

Genesis 28–33 — “Surely the Lord Is in This Place”

Come, Follow Me 2026 — March 9–15

Parallel Accounts: Hosea 12:3–4; John 1:51; 2 Nephi 3; Ether 12:27

Overview

Genesis 28–33 traces the most transformative arc in the life of Jacob — from a young man fleeing his brother’s fury to a patriarch renamed Israel who has wrestled with God and prevailed. These chapters are the spiritual heart of Genesis. They contain two of the most iconic scenes in all of scripture: Jacob’s ladder at Bethel, where heaven opens and the Abrahamic covenant is renewed, and Jacob’s midnight wrestle at Peniel, where he clings to a divine being and refuses to let go until he receives a blessing.

Between these two theophanies lies twenty years of hard labor, family complexity, and covenantal testing. Jacob serves Laban for fourteen years for Rachel and Leah, fathers twelve sons (the future tribes of Israel), and experiences both divine provision and human treachery. Through it all, the Lord repeatedly appears to Jacob — in dreams, through angels, and face to face — confirming that the covenant of Abraham runs through him.

David Butler (Don’t Miss This) frames Jacob’s entire journey with a circle diagram: sometimes Jacob is “inside the circle” — letting God lead — and sometimes he steps “outside the circle” — trying to claim God’s blessings his own way. The moments where the circle’s edge meets Jacob’s path are the “wrestle moments,” where God invites Jacob to do life *with* Him rather than alone. The genius of Jacob’s story is that he oscillates between these two modes again and again — just like us.

Kerry Muhlestein (The Scriptures Are Real, S5 E18) draws the critical distinction between being *born into* the covenant and *personally entering* it. Abraham had to personally enter (likely with Melchizedek). Isaac had to personally enter (Genesis 26). And now Jacob must personally enter — which happens at Bethel when he awakens from the ladder dream and makes his own covenantal response. “Temples are to us what Bethel was to Jacob — sacred spaces where we enter deeper covenants.”

Dr. Jeffrey R. Chadwick (Follow Him) calls Genesis 28 his favorite chapter in all of Genesis, noting that it is profoundly a “temple text” — Jacob having a temple experience in the wilderness. The Come Follow Me manual asks us to consider how God meets us in our most vulnerable moments — alone at night on a rocky hilltop, wrestling in the dark beside a river, walking toward the brother we’ve wronged. “Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not” (Genesis 28:16).

The OT Institute Manual (Religion 301) adds that while blood lineage is significant, “it can be overridden by one’s own faithfulness or lack of faithfulness. Repentance and faith in the Holy One of Israel is what

determines whether one is of the covenant" (2 Nephi 30:2). Jacob's story is the template: being born into a covenant family is the beginning, not the end.

Jordan Peterson (Biblical Series XIII–XIV) reads these same two theophanies psychologically — and lands on the same territory from the outside. Bethel: a *"morally ambivalent character"* who has so far done almost nothing right nonetheless receives the archetypal vision of the ladder — *"and that's the point... people are predisposed to terrible error, and yet"* the connection between heaven and earth opens to them anyway. Peniel: the nation of the covenant is named not for the comfortable but for *"those who contend with God"* — *"that's a hell of an idea."*

Key Concepts

1. *Sullam* (סֻלָּם) — Jacob's Ladder as Temple Text

The Hebrew word *sullam* appears only once in the entire Bible — here in Genesis 28:12. Its etymology likely connects to the root *s-l-l*, meaning "to cast up a mound" or "to raise up," and it is related to *m'sillah* (highway). In ancient Mesopotamian languages, the cognate *simmiltu* means "steps" or "stairway," suggesting not a ladder with two poles and rungs but a stairway, a stepped ramp, or even a ziggurat — a temple tower connecting earth to heaven.

Dr. Chadwick prefers the translation "stairway to heaven" and notes that Bethel is the very place where Abraham had built an altar between Bethel and Ai (Genesis 12:8; 13:3). Joseph Smith taught that the three principal rounds of Jacob's ladder correspond to the telestial, terrestrial, and celestial kingdoms (TPJS, p. 304–305).

Muhlestein (The Scriptures Are Real, S5 E18) connects this directly to Marion G. Romney's teaching: "Jacob realized that the covenants he made with the Lord there at Bethel were the rungs on the ladder that he himself would have to climb in order to obtain the promised blessings — blessings that would entitle him to enter heaven and associate with the Lord." The ladder is not just a vision — it's a covenant map. Each rung is an ordinance; climbing is progression through the covenant path.

2. *Bethel* (בֵּית-אֵל) — The House of God

Jacob names his place of revelation *Beth-El*, literally "House of God," combining *bayit* (house) and *El* (God). When Jacob awakes, he declares the place "the gate of heaven" (*sha'ar hashamayim*), language that directly echoes temple theology. Jacob sets up a stone pillar (*matsevah*) and anoints it with oil — acts that foreshadow temple consecration and anointing practices.

