

“The Rebuilding of Jacob Begins” | Genesis 28 (He Who Wrestles with God: A Study of the Life of Jacob)

The Rev. Dr. Samuel Ferguson | The Falls Church Anglican

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(Small Group Discussion Questions on Page 7)

It's common to see construction signs in residential areas in Northern, VA, despite how densely populated the area is. These signs stand proud before a lot, advertising the builder, and—at times, even with a picture—previewing the coming attraction.

When you look at these signs it is just as common, when you lift up your eyes, to discover there is *already* a house on the lot. To build in Northern Virginia requires also tearing down.

We could set such a sign in front of the life of Jacob when we come to Genesis 28. Surely, building is required. A massive blessing has been set on his shoulders, including having many descendants and possessing the promised land. But at the time, he has no family of his own nor possess any of the land. The house of Jacob needs to be built.

But at the same time, Jacob is no empty lot. And the man standing before us is scarcely fit to be built into the people of God. He's a grasper, a trickster, a man capable of lying and living with the lie.

If Jacob is to be built up, Jacob must also be torn down.

And this is what commences in Genesis 28. The building process begins when Jacob is sent away to find a suitable wife, and hopefully start a family. But the path this building follows, involves tearing down also. In Genesis 28 we'll see the stone laid for the house of Jacob and the house of the Lord, Bethel—but it is not the capstone, but cornerstone. We are dealing with foundations in this chapter. And looking closely at verses 10-22, Jacob's dream, I want to consider how the rebuilding of Jacob begins by noting the (1) Leveling, (2) Re-Visioning, and (3) First Stone.

I. The Leveling (vv 10-11).

Text: Isaac and Rebekah send Jacob away (28:5), and in verse 10 the extent of his journey is stated: “**Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran**” (28:10).

More Like Banishment

While on its surface this seems like a man sent to find a bride, when we consider the details, it's more like a banishment.

Destination: Haran is in Northern Mesopotamia—a 460-mile journey through wilderness. Mesopotamia, a land of false gods, is the place Abraham was commanded to leaven (Gen 12:1-3), and the land Abraham forbid his servant to take his son back to. When sending his servant

to find Isaac a bride in Genesis 24, Abraham makes his swear: “You must not take my son back there.”⁹ So the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master and swore to him concerning this matter (Gen 24:6-9). And now Jacob is going there.

Details: Furthermore, notice the details we are given of the journey.

Nothing: Jacob is alone. Whereas Abraham sent his servant with “ten of his master’s camels ... and all sorts of choice gifts” (Gen 24:10), Jacob travels with no one and nothing. At one point he seeks God’s provision of “bread and clothes” (28:20).

Nowhere: The one night of the journey we are told about, finds Jacob in a nameless place. Three times verse 11 uses this vague term “place: “

Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. 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).

Later, in verse 19, Moses tells us the name of the area is Luz, a Canaanite city. But why doesn’t he tell us this here? Because he wants us to experience things as Jacob did—he did not know where he was.

Night: Finally, we are told it is “night, and the sun had set” and that Jacob has nowhere to shelter, so “taking one of the stones” he “put it under his head and lay down to sleep (v11).”

Not accidentally, when Jacob returns from this journey, twenty years from now, he spends another night alone. And after that night of wrestling, we are told, “The sun rose upon Jacob as he passed Penueel, limping because of his hip” (Gen 32:31). The point: Jacob is entering a twenty-year dark night where he is away from his family, away from what is familiar, and in danger.

Biblical Pattern of Exile and What It Suggests

We are meant to feel Jacob’s journey as an experience the Bible refers to as *exile*. It is the state of being barred from one’s home—it is to never know final security and peace, but to be perpetually unsettled. Adam and Eve experience it when cast out of Eden (Gen 3). Moses experiences it during 40 years in Midian (Ex 3). Israel knows exile for 400 years in Egypt, 40 in the wilderness, then off and on again in Assyria and Babylon. Even individuals, such as Ezekiel or Paul, find themselves cast into the wilderness at times (see 1 Kgs 19:3-5; Gal 1:17). Jesus, too, spends 40 days in the wilderness.

What do we make of this pattern? What do we make of the fact that, just when we think Jacob needs to be built into a reputable man, he’s cast into night?

1. For God to build the New Adam (person), he must tear down the Old Adam (person).

From Genesis 3 onward, we see a dark aspect of humanity developing. People seek autonomy—they do not want to live under God’s law (Gen 3); people fall into rivalry—they resort to violence or deceit to dominate others (Gen 4, Gen 6, Gen 25); and people like Jacob, fall prey to the lie of self-reliance. Jacob has done pretty well for himself. Nature didn’t give him the birthright or blessing. But by relying on his cunning, he found a way to get what he wanted.

