

JACOB'S DREAM

Genesis 28

We have three easy points of connection between this story and those which have preceded it, points which help us to review. And we must review regularly if we are to present the Bible as a continued story and not just as a number of separate stories. The three points are: first, Jacob's relation to Isaac and to Abraham; second, the place Haran; and third, the place Bethel.

Doctrinal Points

The Lord is always present with us and watching over us.

The Word is the connecting link between man and the Lord.

We find the basis of our faith in the truths of the letter of the Word.

Anointing with oil is the symbol of confirming truth by loving it.

Notes for Parents

This beautiful story is familiar to us all. We can picture the young man Jacob starting out on a long journey all by himself with no certainty as to where he would get food or how he would prosper, and also with the knowledge of the wrong he had done his brother and of his brother's anger. He could not have been in a very happy state of mind. We all have times when we are very much like Jacob. We too do wrong and carry burdens on our conscience, and we too often have to start out on new undertakings with very little assurance as to how things will turn out for us.

Have you ever thought how many stories there are in the Bible which concern sleep? Swedenborg tells us that the reason why we need so much sleep is that when we are asleep our minds are taken off the things of this world and of our own success and desires, and the Lord can draw closer to us and renew our souls. Our souls

need sleep even more than our bodies do. Little children need a great deal of sleep because it is in infancy and early childhood that the Lord stores up in them states of trust and innocence which will help them all their lives.

So Jacob had a wonderful dream which gave him hope and courage and led him to promise to serve the Lord all his life. Jacob's dream is a picture of something we may have in our own lives which will give us courage and strength to face all our problems and troubles if only we will take advantage of it. The Bible is our "Jacob's ladder." Its foot is on the earth; that is, it is written in terms of everyday life, which we can understand. But its top is in heaven, and the Lord is there at the top. The ascending angels are our thoughts going up to Him as we read it and the angels that are descending on it are His truths which He speaks to us through it.

Primary

Teach the children the three names in the series Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We can try also to teach them Haran and Bethel, which should be somewhat familiar from earlier stories. There will be no trouble in interesting them in the story of the dream, and they will probably be able to repeat it. Emphasize the fact that the Holy Land was the real home of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, so that Jacob hated to leave it and was looking forward to coming back.

It will also be a good thing to have them learn the names of the wives of Abraham and Isaac. Particularly connect Jacob's setting up of the stones after his dream with Abraham's building an altar at the same place. Tell them that *Bethel* means "house of God."

Isaac grew up to become a great man, as his father had been. His wife's name was Rebekah, and she was the granddaughter of Abraham's brother Nahor, who had settled in a place called Haran.

Isaac and Rebekah had twin sons, Jacob and Esau. You know that most twins look very much alike. But Jacob and Esau were very different in looks and also in character, and they didn't get along well together. So when they grew old enough, Isaac and Rebekah thought it would be a good thing to separate them for

a while.

They sent Jacob to Haran to visit his uncle Laban. They hoped, too, that he would find a wife there. Abraham and Isaac had both been told by the Lord that they and their family ought not to marry any of the women who lived about them in the land of Canaan, because these women worshiped idols instead of the Lord.

The journey to Haran was a long journey for young Jacob to take alone, and he was not very sure that he would be safe on the way and would be able to find enough to eat. And then, too, Jacob loved his own home and wanted most of all to be sure he would return to it.

What was one of the places where Jacob stopped for the night?

What did he use for a pillow?

What did he see in his dream?

What did the Lord tell him?

How did Jacob feel when he woke?

What did he call the place?

Bethel means “house of God.”

What did Jacob do with the stones he had used for his pillow?

Do you remember someone else who had built an altar at Bethel?

What did Jacob promise the Lord?

The dream gave him courage for the long journey, because it showed him that the Lord was near him all the time and watching over him. The Lord is near us all the time, too, watching over us and taking care of us.

And we, too, have a Jacob’s ladder which connects us with Him.

Do you know what it is?

It is the Word.

When we study the Word, our thoughts go up to the Lord and the Lord’s thoughts come down to us, just like the angels ascending and descending on the ladder.

Do you know that the word *angel* means “messenger”?

