Jacob's Ladder and the Wrestling at Peniel

Bible Stories Anthology — Genesis 28; 32

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> **Romans 15:4** *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Why These Stories Were Written — Romans 15:4

Paul had just quoted a thousand-year-old psalm and applied it to Christ (Romans 15:3, quoting Psalm 69:9), and then he explained why he could: *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning*. **Written aforetime** — the scriptures that already stood before this present age of grace opened at Pentecost: the record God gave through Moses, the prophets and the writings, along with the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly ministry, which belong to that same time before Pentecost. (When Paul wrote these words, the scriptures he had in hand were the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospels had not yet been written down.) **Written for our learning** — "learning" is the Greek word for *teaching*, the very word rendered "doctrine" in 2 Timothy 3:16. These are not quaint tales; they are doctrine in narrative form. Adam, Ruth and David never knew us, but God did, and He had their lives recorded with us in mind — written *for* us, though not all of it written *to* us, which is why we read Israel's history as our instruction and not as our marching orders. **Through patience and comfort of the scriptures** — "patience" is literally *remaining under*, the staying power we gain from watching men and women stay under a load; "comfort" is a *calling alongside*, the strength God brings when He meets them there, which is why Paul calls Him "the God of patience and consolation" in the very next verse. **That we might have hope** — not a wish, but confident expectation: the return of Jesus Christ and everlasting life with Him. That is why these accounts exist, and it is how they should be read.

A Stone for a Pillow, a Limp for a Lifetime

Two nights, twenty years apart, changed Jacob's life.

On the first night he was running. He had lied to his blind father, stolen his brother's blessing, and his brother had sworn to kill him. He left home with nothing but a staff in his hand, walked north until the sun went down, and lay on the open ground with a stone under his head. He expected nothing from God. And God opened heaven over him.

On the second night he was coming home. He had two wives, two concubines, eleven sons, a daughter, servants and herds — and word had just come that his brother was riding to meet him with four hundred men. He sent everyone across a stream and stayed behind alone in the dark. A man seized him, and they wrestled until dawn. When the sun rose, Jacob was limping, and he had a new name.

Between those two nights is the story of how God made a grasping, frightened man into Israel, the father of a nation. The first night shows what God promised Jacob when he deserved nothing. The second shows what it took for Jacob to stop fighting and start clinging.

Jesus Himself pointed back to the first night. He told Nathanael, **"Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man"** (John 1:51). Jacob's ladder was a picture of Him.

The Setting

When. By the usual reckoning from the ages Genesis gives for Jacob and Joseph, Jacob was about seventy-seven when he fled from Esau, and about ninety-seven when he came back. Isaac was still alive through all of it; he lived to 180 (Genesis 35:28).

Where.

- **Bethel.** About twelve miles north of where Jerusalem would later stand, in the hill country — roughly sixty miles from Beersheba, two or three days on foot. The Canaanite town nearby was called **Luz**; Jacob renamed the place **Beth-el**, "house of God."
- **Haran.** In Padan-aram, upper Mesopotamia, more than four hundred miles to the north-east, where Rebekah's brother Laban lived and where Abraham's family had settled before him.
- **Mahanaim and the Jabbok.** On the way home, east of the Jordan. The Jabbok is a stream that cuts a deep gorge down to the Jordan valley from the eastern highlands; today it is called the Zarqa River. **Peniel** (also spelled **Penuel**) was a place by its ford. Both Mahanaim and Penuel later became towns (Judges 8:8; 2 Samuel 17:24).

The administration. The **Patriarchal** administration, from the Fall to the Law at Sinai. There was no written scripture, no tabernacle, no priesthood. God spoke to the heads of families directly — in dreams, visions, and by angels. Everything Jacob learned about God in this story, he learned by God coming to him.

What Jacob carried. The birthright he had bought and the blessing he had stolen — and a promise he did not yet understand. His father had just blessed him knowingly with **"the blessing of Abraham"** (Genesis 28:4). But Jacob had never met the God of Abraham for himself. In the last story he called Him **"the LORD thy God"** to his father's face (27:20). That was about to change.

The Story, Told Faithfully

The Ladder

> **Genesis 28:10** *And Jacob went out from Beer-sheba, and went toward Haran.*
>
> **Genesis 28:11** *And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep.*
>
> **Genesis 28:12** *And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.*

"He lighted upon a certain place." The Hebrew word *paga'* means to meet, to come upon, even to bump into. Jacob did not choose the spot. He stopped because **"the sun was set."** The Hebrew says *the place* three times in this one verse, a quiet hint that this ordinary patch of ground is about to become *the* place.