Butler (Don't Miss This) captures the transformation: "The stones of my mistakes have now become the stones of my worship." Jacob arrived at Bethel as a fugitive — fleeing the consequences of his deception. He lay down with rocks for pillows in physical deprivation. And yet God met him there.

Freeman adds: “God will meet you in the places you get yourself to — even through mistake, deceit, or wrongdoing.” Rock bottom became sacred space.

3. Born Into vs. Personally Entering the Covenant

Muhlestein (S5 E18) makes a critical distinction often missed: Genesis 28:20–22 is Jacob's *personal covenant response*. God extends the Abrahamic covenant to a sleeping Jacob in the dream (vv. 13–15). Jacob then awakens and extends covenant back: “If God will be with me... then shall the Lord be my God” (vv. 20–21). This awakening is the moment Jacob personally accepts what he was born into.

Halverson (Unshaken) reads Jacob's conditional language — “If God will be with me” — not as instant conversion but as honest, hesitant first steps: “You still see his personality under there. This conditional response becomes the beginning of Jacob's wrestle.” The vow includes a tithe promise and a commitment to build God's house — real spiritual growth, not theological perfection.

The OT Institute Manual reinforces this with Elder Bruce R. McConkie's teaching that the birthright is “the right to the presidency, or keys, of the priesthood” — not an automatic inheritance but a responsibility that must be personally claimed through righteousness (*Mormon Doctrine*, p. 87).

4. *Tom* (תָּם) — Jacob the “Whole” Man

Genesis 25:27 describes Jacob as a “plain man” (*ish tam*). But Muhlestein (S5 E17) reveals the real meaning: *tam* means “whole, complete, perfect” — the same word used for Noah (“just and perfect man”) and Abraham (“perfect man”). The Arabic cognate *tamm* means “everything whole and well.” Jacob as *tam* indicates he is a complete covenant man despite his supplanter nature. The contrast with Esau as a “cunning hunter” (pursuing worldly things in the field) is deliberate.

5. *Yisra'el* (יִשְׂרָאֵל) — One Who Prevails with God

Jacob's new name, *Yisra'el*, combines *sara* (שָׂרָה, to struggle, to wrestle, to prevail) and *El* (אֱלֹהִים, God). The transformation is from *Ya'akov* (he who grasps the heel / supplants) to *Yisra'el* (one who wrestles with God and prevails). Butler (Don't Miss This) frames it as the core shift of the entire narrative: from “I will figure this out myself” to “God, you prevail in my life.”

Butler adds a beautiful three-patriarch theological statement: when scripture says “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” it reveals God's complete identity: “God of Abraham” = God who **promises** and keeps them. “God of Isaac” = God who **provides** (ram in the thicket). “God of Jacob” = God of second and third and infinite chances who **prevails** in your life. Complete statement: “I am the God who promises, provides, and prevails.”

6. *Peniel* (פְּנִיֵּאל) — The Face of God

Jacob names the wrestling site *Peniel*, meaning “Face of God,” from *panim* (face) and *El* (God). His declaration, “I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved” (Genesis 32:30), echoes a theme throughout scripture: the overwhelming, life-altering experience of being in God's presence.

Remarkably, when Jacob later meets Esau, he tells his brother, “I have seen thy face, as though I had seen the face of God” (Genesis 33:10), drawing a profound connection between divine encounter and human reconciliation.

7. Mahanaim (מַחֲנַיִם) — Two Camps of Divine Protection

As Jacob prepares to face Esau, he encounters angels and names the place *Mahanaim*, meaning “two camps” or “double camp” (Genesis 32:1–2). The dual form suggests that Jacob’s earthly camp has a heavenly counterpart — God’s hosts walk alongside mortal travelers. The encounter with angels at Mahanaim bookends the angelic vision at Bethel, framing Jacob’s twenty-year journey with divine presence at both departure and return.

Verse-by-Verse Commentary

Genesis 28:1-5: Isaac Blesses Jacob and Sends Him to Laban

“And Isaac called Jacob, and blessed him, and charged him, and said unto him, Thou shalt not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan.” (Genesis 28:1)

Hebrew Deep Dive

The verb *tsavah* (צָוָה, “charged”) carries the weight of a solemn command. Isaac’s charge to Jacob is both a father’s farewell and a priesthood blessing. In verse 3, Isaac invokes *El Shaddai* (אֱלֹהֵי שַׁדַּי), “God Almighty,” a covenant name associated with the promises to Abraham (Genesis 17:1). The blessing explicitly transfers the “blessing of Abraham” (*birkat Avraham*) to Jacob and his seed.

Podcast Insights

Dr. Chadwick (Follow Him) emphasizes that Isaac knowingly and willingly reconfirms the Abrahamic covenant upon Jacob — not grudgingly or by accident. He gives the blessing “knowing full well that it’s Jacob” and confirms him as the covenant heir.

Halverson (Unshaken) identifies a generational course correction: “Abraham needed protection FROM the pagan world. Isaac grew up shielded. But Isaac recognizes his own limitations — ‘I don’t even know that world’ — and sends Jacob INTO the world with covenant standards.” Each generation calibrates the balance between “in the world” and “not of the world.”