These tendencies—autonomy, violence, control—are no foundation upon which God will build a people, or His House. They must be leveled to the ground. Which begs questions for us.

Application—God works from the ground up: God is always at work around us and within us—we trust that. But do we also grasp the fact that in order to make us new, God must demolish our old selves?

When Christians think of repenting of sin, we are speaking of a break with a former way of life. Paul speaks of the “death of the old self” even as we seek to put on the “new self” (Col 3:5; Eph 4:22-24). We may think all we need is a new capstone, when what we need is a new cornerstone.

And while God is always at work, there are certain times when this work is more intense than others. One writer speaks of the difference between “chronos time” and “crisis time,” where chronos is normal life, and crisis is when the foundations are being rebuilt.¹ This crisis time can be our own experience of exile. I don’t know what your exile will feel like. But it seems that God often begins to rebuild a person by starting with exile. And this is because much of this deeper uprooting and rebuilding cannot be done in the hustle and bustle of an easy life. It seems that God has a way of bringing us into a type of wilderness when, like Jacob, we feel alone, we don’t understand where we are, and we feel exposed under the elements with only a stone for a pillow.

But what I want to stress is that this leveling is actually a sign that one is under God’s blessing. This is how God works with those he loves—he rebuilds, by tearing down the old, rotting structure, right down to the studs, to the foundation.

[T] Which brings us to our next point: the re-visioning. When a house is torn down, before the new building commences, an architect must have a vision—a picture—of what the new building will be. And this is exactly what happens next for Jacob.

II. The Re-Visioning (vv 12-15)

Text: Jacob is asleep—unconscious!—when the dream happens in verses 12-15, stressing that the foundation of his life will be reset by God, not man. His dream can be separated into two parts, what he sees (vv12-13a), and what he hears (vv 13b-15).

¹ Bruce Waltke, *Genesis*, 395.

He sees three things: a ladder from heaven to earth; angels going up and down; God standing over him. I like the translation of one commentator, who captures well the poignancy of the Hebrew:

Jacob “dreamed, and, look, a ramp was set against the ground with its top reaching the heavens, and look, messengers of God were going up and coming down it. And, look, the LORD was poised over Jacob.”²

What Jacob sees completely shatters his previous assumptions about reality. He thought he was alone, but in reality, God and his angels were at work all around him. He thought he was leaving the territory of the God of his fathers, but in reality, this God was the God of the whole earth. And Jacob, surely thinking the space between himself and God unbridgeable (after all he had done!), finds it being bridged by God himself! God is breaking into Jacob’s domain!

Then there is what Jacob hears, as the Lord addresses him with a series of promises.

Patriarchal: The first set of promises (vv13-14) are those already spoken over Abraham and Isaac—promises of land, offspring, and that he would become a people who would bless all the families of the earth.³

Personal: But then in verse 15, things get far more personal, as the Lord makes certain promises about the relationship he will have with Jacob.

The Lord, towering over Jacob, looks at him and declares

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. (v 15).

Notice what God is saying to Jacob.

First, “I will be with you.” We dare not treat this promise like a cliché. It is the promise that undergirds all other promises; and it is the promise that all other promises look forward to. It is “the secret of all the promises which like a pivot stands precisely in the middle.”⁴ It reminds us of the comfort of the lone traveler in Psalm 23: “even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for thou are with me” (Ps 23:4). God assures this deceiver, this fugitive, Jacob, that he will be with him.

² Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton, 1996), 149.

³ “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. 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 (vv 13-14).

⁴ J. P. Fokkelman, *Genesis*, 61.

Second, “I will watch over you.” This is the promise of God’s attentive response to all danger that Jacob faces.

Third, “I will bring you back.” Whereas it was Jacob’s parents who sent him away; and it was Jacob’s mother, Rebekah, who said “I will send and bring you from there” (Gen 27:45). It is God Almighty who will bring him home.

Then to sum it all up, the Lord says again, “I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (Gen 28:15).

Point: *With You!* The words “I will be with you” are just two in Hebrew. There is no need for more. They could sum up so many of the stories in the Bible. They address our deepest problem (exile from God) and deepest need (reconciliation with God). These words point to the incarnation, the coming of Jesus, *Emmanuel*, “God with us.” These are the words Jesus speaks to his disciples when he sends them out, promising his presence with them by the Holy Spirit: **Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.... And behold, I am with you always....** (Matt 28:19-20).

Jacob is a sinner lying asleep when God makes these promises. They are given as sheer grace. What might they tell us about how God rebuilds a person?

First, whatever dream lies at the foundation of our own life, must be replaced by the message of Jacob’s dream. And it is inevitable that some dream—some deep hope, some set of promises—lives at the bottom of a life. This is what we live for. It is this cornerstone that shapes the other stone of our lives. This must be replaced by the essence of Jacob’s dream, which is this:

God is real, and terrifyingly awesome. And God does break into our lives. And when he does, there is not greater reality to organize our lives by: our principles, our values, our hopes and dreams—they must be *godward* not *selfward*. What dream lies at the foundation of your life?

