

REFLECTION GUIDE

GENESIS 28:10-22 | STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

KEY TERMS

Paddan-aram/Haran - These two place names are used interchangeably in the narrative to refer to the same place (or it's possible that Paddan-aram is the region containing the city Haran). Thus when Isaac sends Jacob to Paddan-aram in v. 6, Jacob is being obedient when he goes to Haran (v. 10).

Bethel - Jacob renames the place where he has his dream *Bethel*, meaning "house of God" (v. 19). Abraham had previously built an altar to God in this location (Gen 12:8).

Pillar - After his dream, Jacob builds a *pillar* which was a common form of Ancient Near Eastern worship (v. 18). Later in his life, Jacob will build an *altar* to God at Bethel (Gen 35:7). Some scholars have suggested a progression from building a *pillar* in chapter 28 to an *altar* in chapter 35 because God later prohibited the building pillars (Deut 16:21-22). Others suggest that *pillars* and *altars* are virtually synonymous terms and both were ways Jacob expressed worship to God.

DID YOU KNOW?

The meaning of the word *ladder* is somewhat uncertain but most translations use *staircase* or *ladder* (v. 12). The symbolism indicates a unique connection between heaven and earth.

BACKGROUND

Following the messy blessing in chapter 27, Isaac instructs Jacob not to take a wife from the Canaanites amongst whom they are living but to go to Paddan-aram to find a wife from their own people (vv. 1-9). Jacob obeys his father's wish and leaves Beersheba for Haran (or Paddan-aram) when he has a dream (vv. 10-11). In this dream, there is a *ladder* (or "staircase") reaching from earth to heaven upon which angels were ascending and descending (v. 12). Above the ladder is God, who re-states to Jacob the promise he previously made to Abraham and Isaac: *The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring...and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed* (vv. 13-15). Some Christians (including Augustine and Luther) have seen this dream as an allegorical reference to Jesus (see the allusion in John 1:50-51) and go so far as to equate Jacob's *stone* with Jesus as the *cornerstone* (see Eph 2:20). Although these interpretations are speculative, at the very least this dream is a foreshadowing of Jesus who would be the ultimate unification of heaven and Earth. Jacob responds to this dream in two ways: he builds a *pillar* and he makes a vow (vv. 16-22). Though Jacob's experience is similar to those of his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham, he interestingly is the only one from his family who makes a vow to God. The vow appears to be testing God in a sense to see if he will be faithful to his promises and is another example of how God uses Jacob despite his unworthiness. At the same time, this story does seem to show growth on Jacob's part as he learns to have faith in the God who pursues him.

GOING DEEPER

Read Ephesians 6:12, John 3:6, and Colossians 3:1-13. Why do you think it's often difficult for us to acknowledge the spiritual realm in everyday life—even as Christians? What thoughts or emotions come up when thinking about the reality of beings like angels and demons? What do you think a healthy awareness of the spiritual realm looks like in everyday life?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

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LEARNING THE WORD

1. Read Genesis 28:10-22. What life situation is Jacob facing? What did Jacob see in his dream?
2. In verses 13-16, what specific things does God say he will do for Jacob? Note the number of times God says, "I am" and "I will."
3. To this point, had Jacob done anything at all to earn or deserve the presence and promises of God? What was Jacob doing when God intervened and broke into his life? What does this teach us about God's grace?
4. In verses 16-22, we see Jacob's response to God. How is Jacob's worship and devotion a direct response to God and his promises?
5. Why is giving a tithe to the Lord a natural response for Jacob? How did he see God's grace and promises as the foundation of his giving back to God?

LIVING THE WORD

6. Read John 1:51. What is the significance of the connection that Jesus is making to Jacob's dream in Genesis 28? How is Jesus the ultimate stairway that connects heaven and earth?
7. Would you say that God and his grace have changed your life? Why or why not?
8. Jacob marked this moment in his life by standing a stone up as a pillar, anointing it with oil, and naming the place so that he would always remember its importance to his life. Why is it important to "mark" significant moments so that you remember God's grace and promises in your life?
9. How could you get some time alone to meet with the Lord this week in a meaningful way?