The OT Institute Manual offers four considerations for why God honored the blessing despite its messy acquisition: (1) the record as we have it may be incomplete — Joseph Smith taught that “ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests” may have altered the text; (2) Rebekah knew by personal revelation that Jacob was the covenant son; (3) the patriarchs were great but not perfect in mortality; and (4) Isaac could have revoked the blessing but instead confirmed it: “Yea, and he shall be blessed” (Genesis 27:33).

Doctrinal Connections

- **Abraham 2:9–11** — The fullness of the Abrahamic covenant includes priesthood, posterity, and the promise that through Abraham’s seed all nations would be blessed.
- **D&C 132:37** — The Lord confirms that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have entered into their exaltation and sit upon thrones.

Come Follow Me Connection

The manual invites us to consider how each generation must choose to receive the covenant — it is not automatic. Isaac blesses Jacob, but Jacob must go, leave comfort behind, and build a covenant life.

Genesis 28:10–22: Jacob’s Ladder at Bethel

“And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.” (Genesis 28:12)

Hebrew Deep Dive

The verb *yachalom* (יָחַלֹם, “he dreamed”) comes from *chalam*, which carries the weight of prophetic vision. The word *sullam* (ladder/stairway) appears nowhere else in the Bible. The angels (*mal’akhei Elohim*, מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים) are literally “messengers of God.” Notice the angels are ascending *and then* descending — they go up first, implying they were already with Jacob on earth before ascending to heaven. God’s messengers are always among us, even before we recognize them.

Podcast Insights

Freeman (Don’t Miss This) isolates God’s “Five-Finger Promise” from Genesis 28:15 — the complete assurance God gives to Jacob upon the ladder: (1) I am with you, (2) I will keep you wherever you go, (3) I will protect you, (4) I will bring you back to this place, (5) I will not leave you until I have done everything I promised you. These become the foundation Jacob returns to throughout his twenty-year journey.

Muhlestein (S5 E18) frames the Bethel experience as the prototype for all temple worship: sacred covenant space, personal ordinances, oil anointing, angelic presence, and a covenant vow in response to divine promise. “Temples are to us what Bethel was to Jacob.”

Dr. Chadwick describes his personal experience teaching on the hilltop of Bethel in 1983 as a 27-year-old instructor at the BYU Jerusalem Center — a 500-foot pile of rocks northeast of Ramallah — where the Spirit opened the passage to him in a way he had never seen before.

The OT Institute Manual quotes the Lectures on Faith chain for developing the faith Jacob needed: (1) know that God exists, (2) have a correct idea of His character, (3) have actual knowledge that the

course of life you pursue is according to His will. “Without an acquaintance with these three important facts, the faith of every rational being must be imperfect and unproductive” (Lectures on Faith 3:2–5).

Gospel Talktrine (Mark Holt, S01E10) reads the ladder as *covenant itself*: the overarching Abrahamic covenant is the ladder, and “*each individual covenant are the rungs*” — circumcision (which the JST ties to baptism), priesthood, covenant marriage. And structurally, the ladder vision sits at the **chiastic center of the five patriarchal generations** (Abraham → Isaac → **Jacob** → Joseph → Ephraim), at the midpoint of Jacob’s own life — Hebrew narrative’s way of marking the central concept of the whole saga. His compass image complements Romney’s rungs: “*The airplane is not powered by the compass — but without pegging your course to those points, the most powerful engines in the world won’t get you where you want to go.*” (Full treatment in the **Genesis 24–27 guide**.)

Jordan Peterson (Biblical Series XIII) highlights what the vision says about *who* gets visions: Jacob at this point is a man fleeing the consequences of his own deceptions — “*it’s not exactly the world’s most heroic story.*” Yet the ladder — an archetype so old it appears across shamanic cultures worldwide — opens to *him*. Peterson’s conclusion: the God of the Old Testament is harshest on conscious, deliberate wrongdoing, but for the one who errs without yet knowing better, “*you always have the opportunity to return to the proper path.*” The ladder appearing to Jacob-the-supplanter is the Old Testament’s version of grace: the line of communication between the human psyche and the transcendent opens *before* the man deserves it — and transforms him afterward. “Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not” is the scoundrel’s astonished discovery that heaven was never closed to him.

Doctrinal Connections

- **John 1:51** — Jesus directly references this vision: “Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man,” identifying Himself as the true *sullam* connecting heaven and earth.
- **D&C 132:19–20** — The promise of eternal increase and exaltation echoes the covenant promises given to Jacob at Bethel.
- **1 Nephi 1:8** — Lehi’s vision of God on His throne surrounded by concourses of angels parallels Jacob’s vision.

Come Follow Me Connection

Jacob’s spontaneous reaction — setting up a pillar, anointing it with oil, making vows — models how to respond to sacred experience. He creates a physical memorial and makes personal commitments. Butler’s image stays: “The stones of my mistakes have now become the stones of my worship.”

