

“Runaway Bribe” (Genesis 28:10-22)

In 1995, *Focus on the Family* aired the amazing story of Frank W. Abagnale. At the age of 16, Abagnale’s parents divorced. This so devastated him that he ran away and became a con man that circled the globe living the high life and passing bad checks. One of his favorite schemes was impersonating airline pilots so that he could pass fake airline payroll checks as well as “ride the jump seat” for free, to anywhere in the world. From age 16-19, Abagnale also impersonated a medical doctor, a BYU sociology professor, and a lawyer. His story has been called “the true story of a real fake.” His life is so fascinating that Steven Spielberg turned it into a film.¹ In the end, an FI agent caught Abagnale. He now serves as a world-renowned consultant and lectures at the FBI’s Financial Crimes Unit.

In Genesis 28, Jacob runs away from home. The plot to receive the blessing from Isaac was a great success...in one sense. However, in another sense it was a terrible failure. Jacob was forced to leave home to escape being killed by his furious brother. So Jacob gets the blessing but he has to leave the inheritance with Esau. He is a runaway. Fortunately for Jacob, and for us, God loves to chase down runaways. This is God’s defining feature—He comes to rebellious people to be with them and to save them.² In fact, when God finally chose to become a person [Jesus], He came to “seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10, NET). This story, in 28:10-22, gives us a picture of how heaven comes down to earth.

Our story begins in 28:10: **“Then Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran.”** This was a journey backward in time for Jacob; backward because he was retracing the steps of his grandfather Abraham, who came from Haran to the Promised Land many years ago. But Abraham left behind him a settlement of people that grew and prospered over the years. So it was natural that his mother, Rebekah, would think of Haran when she cast about for a safe haven for her wayward, youngest son. The trek from Beersheba to Haran was far enough away that Esau wouldn’t follow Jacob there. Yet, there was family at Haran, so Jacob wouldn’t be alone. All in all, Haran was a sensible suggestion. Rebekah’s plan was simple. By sending Jacob to Haran, she was putting him in a safe place for a few months until Esau’s anger subsided. Then she would send word for Jacob to come home. In the meantime, she hoped that her son would marry one of his relatives in Haran and eventually return home, bride in hand. It was a good plan, and in fact it came to pass, but not exactly as Rebekah envisioned.

In 28:11, **“He [Jacob] came to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set;³ and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place.”** The journey from Beersheba to Haran was a long one (approx. 550 miles).⁴ When he was about 70 miles from home, he reached the town of Luz (cf. 28:19). It is surprising that we find Jacob outside the city, apparently sleeping in the wilderness. It was ancient custom not to allow a visitor to brave the elements out of doors or overnight (19:1-3; Judg 19:11-21).⁵ So, either Jacob arrived after the gates were closed, or he was so depressed that he didn’t want to be sociable.⁶ Whatever his thoughts must have been, I believe that Jacob was finally at the end of himself. I believe that he came to realize he would never prosper on the basis of his schemes and struggles. His self-assurance was probably at an all-time low. This was the ideal time for God to break into his life; for now Jacob knew how much he needed God in order to be blessed as his father had been.

The setting of God’s encounter with Jacob matches Jacob’s psychological condition. The security of the son has been replaced by the dangers of the night. The comfort of his parents’ tent has been replaced by a rock. Behind him lays Beersheba, where Esau waits to kill him; ahead of him is Haran, where Laban waits to exploit him. He is situated between a death camp and a hard-labor camp. Back in Beersheba, Esau lies in wait like an angry lion. Ahead in Haran, Laban waits with his spider web to trap and suck the life from his victims.⁷

I imagine he had a hard time sleeping that night...and not just because he was sleeping on the ground with a rock for a pillow. As he reminisced in his mind, I wonder if he thought about his family. Did he worry about his aging father? Did a silent tear slip down his cheek as he remembered waving goodbye to his mother? Did his face turn crimson in the darkness as he replayed his shameful deceit? Did a bullet of fear strike his heart as he thought about Esau's pledge to kill him?⁸

In 28:12, Moses elaborates the scene: Jacob **“had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.”** It's worth noting that Jacob, whose entire life could be summed up as a life of striving and grabbing, finally had an encounter with God, in his sleep. When did Jacob receive this revelation? When he was working? When he was scheming? No, when he was sleeping (see Isa 30:15-16). The two most significant events in the life of Jacob were visitations from God, both while he was sleeping. The first was this dream at Bethel when he was fleeing from the land of Canaan, which ironically was his by virtue of the blessing. The other was his fight at Peniel when he was attempting to return to the land (32:24-32). Each divine encounter was a life-changing event.⁹

Another observation is worth noting: Where was Jacob when he received this vision?

