

# JACOB RECEIVED THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT FROM GOD: JACOB'S BETHEL EXPERIENCE GENESIS 28:10–22

## *Introduction*

Fear, shame, loneliness and destitution – these four experiences grip the hearts and lives of so many people upon earth. So many people feel...

- depressed
- unwanted
- unloved
- alone
- unacceptable
- shut out
- afraid
- useless
- without purpose
- threatened
- poverty-stricken
- helpless
- rejected
- destitute
- hopeless
- defeated
- abused
- ashamed
- discouraged
- embarrassed

There is not a person upon earth who escapes the suffering of some fear, shame and loneliness during his or her life; and in far too many cases, some persons are overwhelmed by these experiences. In addition, there are far too many people within every nation who suffer destitution, stripped of the very necessities of life. Sometimes we suffer these experiences because of our own irresponsibility or sin, and sometimes they are forced upon us by others, due to no fault of our own.

But there is *hope of deliverance* from all these bad experiences, no matter what brings them upon us. Jacob's experience demonstrates this for us Jacob was suffering every one of these, suffering them all at once – fear, shame, loneliness and destitution – and they had flooded in upon his soul because of his own irresponsibility and sin Jacob was

- gripped by fear
- gripped by shame
- gripped by loneliness
- stripped of all but what he could carry, suffering destitution

He was suffering all this because he had sinned and sinned shamefully. It was all due to his own irresponsible and shameful behaviour. Was there any hope for him? Any deliverance? Yes! There was! And there is hope and deliverance for us. This is the message of this much needed passage of Scripture: *Jacob Received the Abrahamic Covenant from God: Jacob's Bethel Experience; Strengthened Through Fear, Shame, Loneliness and Destitution.*

- I. Jacob's desperate need (vv. 10-11).
  - II. Jacob's dream: God's provision to meet the need (vv. 12-15).
  - III. Jacob's new insight (vv. 16-19).
  - IV. Jacob's renewed commitment and vow to God (vv. 20-22).
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## **I. *Genesis 28:10–11 Jacob Forced to Leave Home in Fear and Shame***

There was Jacob's desperate need.

1. Jacob had been forced to leave home in fear and shame, fleeing for his life. Remember, he was about 77 years old at this time; and he had just stolen *the blessing* (inheritance) of his father from Esau, stolen it through lies and deception. (See notes, Gen 27:1-28:9.) Esau, his brother, had threatened to kill him, and now Jacob was having to flee for his life.
  - a. Jacob was gripped by fear. But just how fearful was Jacob? Was he only experiencing a slight sense of fear or was he overwhelmed by fear, the kind of fear that causes a person to dread the darkness of night, to stir at the sound of every noise, to always look over his shoulder and around every comer? Jacob was gripped by fear, a deep sense of fear.
    - => He was not just leaving home; he was fleeing from home. His flight had been planned by him and his mother to save his life from the threat of Esau (Gen 27:41-46). Esau's threat was real, and Jacob feared for his life. Haran was a five-hundred-mile journey for Jacob, and he was traveling by camel, horse or donkey. There were places along the roadway that were dangerous and infested with robbers. He was bound to experience what any of us would feel: apprehension and fear over the lurking dangers of the trip.
    - => Jacob spent the nights out in the open of the countryside, not in the towns along the way. Verse nineteen tells us this: he did not stay in the town of Luz which was nearby; he slept out in the hills on the ground, some distance off the main road. Why? Would it not be because he feared that Esau might be pursuing him, anticipating where he might be day by day and night by night? Jacob was bound to be overwhelmed with fear, wondering if Esau or some robber was behind every rock or lurking in every shadow.