"He took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows." This was no inn and no tent. The heir of Abraham's promise slept like a fugitive on the hillside, his head on a stone.

"Behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven." The word for ladder, *sullam*, appears only here in the Bible. It comes from a root meaning to heap up or cast up, like a raised

roadway, so many scholars think of it as a stairway or a ramp rather than a narrow ladder with rungs. Either way, the picture is the same: a way that joined earth to heaven.

Notice where it stood: **"set up on the earth."** Jacob did not climb it. He did not build it. Heaven came down to where he lay.

That is a striking contrast with the Tower of Babel. There men said, **"let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven"** (Genesis 11:4). Nearly the same Hebrew words, *its top … heaven*, are used in both passages. As this series understands it, the two stories are meant to be read side by side: at Babel, man tried to build his way up to heaven and God came down to scatter them; at Bethel, a man who could build nothing lay helpless on the ground, and God set up the way Himself.

"Behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it." Ascending first, then descending. As this series understands it, the order suggests they were already on earth, going up to report and coming down to serve. Jacob thought he was alone. He was surrounded. **"Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?"** (Hebrews 1:14).

"Behold" occurs three times in these two verses (28:12-13) — *behold a ladder*, *behold the angels*, *behold*, *the LORD*. Each "behold" draws our eyes higher, from the foot of the stair to the angels on it and to the LORD Himself. Repeating the same word at the start of successive clauses is the figure called **anaphora**.

The Promise

> **Genesis 28:13** *And, behold, the LORD stood above it, and said, I am the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed;*
>
> **Genesis 28:14** *And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.*
>
> **Genesis 28:15** *And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.*

"The LORD stood above it." The Hebrew *'alav* can mean *above it* (the ladder) or *beside him* (Jacob); the same phrase is used when the three men **"stood by him"** at Abraham's tent (18:2). Either reading fits. God was over the whole scene, and He was near.

"I am the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac." God introduced Himself as the God of Jacob's family — the God Jacob had heard about but did not yet know.

Then God made seven promises — and asked for nothing.

1. **The land:** "to thee will I give it, and to thy seed."
2. **Descendants:** "thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth."
3. **Expansion:** "to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south."
4. **Blessing to the world:** "in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed."
5. **Presence:** "I am with thee."
6. **Protection:** "and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest."

7. **Return:** "and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of."

Not one word of rebuke for the lies. Not one condition. God did not say, *if you repent* or *if you give me a tenth*. He simply said what He would do. The first four promises are the promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:2-3; 13:14-16), now passed to Jacob by God's own mouth. The last three were for Jacob personally, a frightened man alone on the road.

"To the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south." Naming all four directions to mean *everywhere* is the figure called **merismus** (or merism): the whole expressed by its parts.

"As the dust of the earth." A **simile** — a comparison with "as." Abraham was told of dust and of stars; Jacob, lying in the dust, was told his seed would be as numerous as the dust itself.

"I will not leave thee." Nearly two thousand years later, the same promise was given to believers: **"I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee"** (Hebrews 13:5).

"I Knew It Not"

> **Genesis 28:16** *And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not.*
>
> **Genesis 28:17** *And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.*

"Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not." Jacob seems to have thought that God belonged to his father's tents, and that by running away he had left God behind. He learned that God was on the hillside with a runaway, far from any altar.

"He was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place!" "Dreadful" is *nora'*, awe-inspiring, fearful in the sense of overwhelming reverence. The exclamation — a sudden outburst of feeling — is the figure called **ecphonesis**.

"This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." *Beth-el*, house of God; and *the gate of heaven*. The name "Babylon," *Bab-ili*, meant "gate of god" — the city that tried to build its own gate to heaven. Jacob found the true gate where God had opened it.

The Pillar and the Vow

> **Genesis 28:18** *And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it.*
>
> **Genesis 28:19** *And he called the name of that place Beth-el: but the name of that city was called Luz at the first.*
>
> **Genesis 28:20** *And Jacob vowed 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 raiment to put on,*
>
> **Genesis 28:21** *So that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the LORD be my God:*
>
> **Genesis 28:22** *And this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee.*

“Set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it.” A standing stone (*matstsevah*) was a common marker in the ancient world, set up to remember a treaty, a grave, or an event. Pouring oil on it set it apart. Later, under the Law, Israel was forbidden to set up such pillars, because the Canaanites used them in idol worship (Deuteronomy 16:22, where the same word is translated “image”). Before the Law, Jacob’s pillar was simply a memorial: *here God spoke to me*.