Genesis 29:1–30: Jacob, Rachel, Leah, and Laban

“And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her.”
(Genesis 29:20)

Hebrew Deep Dive

The phrase “a few days” (*yamim achadim*, יָמִים אֶחָדִים) is striking — seven years of hard labor felt like nothing because of love. The Hebrew *ahavah* (אַהֲבָה, love) used here is the same deep, covenantal love word used of God’s love for Israel.

Laban’s deception of Jacob on the wedding night — substituting Leah for Rachel — creates a powerful ironic parallel: Jacob, who wore Esau’s garments to deceive his father, is now deceived in the darkness. Halverson (Unshaken) reads this as pedagogy, not punishment: “Jacob must experience what others experience from his own supplanting nature. Laban is a trickster mirror.”

Podcast Insights

Freeman (Don’t Miss This) traces Leah’s spiritual journey through her sons’ names — one of the most profound emotional arcs in Genesis: **Reuben** (“See, a son!”) — “Now my husband will love me.” **Simeon** (“Heard”) — “Maybe now he’ll hear me.” **Levi** (“Joined”) — “Maybe now he’ll join with me.” Then the breakthrough: **Judah** (“Praise the Lord”) — “Now I will praise the Lord.” Freeman: “Leah’s turning point is the moment she stops seeking happiness through her husband’s approval and finds identity in praising God.” The messianic significance is staggering: the Messiah will come through *Judah* — through the son born of Leah’s surrender, not Rachel’s desire.

Muhlestein (S5 E17) adds that Leah “learns first what Jacob learns through wrestling: surrender to God brings peace.” The trickster meets the trickster, and within the resulting family dysfunction, God produces the twelve tribes.

The OT Institute Manual notes that “the Negev responds to agricultural pursuits that harmonize with its arid character” — Isaac’s household was pastoral, not urban, and the marriages reflected the cultural context of clan alliances. It also clarifies that Jacob 2:27–30 in the Book of Mormon establishes that the Lord’s standard is monogamy, with plural marriage only when He commands it to “raise up seed.”

Doctrinal Connections

- **Genesis 29:17** — Leah’s “tender eyes” (*rakkot*, meaning soft or delicate) may indicate weak eyesight or simply gentle beauty. She becomes the mother of Judah (through whom Christ comes) and Levi (the priestly tribe).
- **Jacob 2:27–30** — The Lord’s standard is monogamy, with plural marriage only when He commands it.
- **D&C 132:34–37** — The Lord explains that the plural marriages of the patriarchs were authorized by Him.

Come Follow Me Connection

Family life in Genesis is messy, complicated, and painful. Leah feels unloved. Rachel is barren. Jacob is caught between two wives and a manipulative father-in-law. Yet God works through this imperfect family to build the twelve tribes of Israel. Freeman's two questions: "Where are you seeking your identity — in human approval or in praising God? What would your 'Judah moment' look like?"

Genesis 31:1-55: Jacob's Departure from Laban

“Return unto the land of thy fathers, and to thy kindred; and I will be with thee.” (Genesis 31:3)

Hebrew Deep Dive

God's promise *"v'ehyeh immakh"* ("and I will be with you") echoes the patriarchal assurance given at Bethel (28:15). The word *immakh* (with you) carries deep covenantal intimacy — not just proximity but active partnership.

Laban and Jacob's covenant at Mizpah introduces the famous "Mizpah benediction" — but in context, it is actually a watchword of mutual suspicion, not warm friendship. The Hebrew *Mitzpah* (מִצְפָּה) means "watchtower," and Laban says, "The Lord watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another" (Genesis 31:49) — essentially, "May God keep an eye on you when I can't."

Podcast Insights

Butler (Don't Miss This) corrects the common romantic reading of the Mizpah blessing: "People put this on jewelry... but it's actually a divine surveillance clause, not a Hallmark card. Both sides are saying: I don't fully trust you, but God can be the referee."

Rachel's theft of Laban's household gods (*teraphim*) is significant. Halverson (Unshaken) reads it as a symbol of unfinished spiritual journey — "wrestling with dual loyalty: household gods vs. Jehovah." Even in the family moving toward covenant, idolatry still lingers. Jacob later instructs his family to "put away the strange gods that are among you" (Genesis 35:2) — the necessary purification before returning to Bethel.

Doctrinal Connections

- **1 Nephi 2:2** — Like Jacob, Lehi receives a divine command to leave everything and take his family into the wilderness.
 - **Abraham 2:3–4** — Abraham also left his homeland at God's command to seek the promised land.
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Genesis 32:1-21: Mahanaim and Preparations to Meet Esau

“And when Jacob saw them, he said, *This is God’s host: and he called the name of that place Mahanaim.*”
(Genesis 32:2)

Hebrew Deep Dive

Machaneh Elohim (מַחֲנֵה אֱלֹהִים, “God’s host/camp”) uses military language — this is an army of angels. The dual form *Mahanaim* (“two camps”) may indicate that heaven’s army flanks Jacob’s earthly camp on both sides.