Junior

The meaning of the “ladder” can easily be taught to children of this age, and they will find it a new and striking way of thinking of the Bible. The

correspondence of stones and of oil can also be given. Have them locate Beer-sheba, Bethel, and Haran on a map. By now they should be able to recall the past events connected with Haran and Bethel. Be sure they know the meaning of the word “angel.” Have them look up the last book in the Old Testament and tell them the meaning of its name.

Isaac and Rebekah had twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Jacob was the one through whom the Hebrew nation was to be carried on; so Isaac sent him also to Haran to find a wife. He traveled all alone, and we find that when he started, he was not even sure that he would be able to find food and clothing.

How did the Lord encourage him?

Where was he when he had this wonderful dream?

Who had built an altar there a long time before?

What story have we had about something that happened at Bethel?

Bethel means “house of God.”

Why do you think Jacob named it that?

Can you tell the story of Jacob's dream? The Hebrew word translated “ladder” means a “way of steps.” Jacob was lying on the earth with his head on a stone.

Who was at the top of the ladder?

Who were going up and down on it?

The word translated “angel” means “messenger.”

Do you know that there really is a “way of steps” between us and the Lord? We are on the earth living every day, working and playing and going to school. And we think of the Lord as in heaven. But every time we read the Bible our thoughts go up toward the Lord and His thoughts come down to us. The Bible is our “Jacob's ladder.” Stones on which things are built represent truths. The stones at the foot of Jacob's ladder are the truths we learn in the Bible. Our thoughts are the “angels” or messengers going up, and the Lord's thoughts are the angels coming down.

How did Jacob feel about his dream?

What did he do to mark the place?

What did he pour on the stone?

The people of Jacob's time knew from tradition—that is, from

things which had been passed down from father to son for many centuries—that there was something holy about olive oil, and that to pour it on anything meant to make the thing holy. This was called “anointing.” People in the beginning knew that oil meant love and that all true love comes from the Lord. When we do anything for someone, if we put love into the doing, the Lord is in it through us, and the service is holy. We want to remember what anointing means and why, because we shall have many cases of it in our study of the Bible. Do you know the twenty-third Psalm? Look it up and read verse 5.

What did the Lord promise Jacob?

What did Jacob promise the Lord?

Both these promises were kept.

Intermediate

The spiritual meaning of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob should be taught at this point, as well as the general meaning of Jacob’s journey and the particular correspondences of the dream. Stress Jacob’s need of this encouragement, and our need of the Word to strengthen us for our daily living.

Isaac and Rebekah had twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Esau was the firstborn, but it was Jacob through whom Abraham’s line was to descend. Esau and Jacob were not identical twins, and they did not get along well together. Jacob had to be sent away to escape the anger of Esau, whom he had tricked. Jacob’s journey grew out of this incident, but it was also planned that he, like his father, should take a wife in Haran.

The journey was a long one for a young man to take alone, and there were no hotels along the way as there would be today. Jacob slept outdoors wherever he happened to be when night fell. From his words near the end of our chapter, we know that when he lay down to sleep at Bethel he was not feeling very confident about the future. But the dream showed him that the Lord was watching over him, and gave him new courage.

Bethel was one of the places where Abraham built an altar when

he first came into the land, and it was also the place where Abram and Lot decided to separate and from which they looked over the land so that Lot might choose the part he preferred. It is called Bethel throughout the Bible story, but apparently the name was actually given it first by Jacob. *Bethel* means “house of God.” The stones which Jacob took for his pillow picture truths, the foundation truths of the Word on which we may rest with confidence. And in the morning Jacob set up these stones for a pillar to mark the place where the Lord had encouraged him and given him a promise and where he also had made a promise to the Lord. Both these promises were kept.

The ladder is the most striking part of the story. The Hebrew word translated “ladder” means a “way”—the translators evidently assumed that a way from earth to heaven must be a ladder, especially since the angels were said to be ascending and descending on it. And the word translated “angel” means “messenger.” Can you think what is the “way” by which our angels or messengers go up to the Lord and His angels come down to us? It is the Word. The angels are our thoughts and the Lord’s thoughts. The foot of the way is on the earth. That is, the Word is written in human language and in terms of things we can understand. But the Lord is at the top. Jacob’s lying down to sleep on stones of the place is a picture of our trusting in what we have learned of the Lord even when we feel alone and afraid. But after his dream, Jacob set the same stones up for a pillar of remembrance and poured oil on them. When we really see how the Word connects us with the Lord, we go forward without fear and we love to think of the truth He has given us. Oil corresponds to love. The custom of “anointing” or pouring oil upon something to signify that it was holy had come down from the times of the Ancient Church, when men knew correspondences. We shall find many instances of it in the Word, and even in our own day it is a part of the ceremony carried out in the coronation of kings and queens.