“He called the name of that place Beth-el: but the name of that city was called Luz at the first.” The Canaanite name was Luz; Jacob gave it the name it would keep.

“If God will be with me … then shall the LORD be my God.” Here is the old Jacob still bargaining. God had just said, *I am with thee* — already true, no conditions. Jacob answered, *If You will be with me … then*. He turned a free promise into a deal. As the library’s tithing study observes, scripture nowhere records that God asked for this vow, and nowhere records Jacob paying a tenth of anything to anyone. God remembered the vow (31:13), and graciously held Jacob to its heart — the return to Bethel — but the terms were Jacob’s, not God’s.

And yet there is growth even here. For the first time Jacob speaks of *the LORD* as someone who might be *my God*. The man who had said “the LORD thy God” to his father was beginning to reach for God himself.

Twenty Years in Haran

Genesis 29–31 tells the long middle of the story, and it can be summarized here.

- **Love at first sight.** Jacob met Rachel at a well and loved her. **“Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her”** (Genesis 29:20).
- **The deceiver deceived.** On the wedding night Laban gave him Leah instead. **“Wherefore then hast thou beguiled me?”** Jacob cried (29:25) — the same kind of trick he had played on his own father. He served seven more years for Rachel.
- **Twelve children in a divided house.** Leah, Rachel, and their two maids bore him eleven sons and a daughter in Haran, amid bitter rivalry between the sisters. Rachel, long barren, finally bore Joseph.
- **Cheated, but kept. “Your father hath deceived me, and changed my wages ten times; but God suffered him not to hurt me”** (31:7). God prospered Jacob’s flocks in spite of Laban.
- **God calls him home. “Return unto the land of thy fathers, and to thy kindred; and I will be with thee”** (31:3). And: **“I am the God of Beth-el, where thou anointedst the pillar, and where thou vowedst a vow unto me”** (31:13). God reminded Jacob of that first night.
- **God guards him.** When Laban chased after him, God warned Laban in a dream, **“Take heed that thou speak not to Jacob either good or bad”** (31:24). Jacob’s summary to Laban was blunt: **“Thus have I been twenty years in thy house”** (31:41). And he gave the credit to God: **“Except the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had been with me, surely thou hadst sent me away now empty”** (31:42).

Every promise of Bethel had been kept: God had been with him, kept him, fed and clothed him, and was now bringing him home. Only one thing stood in the road: Esau.

The Two Camps

> **Genesis 32:1** *And Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him.*

> **Genesis 32:2** *And when Jacob saw them, he said, This is God's host: and he called the name of that place Mahanaim.*

"The angels of God met him." As Jacob left the land at Bethel, he saw angels; as he came back, angels met him again. The same host that had filled the ladder now stood around him on the road.

"He called the name of that place Mahanaim." *Mahanaim* means "two camps" (the Hebrew ending *-ayim* marks a pair). Jacob saw God's camp alongside his own. Centuries later Elisha's servant saw the same thing when his eyes were opened: **"the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha"** (2 Kings 6:17). **"The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them"** (Psalm 34:7).

You would think the sight would have settled Jacob's fear. It did not.

Fear and Planning

> **Genesis 32:3** *And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother unto the land of Seir, the country of Edom.*
>
> **Genesis 32:4** *And he commanded them, saying, Thus shall ye speak unto my lord Esau; Thy servant Jacob saith thus, I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed there until now:*
>
> **Genesis 32:5** *And I have oxen, and asses, flocks, and menservants, and womenservants: and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find grace in thy sight.*
>
> **Genesis 32:6** *And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, We came to thy brother Esau, and also he cometh to meet thee, and four hundred men with him.*
>
> **Genesis 32:7** *Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed: and he divided the people that was with him, and the flocks, and herds, and the camels, into two bands;*
>
> **Genesis 32:8** *And said, If Esau come to the one company, and smite it, then the other company which is left shall escape.*

"Thus shall ye speak unto my lord Esau; Thy servant Jacob." Twenty years before, Jacob had stolen the blessing that said **"be lord over thy brethren"** (27:29). Now he called Esau *my lord* and himself *thy servant*. The old grasping was giving way to fear, and perhaps to shame.

"Four hundred men with him." Four hundred men is an army. Jacob could only assume the worst.

"He divided the people … into two bands." The word for "bands" is *machanoth*, *camps* — the same word as in Mahanaim. God had just shown him two camps, His and Jacob's. Jacob's answer to fear was to make two camps of his own, so that if Esau destroyed one, the other might escape. The wordplay is quiet but pointed: God's two camps meant protection; Jacob's two camps meant he was preparing to lose half his family.