Jacob’s prayer in verses 9–12 is one of the most honest prayers in all of scripture. He acknowledges his unworthiness (*katonti*, קָטַנְתִּי, “I am too small/unworthy”), appeals to God’s covenant promises, and asks for deliverance. This is a model of covenant prayer — honest, humble, and anchored in God’s word.

Podcast Insights

Freeman (Don’t Miss This) highlights Jacob’s prayer as the first step in a three-part reconciliation sequence: (1) **Reconciliation with God** (32:9–12) — “I am not worthy of the least of all mercies and truth.” Looking back, Jacob sees only God’s mercy despite twenty difficult years. (2) **Wrestling with God** (32:24–30) — finalizing submission. (3) **Reconciliation with family** (33:1–11) — only after yielding to God can he approach Esau. The teaching: “Because I have experienced grace, now I can also give grace.”

Dr. Chadwick highlights that the scattering of Israel, foreshadowed in the covenant promises to Jacob (“thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south” — Genesis 28:14), was always God’s intent. The scattering was a “fortunate scattering” — designed to spread the covenant to all the earth.

Doctrinal Connections

- **2 Kings 6:16–17** — Elisha’s servant sees the mountain full of horses and chariots of fire, another “Mahanaim moment” where the invisible heavenly army is revealed.
- **D&C 84:88** — “I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up.”

Genesis 32:22–32: Jacob Wrestles at Peniel

“And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.” (Genesis 32:24)

Hebrew Deep Dive

The verb *vaye’avek* (וַיִּאְבֹּק, “wrestled”) is etymologically linked to *avak* (dust), evoking the image of two figures grappling so intensely that dust rises around them. The unnamed “man” (*ish*) is later understood to be a divine being — Hosea 12:3–4 says Jacob “had power with God” and “had power over the angel, and prevailed.”

The touching of Jacob's thigh (*kaf yereko*, כַּף יָרֵכוֹ, "hollow of his thigh") is significant. The hip socket was considered the seat of physical strength in the ancient world. The injury permanently marks Jacob — he limps forevermore. The name change is the climax: "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob (*Ya'akov*, 'he who grasps the heel/supplants') but Israel (*Yisra'el*, 'one who wrestles with God and prevails')."

The angel's question — "What is your name?" — forces Jacob to own his identity: "Jacob." The supplanter. The heel-grabber. Only by naming what he has been can he receive who he is becoming.

Podcast Insights

Butler (Don't Miss This) reads the wrestle as the climax of Jacob's circle journey: "This is the night Jacob finally stops circumventing and surrenders. The angel asks 'What is your name?' and for the first time Jacob says it out loud — *Jacob* — owning everything that name means. And God says: that's not who you are anymore."

Freeman identifies Jacob's desperate clinging — "I will not let you go until you bless me" — as the turning point from manipulation to earnest seeking: "This is not the same man who schemed for a blessing twenty years ago. This is a man who has been broken enough to know he can't get there on his own."

Muhlestein (S5 E17) emphasizes the sunrise imagery: "New day begins after the night of transformation. Dawn accompanies the blessing." The pattern for all of us: wrestle through the darkest hours, and hold on until the light comes.

Halverson (Unshaken) connects this to the permanent limp: "Jacob's injury is a badge of honor, not a punishment. He will never walk the same way again — and that's the point. Transformation leaves marks." The Israelites thereafter observe the custom of not eating the sinew of the thigh (Genesis 32:32) — the entire nation remembers that their ancestor was changed by God.

The OT Institute Manual quotes George Q. Cannon on why God tests us this way: "He required Abraham to submit to this trial because He intended to give him glory, exaltation and honor; He intended to make him a king and a priest, to share with Himself the glory, power and dominion which He exercised" (*Gospel Truth*, 1:113). The same applies to Jacob.

Jordan Peterson (Biblical Series XIV) finds in the name *Israel* what he calls one of the Bible's most astonishing ideas: the covenant people are defined as "*those who contend with God*" — not those who passively assent. "*If you have something to contend against, that strengthens you... that seems to be the proper relationship with God — the contending, the battling — rather than some sort of loose, weak statement of belief.*" He compares it to marriage: "*If you're lucky, the person that you marry is someone you contend with*" — the contending itself is what forges the bond. Three of Peterson's observations sharpen the reading:

- **Jacob wins — and that matters.** God *lets* Himself be prevailed against and rewards the striving with a blessing. Whatever "belief" meant in the ancient world, it looked more like Jacob's all-night grip than like intellectual assent.

- **The limp is the price of contact.** *“He gets blessed, he wins, but he doesn’t get away scot-free — that’s an indication of just how dangerous that contention actually is.”* Real encounters with the divine leave permanent marks — the same point Halverson makes about transformation.
- **The wrestle follows the reckoning.** The Peniel encounter comes only after Jacob has squared accounts with Laban and is en route to face the brother he wronged — *“the karmic debt is being paid.”* The divine confrontation is inseparable from the human one waiting across the river.