***Prov 29:25*** *Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe.*

***Deu 28:67*** *In the morning you will say, "If only it were evening!" and in the evening, "If only it were morning!" – because of the terror that fills your hearts and the sights that your eyes will see.*
  - b. But Jacob was not only gripped by fear, he was overwhelmed with shame. He had been utterly dishonoured before his family, friends and neighbours. Remember, hundreds of families worked for his family. Abraham alone had 318 men who were able to fight and go to war for him. There were bound to be many more who stayed behind to tend to the herds and ranch (Gen 14:14). Furthermore, the family's estate and business holdings grew considerably under Isaac, Jacob's father (Gen 26:12-16). Jacob had always been honoured and looked upon as the son of the owner, the great rancher and sheik, Isaac. Jacob was well known by the whole community. His home, no doubt, sat right in the centre of the community, and all of the citizens served and worked for his family.

Now think how quickly the news of Jacob's plot — his deceit and lies — against his father and Esau would spread. Think of the scandal — the dishonour, blame, disgrace, outrage, reproach — the utter embarrassment and shame Jacob would feel. He was bound to be overwhelmed with shame, with a deep sense of humiliation and worthlessness.

*Ezra 9:6* And [Ezra] prayed, "I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.

*Job 10:1* "I loathe my very life; therefore I will give free rein to my complaint and speak out in the bitterness of my soul."

*Psa 44:15* I live in disgrace all day long, and my face is covered with shame.

*Psa 142:4* Look to my right and see; no one is concerned for me. I have no refuge; no one cares for my life.

*Psa 31:11* Because of all my enemies, I am the utter contempt of my neighbours and an object of dread to my closest friends — those who see me on the street flee from me.

2. Jacob settled down for the night out in the countryside (v. 11). He was all alone; a deep sense of loneliness surged through his body. How do we know this?
  - => There is no record in Scripture that Jacob had ever left home before, and he was seventy-seven years old. Just imagine: he had never been separated from his family, never separated from his friends and neighbours until now.
  - => Jacob had always been around people, hundreds of people who knew him by name, many of whom were close friends and neighbours. He was bound to sense loneliness being out all alone night after night and day by day.
  - => The depth of loneliness would be even deeper because Jacob was having to avoid people. He had to avoid them because he needed to escape Esau if Esau were by chance pursuing him.
  - => Jacob was facing the unknown, and not knowing what lies ahead always arouses a sense of loneliness within us. Many of us can remember spending our first night in a strange city all alone. Some of us have come from small towns and for the first time stood at hotel windows rising high above some metropolitan city and looked out over the city in all its vastness. Standing there, we have felt the deepest surge of loneliness imaginable sweep through our souls. Such deep surges of loneliness seldom hit us, but when they do, we know what loneliness really is. This must have been the deep loneliness that Jacob was feeling. Perhaps it is even true to say that he was experiencing the despair of loneliness; for he had not only left home, he was forced to flee for his life, from the threat of his own brother.

*Psa 102:7 I lie awake; I have become like a bird alone on a roof.*

*Psa 88:18 You have taken from me friend neighbour – darkness is my closest friend.*

3. Jacob made a pillar of stones and laid down to sleep. Note he was spending the night out in the open, not in the nearby town of Luz. This is a picture of destitution. Jacob now possessed only what he could carry. He had been the heir of his father's estate, one of the largest estates in all the country, if not the largest. How large?

=> Consider the estate of his grandfather, Abraham, the hundreds of labourers and servants who worked for him.

*Gen 13:2 Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold.*

*Gen 24:35 The LORD has blessed my master abundantly, and he has become wealthy. He has given him sheep and cattle, silver and gold, male and female servants, and camels and donkeys.*

=> Consider how his father Isaac increased the estate.

*Gen 26:12-14 Isaac planted crops in that land and the same year reaped a hundredfold, because the LORD blessed him. The man became rich, and his wealth continued to grow until he became very wealthy. He had so many flocks and herds and servants that the Philistines envied him.*

But now, Jacob was having to leave all possessions back home, fleeing for his life. He literally had nothing but what he could carry. Jacob was now homeless and destitute. He had lost all the possessions he had ever owned or ever hoped to inherit. He had tragically fallen as low as a person could, all because of his own sin and irresponsibility. Jacob was now held in the grip of poverty, owning nothing: he was homeless and destitute.