Jacob's Prayer

> **Genesis 32:9** *And Jacob said, O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, the LORD which saidst unto me, Return unto thy country, and to thy kindred, and I will deal well with thee:*
>
> **Genesis 32:10** *I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands.*

> **Genesis 32:11** *Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau: for I fear him, lest he will come and smite me, and the mother with the children.*
>
> **Genesis 32:12** *And thou saidst, I will surely do thee good, and make thy seed as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.*

This is the first prayer of Jacob's that scripture records, and it is a good one. Look at how it is built.

- **He addressed God by His covenant:** "O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac."
- **He stood on what God had said:** "the LORD which saidst unto me, Return unto thy country … and I will deal well with thee." *You told me to come.*
- **He confessed his unworthiness:** "I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant." The Hebrew words are *chesed* and *'emeth*, God's covenant love and His faithfulness. Twenty years earlier Jacob bargained with God; now he admitted he deserved none of it.
- **He remembered the grace:** "with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands." He had left with a stick in his hand; God had made him rich.
- **He asked plainly:** "Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother … for I fear him."
- **He ended on the promise:** "And thou saidst, I will surely do thee good." *You said it.*

It is a model for prayer in any age: come to God on the basis of His word, be honest about fear, and hold Him to what He has said. **"Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus"** (Philippians 4:6-7).

The Present for Esau

> **Genesis 32:13** *And he lodged there that same night; and took of that which came to his hand a present for Esau his brother;*
>
> **Genesis 32:14** *Two hundred she goats, and twenty he goats, two hundred ewes, and twenty rams,*
>
> **Genesis 32:15** *Thirty milch camels with their colts, forty kine, and ten bulls, twenty she asses, and ten foals.*
>
> **Genesis 32:16** *And he delivered them into the hand of his servants, every drove by themselves; and said unto his servants, Pass over before me, and put a space betwixt drove and drove.*
>
> **Genesis 32:17** *And he commanded the foremost, saying, When Esau my brother meeteth thee, and asketh thee, saying, Whose art thou? and whither goest thou? and whose are these before thee?*
>
> **Genesis 32:18** *Then thou shalt say, They be thy servant Jacob's; it is a present sent unto my lord Esau: and, behold, also he is behind us.*
>
> **Genesis 32:19** *And so commanded he the second, and the third, and all that followed the droves, saying, On this manner shall ye speak unto Esau, when ye find him.*
>
> **Genesis 32:20** *And say ye moreover, Behold, thy servant Jacob is behind us. For he said, I will appease him with the present that goeth before me, and afterward I will see his face; peradventure he will accept of me.*
>
> **Genesis 32:21** *So went the present over before him: and himself lodged that night in the company.*

Having prayed, Jacob went back to planning. He sent a lavish gift: about 550 animals in all — goats, sheep, camels with their young, cattle and donkeys — in separate droves with spaces between them, so that Esau would meet wave after wave of generosity before he met Jacob.

"I will appease him with the present that goeth before me, and afterward I will see his face; peradventure he will accept of me." In Hebrew this sentence is full of the word *face* (*panim*):

- "appease him" is literally *cover his face*;
- "the present that goeth before me" is *before my face*;
- "I will see his face";
- "he will accept of me" is literally *he will lift up my face*.

And the next verse says the present went over **"before him"** — *before his face*. Jacob was obsessed with meeting his brother's face. Before morning, he would meet another face first.

Alone at the Jabbok

> **Genesis 32:22** *And he rose up that night, and took his two wives, and his two womenservants, and his eleven sons, and passed over the ford Jabbok.*
>
> **Genesis 32:23** *And he took them, and sent them over the brook, and sent over that he had.*
>
> **Genesis 32:24** *And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.*

"He rose up that night … and passed over the ford Jabbok." He got his whole household across the stream in the dark. **Eleven sons** — Benjamin was not yet born.

"And Jacob was left alone." Everything Jacob had worked for was on the other side of the water. He had no plan left, no gift to send, no one to hide behind.

"And there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day." The Hebrew plays on sounds here: the stream is *Yabboq*, "wrestled" is *ye'aveq* (from *'avaq*, possibly related to the word for dust — grappling in the dust), and the man is *Ya'aqov*. Jacob, at the Jabbok, *ye'aveq* — the figure of **paronomasia**, a play on similar-sounding words.

Notice who started it: **"there wrestled a man with him."** Jacob did not go looking for a fight. The man came to Jacob — as God had come to him at Bethel.

