In the word *company*, from the root ‘to assemble’, the Old Testament term for the church or congregation makes its first appearance, bringing with it the idea of coherence as well as multiplicity. It is associated with Jacob again in 35:11; 48:4.”¹⁰ Kenneth Mathews adds, “As a special reference to assembled Israel, the word ‘community’ commonly appears in the Pentateuch (e.g., Exod 12:6; Lev 16:17; Num 14:5; Deut 31:30) yet infrequently in Genesis (35:11; 48:4; 49:6).”¹¹ Isaac is praying that Jacob will become the fruitful, multiplying *church* of God in the world. Through Jacob and the congregation of people descended from Jacob, God intends to send his most generous blessing into the world: his only-begotten, beloved Son, Jesus Christ.

The Blessing of Abraham

In the next verse, Isaac makes Jacob’s reception of Abraham’s blessing explicit: “May he give the blessing of Abraham to you and to your offspring with you, that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings that God gave to Abraham!” (Gen. 28:4). By articulating the idea that Jacob should take possession of the land God promised to give to Abraham, we see the final element of the Abrahamic promises coming to Jacob. Aside from the new *language* (not a new concept) of describing Jacob as a “company/church,” nearly every phrase echoes God’s promises to Abraham (cf. Gen. 12:2–3, 7; 13:15, 17; 15:7–8, 18; 17:1, 6, 8, 16, 20; 22:17; 24:7) and to Isaac (Gen. 26:3–4, 24), but “this is the first time that Jacob has been designated heir of the Abrahamic promises.”¹² Isaac’s role is “as that of a link in a chain, a transmitter” of the blessings of Abraham.¹³ As Isaac says farewell to his son, “the promises of Abraham and the promises of Isaac are now the promises of Jacob.”¹⁴ God’s plan for liberating his creation from bondage to sin, death, and the devil will take place in and through *Jacob*.

The Hypocrisy of Esau

Only after Isaac sends away Jacob does Esau realize something of his sin by taking Hittite wives; however, rather than repenting from what he has done in order to plead for God’s mercy, Esau compounds his sin by taking a third wife from Ishmael’s family:¹⁵

[6] Now Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there, and that as he blessed him he directed him, “You must not take a wife from the Canaanite women,” [7] and that Jacob had obeyed his father and his mother and gone to Paddan-aram. [8] So when Esau saw that the Canaanite women did not please Isaac his father, [9] Esau went to Ishmael and took as his wife, besides the wives he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham’s son, the sister of Nebaioth. (Gen. 28:6–9)

Esau’s reasoning is straightforward: (1) Isaac has blessed Jacob; (2) as a condition of that blessing, Jacob must marry a relative rather than one of the daughters of the Canaanites; (3) therefore, if Esau wants to make up for having already married two of the women of the land, he must marry a close

relative—his cousin from his father’s half-blooded brother, Ishmael. Indeed, if the only problem keeping Esau from receiving the blessing is that he has not yet married a close relative, then Esau’s plan makes good sense.

In fact, Esau does not at all understand what is really keeping him from receiving the blessing: his own sinful rebellion against God. Therefore, Esau’s third marriage only further seals his rejection. Just as God explicitly promised to dispossess the Canaanites from the land (Gen. 15:18–21), God also explicitly stated that Ishmael will not inherit Abraham’s covenant and blessing (Gen. 17:19–21; 21:12; 25:5–6). Esau cares about his own enrichment, but he treats God’s word with contempt. Therefore, he misunderstands the reason that Jacob has received the blessing instead of him, and he uses human logic in his attempt to solve a divine problem of how God will bring his generous blessing into the world. In this tone-deafness, Esau marries yet *another* wife whom God has rejected from receiving the blessing. Derek Kidner writes, “While Esau took the point, his attempt to do the approved thing was, like most religious efforts of the natural man, superficial and ill-judged. To take a third wife, even though an Ishmaelite was better than a Hittite, was hardly the way back to blessing.”¹⁶ Instead of this act of hypocrisy, Esau should have repented from his sin and humbled himself to enjoy the blessing through Jacob. Tragically, Esau tries to correct a spiritual problem with a fleshly solution.¹⁷ Esau despised and sold his birthright (Gen. 25:34), and then he forfeited the blessing by marrying Hittites (Gen. 26:34). Now, he seals his rejection by “marrying into the family of the discarded Ishmael.”¹⁸

God Generously Blesses His People (Genesis 28:10–15)