**Thought 1.** Few people ever suffer as much as Jacob was suffering. He was suffering four emotions all at once: suffering fear, shame, loneliness and destitution. Few of us are ever overwhelmed by all four at the same time, but Jacob was. And still fewer of us would ever bring the suffering of all four upon ourselves because of some sin and shameful behaviour, but Jacob did.

The point is this: Jacob was in desperate need of help, as desperate a need as could ever be experienced. Was help available? Was there any person who would help and strengthen Jacob? Any person who can help and strengthen us when we face fear, shame, loneliness or destitution?

*Psa 107:17 Some became fools through their rebellious ways and suffered affliction because of their iniquities.*

*Prov 13:15 Good judgment wins favour, but the way of the unfaithful leads to their destruction.*

*Eccl 2:23 All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.*

*Isa 48:22 "There is no peace," says the LORD, "for the wicked."*

*Rom 7:24-25 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God — through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.*

## **II. Genesis 28:12–15 Jacob's Dream: God's Provision to Meet the Need**

There was Jacob's dream, where God met his desperate need. While Jacob slept, he had a dream, and in his dream, God gave four great provisions to meet his need. Note that these same four great provisions exist to meet the needs and crises.

1. There was the vision of a great ladder or stairway stretching all the way from earth up into heaven. The stairway was huge, wide enough for streams of angels to pass one another, ascending and descending on it. What did the stairway symbolize for Jacob? It symbolized at least two truths.
  - a. The stairway pictured the great gulf and separation between heaven and earth, between God and man. The gulf and separation was so vast that no man could ever reach heaven apart from the supernatural work of God and His angels. Jacob was bound to see how helpless he was in trying to reach God on his own. God had to provide the way if man was ever to reach heaven.

*Isa 59:2 But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.*

*Isa 64:7 No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins.*

*Luke 16:26 "And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us."*

- b. The stairway also pictured this fact: there is a great stairway stretching between earth and heaven. A way has been provided for man to reach heaven, a way provided by God Himself.

**Thought 1.** Note this interesting fact: Jesus Christ Himself referred to this experience of Jacob. But He not only referred to it, He claimed that He Himself was the ladder, the very way God had provided for man to reach heaven. What happened was this: one of Jesus' disciples had just declared that Jesus was the Son of God. In response, Jesus made His great claim:

*John 1:51 He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."*

When will we see the angels ascending and descending upon Jesus? We do not know. This probably refers to the great day of His return, the day when He returns in glory with all the heavenly host. But for now, the point to see is this: Jesus Christ claimed to be the great stairway (the Way) that reaches from earth to heaven.

=> Jesus Christ is the Way to God and heaven.

**John 14:6** *Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

=> Jesus Christ is the great Mediator between heaven and earth, between God and man.

**1 Tim 2:5** *For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.*

**Heb 9:24** *For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence.*

=> Jesus Christ is our advocate between heaven and earth, between God and man, the propitiation (sacrifice, covering) for our sins.

**1 John 2:1-2** *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense — Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*

2. There was the vision of angels, a stream of angels, ascending and descending upon the stairway. What did the angels symbolize for Jacob? The word *angel* simply means messenger. Jacob saw the angels come to earth to carry out the commands of God and then return to heaven to report on their work. What was their work upon earth that would concern Jacob at this point in his life? (See *Angels*, Heb 1:4-14.) Scripture tells us that angels have a very important function in God's dealings with believers, four functions in particular. Note what Scripture says: "They [are] all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them that are the heirs of salvation" (Heb 1:14).

=> Angels protect and deliver believers through trials.

**Psa 91:11** *For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. (see Psa 34:7; Isa 63:9; Dan 3:28; 6:22; Acts 12:7-11).*

=> Angels guide and lead believers in their ministry.

**Mt. 2:13** *When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." (see 1 Kng 19:5; Mt. 2:19-20; Acts 5:19; 8:26).*

=> Angels encourage believers. Note that this assistance seems to begin at childhood and continues on throughout life.

