Jacob Flees to Laban

In the previous chapter Jacob had conspired with Rebekah to steal the blessing of the oldest son from Esau. Isaac was a wealthy man and the bulk of his fortune would go to the eldest son. Isaac gave Jacob his blessing of wealth which included the richness of the earth and an abundance of grain and wine. The blessing he so eagerly sought was now in his possession, however he could not access his fortune. Because of Esau’s threat on his life, Rebekah convinced Isaac to send him away to her brother Laban. Isaac had obtained a wife from the clan of his family that stayed in Haran and Jacob would do the same. Unlike Abraham who sent his trusted servant along with a contingent of attendants with livestock, money and jewelry, Isaac sent Jacob alone, traveling on foot. He would pay the dowry for his wife not with money but with his own labor. Perhaps this was his reward for the manner in which he had secured his inheritance. Esau misunderstood Isaac’s purpose for sending Jacob away for his wife only seeing that Jacob was ordered not to marry a Canaanite woman. He may have thought that he could recover his stolen blessing by marrying outside the Canaanite clans. He did not see the fullness of the plan which included maintaining the lineage through which Jesus would be born. He sought to please Isaac so he married a daughter of Ishmael not realizing that Ishmael was rejected by God and that this path to securing the blessing was a dead end.

Jacob, the would be wealthy man, traveled alone spending his nights not in a comfortable tent but in open country. The comforts of home and the cares of everyday life can be distractions. Jesus himself prepared for being tempted by Satan by fasting for 40 days and nights in the desert (Matt. 4:1-2). Sometimes a wilderness experience can facilitate an encounter with God. In the case of Jacob, it is likely that he did not have a personal relationship with God at this point in his life. Isaac was certainly a man of faith and he would have raised his sons with proper religious instruction but he could not enter into a relationship with God on Jacob’s behalf. Consider Jacob’s answer to Isaac in the preceding chapter when asked how he was able to bring a meal so quickly. Jacob said “The Lord ***your*** God gave me success”. Children can be raised in church, attend Sunday school, be involved in youth groups, even be baptized all without a personal relationship with Jesus. I have even heard of pastors being saved in the midst of a church service. For Jacob I believe this was a life altering salvation experience similar to what Saul experienced on the road to Damascus. Ray Pritchard wrote: “*God had never spoken to Jacob before. For all the years of his life, God had never 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.”* As he stopped to spend the night, God gave him the vision that is referred to as Jacob’s Ladder. Jacob saw angels going up and down the ladder with God at the top. Angels are constantly attending to God’s instructions. Matthew Henry wrote “*Angels are employed as ministering spirits, to serve all the purposes and designs of Providence, and the wisdom of God is at the upper end of the ladder, directing all the motions of second causes to the glory of the first Cause. The angels are active spirits, continually ascending and descending; they rest not, day nor night, from service, according to the posts assigned them. They ascend, to give account of what they have done, and to receive orders; and then descend, to execute the orders they have received.”* The ladder is Jesus himself (John 1:51). Jesus descended to dwell among man and he will ascend to take the church home with him at the appointed time.

In the vision God reaffirmed His covenant which He originally established with Abraham. Jacob had to have his own personal relationship with God for this to happen. He would inherit the blessing that God had given to Abraham then to Isaac to be passed on to future generations but he could not inherit their relationship with God. When Jacob awoke, he knew that he had been in God’s presence and used the stone pillow he slept on as altar. His reaction was one of fear (see Prov. 9:10). While the NIV says he referred to Bethel as awesome, the KJV says that he saw it as dreadful. We should not see this as meaning that to be in God’s presence is awful but we should approach it with reverence acknowledging God’s power.

The chapter ends with Jacob making a vow to God that reveals his immaturity in his relationship with God. The promises that ***if*** God will be with him and provide for him, ***then*** He would be Jacob’s God and would receive tithes. This shows that at this early stage in his walk with God that he saw faith in God as conditional (see Heb. 5:13). We are fortunate that God’s love for us in unconditional.