As Jacob leaves Beersheba toward Haran, he begins a major new chapter in his life relatively late in life. His twin brother Esau was forty years old when he married the Hittite women (Gen. 26:34), and we do not know how long Esau was married before Jacob stole the blessing from Esau in Genesis 27.¹⁹ Despite his age, Jacob leaves his promised land to go into exile in the land of Mesopotamia:²⁰ “[10] Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. [11] And he came to a certain place and stayed there that 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 to sleep” (Gen. 28:10–11). Jacob not only goes into exile, but no one welcomes him into a home to spend the night along his journey (cf. Gen. 19:1–3): “That Jacob is forced to bed down under the stars may suggest his distance from human habitation, or his estrangement, or simply affirm that providence overruled the traditional custom of finding lodging in someone’s house.”²¹ Jacob is separated from his family and all hospitality as he departs from the land of Canaan, homeless and friendless.

Certainly, his lonely journey must raise haunting questions in his mind. Yes, his father Isaac has twice blessed him, but “were the promises actually his? If he truly was the heir, why must he flee from the land? Would God’s blessing be his as it had been Abraham’s and Isaac’s before him? Nothing less than a sure word from God would ease his doubts and give him confidence for the future.”²² After coldly purchasing his brother’s birthright and manipulatively deceiving his blind father to gain the blessing, what confidence can Jacob cling to in order to assure himself that God Almighty *will* bless him? When Jacob stretches out to sleep on the rocky ground, he closes his eyes with no certain hope in his future.

Jacob's Ladder

It is at this moment of isolation—and, importantly, “in that *place*” (Gen. 28:11)—that God himself visits Jacob in a dream. Just as God made covenant promises to Abraham in a “vision” (Gen. 15:1) in the night (Gen. 15:12–21), so God will now make those same covenant promises to Jacob in a “dream” during the night.²³ The phrase “in that place” appears three times in Genesis 28:11 (ESV: “a certain place...of the place...in that place”), and then again in Genesis 28:16 (ESV: “this place”), 17 (ESV: “this place”), and 19, emphasizing the importance of the place that Jacob has selected for his campsite:²⁴

[12] And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! [13] And behold, the LORD stood above it 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. [14] 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 in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. [15] Behold, 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.” (Gen. 28:12–15)

In Genesis 28:10–12a, the narrative uses eight verbs to describe the consecutive series of events regarding where Jacob goes, what happens to him, and what he does. Now, however, the narrative suddenly shifts away from preterite verbs that describe the narrative sequence of the *past* toward participles that vividly portray ongoing action in the *present*: “set up...reaching...going up...going down...standing.” The effect of this change is striking, as Victor Hamilton observes: “The switch in verbal form also moves the story beyond what the narrator saw Jacob doing (vv. 10–12a) to what Jacob himself saw (vv. 12a–13a).”²⁵

Additionally, the word “behold” appears twice in Genesis 28:12, first to note the presence of “a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven,” and second to describe “the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.” Then, the word “behold” appears again in verse 13 to acknowledge the presence of Yahweh himself, standing above the ladder. In each use, the word “behold” adds “something strikingly original and fresh.”²⁶ It is remarkable to see the ladder on its own, but more remarkable still to see how the angels are using the ladder to travel between heaven and earth—and all the more remarkable still to see Yahweh standing above the ladder! The text does not explicitly tell us *why* the angels are going up and coming down on the ladder, but from other references to angels in Genesis (cf. Gen. 3:24; 18:1–22; 19:1–22) we may deduce that these angels manifest the presence of God as his representatives and messengers.²⁷ The Old Testament portrays God’s angels as “patrolling” the nations, so this ladder seems to serve as the point of connection between heaven and earth.²⁸

The citizens of Babel wanted this portal into heaven. Therefore, they began to build “a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth” (Gen. 11:4). The ladder that Jacob sees, however, “is not a product of human delusions of grandeur. It is a way by which God will make himself known to Jacob. Messengers, not

pride, go up and down this structure.”²⁹ So, while this ladder has some resemblance to the ancient ziggurat temples, we must recognize the strict difference between the two structures. The ziggurats and the Tower of Babel were human attempts to reach God, whereas this Ladder is God’s work of reaching down to Jacob.³⁰ The builders of the ziggurats followed in the faithless footsteps of Esau by employing human logic to solve a divine problem of how to bridge the gap between a holy God and a sinful people.