**Mat 18:10** “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.” (see Acts 27:23-25; Heb 1:14; Psa 91:11).

=> Angels escort believers into heaven.

**Luke 16:22** “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried.”

Seeing angels ascend and descend from earth to heaven encouraged Jacob's heart to the fullest degree possible. The angels meant that God had a host of messengers and ministering spirits who were actively looking after Jacob and the other believers upon earth, a host of angelic beings who were available...

- to protect and deliver him
- to guide and lead him
- to encourage him
- to escort him into heaven when that glorious day arrived

3. There was the vision of God's presence in heaven, of God's standing above the ladder, above the very top of it. This was bound to picture the most marvellous truth for Jacob: the sovereign control of God, His supreme power to control all affairs between heaven and earth. God was in charge of everything, no matter what it was, everything in heaven and earth. This meant a most wonderful and practical thing for Jacob (and for us): God has the sovereign power...

- to protect him and all other believers from robbers, threats and all other lurking dangers
- to take care of the past with all its failures and of the future with all its uncertainty
- to look after his family and other loved ones while he was away
- to fulfil His promises to Abraham, the promised seed and the promised land
- to control all events upon earth and work them out for good, whether involving one person or a whole community of people

Jacob's mind was probably flooded with all the things that he needed God to handle in his life. The crucial point to see is this: Jacob now knew that God would handle his problems for him. Despite his tragic and miserable failure, God was still in sovereign control, and He had the sovereign power to work all things out for good.

**Rom 8:28** *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

**Phil 2:13** *For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*

4. There was God's Word and promises (vv. 13-15). Note who it was that spoke to Jacob: the Lord, the God of Abraham and of Isaac. The Lord (Yahweh) is *the redemptive*

*name* for God. It is the name God uses to stress that He saves and redeems man from his fall into sin and death. (See note 2, Gen 2:4.) God was assuring Jacob that the same God who redeemed his grandfather and father would redeem him. The greatest of hopes obviously surged through Jacob's mind when the Lord Himself, the God of the believer's salvation, began to speak to him. He, the same Lord who spoke to Abraham and Isaac, was now going to speak to him. And this after Jacob's miserable failure. What mercy! What grace! Mercy and grace undeserved. The Lord was the only hope of salvation Jacob had, and here He was — the LORD God of redemption — speaking to Jacob. Jacob was about to receive the very Word of the Lord Himself, receive the Word and promises of God, the Abrahamic covenant.

Note: this is the first time that God gave the promises of Abraham to Jacob. Jacob had, just a few days earlier, plotted to get the blessing of the promises through his father, Isaac. But now, the real blessing of the promises was to be given by God Himself. Note that the promises given to Jacob and his descendants were the very promises of the Abrahamic covenant.

- 1) The promised land of Canaan (a symbol of heaven. See note, Gen 12:1c.)
- 2) The promised seed: this meant numerous descendants, so many that they would number as the dust of the earth and spread out in every direction (v. 14. See note, Gen 12:2-3.)
- 3) The promised seed, a very special seed: this meant the Messiah, the Saviour of the world in whom all the families of the earth will be blessed (v. 14c. See note, Gen 12:3.)
- 4) The promise of His presence and protection (v. 15). Note that God gave Jacob the greatest protection imaginable:

=> God's presence: "I am with you."

=> God's protective, keeping power: "I will keep, protect, watch over you wherever you go."

=> God's assurance that He would fulfil His promises and purpose in Jacob's life: "I will not leave you until I have fulfilled my promises and purposes in your life."

**Thought 1.** Note that the great promises given to Jacob are also given to us.

(1) The promise of God's presence.

**Gen. 28:15** "I am with you."

**Mat 28:20** "And surely I am with you always, [even] to the very end of the age."

**Mat 18:20** "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

**Exo 33:14** The Lord replied, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

**Isa 43:2** "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze."



(2) The promise of God's protective, keeping power.

**Gen. 28:15** *[I] will watch over you wherever you go.*

**Psa 121:4** *Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.*

**2 Tim 1:12** *I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.*

**1 Pet 1:5** *Who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.*

**Jude 1:24** *To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy.*

**Rev 3:10** *Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.*

(3) The promise of God's leadership.