- *Physically*: He was in a barren, rocky wasteland, in the middle of nowhere.
- *Socially*: He was separated from his family and fleeing for his life.
- *Materially*: He had nothing but the shirt on his back.
- *Spiritually*: He was distant from God and alone and without hope.¹⁰

God loves to intervene and meet us when we are empty, lonely, and running away from Him. Heaven comes down to earth when we are the most in need of God. That is the story of Christmas! If you have placed your faith in Christ, it is also the story of your life.

Ironically, many people today are content to have us stop with this verse. Why? **“Angels!”** Angels are big business and many people get excited about them. Angels have been on the cover of every major news magazine; they have infatuated the American public. It is assumed that our interest in angels is good. But the Bible tells us that we must test the spirits (1 John 4:1-3), “for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor 11:14). Everything that is “spiritual” is not good!

I will say this though: Not many people in the Bible ever saw angels.¹¹ Most people lived their entire lives without ever seeing one. But here and there, at certain critical moments in history, God allowed a few people this privilege. It's as if God would draw back the curtains at a crucial moment to let someone see the angels of God at work behind the scene. Jacob is one of the few.

What are the angels doing? They are going up and down the stairs. They are taking messages from earth up to heaven and messages from heaven down to earth. They are heavenly couriers who report to God concerning the situation on the earth (Heb 1:14). They also carry out God's will—answering prayers, giving guidance, providing protection, fighting for the people of God, and fending off the attacks of Satan.

Fortunately, 28:13-15 tells us who God is. Why get caught up with the servants of God when you can have the Master Himself? Moses writes, **“And behold, the LORD stood above it [or “stood beside him, NRSV¹²] and said, ‘I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants 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.”¹³ The “ladder”¹⁴ evidently resembled a stairway with steps that reached to heaven.¹⁵ Jacob at the bottom, God at the top, a stairway filled with angels in between. What does it mean? This ladder, with its “top” reaching to heaven, was literally “placed toward the earth.” Remember the tower of Babel in which rebel humanity attempted to build a tower with a “top” that reached “into heaven” (11:4)? The ladder in Jacob’s dream, by contrast, brings heaven to earth. The point being: Humanity’s efforts to reach heaven are never effective. Led Zeppelin got it wrong in their song *Stairway to Heaven*. Men and women can access heaven only when it comes to earth or when God takes them to heaven.

The Bible tells us that the ladder is Jesus. Jesus said in John 1:51, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” Jesus is our stairway to heaven. He makes this clear, in John 1:51, that *He* is the access to heaven. *He* is the means by which heaven comes down to us and by which we can go to heaven. *He* is the “ladder.” He does not show us a way, *He is* the way. In John 14:6, Jesus Himself said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.” In 1 Timothy 2:5, Paul wrote, “For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” Ultimately, it was Jesus Christ who bridged the gap between heaven and earth. It is through Him that God has come down to man. It is through Him that man will have access to God. The religions of man teach that we must rise up to God. Yet, the message of the Bible is that God comes down to man. Therefore, if you want to have a relationship with God, you must come to Him on His terms...and that means going through Jesus! You can do this today. Simply acknowledge your sin to God, cease trusting in your own good works, church membership, baptism, or world view, and trust in Christ alone.

For all the years of Jacob’s life, God had never before spoken directly to him. To his grandfather Abraham—yes. To his father Isaac—yes. But to Jacob—no. For his whole life he had lived on the borrowed faith of his father and grandfather. He was raised in their faith, was taught their faith, knew their faith, and even believed their faith, but he had never had a personal experience with the God of his father and grandfather. To Jacob it was all second-hand reality.

Interestingly, God does not rebuke Jacob for the shameful way he has treated his brother or father. What a gracious God. We often think God is discontented with us, yet the truth is He loves us and wants to speak words of encouragement and grace to us. Think for just a moment about how much you love your children or grandchildren. Do you think a perfect and loving God loves you any less? Of course not!