Second, to live into the promises of God, means to see that our lives are just one piece of a much larger plan. Neither Abraham, Isaac, nor Jacob are sufficient in themselves for the realization of God’s larger plans. They are **stones in a cathedral, not castles in and of themselves**. At a time when we speak of building “our careers” and “our families” and “our social media platforms,” the promises God makes to Jacob strike us differently. They span out far past Jacob’s individual life: **in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed (14)**. Jacob’s individual life matters but it only makes sense as a piece in a much larger vision.

Sum: If what is leveled in exile is the notion of “**life as we would have it.**” What is begun in exile is “**life as God gives it.**” It is a gift of grace, that comes with the promise of His presence.

[T] Let us finally consider how Jacob responds.

III. The First Stone (vv 16-22)

Jacob wakes from his dream in verse 16, and in the following verse he responds.

His response is marked by awe and reverence:

“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.” (28:16-17).

Next, he responds by setting up stone to mark this moment—the *first stone of Bethel!*

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.... (28:18-19).

And finally, Jacob responds by making a vow—his response to God’s promise to him, by making a promise to God:

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.” (28:20-22).

The Transformation—new building—has begun:

We can see that the transformation—the rebuilding of Jacob—has begun. The deceiver, is now the vow maker. The one fleeing is father’s house, can envision coming back to it. And with the promise of the tithe, the “grasper” is turning into the “giver,”⁵ (he committed to tithing 10%).

The transformation is far from complete. Notice that Jacob is still hedging his bets with this vow, “If God will be with me...” And know that Jacob has still incredible tests before him, and will be in Haran for twenty years under the thumb of his uncle Laban. But nevertheless, God broken in to Jacob’s domain, the tearing down, and building up, has begun.

Application and close: There are two general themes of application I want to highlight as we conclude:

(1) God will get down to the foundation of you: in rebuilding you, God will get down to the foundation of your life. And that is the dream that underlies everything—who your god is, what you’re living for, what story you think your life is part of. These are foundational truths. And God wants the foundation of our lives to be a vision of his greatness, fear of the Lord that issues from this vision, and the awareness that our life is a piece in a larger project that he is building.

⁵ Bruce Waltke, *Genesis*, 394.

The promises for Jacob are part of a structure that spans all of history, all of humanity. God wants Jacob realigned unto this vision.

(2) The most important promise, God with you, can be yours in Jesus Christ.

The most important promise in this scene is the promise of God's presence—it is the goal of all the other promises. But it is also important because it is the one promise that can be immediately received—at least in measure. For the land, the offspring, the larger blessing, Jacob must wait. And much of this, he will never see. But God is *with him*, in the present. That was Jacob's joy.

And do you know it can be yours, too? It is not only for the patriarchs and their natural children. In Jesus Christ, God breaks into our domain. **Jesus is Jacob's ladder**—the place where heaven breaks into earth. In John's Gospel, when Philip and Nathanael are trying to grasp what it means if Jesus is the Son of God, Jesus takes these words from Jacob's dream and applies them to himself:

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; Gen 28:12).

God breaks into Jacob's domain. And things will be forever different for Jacob from hereon. And God continues to break into people's lives in Jesus Christ. He is Jacob's ladder—the place where God comes to us. Have you come to the end of yourself? Are you weary and laid bare in exile. Do you see Him, standing atop that ladder. He knocks. He speaks. He says, "Jacob, I will be with you, I will protect you, I will bring you home; I never leave you until I fulfill my promises for you."

Let's Pray.

Discussion Questions:

1. With the events of Genesis 27 in mind, read Genesis 28:10. How might Jacob have been feeling as he set out for Haran?
2. God shows up in Jacob's life (Gen 28:12-15) before Jacob shows any repentance for his actions in Genesis 27, and while Jacob is asleep. What does this tell us about the ways of God? Do we need to start fixing ourselves before he starts to fix us?
3. Read God's promises to Jacob in Genesis 28:15. Write them on a piece of paper, as though God were making these promises to you. In Christ, do you believe such promises are made to you? How do these promises impact your daily life? Romans 8:26-39 is a good passage to read if you'd like to ponder more of how God is presently active in caring for you.
4. Jacob has to be torn down in order to be rebuilt. Are there areas in your life—your own plans and dreams, a desire to control, etc.—that God has been tearing down? Painful as it may be, do you see his loving hand in this act of rebuilding?

This is a preaching draft. Final transcript will be posted at a later date.

5. Jacob set up a stone in Gen 28:18. Is there a time when God broke into your life that you marked with “a stone of remembrance” (whether literally or figuratively)?

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