It is in this connection that we understand what Jesus meant when he claimed to *be* the ladder that Jacob saw: “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” (John 1:51).³¹ John Calvin puts it memorably:

It is Christ alone, therefore, who connects heaven and earth: he is the only Mediator who reaches from heaven down to earth: he is the medium through which the fullness of all celestial blessings flows down to us, and through which we, in turn, ascend to God. He it is who, being the head over angels, causes them to minister to his earthly members. Therefore, (as we read in John 1:51,) he properly claims for himself this honor, that after he shall have been manifested in the world, angels shall ascend and descend.³²

Jesus came not to encourage humans to build their own way up to God, but to present himself as the Way (cf. John 14:6) by which guilty sinners may be reconciled to a holy God. Jesus *is* the divine solution to the human problem of sin.

Yahweh’s Promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

The text describes Yahweh’s location in this vision, although the meaning is unclear. On the one hand, the text may mean that he stands “above” the ladder “in a position of authority, to preside over” it.³³ On the other hand, Yahweh may stand “beside” the ladder, coming near to Jacob as he speaks to him.³⁴ There are good arguments for understanding the Hebrew either way. More importantly than knowing *where* Yahweh is, the text directs our attention to *what* Yahweh says. Yahweh identifies himself as the God of Abraham “your father” and the God of Isaac. Notably, Yahweh names *Abraham*, rather than Isaac, as Jacob’s “father.” In fact, Abraham is Jacob’s grandfather, but Yahweh’s point is theological rather than genealogical. By this, Yahweh “recalls the great promises and blessings given to them and anticipates their reaffirmation and reapplication to Jacob.”³⁵ Yahweh relates to Jacob not for Jacob’s own sake, but for the sake of the covenant promises that he made to Abraham, and reaffirmed to Isaac.

Remember that Jacob has just committed a wicked sin by deceiving his father, and yet Yahweh relates to Jacob entirely by grace. Indeed, the only hint of reproach may come when Yahweh states that he is the “God of Isaac”: “For Jacob now lies before the one who says in essence: I am the God of the one whom you deceived and of whom you took advantage. Jacob could supplant Esau. He could deceive Isaac. But what will he do with Yahweh?”³⁶ Even so, God transfers his promises to Abraham and Isaac to Jacob. Derek Kidner remarks:

This is a supreme display of divine grace, unsought and unstinted. Unsought, for Jacob was no pilgrim or returning prodigal, yet God came out to meet him, angelic retinue and all, taking him wholly by surprise. Unstinted, for there was no word of reproach or demand,

only a stream of assurances flowing from the central ‘I am the Lord’, to spread from the past (13a) to the distant future, from the spot where Jacob lay (13b) to the four corners of the earth (14) and from his person to all mankind (14b).³⁷

First, Yahweh promises to give Jacob and Jacob’s offspring the land on which he lies (Gen. 28:13). Jacob is fleeing the land of Canaan as an exile, and yet Yahweh promises that Jacob will eventually possess this land that he must leave. By promising something that Jacob must wait so long to lay hold of, Jacob must learn to trust Yahweh rather than the blessings that Yahweh can provide.³⁸ Second, Yahweh promises to make Jacob’s offspring as numerous as the “dust of the earth,” adding that Jacob’s offspring will spread abroad throughout the far corners of the earth (Gen. 28:14). Abraham had only one son by promise: Isaac. Isaac had two sons from the same mother, but God rejected Esau to choose Jacob. Now, God reiterates the same promises of making the offspring of Abraham and Isaac innumerable (cf. Gen. 13:16; 15:5; 17:4–6; 22:17; 26:4), but he specifies that their offspring will become innumerable through *Jacob*.

Third, Yahweh specifies the overarching purpose for blessing Jacob: “and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 28:14). Yahweh made this promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18) and to Isaac (Gen. 26:4). Additionally, Isaac prophesied a version of this blessing to Jacob (Gen. 27:29), but now Yahweh makes this promise explicit. God will bless all the families of the earth through Jacob and Jacob’s offspring. Victor Hamilton makes an important point about this promise: “Thus far in the Jacob story the emphasis has been on Jacob’s ‘getting’ the blessing. Here the emphasis shifts to ‘being’ the blessing.”³⁹ It is through this promise that God will bring forth his own Son as the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to bless all the families of the earth through Jesus Christ.⁴⁰

With Jacob, Keeping Jacob, and Bringing Jacob Back

To all this, Yahweh adds an important promise for Jacob’s exile: “Behold, 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” (Gen. 28:15). Just as Yahweh promised to be with Isaac (Gen. 26:3, 24), Yahweh now promises to be *with* Jacob. Furthermore, Yahweh makes a unique promise to *keep* (i.e., “guard”) Jacob wherever he goes—a promise God makes only here in the book of Genesis.⁴¹ Later, however, God will extend this promise to all his people in the priestly benediction of Aaron: “The LORD bless you and *keep* you...” (Num. 6:24).⁴² These promises are critical, and Jacob cannot safely venture into foreign lands without them. More importantly, Yahweh promises to bring Jacob back to the land. Jacob’s exile will only be temporary. Although Jacob must leave the land of promise for a time, God will not leave Jacob until he has accomplished everything he has promised to do for him.