In the dream the Lord made a promise to Jacob, and Jacob—after he woke and set up the pillar—made a solemn vow to the

Lord. This exchange of promises is a “covenant.” The Lord’s promise is made to all of us just as much as to Jacob, and if we make Jacob’s vow and keep it, the Lord will fulfill His promise to us as surely as He did to Jacob. Sometimes people wonder why the Lord should have prospered Jacob, who was obviously such a faulty person. But the story should encourage us very much, for it shows that if we study the Word and try to live according to its precepts, then we too—who are full of faults—can eventually reach our heavenly home, and that the Lord is always close to us trying to show us the true way.

Basic Correspondences

stone = truth

oil = love

Senior

The deeper meaning of Jacob in relation to Abraham and Isaac is especially useful for young people of this age, as well as the need of going back to Haran to renew our childlike good intentions, but with a view always to becoming more and more serviceable to the Lord—coming back to the Holy Land.

This is one of the most striking and best-loved stories in the Bible. The picture is so clear that it has inspired artists: Jacob lying on the ground with his head on the stone, the shining ladder or “way” stretching up to heaven, the bright forms of angels ascending and descending on it, and a suggestion of the Lord’s figure in the radiance at the top.

In the inner meaning the vision is still more beautiful. We know that stones represent truths. Truth is sometimes hard, yet we can always depend upon it. When we are in doubt or fear and are entering upon a new course which may bring us into difficulties and dangers, we can have confidence in the truths which we have learned from the Word, knowing that if we keep the Commandments with a desire to serve the Lord, we shall be given strength to meet whatever comes. In the series Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Abraham represents the time when we are very little children,

trusting wholly in our parents and knowing no law except obedience to them; Isaac represents the time when our reasoning faculty is developing and we are trying to decide what is right and wrong according to what we can learn from the Word with the help of our parents and teachers; and Jacob represents the time when we are beginning our independent lives, not perhaps entirely grown up yet, but no longer directly under our parents' control and guidance. So this journey of Jacob in its inner meaning comes very close to the experience of young people just leaving home for college or just beginning to earn their living. At this time we look forward eagerly to the future and yet we are a little anxious, a little fearful of our own powers, and in the back of our minds is the wish for assurance that someone is taking care of us still. We need Jacob's dream to encourage and sustain us.

What is our "way" from earth to heaven? It is the Word of God, which connects earth with heaven and man with God. Its foot is on the earth, the letter of the Word, written in human language about the earth and the people on it. At the top of the way is the Lord: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." What are the angels? We remember that the word "angel" means "messenger." Every time we open the Word with a sincere desire to learn of the Lord, our "angels" begin to come down to us. And it was during the dream that the Lord spoke to Jacob and promised him that he should return to his land in time and that the land would be his. As we read the Word, its promises speak to us clearly, telling us that if we are faithful heaven will be ours, whatever our experiences in life may be.

When Jacob woke in the morning, his first reaction was awe. He realized that the Lord was not far away and unheeding, but present with him and watching over him. He promised to serve the Lord, and he set up the hard stones on which he had been lying as a pillar of remembrance and a witness of the covenant between himself and the Lord. In the same way, when we have once had a vision of what is in the Word, the truths of the letter stand in our minds as assurances, proved by experience. And we,

like Jacob, “pour oil upon them”; that is, we love them and think of them as holy, and begin to yield willing service instead of obedience prompted by self-interest, in hope of reward or fear of punishment. Jacob’s promise to give the Lord a tenth of all he received represents acknowledgment that *all* we have is from the Lord and should be used in His service. This is the meaning of the “tithes,” which has played a prominent part in church finances even to this day.

