

The Long and Winding Road

Jacob

The five Books (or scrolls) of Moses start with a book of “Beginnings” or “Genesis,” as it is commonly called in English Bibles. This first book explains the beginning of the world, the beginning of humanity’s relationship with God, the beginning of humanity’s struggle with sin. The book teaches the beginning of the Hebrew nation and sets out promises that would flow through those people from the offspring of the Hebrew father Abraham.

It also teaches the beginning of the Hebrew title “Israel” which becomes the national identity for the Hebrew people for thousands of years. Even today, four thousand years later, “Israel” is the name given to the Middle Eastern homeland for Jews.

Israel’s Links to Abraham

Abraham is central to the story that eventually produces “Israel.” Abraham and Sarah had a single son, “Isaac.” As Isaac grew up, God indicated that Isaac was the link in the chain of Abraham’s offspring that would carry the Hebrew blessing to the world.

I will be with you and bless you... and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed (Gen. 26:3-4 ESV).

The next link in the chain came after Isaac married and had twin boys – Esau and Jacob. God continued to sharpen the focus of his earlier prophetic proclamation. God explained that his promise of blessing was going to come through the lineage of the younger twin, Jacob.

God explained when appearing to Isaac’s pregnant wife, Rebekah,

Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger” (Gen. 25:23 ESV).

With this, the story of Jacob is set up.

Jacob

Jacob was an unlikely candidate. He was deceitful, conniving, and a liar. Even his name sounds like the Hebrew word for “cheater” or “one filled with guile and deceit.” But God’s

choice, like God's wisdom, is rarely the obvious choice of man. God chose Jacob, and then set about to turn Jacob into the man he needed to be.

When Jacob and Esau were born, Jacob came out second, grasping the ankle of his elder twin. This earned him the name, "Jacob," which comes from the Hebrew verb that has a semantic idea of "clutching" or "grabbing" (*'aqeb* – עִקֵּב). It also happened to refer to "cheating" or "being filled with guile."

Jacob was a deceiver. He deceived his father into receiving a blessing meant for his brother, and he manipulated his brother out of his elder birthright for a bowl of stew!

Jacob's trickery, deceit, and lies didn't earn God's promises. To the contrary, from those actions, his brother thought of killing him and his father was devastated and disappointed. Jacob left home a coward, fleeing from the consequences of his sins.

JACOB'S DREAM

Jacob left home at his mother's urging, fleeing his brother before Esau could execute his wrath. His mother had convinced her husband Isaac to send Jacob back to his mother's relatives in Mesopotamia where he would hopefully find a wife from among his cousins.

While on his way, one night Jacob was sleeping out under the stars when he had a most peculiar dream:

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! 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. 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 ESV).

Jacob was over 40 years old. He had wrangled from his brother, schemed with his mother, lied to his father, and stolen the family inheritance/blessing, all for his own enrichment.

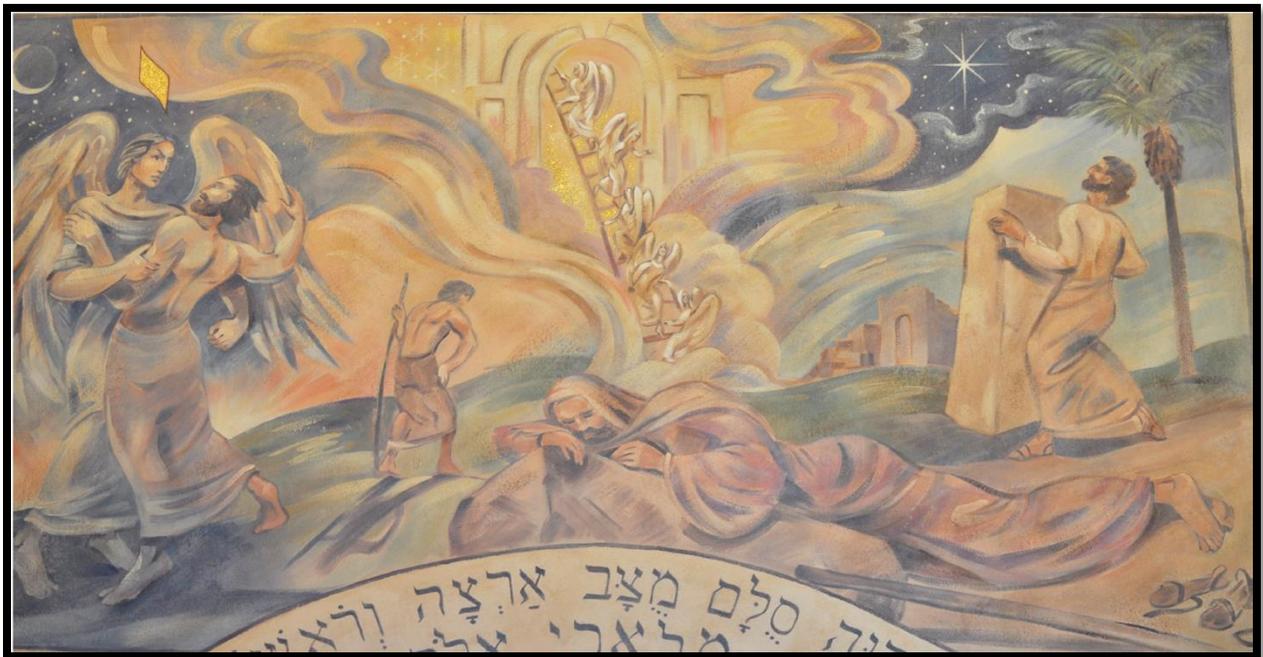
His journey was the opposite of his grandfather Abraham. In faith, Abraham had left Haran for Canaan. In fear, Jacob fled Canaan for Haran. No doubt this was a time of great crisis for Jacob. He was traditionally a tent dweller, not a hunter living on the ground. Fleeing for his life, he went from being a mama's boy to a life on the run, headed to impose on unknown relatives.