Gordon Wenham observes that “the promises were first made to Abraham as he was settling in the land, but they are reaffirmed to Jacob as he is fleeing from it.”⁴³ God’s plans and purposes will not be thwarted, no matter what happens to Jacob on his journey. More than this, we should also recognize that God has tied the fulfillment of his promises—and, therefore, he has tied his own glory—to this scoundrel, Jacob: “Should anything happen to Jacob, should Yahweh leave him or withdraw his protection, all the earlier promises involving Jacob’s descendants would be aborted.”⁴⁴ God’s insistence on using Jacob does not have to do with Jacob, but with *God*. God intends to raise up a

kingdom for himself through the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, even though Jacob is in no way deserving of such a blessing. God is operating according to his grace and mercy, not according to human notions of justice or fairness. Jacob will suffer much because of his sins, but God will glorify himself by blessing and multiplying Jacob.

God Makes His People a Generous Blessing (Genesis 28:16–22)

When Jacob awakes, he is afraid (Gen. 28:17); however, this is a different thing from suggesting that Jacob is “struck with terror, as reprobates are, as soon as God shows himself; but he was inspired with a fear which produces pious submission.”⁴⁵ Rather, Jacob takes a step forward in the true fear of the Lord. As Allen Ross remarks, the “clear revelation of God’s gracious dealings can transform a worldly individual into a worshiper”:⁴⁶

[16] Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.” [17] And 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.”

[18] So early in the morning Jacob 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. [19] He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first. (Gen. 28:16–19)

Upon awaking, Jacob recognizes that in “that place” (cf. Gen. 28:11) where he set up camp, Yahweh has been present, even though Jacob did not know it (Gen. 28:16). “That place” is “awesome”—it is the house of God (Hebrew: *Beth-el*) and the gate of heaven (Gen. 28:17). Again, this is not the site that Jacob chose to build a tower reaching up to God. Instead, this is the place where God chose to come down to Jacob. Jacob trusts what God can do for him more than he trusts what he can do for God.

Pillar and Oil

After his initial statements of surprise, Jacob responds to the Lord’s revelation in two ways. First, Jacob sets up the stone from under his head as a pillar and pours oil on the top of it. Gordon Wenham explains Jacob’s use of a stone as a pillar:

Stones could be erected as memorials to the dead (35:20; 2 Sam 18:18) or as witnesses to agreements, especially boundary agreements (31:45, 51). Standing stones are frequently mentioned elsewhere in the OT as a feature of Canaanite religion that is to be shunned, “Beside the altar of the LORD...you shall not set up a pillar, which the LORD your God hates” (Deut 16:21–22; cf. Exod 23:24; 34:13; 1 Kgs 14:23).⁴⁷

As for the pouring of oil, Allen Ross writes this:

Jacob’s offering took the form of oil poured on top of the stone, perhaps pointing to the Lord at the top of the stairway. Pouring the oil before the Lord was a gift to God, for it conveyed much the same attitude as making a sacrifice. It was a symbolic ritual act by which Jacob

demonstrated his devotion to the Lord and consecrated the spot as holy to him. Later, oil was used in worship to sanctify the holy places and holy things (Lev. 8:10–11). This duly consecrated altar thus served to commemorate the appearance, express the patriarch's devotion, and guarantee the seriousness of the oath of the worshiper (cf. Gen. 12:8; 13:18; 26:25).⁴⁸

In both cases, the important thing we must recognize is that Jacob is not setting up these elements of his own initiative. Rather, he is responding in worship to the Lord's revealed presence in this place. In other words, he is not seeking after some false god after his own imagination, but acting according to the revelation from the living God that he has received. He renames the place Bethel (lit., "house of God"; cf. Gen. 28:17) in honor of God's appearance. Importantly, this is the first point where we see Jacob as a *giver* rather than a *taker*. Jacob *gives* oil as a sacrifice to the God who spoke to him.

Jacob's Vow

The second way that Jacob responds to the Lord's revelation is by making a vow where he prays God's promises back to him:⁴⁹

[20] Then 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, [21] so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, [22] and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you." (Gen. 28:20–22)

The translation of this passage is tricky, since there is a disagreement among interpreters about where the "if" clauses end and the "then" clause begins.⁵⁰ In other words, what does Jacob say that *God* will do, and what does Jacob say that *he* will do in response?