In 28:13-15, God gives Jacob several precious promises. While the promises of Jacob do not apply directly, across the board to us, it is amazing what we can learn about God’s character through these promises. Think of all the needs that these words address:

- *Shame*: “I am the God of your father Abraham.” Jacob, even though you feel like you have blown it (and you have), I can take away the embarrassment of your life and use you.
- *Betrayal*: “I am the God of Isaac.” Jacob, I know you’re feeling like you betrayed your dad (and you did). Nevertheless, I am your dad’s God and I will not fail him, even when you do. I’m a big God and I can be trusted.
- *Loss of his homeland*: “I will give you this land.” Jacob, I know you’re a runaway, but one day I’m going to give you and your descendants the Promised Land.
- *Loss of his family*: “Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth.” Jacob, I know your family relationships are strained but I will give you many other descendants.

- *Insignificance*: “All peoples on the earth will be blessed through you.” Jacob, right now you may feel very small and insignificant, but your life is going to count for me. It may not seem that way right now, but I will use you.
- *Fear of the future*: “I am with you... wherever you go.”¹⁶ Jacob was the first person in the Bible to hear the assurance “I am with you” (28:15). It was a promise that God later repeated to Moses (Exod 3:12; Joshua (Josh 1:5), Gideon (Judg 6:16), regarding Immanuel (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:23), and to all disciples (Matt 28:20; Heb 13:5).¹⁷ As we look at Jacob’s experience, I want you to see that God is also with you. You may be on the verge of a mental collapse; but although you cannot sense it, God is with you right now. You may be quite ill. You may be misunderstood by your friends. You may be abandoned by a husband, a wife, or your children. You may have lost a job. You may be discouraged. You may feel that you have so little self-worth that no one will ever care for you again. I want you to hear God speaking.¹⁸ He speaks when you need Him most.
- *Fear of Failure*: “I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”¹⁹ Jacob, I know it seems life is unpredictable (and it is) but I’m in control. And I am faithful even when you are unfaithful. My life for you is everlasting and I will make good on my promises.

God speaks all of these promises to Jacob, of all people. Why Jacob? He steals well; he rips off his old, blind father; he has never really worshipped God. He is the last guy that you or I would choose. Why does God choose Jacob? God loves to use the weak and foolish people of this world (1 Cor 1:27-29). He does this to shame the wise and strong.

The amazing point is that God now speaks to Jacob at the moment of his desperation. All that has happened is prologue. Even his deception and trickery was used by God to bring him to this precise moment in life. Now that he is running for his life, now that he is leaving the Promised Land, now that he has disgraced himself, now that he has finally reached the bottom, at that exact moment, God speaks to Jacob. C.S. Lewis said that God whispers to us in our pleasure and shouts to us in our pain. Pain, he said, is God’s megaphone to rouse a sleeping world. Now God moves to rouse Jacob, even while he sleeps.

In 28:16-17, “**...Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.’ He [Jacob] was afraid and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’**” Can you imagine what it must have been like to wake up after having a dream of this magnitude? Think back to the last surreal dream you had. If you’re like me, when you wake up and rub the sleep from your eyes, you immediately question the reality of what you dreamed. I have had some dreams that were so real that when I woke up I had to remind myself they were just dreams. Jacob is probably in the same state of mind. Quickly though, he recognizes that he has just had a personal encounter with the living God...so he gets excited. As our African American brethren like to say, “He had some “church”! He is overwhelmed with God’s presence. In his euphoria and fright,²⁰ Jacob utters some confused theology. The truth is: Everywhere God is present is sacred. Now the question is, “Where is God?” He is everywhere! He rules over all creation.

On Friday, I was able to talk to my neighbor about my spiritual pilgrimage. During our conversation, I told him of an experience I had in June of 1993. After graduating Bible college with a degree in theology, God met me in a poolroom at Neptune Swimming Pool Company in Clackamas, OR. One month before I was married, God graciously convinced me, once and for all, that He was real, the Bible was real, heaven and hell were real, and I would give an account for my life. Why was this necessary and why did this mark me so? I grew up in the church yet always had nagging questions and doubts. Occasionally, the following thoughts would pop into my mind: “What if this is all a joke?” “What if I have believed in the wrong God?” “What if the Bible is not true?” I acknowledge that these thoughts can be fairly typical. God understands that we are dust and that our minds can be mush. Nevertheless, God directly met me

and persuaded me of His truth. That was a momentous occasion. It shaped me into who I am today. However, I don't need to return to the poolroom at Neptune and visit it like it is a shrine. God could have met me anywhere and reveal Himself to me. Therefore, I am to worship God, not where God met me.