Who was this man? Genesis calls him **"a man."** Hosea, looking back, calls him **"the angel"** (Hosea 12:4). He came in human form, as angels often did (Genesis 18:2; 19:1; Judges 13:6). We will come back to what Jacob meant when he said he had seen God face to face.

The Touch

> **Genesis 32:25** *And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him.*
>
> **Genesis 32:26** *And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.*

“When he saw that he prevailed not against him.” They wrestled all night, and neither won. Jacob had been fighting all his life — with Esau in the womb, with his father’s plans, with Laban’s tricks — and he fought now.

“He touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob’s thigh was out of joint.” One touch. The man who could not “prevail” by wrestling ended the contest instantly, the moment he chose to. The hip socket was wrenched from its place. As this series understands it, the angel had never been in danger of losing. He let the night-long struggle go on until Jacob had spent every ounce of his own strength, and then showed with a touch who had held the power all along.

“Let me go, for the day breaketh.”

“I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.” Here is the turning point of Jacob’s life. A man with a dislocated hip cannot wrestle; he can only hang on. Jacob stopped fighting and started clinging. And what he asked for was not strength, or victory, or safety from Esau. He asked for a blessing — and he asked it from the one who had just crippled him.

Hosea tells us what those words were like: **“Yea, he had power over the angel, and prevailed: he wept, and made supplication unto him”** (Hosea 12:4). Jacob prevailed with tears and pleading, not with muscle. To ask a blessing is to admit the other is greater: **“without all contradiction the less is blessed of the better”** (Hebrews 7:7). The man who had once stolen a blessing by trickery now begged for one openly.

The New Name

> **Genesis 32:27** *And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob.*
>
> **Genesis 32:28** *And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.*
>
> **Genesis 32:29** *And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there.*

“What is thy name? And he said, Jacob.” Twenty years earlier his father had asked, **“Who art thou, my son?”** and he had answered, **“I am Esau”** (27:18-19). Now he told the truth. *My name is Jacob* — heel-grabber, supplanter. It was a confession of who he had been.

“Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel.” In the Bible a name describes a person’s nature or calling, and when God changes a name He is declaring a new identity: Abram became Abraham, **“for a father of many nations have I made thee”** (17:5); Sarai became Sarah; Simon became Cephas, Peter (John 1:42).

“For as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.” *Israel* is formed from *sarah*, to strive or contend (the verb translated “hast power”), and *El*, God. Hosea uses the same verb: **“by his strength he had power with God”** (Hosea 12:3). Scholars understand the name several ways: *he strives with God*, *God strives*, or *God rules* — and the KJV’s “as a prince” reflects another related root, *sar*, prince. What the verse itself explains is plain enough: Jacob had contended with God and with men — with Esau and with Laban — and had come through. And he had prevailed with God by clinging, weeping, and asking.

“Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name?” The angel who appeared to Manoah answered the same question the same way: **“Why askest thou thus**

after my name, seeing it is secret?" (Judges 13:18). An angel's own name does not matter. He comes in the name of the One who sent him.

"And he blessed him there." Jacob got what he asked for — not by deceit, but by asking.

"I Have Seen God Face to Face"

> **Genesis 32:30** *And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.*
>
> **Genesis 32:31** *And as he passed over Penuel the sun rose upon him, and he halted upon his thigh.*
>
> **Genesis 32:32** *Therefore the children of Israel eat not of the sinew which shrank, which is upon the hollow of the thigh, unto this day: because he touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh in the sinew that shrank.*

"Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved." *Peniel* means *face of God* (*peni*, face of; *El*, God). All night Jacob had dreaded seeing his brother's face. Instead, he had met the face of God.

But how could he say he had seen God? John is plain: **"No man hath seen God at any time"** (John 1:18). Genesis called the wrestler a man; Hosea called him the angel.

The answer lies in how scripture speaks of God's messengers. An angel sent by God speaks and acts with God's authority, and to meet him is spoken of as meeting God. God said of the angel He sent before Israel, **"obey his voice … for my name is in him"** (Exodus 23:21). When Hagar met **"the angel of the LORD"** (Genesis 16:7), she called **"the name of the LORD that spake unto her, Thou God seest me"** (16:13). When the angel of the LORD left Manoah, **"Manoah knew that he was an angel of the LORD. And Manoah said unto his wife, We shall surely die, because we have seen God"** (Judges 13:21-22). As this series understands it, Jacob's words are the same kind of speech: the angel came in God's name and with God's authority, so to face him was to face God. Some teach that the wrestler was God Himself in bodily form, or the Messiah before His birth; this series follows John 1:18 and Hosea's own identification, **"the angel."** Jacob himself, blessing Joseph's sons many years later, spoke of **"The Angel which redeemed me from all evil"** (Genesis 48:16).