The ESV translates the "if" clause through the first half of Genesis 28:21, so that Jacob begins to talk about what *he* will do starting at the end of 28:21: "then the LORD shall be my God..." From this perspective, many have criticized Jacob as though he is putting God to the test, waiting to see whether the Lord will fulfill his promises before formally taking Yahweh as his God.⁵¹ Instead, it is probably better to understand the phrase "the LORD shall be my God" as the last part of the "if" clause (what God will do) rather than as the first part of the "then" clause (what Jacob will do in response). That is, Jacob is not bargaining that he will *make* Yahweh his God, but he is summarizing all God's promises under the overarching promise that Yahweh will be God to him: "...[if] the LORD will be my God." In Hebrew, Jacob an imperfect (future) tense verb to begin this vow: "If God *will be* with me...." Then, he uses a construction of perfect tense verbs with the word "and" (in Hebrew, a single letter: *waw*) in a way that communicates that all the following verbs are to be read in sequence with (that is, in the same tense as) the first verb: "If God *will be* [imperfect] with me and *will keep me* [*waw*-consecutive perfect] in this way that I go, and *will give* [*waw*-consecutive perfect] to me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and *I will return* [*waw*-consecutive perfect] in peace to my father's house, and Yahweh *will be* [*waw*-consecutive perfect] to me as God..." (Gen. 28:20–21; my translation).⁵² Afterward, Jacob breaks the series of *waw*-consecutive perfect tense verbs that formed

the “if” section with two imperfect verbs that constitute the “then” section: “...then [lit: “and”] this stone that I set up as a pillar *will be* [imperfect] the house of God, and of all that you give to me, I *will tithe* [imperfect] a tenth of it to you” (Gen. 28:22; my translation). The grammar of the sentence clearly marks all of Genesis 28:20–21 as what God will do, and then Genesis 28:22 alone as the vow of what Jacob will do.

Jacob, then, is not bargaining with God; rather, “it would be fairer to say that Jacob was taking the promise of 15 and translating the general into the particular.”⁵³ God promised to be “with” him “wherever” he goes (Gen. 28:15), and Jacob cites both of those promises in the first part of his prayer: “If God will be with me...in this way that I go...” (Gen. 28:20). Then, Jacob prayer for “bread to eat and clothing to wear” (Gen. 28:15) corresponds to God’s promise to “keep” him (Gen. 28:15). expresses his faith that God will meet his basic needs along the way. If God does not give him food or clothing, then in what sense will God *be with* him and *keeping* him? Then, when Jacob prays “so that I come again to my father’s house in peace” (Gen. 28:21a), he is again citing the explicit promises of God to bring Jacob back into the land (Gen. 28:15). The final phrase of the “if” clause (“and if Yahweh will be my God”; Gen. 28:21b) functions as a summary of all that God has promised him, but it also echoes the language that God used to open his speech: “I am the LORD [Yahweh], the God of Abraham you father and the God of Isaac” (Gen. 28:13). Yahweh has been God to Abraham and to Isaac; will he also be God to “the third generation?”⁵⁴ In the covenant with Abraham, Yahweh explicitly promised that he would be God not only to Abraham, but to Abraham’s offspring after him, throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant (Gen. 17:7).⁵⁵

Jacob is pleading Yahweh’s covenant promises back to him as Jacob prepares to go into his exile. Where Esau invented his own way to gain the blessing from God by marrying an Ishmaelite as his third wife, Jacob prays God’s own word back to him. God rejects human means and methods of approaching him, but he loves to hear us pray his word back to him, for it means that we have set our hope and faith on him, and not on our imaginations or sinful desires.⁵⁶ So, when Jacob comes to the “then” part of his vow, he promises *first* that this pillar stone will be “God’s house” (Gen. 28:22a). That is, he promises that the city of Bethel will be treated as a place of worship. Indeed, when Jacob returns, he worships again at Bethel (Gen. 35:1–15).⁵⁷ Furthermore, Jacob promises to give a tenth of his possessions in worship to the Lord. In this, Jacob “is imitating the actions of his grandfather Abraham (cf. 17:7; 14:20). He is also, as father of the nation, setting a pattern for all Israel to follow.”⁵⁸ When Abraham tithed to Melchizedek a tenth of all the spoils from his victory over the Mesopotamian kings (Gen. 14:20; cf. Heb. 7:4), he acknowledged that the God in whose name Melchizedek blessed him was the rightful possessor of heaven and earth (Gen. 14:19). Jacob promises to do the same as an acknowledgement that, if God does indeed bless him, everything he have will have come from God.⁵⁹