In the midst of this faith walk (or lack thereof), Jacob had this dream of the LORD. In the dream, God identified himself as “the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac.” God identified himself as God of the first generation of promise (Abraham) and God of the second generation of promise (Isaac). But God was *not* the God of Jacob at that time, at least not in what is seen in Jacob’s life or in God’s self-identification.

Yet, God still proclaimed his choice of blessing through Jacob. God explained that the promises made to Abraham and Isaac would find fulfillment through Jacob. These promises of land, innumerable descendants, and the offspring through whom all the fallen earth will be blessed, were assured to flow from Jacob and his seed.

No doubt, the events that brought Jacob to this point in time where he fled for his life reacted in his mind with his dream. The text says that Jacob was “afraid,” and that he suddenly considered the previously unassuming place to be “none other than the house of God...the gate of heaven” (Gen. 28:17).

Jacob named the place “Bethel” which can be translated as “house” (*beth*) of God (*El*). He erected a stone pillar where he had dreamed of the ramp to heaven and then poured oil on it. When this event is retold in Genesis 31:13, the word used for anointing the pillar with oil is the Hebrew root *m-sh-h*, the root also for “messiah” or anointed.



Jacob's Wrestling Match

Jacob continued on his journey to his uncle's homeland in Haran and upon arriving fell in love with the beautiful Rachel. Reaching a deal with his Uncle Laban, Jacob agreed to labor for seven years in return for Rachel's hand in marriage. The years flew by as Jacob worked for the love of his life.

The time then came when Jacob, the deceiver, became the deceived. The long-awaited nuptials arrived. The story doesn't tell the reader how much Jacob had to drink at the wedding, but in the darkness of night, in the tent of consummation, Jacob was given Leah, Rachel's older sister, rather than Rachel. Jacob awoke the next morning to find himself the recipient of deception.

His father-in-law tricked Jacob into marrying Leah, the older sister of his sought-after Rachel. In one of many ironic twists in the storyline, Jacob is told that Leah must be married first, as the older sister. In essence, Jacob who tricked his father into giving him the things of the older brother, also got tricked into taking the older sister.

Jacob agreed to work another seven years, if he could then have Rachel's hand in marriage as well. Jacob served his father-in-law Laban for a total 14 years, seven for each daughter he had married, Leah and Rachel. That doesn't mean the years were wage-free, but the principal reward was the right to marry. Those were fruitful years for Laban. As Jacob served him, Laban saw great wealth grow from little investment. Under Jacob's care, the flocks multiplied, and with that came food, trade, and many other blessings.

There came a time where Jacob was ready to return home with his wife and belongings. Laban didn't want Jacob to leave. Laban knew what had happened under Jacob's oversight, and didn't want to lose it. Laban had a good thing going with Jacob under his thumb, but Jacob insisted. The only thing to be negotiated was the price. How much would Laban assign to the work Jacob had given? Laban placed the negotiations into Jacob's lap, telling Jacob to set the price. Jacob responded that God was the one behind the blessings, and Jacob would let the Lord set the price. The drama of the story unfolds with Laban trying to manipulate things to keep the price low, but ultimately the God who had blessed Laban through Jacob, also blessed Jacob in spite of Laban.