"And my life is preserved." Jacob expected to die for such a meeting. Instead he lived.

"As he passed over Penuel the sun rose upon him." Twenty years before, at Bethel, **"the sun was set"** (28:11) when the fugitive lay down. Now the sun rose on Israel. As this series understands it, the two notes frame the whole exile: Jacob's long night was over.

"And he halted upon his thigh." "Halted" is the old word for *limped*. Jacob walked away blessed and crippled, both. He would never again walk in his own strength without remembering who had touched him. As the apostle Paul would learn in another way, **"my strength is made perfect in weakness"** (2 Corinthians 12:9). When the book of Hebrews names Jacob's final act of faith, it says he **"worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff"** (Hebrews 11:21) — the staff he had crossed the Jordan with as a runaway (Genesis 32:10).

"Therefore the children of Israel eat not of the sinew which shrank." The sinew in the hollow of the thigh is usually identified with the sciatic nerve. Israel remembered this night in its diet, and many Jews still avoid it today — a memorial of the night their father was touched by God.

The Face of His Brother

> **Genesis 33:1** *And Jacob lifted up his eyes, and looked, and, behold, Esau came, and with him four hundred men. And he divided the children unto Leah, and unto Rachel, and unto the two handmaids.*
>
> **Genesis 33:2** *And he put the handmaids and their children foremost, and Leah and her children after, and Rachel and Joseph hindermost.*
>
> **Genesis 33:3** *And he passed over before them, and bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother.*
>
> **Genesis 33:4** *And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept.*

"He divided the children." Even now the old favouritism showed: the maids and their children in front, Leah and hers after, **"and Rachel and Joseph hindermost"** — safest of all.

"He passed over before them, and bowed himself to the ground seven times." But notice this: Jacob no longer hid behind his family and his gifts. He went out in front, limping, and bowed. Bowing seven times was the full, formal homage of a servant to a lord — a phrase found centuries later in letters from Canaanite rulers to the kings of Egypt: *seven times and seven times I fall at the feet of my lord*.

"And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept." All Jacob's fear was for nothing. God had gone before him and changed Esau's heart. The words are almost the same as the father's welcome in the parable of the prodigal son: **"his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him"** (Luke 15:20).

Then Jacob said something remarkable:

> **Genesis 33:10** *And Jacob said, Nay, I pray thee, if now I have found grace in thy sight, then receive my present at my hand: for therefore I have seen thy face, as though I had seen the face of God, and thou wast pleased with me.*

"I have seen thy face, as though I had seen the face of God." The night before he had seen God's "face" at Peniel and lived. Now he saw his brother's face, and found grace there too. The *face* word that ran through all his fearful planning (32:20) ends in reconciliation.

Back to Bethel

> **Genesis 35:1** *And God said unto Jacob, Arise, go up to Beth-el, and dwell there: and make there an altar unto God, that appeared unto thee when thou fleddest from the face of Esau thy brother.*
>
> **Genesis 35:2** *Then Jacob said unto his household, and to all that were with him, Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments:*
>
> **Genesis 35:3** *And let us arise, and go up to Beth-el; and I will make there an altar unto God, who answered me in the day of my distress, and was with me in the way which I went.*

Jacob did not go straight back to Bethel. He settled near Shechem, and trouble followed (Genesis 34). Then God called him: *Arise, go up to Beth-el.*

“Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments.” Idols had come with the family from Haran — Rachel had stolen her father’s household gods (31:19). Before Jacob returned to the house of God, he cleaned house.

“God, who answered me in the day of my distress, and was with me in the way which I went.” This is Jacob’s testimony. It is the promise of Bethel — “I am with thee” — confirmed by decades of experience.

> **Genesis 35:9** *And God appeared unto Jacob again, when he came out of Padan-aram, and blessed him.*
> **Genesis 35:10** *And God said unto him, Thy name is Jacob: thy name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name: and he called his name Israel.*
> **Genesis 35:11** *And God said unto him, I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins;*
> **Genesis 35:12** *And the land which I gave Abraham and Isaac, to thee I will give it, and to thy seed after thee will I give the land.*
> **Genesis 35:13** *And God went up from him in the place where he talked with him.*
> **Genesis 35:14** *And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he talked with him, even a pillar of stone: and he poured a drink offering thereon, and he poured oil thereon.*
> **Genesis 35:15** *And Jacob called the name of the place where God spake with him, Beth-el.*

At Bethel, God confirmed everything: the new name, **“Israel shall be thy name”**; the promise of **“a nation and a company of nations”** and **“kings”**; the land. God called Himself **“God Almighty,”** *El Shaddai*, the name He had used with Abraham (17:1). And Jacob set up a pillar again, and poured out a drink offering and oil, and named the place Beth-el again.

