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## Waking Up

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Today we're going to take a look at a story that if you have grown up in the church is probably familiar to you from your childhood, the story of Jacob's dream from Genesis 28.

*Jacob left Beersheba and went to Haran. He came to a certain place and camped for the night since the sun had set. He took one of the stones there, set it under his head and lay down to sleep. And he dreamed: A stairway was set on the ground and it reached all the way to the sky; angels of God were going up and going down on it.*

*Then GOD was right before him, saying, "I am GOD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. I'm giving the ground on which you are sleeping to you and to your descendants. Your descendants will be as the dust of the Earth; they'll stretch from west to east and from north to south. All the families of the Earth will bless themselves in you and your descendants. Yes. I'll stay with you, I'll protect you wherever you go, and I'll bring you back to this very ground. I'll stick with you until I've done everything I promised you."*

*Jacob woke up from his sleep. He said, "GOD is in this place—truly. And I didn't even know it!" He was terrified. He whispered in awe, "Incredible. Wonderful. Holy. This is God's House. This is the Gate of Heaven."*

*Jacob was up first thing in the morning. He took the stone he had used for his pillow and stood it up as a memorial pillar and poured oil over it. He christened the place Bethel (God's House). The name of the town had been Luz until then.*

*Jacob vowed a vow: "If God stands by me and protects me on this journey on which I'm setting out, keeps me in food and clothing, and brings me back in one piece to my father's house, this GOD will be my God. This stone that I have set up as a memorial pillar will mark this as a place where God lives. And everything you give me, I'll return a tenth to you."<sup>1</sup>*

Each morning we open our eyes and awaken from sleep. Some of us pop out of bed with a "Good Morning, World!" while others groan, hit the snooze, and roll over hoping to get a few more minutes of sleep. For some the smell of breakfast or freshly brewed coffee makes it easier to get out of bed. For others, thoughts of what we expect from the day might make it easier or more difficult to get out of bed. For some of us waking up is a process, meaning that our eyes may be open, and we may be out of bed, but we aren't fully awake until we've had our coffee, or our shower, or our breakfast, or read the paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 28:10-22, [The Message](#)

There are a number of stories in the scriptures that talk about waking up. In Genesis 2, we have the first “wake-up.” God takes some earth and shapes it, forms it, and then breathes into it, and the Adam becomes a living being. He opens his eyes, and wakes up. It would be pretty cool to open your eyes for the very first time and be looking into the face of God. And then later in Genesis 2, Adam wakes up a second time and there’s a woman! Adam’s got to be thinking at this point, what’s going to happen the next time I wake up? But then Adam and Eve have some children and Adam there is no mention of Adam sleeping again . . . though its probably more accurate that between the kids and Adam’s snoring, Eve never sleeps again.

We have stories about people like Joseph, the father of Jesus, who God speaks to in dreams, and then Joseph wakes up and does what God has asked of him. We have dramatic wake-up stories in the gospels when Jesus raises a young girl and his friend Lazarus wake from the dead.

In Genesis 28, we find this story about Jacob and another “wake-up.” To set the stage for the story, part of the lineage and heritage of Jacob’s family was that his grandfather Abraham had been called by God to leave his home in Haran (northern Mesopotamia/modern day Iraq). God had promised to make Abraham a great nation, to bless him greatly, and to bless all nations through him. God had led Abraham to Canaan/Israel, and promised to give him and his descendants the land even though Abraham and his wife Sarah were old and childless. And in their old age, God had given Abraham and Sarah a son, Isaac, and the promises of God were passed down to him, and God affirmed his covenant promises with Isaac, just as he had with his father Abraham. Isaac and his wife Rebekah had two sons, twins named Esau and Jacob.

Jacob and his brother Esau had a difficult relationship. Even before their birth, their mother Rebekah could feel them struggling with one another in the womb. Esau was born first, but Jacob followed closely behind grasping his brother’s heel. Their conflict continued as they grew into adulthood as Esau and his skills in hunting and the outdoors made him his father Isaac’s favorite, while Jacob was his mother’s favorite.

One day, Esau came home from hunting extremely hungry, to find Jacob making some stew. When Esau asked for some stew, Jacob demanded Esau’s birthright, the extra share of inheritance that the eldest son received from his parents estate, in exchange for the stew. Out of his hunger, Esau consented.

Later after Jacob had tricked his brother out of his birthright, Jacob (at his mother’s urging) impersonated Esau and tricked his father Isaac into giving him the blessing his father had intended for Esau.

After this incident, Esau is so angry that he decides to kill his brother as soon as their father is dead. Hearing this, Rebekah convinces Isaac to send Jacob away under the pretense of sending him elsewhere to find a wife. So Jacob leaves home to go back to his mother's homeland to find a wife and escape his brother's anger.

So when we find Jacob in Genesis 28, he is alone, fearful, and running for his life as a consequence of his actions. To this point in Jacob's life, he has not exactly been what we would think of as a model citizen, he's been a con artist and a deceiver. We don't know what Jacob thought of God's promises to his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac, but at this point he is estranged from his family, and has no idea if he will ever be able to return home again.

And so running for his life to the safety of his mother's family, Jacob finds himself out in the middle of nowhere when night falls. And Jacob decides to settle down for the night and get some sleep. He finds a "comfortable" stone and lays it out to be his pillow and goes to sleep. He has this dream of a ladder or a staircase, stretching up from the earth on which he lay up into heaven, with angels and ascending and descending it.