**Gen. 28:15** *"I will bring you back to this land."*

**Rom 8:14** *Because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.*

**John 16:13** *But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.*

(4) The promise of God's fulfilling His promises and purposes in our lives.

**Gen. 28:15** *"I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."*

**1 Kng 8:56** *Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses.*

**Isa 14:27** *For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?*

**Rom 4:21** *Being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.*

**Rom 8:28** *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

**Phil 1:6** *Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

### **III. Genesis 28:16–19 Jacob's New Insight into God's Presence and Care**

There was Jacob's new insight into God and into himself. Right after God had finished speaking, Jacob awoke and he was engulfed with a deep sense of God's presence. He now understood God as never before, for God had revealed His sovereign care both for His

people and for Jacob. God was overseeing and taking care of all things including Jacob in this, Jacob's desperate hour of need. Jacob was stricken with new insight into God's presence and care. Note the new insight that now flooded his heart and mind.

1. Jacob now knew that the Lord was present with him whether he felt the Lord's presence or not, that the Lord's presence was always with him in a very special way (v. 16). Since his flight from home, he had been gripped with fear, shame, loneliness; and he was now destitute. He had been suffering mentally and emotionally for days, and he was sensing great conviction of sin because of the great wrong he had done against his father and brother. He had been in the very depths of discouragement and despair. But God had gloriously met him in his desperation and need. God was present with him now, and God would always be present with him protecting and meeting his needs.

This glorious truth struck Jacob. With new insight he saw as never before that the Lord was always with him whether he felt it or not.

2. Jacob sensed how awesome his experience had been: Bethel would always be a special place to him (v. 17). Jacob felt just like we feel about the places where God has met us in special ways: as though the place were holy ground:

=> It was the very house of God: a very special place where he could meet God in worship and prayer.

=> It was the very gate of heaven: a very special place where he could ask and seek and knock until God heard and answered his prayer.

3. Jacob needed to set the place apart as a very special place of worship (vv. 18-19). Note that Jacob had fallen back to sleep sometime during the night. When he awoke...
  - he dedicated the place as a very special place of worship. He built an altar by stacking stones one upon another. Then he anointed the altar with oil. To a believer, pouring oil upon a person or object has always been a symbol of dedication or consecration. Jacob was dedicating the place to God as a very special place of worship.
  - he named the place Bethel, which means *house of God* (v. 19). Note that the city Luz, which was nearby, was to eventually have its name changed to Bethel.

#### **IV. Genesis 28:20–22 Jacob's Renewed Commitment and Vow**

There was Jacob's renewed commitment and vow to God. Jacob needed to make a renewed commitment to God, a renewed vow (vv. 20-22). This is the first vow recorded in the Bible. Some interpreters say that Jacob was trying to strike a bargain with God in these verses. But several facts argue against this: Jacob's deep experience with God and the very tone of the passage, and our own very special encounters and deep experiences with God – all these point strongly to Jacob making a renewed commitment to God. Out of a heart of love and thankfulness to God, Jacob was *voluntarily* vowing to follow God as never before.

1. Note the reason why Jacob was recommitting his life to the Lord: because of the great promise God had just made to him — the promise to protect, provide, and lead him. Note the humility and meekness of Jacob in dealing with God's provision: the only thing Jacob really requested was the bare necessities of life, food and clothing.
2. Jacob's vow involved three commitments:
  - => that the Lord, the God of redemption and salvation, would always be his God (v. 21b)
  - that he would always worship God in Bethel when there (v. 22)
  - => that he would be faithful in tithing to God (v. 22)

**Thought 1.** When God meets us and gives us very special experiences — special manifestations of His presence — we should always rededicate our lives to Him. God wants us to be totally dedicated to Him.

**Luke 9:23** *Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."*

**Rom 12:1-2** *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

**1 Pet 4:2** *As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.*

**Deu 6:5** *Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*

**Jer 29:13** *You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ■*