We should learn to remember, whenever we seem to be alone and facing difficulties and perhaps dangers, that the Lord is really close to us, and that we can see Him if we go to His Word, lift our thoughts to Him, and try to learn what He has to say to us. Jesus, as He was about to leave His disciples, said: “Remember! I will be with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20)

Adult

After the general meaning of the story, possible points of special interest may be the reason for going to Haran for wives, the reason why Isaac himself was not allowed to go there while Jacob was, and the meaning of “angel.”

We recall that when Isaac grew up, Abraham sent his servant to Haran to find a wife from among his own kindred, and that the servant brought back Rebekah, the granddaughter of Abraham’s brother Nahor. Isaac and Rebekah had twin sons, Esau and Jacob. They represent the will and the understanding on the natural plane. Swedenborg says (AC 1893): “There are in every man an internal man, a rational man that is intermediate, and an external, which is properly called the natural man. With the Lord these were represented by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” The Abraham stage with us is our infancy, when the internal man is open to the heavens and is filled by the Lord with “remains”—innocent, trustful, happy states which can later be used in our regeneration. Then we develop into the rational, or Isaac, stage; and finally we are ready to carry out in everyday life the knowledges and affections which we have developed in the previous stages. The rest of our lives is spent, if

we regenerate, in bringing into order first this natural or external plane and then successively the rational and the internal plane. So, although Abraham and Isaac come first and in one sense are higher than Jacob, their descendants are called the seed of Jacob or the children of Israel (Israel being Jacob's later name) and their history occupies the rest of the Old Testament. Esau was the firstborn, and we readily recall the story of how Jacob cheated him first of his birthright and then of his blessing. Esau was the firstborn of the twins because Esau represents the will; Jacob, the understanding; and the will actually comes first. All power is from the will, even the power to think. But throughout most of our lives Jacob supplants Esau because we have to learn what is right before we can do it. It is only late in life that Esau begins to break off the yoke of his brother—that is, when by long practice in doing the truth we finally come to love what is good. Esau and his descendants (the Edomites) play only a small part in the Bible narrative. This is because that narrative is concerned with our life in this world, when for the most part we must be under the guidance of truth.

After Jacob had stolen Esau's blessing, Esau threatened to kill him, and his mother Rebekah persuaded Isaac to send him to Haran to find a wife from the family of her brother Laban. We recall that Haran was the place where Abraham and his family stopped for a time on their journey from Ur to Canaan, that Abraham's brother Nahor settled there, and that Abraham's father, Terah, died there. Terah represents the old, idolatrous state; and Haran, the first stage of our progress toward a really good life, before we have reached any real understanding of the truth. That is, Haran represents good and truth of a very external kind, or goodness in an obscure state. Yet this simple goodness is the beginning of all our spiritual progress, and we must constantly be going back and renewing in ourselves this fundamental desire to "be good." Abraham was told by the Lord on no account to allow Isaac himself to go back to Haran; yet Jacob was sent there and spent twenty years there. The reason for this is found in the differ-

ence in correspondence between Isaac and Jacob. Isaac represents the true rational, which must remain in the Holy Land of spiritual thinking and lift external and natural knowledges up to itself, as Rebekah was brought out of Haran to the Holy Land to Isaac. Jacob, on the other hand, represents the Lord's working on the natural plane of our lives; so he necessarily must spend a great deal of time in Haran and must unite himself to affections on that plane. We live on the natural plane of thought most of the time. In that plane we try to do right, to distinguish between right and wrong, to form good habits, and gradually to bring that plane up to the level set by the Lord's own example when He lived in the flesh. This is Jacob living in Haran, marrying there, having children, and accumulating flocks and herds—but always with the knowledge that eventually he was to take them all back with him to the Holy Land.

Jacob knew he was to come back to the Holy Land because the Lord told him so in the dream which is the subject of our lesson for today, and at the same time the Lord promised him that land for his inheritance. This dream was given him at Bethel. Bethel, the site of the second altar which Abraham built after he entered the Holy Land, pictures a heavenly state in which there is knowledge of celestial things. Jacob's tarrying here is a picture of spiritual preparation for daily life. It was toward evening—the end of the former state—and he took some of the stones of the place for his pillows and lay down to sleep; that is, he rested upon fundamental heavenly truths, and his consciousness of worldly things was for a time suspended. Then he saw the vision of the ladder or “way” reaching from earth to heaven, with the Lord at the top and the angels ascending and descending upon it; and the Lord spoke to him, promising him protection and favor.