In the world that Jacob lived, it was believed that there were passageways between realms by which gods could descend from heaven down to earth to be worshipped, normally at the site of a temple. And God stands beside the ladder and says to Jacob what he has promised to Abraham and Isaac before him: "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that 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."

There in this no-name, in-between place, God shows up and makes the same promises to Jacob that God had made to his father and grandfather. God reaches down to Jacob, and though Jacob is alone, God promises to be with him. Jacob is in danger and afraid, and God promises him protection, provision, and even blessing. Jacob is far from home, yet God promises him a homecoming.

Jacob wakes up. He exclaims "Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!" He becomes aware of the presence of God and experiences for himself the promise of God that had given to his family through his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac.

Jacob wakes up in awe and in fear. The text says that he gets up early in the morning, and takes the stone that had been his pillow, and pours oil on it. He calls the place "Beth-El" or

house of God, and vows that if God will do what he says and be with him, keep him safe, provide for him, and bring him back safely to his father's house in peace, then God shall be his God, the stone shall be God's house, and that he will give God a tenth of everything that he has.

As a result of his encounter with God, Jacob's eyes are opened, he wakes up and he begins to live in a new reality. In a sense, Jacob had been asleep, unaware of the presence of God, unengaged with the promises of God to his father and grandfather. But as a result of his encounter with God, Jacob wakes up. He becomes aware of the presence of God. He engages with the promises of God's presence, God's protection, provision, and blessing, and of a safe homecoming, and vows or covenants with God that if God will look out for him, that he will serve and honor God.

Jacob then leaves Bethel and continues safely on to his uncle's house in Haran. God is good to his promises, and Jacob becomes prosperous and marries (twice), has many children, and acquires great flocks and herds. After many years, he leaves Haran, reconciles with his brother Esau, and returns home safely. Then Jacob keeps his promise to God and tells his family and all his servants to put away all their other gods and prepare themselves to return to the site of Jacob's encounter with God at Bethel. And there Jacob encounters God again. God reaffirms his promises and Jacob pledges his full allegiance to God, just as he had promised that night many years before when he was on the road alone, fearful, and far from home.

It is easy to hear Jacob's story and have difficulty relating to it. Talk about birthrights and a father's blessing, and the fact this story is thousands of years old and from a different culture can cause us to reduce it to just another story. But Jacob's story isn't all that different from our own, is it? It may not be so hard to imagine the experience of the pain of strained relationships. It may not be so difficult to imagine feeling as though we had to rely on ourselves and make our own way, even if it was at the expense of others. It's not so difficult to imagine feeling alone or afraid. It's not difficult to think of times where we have wondered or feared what the future holds.

But whatever our experiences, wherever we find ourselves in life, and wherever we have been, and whatever we have done, God's promises to Jacob are the same for us, and God is just as faithful as He was to Jacob:

God promised to be with Jacob wherever he went, Jesus promises that he will be with his followers even to the end of the age.<sup>2</sup> We are never truly alone, God's presence goes with it when we are aware of it, and even when we are not. Sometimes it surprises us like it did Jacob, and we exclaim "The Lord is in this place and I did not know it." We may not have the same sort

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 28:20

of transcendent experience as Jacob does in his dream, but we can be confident that God never leaves us alone to fend for ourselves.

As God promised to protect, provide, and bless Jacob, the scriptures are full of the promises of God's provision and blessing to his people. The Psalmist writes that "the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."<sup>3</sup> Jesus promises that those who ask, receive, those who seek, find, and that the door is opened to those who knock.<sup>4</sup> and Paul writes of God's grace which is sufficient for our every need.<sup>5</sup>

As God promised to bring Jacob safely home, Jesus promises to make a home for us, and to take us to our eternal home when the time comes, that where he is, we will also be.<sup>6</sup>

And while God offers these promises to all, sometimes we live our lives in a spiritual slumber, unaffected by the experience of God and his promises. We may have heard about them or lived in them in the past, but we haven't really owned them for ourselves just as Jacob had learned of the promises of God to his father and grandfather, but hadn't lived in them or experienced them for ourselves. And just as God called to Jacob in the dream, and invited him to a new life and experience with God, God is calling each of us to become more awake to him and his promises, and to go forth living in them and in the hope and the blessings that they bring.

Depth and breadth of God's promises can mean that we keep waking up a little more.

Sometimes waking up is easy. The sun rises and hits our face and we open our eyes. Sometimes we hear the promises of God and we immediately resonate with them and seek to live in them.

But sometimes waking up is more difficult. It requires an alarm clock. A wake-up call from the front desk. Or even a bucket of water. Sometimes God has to be a little more dramatic to get our attention.

We may not encounter God in such a dramatic way as Jacob. While we may encounter God in our dreams, we may also encounter God as we experience the ocean, the night sky, or the sunset. We may encounter God in worship in a sanctuary, in a dramatic experience, in a conversation with a friend or family member, in the pages of a book, or a moment of stillness and silence. God is speaking and his promises to Jacob are the same as his promises to us.

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 23:1

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 7:7

<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:9

<sup>6</sup> John 14:1-4

That God will be with us, that God will provide everything that we need, and that God will bring us home to himself.

What do you need to wake up to today? What do you need a fresh assurance from God of? Maybe you need a fresh assurance of his presence . . . maybe you need a deeper understanding or appreciation of his love for you . . . of the goodness and sufficient nature of his grace . . . maybe you just need a sense of the peace and security of being home . . .