Both names remain. After Abram became Abraham, scripture never again calls him Abram. But after Jacob became Israel, scripture goes on calling him *Jacob* — even God does: **“God spake unto Israel in the visions of the night, and said, Jacob, Jacob”** (Genesis 46:2). As this series understands it, this is a true picture of a believer: God gives a new name and a new nature, but the old man is still there, and the two names live side by side for the rest of the story.

Where the Story Leads

To the Messiah

The ladder is Jesus Christ. When Nathanael confessed Jesus as **“the Son of God … the King of Israel,”** Jesus answered:

> **John 1:51** *And he saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.*

Jesus took Jacob’s dream and placed Himself in it. The angels ascend and descend not on a stairway but **“upon the Son of man.”** He is the way between earth and heaven. **“For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus”** (1 Timothy 2:5). A man — the Son of man — is the connection Jacob saw.

And recall the context: moments before, Jesus had called Nathanael **“an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!”** (John 1:47). As the last story noted, the Greek word *dolos*, guile, is the word the Greek Old

Testament uses for Jacob's **"subtilty"** (Genesis 27:35). Jesus was speaking to a true Israel, without Jacob's old guile — and promising him Jacob's vision, fulfilled in Himself.

Heaven opened by His work. The way Jacob saw in a dream was opened in fact by the Messiah's death, resurrection, and ascension. He died for our sins; God raised Him from the dead; and He **"was taken up; and a cloud received him"** into heaven (Acts 1:9), where He is **"at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us"** (Romans 8:34). **"He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them"** (Hebrews 7:25).

The God of Jacob. God was not ashamed to call Himself by the name of this grasping, frightened man: **"The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge"** (Psalm 46:7). **"God is not ashamed to be called their God"** (Hebrews 11:16). And from Jacob came Judah, and from Judah the King. The dying Jacob spoke of **"the mighty God of Jacob; (from thence is the shepherd, the stone of Israel:)"** (Genesis 49:24).

To the Grace Administration

Access by one Spirit. Jacob saw the gate of heaven once, in a dream. Believers now have constant access: **"For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father"** (Ephesians 2:18). **"Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way"** (Hebrews 10:19-20).

The house of God is now His people. Jacob called a hillside *Beth-el*, the house of God, and set up a stone. In the grace administration God does not live in a place: **"Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?"** (1 Corinthians 3:16). The body of Christ is **"an holy temple in the Lord … an habitation of God through the Spirit"** (Ephesians 2:21-22). Jesus Himself said the hour was coming when worship would not be tied to any mountain or place, for **"God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth"** (John 4:24).

Grace before merit. At Bethel God gave Jacob seven promises and asked for nothing, to a man who had just lied his way out of his father's house. Jacob answered with *if*. God's grace today is the same: freely given, not bargained for. We do not make deals with God; we receive what He has already given.

A new name, and the old man. Jacob received a new name and a new nature, but *Jacob* did not disappear. Believers are told: **"if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new"** (2 Corinthians 5:17) — and yet also told to **"put off … the old man"** and **"put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness"** (Ephesians 4:22-24). The new nature is real and complete; walking in it is a daily choice. As this series understands it, Jacob and Israel living side by side is a picture of that walk.

Strength in weakness. Jacob's blessing came when his strength was broken. Paul learned the same: **"My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness"** (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Ministering spirits. God's angels still serve those who are heirs of salvation (Hebrews 1:14). We may not see Mahanaim, but God's camp still stands beside ours.

To the Topic of Transformation and Prayer

- **God meets people at their lowest,** not their best: a runaway with a stone for a pillow.
- **God keeps His promises** over decades: every word of Bethel came true.

- **Pray on the basis of what God has said:** "thou saidst."
- **Honest confession opens the door:** "What is thy name?" — "Jacob."
- **Clinging, not fighting:** the blessing came when Jacob could only hold on.
- **God goes ahead:** Esau's heart was changed before Jacob arrived.
- **Clean house before worship:** put away the strange gods.

The Main Takeaway

God met Jacob when he was running and deserved nothing, opened heaven over him, and promised to be with him and bring him home; twenty years later, when Jacob was frightened and alone, God met him again, broke his strength with a touch, and blessed him when he stopped fighting and clung on — giving him a new name, Israel; the ladder Jacob saw is Jesus Christ, the one mediator, through whom heaven is open to every believer today.