As Jacob left, with his large family, his many flocks, and his workers, he was scared. He and his twin had been separated for about two decades. When they had last been together, Esau was breathing death threats against his brother because Jacob had robbed Esau through multiple deceptions.

Over the two decades, Jacob had found God, grown through his faith, and become a new and better person. Jacob had no idea what had happened to Esau. Had the killing anger smoldered over the years? Was it more intense or less? Jacob didn't know, but was about to find out. Jacob was returning to Esau's neighborhood, and was petrified. Jacob planned how to return, dividing his camp and possessions into two in hopes of saving one. Jacob

also fell before the Lord in prayer. In his prayer, one readily sees how Jacob had grown spiritually.

O LORD, ... I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps (Gen. 32:9-10).

As Jacob thought through his return he decided to send ahead a gift to his brother.

And from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau... For he thought, "I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterward I shall see his face. Perhaps he will accept me. (Gen. 32:13, 20).

It isn't clear whether the gift was to be seen as a replacement for what Jacob stole, or whether Jacob was trying to show Esau that Esau was the superior, and Jacob the servant. Either way, it was a gift seeking to soften Esau's wrath.

There is a subtlety in the Hebrew original that English translations miss. The word used for "gift" is not the ordinary word. It is *minchah*, a word used in the sacrifices of Israel for the cereal offering. The gift that Jacob was offering Esau was a sacrifice seeking to restore a relationship that was broken.

That night, Jacob has another encounter with God, but this time it isn't a dream of a ladder. It is altogether different.

The same night Jacob arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip (Gen. 32:22-31 ESV).

The story reads chockful of mystery. Jacob was alone at night, a dark time of unseen and unknown things in the era before modern lighting. Jacob's mind was not expecting this encounter. Jacob's fear was his coming encounter with Esau. That was one of life or death. In the midst of his huge concern, Jacob went off by himself and encountered the unexpected. A man comes to "wrestle" (more literally, to "kick up the dust!") with Jacob. The Hebrew word for wrestle sounds a lot like the word for the stream (Jabbok), and also puns off of Jacob's name. The place, the struggle, and Jacob are all intertwined in the narrative.

The "man" does not defeat Jacob per se. They wrestled until dawn, and Jacob seemed to hold his own. Then in a bizarre twist, the man touched Jacob's hip and the hip failed. It was apparent the man could have done this all along, but was wrestling for Jacob's sake, not out of an inability to win. The man told Jacob to let him go, but Jacob had fought all night and wanted a blessing before releasing the man.

And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him (Gen. 32:27-29).

Jacob had spent the lonely dark night wrestling with a man, but his real struggle had been with God. With the night over, the struggle was finished.

The man told Jacob that through his struggle with God, Jacob had found the victory he needed in his life. The man asked Jacob his name, and Jacob replied. Jacob's name spoke to his personage. His name's meaning and his life in his younger days were one and the same. Jacob was a deceiver. Jacob was wily and deceptive, having supplanted his older brother in the family order.

The man then told Jacob that his name was changed. No longer was Jacob a deceiver. He was now "Israel," referencing his struggle with God. "Israel" derives from the idea of God ("El") fighting ("ysra"). God took Jacob the deceiver and turned him into one that not only would struggle with God, but one for whom God would fight.

As an aside, Jacob, aka Israel, asked a reciprocal request. Just as the man had asked Jacob his name, after answering, Jacob asked for the name of the man. The man, who the story makes clear is God's messenger or angel, doesn't reply. The story has Jacob answering to God. God doesn't answer to people. What God does instead is take control of one's destiny. God takes one's name, one's character, and changes it. One might struggle in the change, but one finds at the end a life that is precisely what God needs for his fight.

The Prophetic Message Explained

Jacob's story finds an echo in the New Testament Gospel of John. John 1:43-51 reads,

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." ... Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

At first blush, this account of Nathanael's calling seems far removed from Jacob, but the connection is there.

In this passage, Jesus called Philip to follow him as a disciple. Philip was a neighbor to Andrew and Peter in Bethsaida, a town on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, a little over 3 miles east of Capernaum.

Philip then went and found Nathanael, telling Nathanael,

We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.

Nathanael was notably skeptical, responding a bit derisively, "Can anything *good* come out of Nazareth?" Philip talked Nathanael into going with him to find out for himself.