Importantly, the law of Moses commanded the Israelites to give not just one tithe, but two annual tithes *and* a third tithe made once every three years, for a total of 23% of their income—and all this before counting the cost of animal sacrifices, gleanings left behind for the poor, charitable gifts, vows, and freewill offerings.⁶⁰ At its best, therefore, the practice of tithing was one element of an overall lifestyle of genuine generosity. At its worst, tithing degenerated into a technique for self-righteousness (Luke 18:12) or a loophole to avoid generous, sacrificial giving (Mark 12:41–44). The New Testament calls each believer to give “as he may prosper” (1 Cor. 16:2), so that we cannot

reduce our giving to a simple calculation of 10%.⁶¹ Rather, we are called to give cheerfully (2 Cor. 9:6–7), generously (2 Cor. 9:11, 13), and sacrificially (Mark 12:41–44; Luke 21:1–4). All of this, of course, is not because we are trying to buy our way into heaven any more than Jacob's Ladder is a monument that Jacob builds to ascend himself into heaven.⁶²

Rather, we worship by generous giving as a response to what God has done through his Son, who has bridged heaven and earth through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Though the Son was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that we, by his poverty, might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9). By this generous blessing that God has given to us in Christ, God transforms us from greedy takers into generous givers who lavishly bless others. By both word and deed, God sends us to *be* a generous blessing by seeking to lead all the families of the earth to be blessed in Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think leads Isaac to openly bless Jacob in Genesis 28:1–4? Why didn't Isaac bless Jacob the first time around? What do we learn from Isaac's repentance in this matter? Where have you turned away from some sin to begin obeying God? What makes repentance so difficult for us to do? Is there an area where you need to turn away from a sin right now?
2. What is Esau trying to do by taking an Ishmaelite woman as his third wife? Why will this course of action fail to accomplish his objectives? What does this teach us about seeking God's blessings according to human wisdom, rather than God's word? Can you think of any areas where you are hoping to gain something with God apart from what he reveals in his word?
3. Why does God make such lavish promises to a scoundrel like Jacob (Gen. 28:13–15)? How do these promises advance God's agenda of bringing into the world the kingdom of his Son Jesus Christ? Why doesn't God use someone more righteous than Jacob for his purposes? Which of these promises does God extend to us in the new covenant that we have in Christ?
4. What prompts a greedy man to generosity in making a sacrifice of oil (Gen. 28:18) and vowing a tithe (Gen. 28:22)? What kinds of sacrificial generosity does God require of us in the new covenant? How do you steward the wealth that God has entrusted to you? Do you give cheerfully, generously, and sacrificially? If not, what in your life needs to change?

Notes

1. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 439.

2. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 106 Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.vi.i.html>>

3. The ESV here smooths out “daughters of the Canaanites” as “Canaanite women”; however, the ESV uses the more literal phrase “daughters of the Canaanites” in the parallel passage in Genesis 24:3. The same phrase is used in both passages, but the translation obscures the connection between the passages.

4. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 439. *My note*: The format includes the negating particle **לֹא** (“not”) plus a verb (here, “take”) in the imperfect tense (**יִקַּח**).

5. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 213.

6. “However, whereas Abraham sent his servant on Isaac’s behalf, Isaac sends Jacob himself. For Jacob to take a lead in looking for a wife would seem more typical. Isaac is always portrayed as somewhat passive.” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 213.)

7. “V. 2 makes clear that Isaac desires Jacob to marry the daughter of Rebekah’s brother. That means that Jacob will marry his first cousin and that his maternal uncle will be his father-in-law. But one needs to distinguish first cousins, which are parallel cousins (children of same sex siblings [probably the case with Isaac and Rebekah], either matrilaterally or patrilaterally), from cross-cousins (children of opposite sex siblings [the case with Jacob and Leah/Rachel]). The latter form of marriage, while strange in Western culture, is frequent in other societies. A cross-cousin is an ideal mate if one wants to marry a close relative who is nonetheless outside one’s tribal unit.” (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 234.)

8. Kidner, *Genesis*, 168.

9. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 440.

10. Kidner, *Genesis*, 169.

11. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 440.

12. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 214.

13. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 235.

14. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 192.

15. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 235.