Jacob's dream is always a beautiful and appealing picture, and it is all the more beautiful when we see its deeper meaning. What is the “way” which connects earth with heaven and the Lord? It is the Word. Its letter is made up of things of earth and is read and learned by us while we are upon this earth. But within and

above the letter are meanings, higher and higher—first about the history of man as a race, then about the development of each one's soul, then about the angels and their life—and highest of all about the Lord's own life and work. From the letter our thoughts can ascend gradually to some knowledge of the Lord Himself; and once we have gained this knowledge, the Lord's spirit and teaching can reach down to us and instruct us even in the little things of life on earth. Perhaps we recall that *angel* means “messenger.” In the Old Testament the same word is used of earthly and of heavenly messengers, and *Malachi*, the name of the last book of the Old Testament, means “my messenger.” The same is true of the Greek word used in the New Testament. Literally, John the Baptist sent “angels” to the Lord to ask if He really was the Messiah. Can we not see our thoughts—like messengers from our minds—climbing up by means of the Word to the Lord, and his thoughts—like messengers—coming down to us through it? We are at the bottom; the Lord is at the top. And if we listen to the Word, we can hear the voice of the Lord telling us that the Holy Land of heavenly life is meant for us, and that He is with us and will keep us wherever we go. But in order to have this vision, we must be in a state in which we rest on the foundation truths of our faith and put our concern for ourselves and the world to sleep.

Jacob needed this vision to keep him from becoming absorbed in the life of Haran. We need it to keep us mindful that heaven is our real home, and to keep us from becoming absorbed in the duties, cares, and pleasures of everyday life in the world. And when Jacob awoke, realizing that he had been granted a vision of the Lord, he set up the stone upon which he had rested as a pillar and poured oil upon it and vowed to serve the Lord and to give Him a tenth of all he should possess. This is a picture of what our reaction should be to the realization that the Word is our means of connection with the Lord. In our lives we should set up the simple, fundamental truths—the Commandments—as our testimony that we are to serve the Lord, and we should put love into the keeping of them, as Jacob poured oil on the pillar. And we should

promise to obey the Lord, to worship Him, and to make everything that we have holy, recognizing that it comes from Him, by using it as He would have us use it; this is pictured by the giving of tithes.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Doctrine of the Holy Scripture, n. 78: “It is through the Word that the Lord is present with a man and is conjoined with him, for the Lord is the Word, and as it were with the man in it. The Lord is also Divine truth itself, as likewise is the Word. From this it is evident that the Lord is present with a man and is at the same time conjoined with him, according to his understanding of the Word, for according to this the man has truth and the derivative faith, and also love and the derivative life. The Lord is indeed present with a man through the reading of the Word, but He is conjoined with him through the understanding of truth from the Word, and according thereto; and in proportion as the Lord has been conjoined with a man, in the same proportion the church is in him. The church is within man; the church that is outside of him is the church with a number of men who have the church within them. This is meant by the Lord’s words to the Pharisees who asked when the kingdom of God would come: ‘The kingdom of God is within you.’ (Luke 17:21) Here the ‘kingdom of God’ means the Lord, and from Him, the church.”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. Who were the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah? *Esau and Jacob*
- J. Why was Jacob sent away from home? *to find wife, flee brother*
- P. Where was he to go? *Haran*
- P. What was one of the places at which he stopped at night? *Bethel*
- J. Where have we heard of Bethel before? *Abram stories*
- P. What did Jacob use for a pillow? *stones*
- P. What did he see in his dream? *ladder*
- P. Who was at the top of the ladder? *the Lord*
- P. Who were going up and down? *angels*
- J. What does *angel* mean? *messenger*
- J. What did the Lord tell Jacob? *land to be his*
- J. What did Jacob do when he woke? *made pillar*
- J. Why was the place called Bethel? *see verses 16-19*

344

JACOB'S DREAM

- J. What did the dream do for Jacob? *encouraged him*
- J. What is our Jacob's ladder? *the Word*
- I. What are the angels ascending and descending upon it? *thoughts*
- I. What were the stones which Jacob took for his pillow? *foundation of truths*
- S. Why did he afterward set them up for a pillar? *exalt basic truths as rules of life*