Doctrinal Connections

- **Enos 1:2–4** — Enos wrestles before God in prayer, his soul hungering, until he receives a remission of sins.
- **Alma 8:10** — Alma “wrestled with God in mighty prayer” for the people of Ammonihah.
- **Ether 12:27** — “If men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness... and my grace is sufficient.”
- **D&C 98:12–15** — “I will prove you in all things, whether you will abide in my covenant, even unto death.”
- **Moses 1:13–20** — Moses’ encounter with Satan, where he must repeatedly command Satan to depart before seeing God’s glory, parallels Jacob’s persistent wrestling.

Come Follow Me Connection

Jacob’s wrestle teaches us that receiving God’s blessings sometimes requires a fight — not against God, but *for* God. We cling to faith through dark nights. We refuse to let go even when injured. And we are transformed in the process. President Russell M. Nelson’s invitation to “let God prevail” finds its Old Testament archetype here: Israel is the name of one who lets God prevail by wrestling through, not giving up.

Genesis 33:1-20: The Reunion of Jacob and Esau

“And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept.” (Genesis 33:4)

Hebrew Deep Dive

The verb *vayishakehu* (וַיִּשָּׂקֵהוּ, “and he kissed him”) has unusual dots (*puncta extraordinaria*) above each letter in the Masoretic text — one of only a handful of such markings in the entire Hebrew Bible.

Ancient rabbis debated whether Esau’s kiss was sincere. The majority view holds that in this singular moment, Esau’s emotions were genuine. The weeping of both brothers (*vayivku*) suggests authentic reconciliation.

Jacob’s declaration to Esau — “I have seen thy face, as though I had seen the face of God” (Genesis 33:10) — deliberately echoes his Peniel experience. Having wrestled with God face to face, Jacob now sees God’s face in his estranged brother. This is perhaps the most powerful theological statement in the Jacob narrative: divine encounter and human reconciliation are inseparable.

The exchange of “I have enough” is remarkable: Esau says *yesh li rav* (“I have plenty”) and Jacob insists *yesh li khol* (“I have everything”). Both have arrived at sufficiency — but Jacob’s word choice (*khol*, “all/everything”) reflects a man who has found his wholeness in God, not in possessions.

Podcast Insights

Butler (Don’t Miss This) traces the reconciliation formula: Jacob bows seven times, Esau runs to meet him, they embrace, kiss, and weep. Then Butler makes the key observation: “Jacob previously stole a blessing; now he brings an offering. He went from taking to giving. Because he has experienced grace, now he can also give grace.”

Freeman draws the Christological parallel: “Esau *ran* to meet him — just like the father *ran* to meet the prodigal son (Luke 15:20). Both are stories of grace overcoming grievance.”

Muhlestein (S5 E17) highlights Esau’s possible change of heart beginning in Genesis 28:6–9, where Esau sees Isaac reconfirming the blessing to Jacob and takes a wife from Ishmael’s line (still Abrahamic): “This is a young man who realizes his loss and begins a change of heart — not a cynical attempt to regain favor.”

Dr. Chadwick shares the story of Joseph Smith and Orson Hyde’s reconciliation as a Latter-day parallel — relationships that seemed irreparably broken can be healed through humility, courage, and God’s grace.

Jordan Peterson (Biblical Series XIV) adds three sharp observations on the mechanics of this reconciliation:

- **The gift is the payment of the real debt.** Jacob’s droves of animals aren’t mere diplomacy — “*the gift that’s being offered is of sufficient magnitude to erase the debt of the loss of the birthright... it’s the payment of the real debt.*” Real reconciliation costs something proportional to the injury.
- **Honor the 5%.** Esau graciously refuses the gift; Jacob wisely insists; Esau wisely accepts. Peterson: even if Esau is 95% convinced that seeing his brother is enough, “*there’s probably 5% of him that’s still really not all that happy... that 5% that hasn’t been completely convinced will find its voice at some point and maybe undermine the whole reconciliation. You don’t want to think that you’re any nicer than you are.*” Accepting restitution protects the peace.
- **“As though I had seen the face of God.”** Jacob’s stunning statement to Esau (Genesis 33:10) — coming one chapter after *Peniel*, “the face of God” — is deliberate: Esau, the wronged brother with the *right* to stand in judgment, becomes for Jacob “*a representative of the divine element of justice... to be reconciled to you would simultaneously reconcile me with God.*” The two face-to-face encounters, *Peniel* and the reunion, are one event in two scenes.

Doctrinal Connections

- **Luke 15:20** — The father running to embrace the prodigal son mirrors Esau running to meet Jacob.

- **3 Nephi 12:23–24** — The Savior’s command to reconcile with your brother before making an offering directly echoes Jacob’s journey.
- **D&C 64:10** — “I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men.”
- **Mosiah 4:13** — King Benjamin teaches that we should not have a mind to injure one another but to live peaceably.

Come Follow Me Connection

Is there an “Esau” in your life — a relationship broken by hurt, misunderstanding, or old wounds? Jacob’s story teaches that reconciliation requires both divine encounter (wrestling with God) and human courage (walking toward the one you’ve wronged). Butler’s sequence holds: reconcile with God first, then with family.