16. Kidner, *Genesis*, 168.

17. “A further fault is, that he does not seek it as he ought: for he devises a new and strange method of reconciling God and his father to himself; and therefore all his diligence is without profit. At the same time he does not seem to be careful about pleasing God, so that he may but propitiate his father. Before all things, it was his duty to cast aside his profane disposition, his perverse manners, and his corrupt affections of the flesh, and then to bear with meekness the chastisement inflicted upon him: for genuine repentance would have dictated to him this sentiment, Seeing I have hitherto rendered myself unworthy of the birthright, my brother is deservedly preferred before me. Nothing, therefore, remains for me but to humble myself, and since I am deprived of the honor of being the head, let it suffice me to be at least one of the members of the Church. And, certainly, it would have been more desirable for him to remain in some obscure corner of the Church, than, as one cut off and torn away from the elect people, to shine with a proud preeminence on earth. He aims, however, at nothing of this kind, but attempts, by I know not what prevarications, to appease his father in whatever way he may be able. Moses, in this example, depicts all hypocrites to the life. For as often as the judgment of God urges them, though they are wounded with the pain of their punishment, they yet do not seek a true remedy; for having aimed at offering one kind of satisfaction only, they entirely neglect a simple and real conversion: and even in the satisfaction offered, they only make a pretense. Whereas Esau ought thoroughly to have repented, he only tried to correct the single fault of his marriage; and this too in a most absurd manner. Yet another defect follows: for while he retains the wives who were so hateful to his parents, he supposes he has discharged his duty by marrying a third. But by this method, neither was the trouble of his parents alleviated, nor his house cleansed from guilt. And now truly, whence does he marry his third wife? From the race of Ishmael, whom we know to have been himself degenerate, and whose posterity had departed from the pure worship of God.” (Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 108–09. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.vi.i.html>>)

18. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 441.

19. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 238.

20. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 110–11. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.vi.i.html>>

21. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 221.

22. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 487.

23. “Like Abraham in chapter 15, Jacob received a confirmation of the promised blessing while asleep in the night (cf. 15:12; 18:11). Abraham received a ‘vision’ (15:1) and Jacob saw the Lord in a ‘dream’ (28:12). In both narratives, however, a divine confirmation was given regarding the establishment of the same covenant of promise: (1) the gift of the land; (2) the promise of great posterity; and (3) blessing to all the nations. In a remarkably similar fashion, the viewpoint of both chapters turns to the future ‘exile’ of Abraham’s seed and the promise of a ‘return.’ Abraham’s vision looked forward to the sojourn to Haran and to the Lord’s eventual return of Jacob to the land promised to Abraham. In both cases, the promise was that God would not forsake them and would return them to their land. As Abraham’s vision anticipated narratives from the latter part of the Pentateuch, so Jacob’s vision anticipated the events which were to come in the next several chapters.

24. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 221.

25. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 239.

26. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 222.

27. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 489.

28. “‘Angels of God going up and down on it.’ Most commentators regard this as merely underlining the idea that earth and heaven were linked by a ladder. But this overlooks that this is a new verbal clause introduced by וַיַּרְא, which is evidently adding something strikingly original and fresh. Angels in the OT are conceived of as looking after different nations and their territories and as patrolling the earth (Job 1:6; 2:1; Zech 1:8–17; cf. Deut 32:8). So Rashi suggests that the ascending angels are those responsible for Jacob’s homeland and descending ones are those responsible for the foreign land to which he is going. In other words, this vision of the angels is an assurance of God’s protection of Jacob even though he is leaving home. This is an attractive idea in that the vision thus anticipates the verbal assurances given in v 15. In a similar way, Abraham’s night vision (15:11–12) anticipated the prophecy in 15:13–16.” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 222.)

29. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 240.

30. “As for possible cultural background to explain a heavenly staircase, scholars cite either Egyptian or Akkadian parallels to explain the imagery, the latter being more likely. There is no clear connection of the stairway, however, with the Babylonian ziggurat, which possessed a series of steps, although there is some resemblance.... What the ziggurat and similar representations share in common with Jacob’s dream is simply the common imagery of a designated meeting place between earth and the divine sphere.” (Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 450.)

31. “Jesus took this figure of a means of access between heaven and earth, as a vivid foretaste of himself as the Way (John 1:51).” (Kidner, *Genesis*, 170.)

32. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 113. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.vi.i.html>>

33. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 241.