As Nathanael approached Jesus, Jesus called out, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael saw this as a particular insight on Jesus' part. Nathanael replied, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered,

Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.

At this, Nathanael was convinced. He proclaimed Jesus not only his teacher (rabbi), but also the Son of God and King of Israel.

Jesus replied that if Nathanael believed, based simply on what Jesus disclosed in his limited conversation, Nathanael would really be moved when he saw,

heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

Viewed in isolation, this story doesn't quite make full sense. Why was Nathanael so moved? Was it simply because Jesus saw him as one with no deceit? There is more at play here. The Genesis story of Jacob provides the missing link.

The context is consistent with the idea that Nathanael, before hearing the call of Jesus through Philip, was sitting under a tree studying or thinking about the episodes of Jacob, especially those at Bethel.

Jesus clearly knew these thoughts of Nathanael as Jesus greeted him with the declaration, "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit." For Jesus, to speak of an "Israelite" in whom is "no deceit" is to use phrases and words laden with meaning from Jacob. Jacob was the deceitful one, whose name ultimately gets changed to Israel at a time when he has grown out of his ready deceitfulness.

Nathanael is stunned that Jesus could have read his mind regarding what he had been contemplating and for his study and asked, "How do you know me?" Jesus explained that he saw what was in Nathanael's mind even before the call, when Nathanael was "under the fig tree." In his amazement, Nathanael readily proclaimed Jesus as "the Son of God! The King of Israel!" Jesus then returned to the Jacob narrative proclaiming a true prophetic reading of the dream,

Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

The real Bethel, the real house of God, the real ladder where God descends to meet his people, the nexus between heaven and earth, was to be the cross of Christ. The anointing, the Messiah would not be Jacob's stone, but the "stone the builders rejected" (Acts 4:11).

Conclusion

In the story of Jacob, the prophecies of Genesis continue, but in a different vein. It is not just the clear prophetic word of ancestors through whom God would bring the redeemer of mankind. It is more. The solution to the sin of Adam and Eve, the male offspring of woman, who would conquer the work of Satan, at a personal price would come through the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

As Jacob an unworthy deceiver dreamed, the heavens would open and God would provide a bridge or ladder that spanned from God to people. That spot was anointed, a place of the

Messiah. This same spot marks a turning point for sinful people, where they begin to grow into vessels fit for God's purposes.

The story of Jacob's wrestling with God has an otherworldly element to it that is mysterious and hard to explain. While this mysterious story speaks to the human encounter with God, it may also indicate something more.

From the human perspective, one learns from the story that God is in control, and whatever one may face, one faces with him. Even one's limps and inadequacies are part of the package deal of being in God's hands. This was a mysterious encounter with God, that gave Jacob what he needed. It's hard to explain, but that is often the way with God.

One must always be careful reading an analogy or Messianic prophecy into Scripture, when Scripture doesn't already offer the prophetic understanding. So with that caveat, beyond the human encounter, it might not be a stretch to see the Garden of Gethsemane unfold in this story. Before his crucifixion, Jesus struggled with what God had before him. Seeking God's will above all else, Jesus still prayed for the cup to pass from him. Jesus wrestled through the night, but when it was done, was blessed by God. Not without pain. There was more than a limp coming Jesus' way, but Jesus was who he needed to be, and was taken care of by God the Father and Holy Spirit, through the ordeal that lay ahead.

Points for Home

1. *"Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing." Esau said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has cheated me these two times. (Gen. 27:35-36)*

We all mess up. Fear, selfishness, envy, greed, a lack of trust, and many other sins pervade our decision making more times than we'd like to admit. Fortunately, God's mercy trumps humanity's fallibility.

Today's reading is one passage in a longer story that illustrates the point. Jacob, whose name comes from the Hebrew for "heel" was born grasping the heel of his twin brother Esau. The Hebrew "heel" was also used for one who snuck up and attacked another from behind. Esau in conversation with his father Isaac learns that Jacob has deceitfully taken advantage of their blind father and secured the first-born blessing by pretending to be Esau. Esau is furious, having already traded his birthright to Jacob for food. Why would Jacob do such things?