The Structure of Genesis 28–33 — Literary Analysis

The Jacob cycle (Genesis 25–35) is widely recognized as one of the most carefully structured literary units in Genesis, built around a chiasmic pattern:

- A — Bethel: Vision of God, covenant promised (28:10–22)
- B — Arrival at Laban’s, marriage negotiations (29:1–30)
- C — Birth of Jacob’s children (29:31–30:24)
- D — Jacob prospers under Laban’s service (30:25–43)
- C’ — Departure, Laban pursues, covenant at Mizpah (31)
- B’ — Preparations to meet Esau, gift negotiations (32:1–21)
- A’ — Peniel: Wrestling with God, covenant transformation (32:22–32)
- Resolution: Reconciliation with Esau (33)

The center of the chiasm is Jacob’s economic prosperity — his material blessings — but the true transformation happens at the bookends: Bethel (where Jacob sees God above the stairway) and Peniel (where Jacob wrestles God *face to face*). The movement is from vision to encounter, from promise to fulfillment, from Jacob to Israel.

The narrative also features a deliberate irony of “measure for measure” (*middah k’neged middah*): Jacob deceived his father through disguise, and Laban deceives Jacob through a veiled bride. Jacob favored one wife over another, and his own sons will later favor one brother (Joseph) for destruction. The text teaches that actions have consequences — yet grace and transformation are always available.

Insights from Podcasts and Sources

Follow Him Podcast — Dr. Jeffrey R. Chadwick

Dr. Chadwick, BYU Jerusalem Center Professor of Archaeology and Near Eastern Studies, brings archaeological expertise and personal experience at the biblical sites. Key takeaways:

- Genesis 28 is his favorite chapter — a “temple text” representing Jacob having a temple experience
- He has personally taken students to the rocky hilltop of Bethel northeast of Ramallah
- The Abrahamic covenant was always meant to be inclusive, not exclusive
- The scattering of Israel was a “fortunate scattering” — God’s method of spreading the covenant to all nations
- Isaac knowingly confirmed the blessing on Jacob — Rebekah was a woman of revelation
- The Joseph Smith–Orson Hyde reconciliation parallels Jacob and Esau

Unshaken (Jared Halverson)

Halverson brings generational analysis and moral nuance. Full transcript. Key frameworks:

- **Generational Course Corrections:** Abraham needed protection FROM the pagan world; Isaac sends Jacob INTO the world with covenant standards. Each generation calibrates between “in the world” and “not of the world.”
- **Jacob’s Conditional Faith:** The “If God will be with me” vow is honest hesitation, not instant conversion. The beginning of the wrestle.
- **Laban as Trickster Mirror:** Jacob’s deceptive nature reflected back — pedagogy, not punishment. He must experience what others experience from his supplanting nature.
- **Rachel’s Idols:** Symbol of unfinished spiritual journey — even the covenant family carries lingering idolatry.
- **The Permanent Limp:** A badge of honor, not a punishment. Transformation leaves marks.
- **Law of Increasing Returns:** Quick rewards peter out; covenant investment produces exponentially increasing blessings over time.

Don’t Miss This (Emily Belle Freeman & David Butler)

Freeman and Butler focus on the emotional and relational arc. Full transcript. Key insights:

- **The Circle Diagram:** Inside = God leads; outside = Jacob leads; on the line = wrestle moments. Jacob oscillates between these modes — just like us.
- **The Five-Finger Promise** (Genesis 28:15): God’s complete assurance — I am with you, I’ll keep you, protect you, bring you back, and not leave you.
- **“Stones of mistakes → stones of worship”:** Bethel transforms rock bottom into sacred space.
- **Leah’s Son Names as Spiritual Journey:** Reuben (see me) → Simeon (hear me) → Levi (join me) → Judah (praise God). The shift from seeking human approval to praising God.
- **Three Patriarchs = God’s Complete Identity:** Abraham = promises, Isaac = provides, Jacob = prevails. “I am the God who promises, provides, and prevails.”
- **Reconciliation Formula:** Reconcile with God first (prayer + wrestle), then with family. “Because I have experienced grace, now I can also give grace.”

- **Mizpah as Surveillance, Not Sentiment:** “People put this on jewelry... but it’s a divine surveillance clause, not a Hallmark card.”

The Scriptures Are Real (Kerry Muhlestein — S5 E17 & E18)

Muhlestein brings Egyptological expertise and covenant theology. S5 E17 transcript and S5 E18 transcript. Key insights:

- **Born Into vs. Personally Entering:** Being born into the covenant ≠ personally entering it. Genesis 28:20–22 is the moment Jacob personally accepts.
- **Tom/Tamim Analysis:** Jacob as “plain man” actually means “whole, complete, perfect” — same word used for Noah and Abraham.
- **Rungs on the Ladder = Ordinances:** Marion G. Romney’s teaching: the covenants are the rungs Jacob must climb. “Temples are to us what Bethel was to Jacob.”
- **The Pressure Cooker Continues:** “Every one of us lives in an Old Testament world” — messy, complex, multifaceted. The covenant unfolds in this mess.
- **Jacob’s Trickster Archetype** (with guest Robbie Taggart): Cross-cultural trickster figure who eventually becomes culture hero. His deceptive nature doesn’t disappear; it gets redeemed and redirected.
- **Family Covenant at Bethel (ch. 35):** Jacob brings entire family back, instructs them to “put away strange gods,” and they all enter covenant together — possibly explaining the timing before Rachel’s death.