34. “The text at v. 13a permits two different interpretations of the Hebrew that describes the position of the Lord in the dream: either the Lord stands above the ladder or stands at the side of Jacob. The LXX and many EVs translate the Hebrew as ‘above it,’ referring to the ladder, meaning that the Lord stood at the top of the stairway (e.g., NIV, AV, RSV, NASB). By this understanding, the Lord positioned above the ladder casts a forceful figure, looming over the earth beneath (cp. Exod 17:9). Alternately, the antecedent may be Jacob, meaning that the Lord stood ‘beside him’ on the earth, presumably at the base of the ladder (e.g., NJB, NAB, REB, NRSV, NJPS, HCSB). A similar Hebrew expression describes the three visitors at Abraham’s side, “standing near him” (18:2, NRSV; cp. 1 Sam 22:6); also the Lord is pictured beside an inanimate object in Amos’s visions (7:7; 9:1). The pronoun (‘it’) in v. 12 clearly refers to the stairway. Moreover, the depiction of the Lord at the top of the stair with ascending and descending angels conforms to the traditional image of patrolling angels who come and go at God’s bidding (cf. 1 Kgs 22:19–22; Job 1:6–8; 2:1–3; Zech 1:10;

6:5).” (Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 451.)

35. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 222.

36. Hamilton continues this quotation by bringing out the play on words surrounding Jacob’s name: “Can Jacob ‘*āqab* (supplant, cheat) Yahweh?” (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 241–42.)

37. Kidner, *Genesis*, 169.

38. “We read that the land was given to his posterity; yet he himself was not only a stranger in it to the last, but was not permitted even to die there. Whence we infer, that under the pledge or earnest of the land, something better and more excellent was given, seeing that Abraham was a spiritual possessor of the land, and contented with the mere beholding of it, fixed his chief regard on heaven.” (Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 115. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.vi.i.html>>)

39. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 242.

40. “So here God promises that in Jacob and his seed all nations shall bless themselves, because no happiness will ever be found except what proceeds from this source. That, however, which is peculiar to Christ, is without impropriety transferred to Jacob, in whose loins Christ then was. Therefore, inasmuch as Jacob, at that time, represented the person of Christ, it is said that all nations are to be blessed in him; but, seeing that the manifestation of a benefit so great depended on another, the expression in thy seed is immediately added in the way of explanation.” (Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 116. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.vi.i.html>>)

41. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 223.

42. “The promise of divine protection does not exclude conflict and tension, but it does guarantee the outcome for the good of the covenant and its recipient.” (Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 491.)

43. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 223.

44. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 243.

45. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 118. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.vi.i.html>>

46. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 483.

47. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 223.

48. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 492.

49. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 225.

50. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 493. Grammatically, the “if” clauses are the *protasis*, and the “then” clauses are the *apodosis*.

51. “If this is the case, the jeopardy of Jacob’s character continues. In contrast to Abraham’s being tested by God, Jacob has taken the role of doing the testing. In contrast to God’s placing conditions on Abraham (leave your country, etc.) so that the promises can be realized, Jacob puts conditions on God before God can become the ‘beneficiary’ of the promises Jacob offers. In his vow, he presumes on the grace of God. Everything is backward here, and it is an intolerable situation that will have to be fixed before God can proceed with Jacob. Jacob is still more scoundrel than saint. He treat God as a passenger along for the ride, whereas God insists (and rightly so) on being in the driver’s seat.” (Walton, *Genesis*, 573–74.)

52. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 248.

53. Kidner, *Genesis*, 169.

54. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 241.

55. Indeed, Jacob uses nearly identical words: “And Yahweh will be to me as God” (וַיְהִי יְהוָה לִּי וַיְהִי יְהוָה לִּי; Gen. 28:21b). God said: “...to be as God to you, and to your offspring after you” (לְהִיּוֹת לָךְ לְאֱלֹהִים; Gen. 17:7)

56. “As already noted, Jacob’s conditions echo the promises made in v 15; only the mention of food and clothing is additional. Jacob’s prayer is thus based on the divine promise. To suggest that divine promises make prayer redundant, so that Jacob’s vow must come from a different author from the promise, misunderstands the

nature of petitionary prayer within Scripture (cf. Luke 11:5–13).” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 225.)

57. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 493.

58. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 225.

59. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 249.

60. Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2006), 205–08.

61. Kidner, *Genesis*, 170.

62. “*The effectual revelation of God’s protective presence and promised blessings will inspire devout and faithful worship.* Those who fully realize God’s gracious provision, those whom the Word of God has powerfully impressed, will respond with consecration and commitment. Where there is no reverential fear, no commitment or no devotion, there is probably very little apprehension of what the spiritual life is all about. Like the revelation to Jacob, the written revelation of God makes believers aware of the Lord’s presence and prompts them to a higher level of living.” (Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 494.)