Interestingly, Jacob was God's choice to receive the promises to Abraham and Isaac. It was through Jacob that God was going to raise up a nation and ultimately bring the Messiah to bless Israel and the nations. Why did Jacob feel compelled to work deceitfully? Couldn't God be trusted to bring his plans to fruition without Jacob forcing it? One might even think that God might change his plans once the character

of Jacob was shown. But no, God's plans were not so easily thwarted. Instead, God went to work on Jacob. God let Jacob experience deceit from his future father-in-law. That would cost Jacob 14 years of his life. God let Jacob experience the fear of his brother Esau's wrath. God sent an angel to wrestle with Jacob and bring him to his senses. God didn't give up on Jacob. God shaped Jacob into who Jacob needed to be.

I'm glad God doesn't give up too easily. All of us who follow God have a calling from him. I want to be the man God has called me to be. I know that part of that means I need to live the life he's called me to live. Yet over and over again I find myself falling short. I don't measure up to my own standards, much less his.

His mercies are long, as is his patience. In steadfast love, he continues to mold and shape me, in spite of my own proclivities to sin. I am thankful for his mercies, and want to do better.

2. *Jacob 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. 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! And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac... 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. Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." (Gen. 28:11-16).*

If you were to take a sheet of paper and pen, and make a list of things you need right now, what would be on it? Maybe it would be financial help, a car, a job, or the like. Maybe it would be better health. Maybe the top of your list would be conquering some destructive life style. Perhaps it would be mending torn relationships or a broken heart. Whatever and however we list our needs, this passage should give each of us a jolt. We need a better vision of God. We need him front and center in our lives.

Jacob was on the run from his brother. He had done his brother wrong, over and over, and his brother had reached a breaking point where he was planning on killing Jacob. While he was on the run, Jacob slept out under the stars and had an encounter with God. God spoke to Jacob in a dream. God told Jacob that God had plans for Jacob and that God would not depart from him until those plans were successfully completed.

That changed things for Jacob. It should change things for all of us. God wishes to meet with everyone, albeit not always in a dream! In God's mercy, not based on our deserving character or actions, God has sought to establish a relationship where

we can commune with him, seek his plans, and work with him to see them to fruition.

This was personal for Jacob. It was a private encounter he had with the living God. It wasn't a theological discussion. It wasn't an intellectual deliberation. It was a real encounter with a real God. I want that. It goes to the top of my "need list." Encountering God will change everything else on that list. I will have his hand in my life to conquer sin, to teach me love, to shift my priorities and teach me discipline necessary for financial health. He will strengthen me for any physical ordeal. I need God now.

Over and over Abraham saw what God had before him. In so doing, Abraham saw Jesus. I wonder how often I fail to see God because I am not looking. God's hand is no less active in our lives today, even if he is not expressing prophetic events about his coming salvation on Calvary. God is at work. He calls, he sends, he affirms. I want to open my eyes to see and then do!

3. *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, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God (Gen. 28:20-21).*

This passage of Scripture has always bothered me. Now that might not be a good thing to say, but give me a chance to explain. I am not a fan of people making deals with God. "God, you give me this and that, and I will follow you." Or, "God, you heal my loved one, and I will do what you want." I think that as we grow in our relationship with God, we move to a place of, "God, I will follow you regardless."

This passage is instructive, not as affirming the "deal-making" approach in relating to God, but rather for insight into why and how we move into a more mature walk. At the time of this passage, Jacob has lived a life that seems woefully short of personal encounters with the Divine. Jacob's reputation was not that of a godly man, but of a swindler, conspirator, and deceiver. Whether swindling his brother out of an inheritance or conspiring with his mother to deceive his father, Jacob has not modelled righteousness in any sense. Then came his first detailed encounter with God. In a dream, he saw God related to him on earth. In his dream, God's messengers came down from heaven right where he was, returning from him to the Lord. This was true relationship, back and forth communication between God and Jacob.

God offered his promises to Jacob, but never conditioned them on one thing or another. God simply declared that he would bless Jacob and work through Jacob

to establish his plans. Jacob awoke, realized it was God, and then pitched his deal. This was Jacob in an early stage of faith and relationship, not a mature Jacob who had walked for years with God.

Over time, however, Jacob's relationship with God changed. Jacob was never the perfect man – husband or father—but almost two decades later, when Jacob was returning to his homeland, we see a different Jacob. Jacob is scared to return near his brother who had vowed to kill him. Jacob goes, nonetheless because God told him to. Jacob in his fear tells God he knows he is unworthy of God's love and faithfulness, but seeks God's help anyway. It is a touching maturity from his young, brash, "Let's make a deal" days. That is what comes from a mature walk with God.

Today's passage doesn't teach me to make a deal with God. It teaches me to grow closer to him, maturing in my walk.