It has been my observation that relatively few people meet God on Sunday morning. You are much more likely to meet God on the bed of affliction, or when you lose your job, or when your children are sick, or when your friends betray you, or when your marriage collapses. You are much more likely to meet Him after an accident than during the coffee hour on Sunday morning. You're much more likely to meet Him in the hospital than in the sanctuary. Not because God is not here; He *is* here and not just on Sunday either. Our problem is, God speaks but we don't listen. It takes tragedy, it takes failure, it takes financial setback, it takes heartache, it takes illness, it takes the collapse of our dreams—then at last we look up to heaven and say, “Surely the Lord was in this place, and I knew it not” (Gen 28:16).

Our story concludes in 28:18-22: **“So Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on its top. He called the name of that place Bethel [the “house of God”]; however, previously the name of the city had been Luz. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, ‘If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, and I return to my father’s house in safety, then the LORD will be my God. This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God’s house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.’”** Jacob set the stone up as a memorial to God’s revelation and promises (28:18). His pillow becomes a pillar. Why does Jacob raise a pillar and not just build an altar like his grandfather, Abraham? Both a pillar and a stairway have a “head” that points upward.²¹ Jacob is acknowledging God. Pouring oil on the pillar constituted an act of consecration. Oil was used throughout the Old Testament as a symbol (type) of the Holy Spirit.

This pillar becomes a monument of remembrance. Jacob wants to memorialize the event. Many of you are familiar with the old hymn, *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*. The second verse of this song begins with these words: “Here I raise my Ebenezer.” Well, you may remember a couple of months ago when we sang this song and Paco introduced a video with people from our church trying to figure out what an Ebenezer was. It sounds like an old man that we are ticked at. At the end of the video, Andy Schwartz finally bailed us out and explained that an Ebenezer is a monument, a memorial. It is a means of remembering who God is. Examples of this are journaling, our first Bible, a special date, a significant picture. We need to be reminded of the grace of God. We need to have something to pass on down to our children and grandchildren. We need to build a legacy of faith through generational stories.

In 28:20-22, Jacob makes a vow that also includes his finances. The tithe is not a debt paid to God. Rather, it is a tangible acknowledgment that everything we have belongs to Him. In the Old Testament, the tithe was an obligation before God. In the New Testament, the requirement of tithing has been swallowed up in the privilege and joy of being a faithful steward of God’s resources. God’s expectation for each one of us is to give cheerfully, regularly, and sacrificially. Jacob swore that the Lord would be his God, if God proved faithful to him.²² Jacob’s vow (28:20-21; cf. 31:13; 35:1-3, 7) can be translated “Since...” rather than “If...” Jacob was asking no more than the fulfillment of God’s self-imposed obligations delivered in the dream.²³ However, many pastors and commentators understand Jacob’s vow to be an example of his scheming carnality. A casual look at his dedicatory comments may appear that his response was conditional because of the word “if” (28:20-21). In other words, “If God blesses me, then I’ll serve Him.” To interpret Jacob’s response in this way is to misread his words and his heart. Rather, Jacob was simply saying, “If God will help me, I’ll fulfill my commitment.” In other words, Jacob was acknowledging the fact that he could not do it alone. He needed God’s help. God would have to make it possible for him to carry out his commitment.²⁴ Jacob wasn’t making a bargain with God; he

was affirming his faith in God. He was promising his life, his worship, and his possessions.²⁵ This is God's expectation of us as well.

At some point in time, all of us must claim the great promises of God for ourselves and step out in faith, making our own commitment to Him. God has no grandchildren!²⁶ You may be able to relate to Jacob. Like Jacob, you may have grown up in a Christian home; however, you've spent your fair share of time running away from God. Like Jacob, you have to find your own faith. Most people leave the church and then come back when they have children, with the hope that their children get religion.

The assurance of God's presence should bring about, in every believer, the same response of worship and confidence it prompted in Jacob. This is the message from the beginning: God, by grace, visits His people and promises them protection and provision so that they might be a blessing to others. They in turn were to respond in faith, fearing Him, worshipping Him, offering to Him, vowing to Him, and making memorials for future worshippers at such places.