- **God comes to us** before we come to Him.
- **God's promises do not depend on our deserving them.**
- **Every word God speaks, He keeps.**
- **The blessing comes by clinging, not by grasping.**
- **Weakness is where God's strength shows.**
- **Jesus Christ is the way between earth and heaven.**

For Our Learning — The People

- **Jacob / Israel.** Fled from Esau; saw the ladder at Bethel; served Laban twenty years; wrestled the angel at Peniel; renamed Israel; reconciled with Esau; returned to Bethel.
- **Esau.** Jacob's twin; came with four hundred men and ran to embrace him.
- **Laban.** Rebekah's brother in Haran; deceived Jacob and changed his wages ten times.
- **Leah and Rachel.** Laban's daughters and Jacob's wives; Rachel was the loved one and the mother of Joseph.
- **Bilhah and Zilpah.** The maids given to Rachel and Leah, mothers of four of Jacob's sons.
- **Joseph.** Rachel's firstborn, placed "hindermost" for safety when Esau came.
- **The angels of God.** On the ladder at Bethel and in the camp at Mahanaim.
- **The man at the Jabbok.** Called "a man" in Genesis and "the angel" in Hosea; wrestled Jacob, touched his thigh, and gave him the name Israel.

For Our Learning — Customs and Orientalisms

- **Sleeping in the open.** Travellers without shelter slept on the ground, a stone for a headrest.
- **Standing stones.** A pillar (*matstsevah*) marked a sacred event, treaty or grave; later forbidden under the Law because of Canaanite idolatry.
- **Anointing with oil.** Pouring oil set a thing apart as holy.
- **Vows.** Solemn, binding promises made to God, often conditional.

- **Names.** A name described a person's nature; a new name from God meant a new identity.
- **Messengers and gifts.** A man approaching a powerful rival sent messengers and gifts ahead to win favour.
- **Bowing seven times.** The full homage of a servant to his lord.
- **Blessing by the greater.** To ask a blessing was to acknowledge the other as superior.
- **Guarding the favoured.** Placing the most loved at the back, furthest from danger.
- **The sinew of the thigh.** Israel's dietary memorial of Jacob's wrestling.
- **Household gods.** Small idols kept in homes, which Jacob had his family put away.

For Our Learning — Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used by God to add emphasis and feeling. These are the ones in this story:

- **Anaphora** — the same word beginning successive clauses. "Behold a ladder … behold the angels … behold, the LORD" (28:12-13).
- **Merismus** — the whole expressed by its parts. "To the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south" (28:14).
- **Simile** — a comparison using "as." "Thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth" (28:14); "as though I had seen the face of God" (33:10).
- **Ecphonesis** — a sudden exclamation. "How dreadful is this place!" (28:17).
- **Paronomasia** — play on similar sounds. *Jabbok* / *ye'aveq* (wrestled) / *Jacob*; *Mahanaim* / *machanoth* (two camps / two bands); *Peniel* and the many *faces* of 32:20 and 33:10.
- **Erotesis** — questions asked for effect. "What is thy name?" (32:27); "Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name?" (32:29).
- **Idiom** — an expression whose meaning comes from the language's own usage. "I have seen God face to face" (32:30), speaking of meeting God's own messenger (compare Judges 13:21-22).

What the Bible Actually Says

- **Jacob did not climb the ladder;** it was "set up on the earth," and God spoke from above it.
- **God's promises at Bethel had no conditions;** Jacob's vow did.
- **Scripture never records Jacob paying the tenth** he vowed.
- **The wrestler came to Jacob,** not the other way around.
- **Genesis calls him "a man"; Hosea calls him "the angel."**
- **Jacob prevailed by weeping and pleading** (Hosea 12:4), after his hip was put out of joint.
- **"No man hath seen God at any time"** (John 1:18); Jacob's "face to face" refers to meeting God's messenger.
- **Scripture keeps using the name Jacob** after he became Israel.
- **Jesus applied the ladder to Himself** (John 1:51).

God's Will and Intent

- **God seeks out the undeserving,** as He met Jacob on the run.
- **God keeps every promise** He makes, though it take decades.
- **God does not bargain;** He gives.
- **God breaks self-reliance** so that His people learn to cling to Him.
- **God gives a new name and a new nature.**
- **God goes ahead to prepare the way,** as He did with Esau.
- **God opened heaven** through His Son, the one mediator, crucified, raised, and ascended.