An atheist and a Christian were engaged in an intense public debate. On the blackboard behind the podium the atheist printed in large capital letters, "GOD IS NOWHERE." When the Christian rose to offer his rebuttal, he rubbed out the W at the beginning of where and added that letter to the preceding word no. Then the statement read, "GOD IS NOW HERE."²⁷

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Notes

- ¹ *Catch Me If You Can* (DreamWorks, 2002), rated PG, written by Jeff Nathanson, directed by Steven Spielberg.
- ² Bill T. Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 125.
- ³ Sunset and sunrise are common images of distress and deliverance (cf. Gen 15:12, 17; 19:1; John 13:30). Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 389.
- ⁴ John H. Walton, *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 570.
- ⁵ Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis*, 124.
- ⁶ Bruce Goettsche, Never Alone (Genesis 28:10-22): <http://www.unionchurch.com/archive/090599.html>
- ⁷ Waltke, *Genesis*, 388-389.
- ⁸ Ray Pritchard, *Jacob's Ladder* (Genesis 28): <http://www.calvarymemorial.com/sermons/SMdisplay.asp?id=331>.
- ⁹ Allen P. Ross, "Jacob's Visions: The Founding of Bethel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142:567 (July-September 1985), 226. Bethel receives more mention in the Old Testament than any other city but Jerusalem. This indicates its importance in biblical history.
- ¹⁰ Bob Hallman, "Nowhere To Look But Up" (Genesis 28:1-22). http://calvarychapel.com/kauai/teachings/genesis_pdf/gen_28_notes.pdf, 9.
- ¹¹ The following individuals saw angels: Elisha's servant at Dothan, Daniel, Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, the women at the tomb of Christ, Paul, and the apostle John.
- ¹² Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 18-50*: NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 240-241.
- ¹³ This was the first of seven or eight revelations that Jacob would receive in his lifetime (Gen 31:3, 11-13; 32:1-2, 24-30; 35:1, 9-13; 46:1-4).
- ¹⁴ The Hebrew word *sullam* is only used here in the OT.
- ¹⁵ Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis*, 124; Walton, *Genesis*, 570; Ronald F. Youngblood, *The Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 218.
- ¹⁶ Sailhamer writes, "The Lord said, 'I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land' (v. 15). Within this carefully constructed narrative, those words become the guiding motif and principle that governs the course of the narrated events. So when Jacob returned from Laban's house after many years, he returned to the same place, Bethel, where God again blessed him and promised to give him the land he had already promised to Abraham (35:12); and God reaffirmed his promise to make his descendants into a great nation (35:11). Just as Jacob erected a 'pillar' (*massebah*) at the outset of his journey and then named the place 'Bethel' (28:18-19), so also when he returned, he erected another 'pillar' (*massebah*) and named the place 'Bethel' (35:14-15). At either end of the Jacob narratives, then, the writer has placed the reminder that God was with Jacob in all that he did and that God was faithful to his promises. John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis*: EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), Electronic ed.
- ¹⁷ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Genesis* (<http://www.sonlight.com/constable/notes/pdf/genesis.pdf>, 2005), 197.
- ¹⁸ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis 12-36 Vol. 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985 [1998]), 766.
- ¹⁹ Pritchard, *Jacob's Ladder*: <http://www.calvarymemorial.com/sermons/SMdisplay.asp?id=331>.
- ²⁰ The term "afraid" is used in the Bible to describe a mixture of terror and adoration, a worshipful fear (cf. Exod 19:16). Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988 [2002 ed.]), 491.
- ²¹ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 18-50*, 246.
- ²² Vows are often made in distress. Jephthah (Judg 11:30-39), Hannah (1 Sam 1:10-28), and Jonah and his sailors (Jon 1:16-2:10).
- ²³ Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26*, Vol. 2 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 454.
- ²⁴ Gene A. Getz, *Jacob: Following God Without Looking Back* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 65; cf. Ross, *Creation & Blessing*, 492; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 18-50*, 246; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Vol. 2: WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1994), 226.
- ²⁵ Youngblood, *The Book of Genesis*, 221.
- ²⁶ Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis*, 125.
- ²⁷ Preaching Today Citation: Vernon Grounds, Radical Commitment. *Christianity Today*, Vol. 30, no. 7.