OT Institute Manual (Religion 301, Chapter 7)

The CES manual provides foundational doctrinal context. Key insights:

- **Covenant people are about faithfulness, not bloodlines:** “Repentance and faith in the Holy One of Israel is what determines whether one is of the covenant” (2 Nephi 30:2).
- **Lectures on Faith chain:** Three kinds of knowledge necessary for faith — God exists, His character is correct, the course of life pursued is according to His will.
- **George Q. Cannon on testing:** “He required Abraham to submit to this trial because He intended to give him glory, exaltation and honor; He intended to make him a king and a priest.”
- **“Gathered to his people”** presupposes faith in personal continuance after death — the patriarchs understood the spirit world.
- **Birthright = right to presidency/keys of priesthood** (McConkie) — spiritual inheritance earned through righteousness, not merely claimed by birth order.

Jordan Peterson — Biblical Series XIII (Jacob’s Ladder) & XIV (Jacob Wrestling with God)

Lecture XIII transcript · Lecture XIV transcript

Peterson’s psychological reading of the Jacob cycle, woven into the commentary above:

- **The scoundrel's vision** (XIII): the ladder — an archetype found across shamanic cultures — opens to a *"morally ambivalent character"* fleeing his own deceptions. God's readiness to receive the unconscious sinner who hasn't yet learned: *"You always have the opportunity to return to the proper path."*
- **Israel = those who contend with God** (XIV): belief in the ancient world looked like Jacob's all-night grip, not intellectual assent. Contending strengthens; marriage itself is a wrestling match.
- **The limp**: divine contact is dangerous and leaves permanent marks.
- **Reconciliation mechanics** (XIV): the gift as payment of the real debt of the birthright; honoring the unforgiving 5%; Esau's face as the face of God — human reconciliation and divine reconciliation as one event.

Additional Sources

- **Jeffrey Bradshaw** — "Faith, Hope, and Charity: The Three Principal Rounds of the Ladder of Heavenly Ascent" (Interpreter Foundation)
 - **Jamie J. Huston** — "The Integration of Temples and Families: A Latter-day Saint Structure for the Jacob Cycle" (Interpreter Foundation)
 - **Andrew C. Skinner** — "Jacob in the Presence of God" (BYU RSC)
 - **Gospel Lessons YouTube** — "Jacob's Ladder and the Abrahamic Covenant"
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Personal Application & Discussion Questions

1. **The unexpected sacred space.** Jacob said, "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not." Butler adds: "God will meet you in the places you get yourself to — even through mistake." When have you felt the Lord's presence in an unexpected place?
2. **Born into vs. personally entering.** Muhlestein teaches that being born into the covenant is not the same as personally accepting it. What was your "Bethel moment" — when the covenant stopped being your parents' and became yours?
3. **Wrestling through the night.** Jacob wrestled until dawn and refused to let go. Freeman: "This is not the same man who schemed for a blessing twenty years ago." What are you currently wrestling with in prayer, and how can Jacob's persistence encourage you?
4. **The limp that remains.** After Peniel, Jacob walked with a permanent limp. Halverson: "Transformation leaves marks." How have your most transformative spiritual experiences left you changed?
5. **Leah's Judah moment.** Freeman traces Leah's shift from seeking her husband's approval (Reuben, Simeon, Levi) to praising God (Judah). Where are you seeking your identity — in human approval or in God?
6. **Seeing God's face in others.** Jacob saw God's face in Esau's face. Who in your life might you see differently if you looked for the divine image in them — especially those with whom you have conflict?

7. **Reconcile with God first.** Butler's sequence: reconcile with God (prayer + wrestle), then with family. "Because I have experienced grace, now I can also give grace." What step might you take this week?
 8. **The Circle.** Butler's framework: inside = God leads, outside = I lead. Where on the circle are you right now? What would it take to step back inside?
 9. **The God who promises, provides, and prevails.** Butler's three-patriarch statement. Which aspect of God's character do you most need to remember right now — that He promises, that He provides, or that He prevails?
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Key Quotes

President Russell M. Nelson: "Are you willing to let God prevail in your life? Are you willing to let God be the most important influence in your life?" (*General Conference*, October 2020)

Marion G. Romney: "Jacob realized that the covenants he made with the Lord there were the rungs on the ladder that he himself would have to climb in order to obtain the promised blessings — blessings that would entitle him to enter heaven and associate with the Lord." (*Temples — The Gates to Heaven*, Ensign, 1971)

"The stones of my mistakes have now become the stones of my worship." — **David Butler**, Don't Miss This

"God will meet you in the places you get yourself to — even through mistake, deceit, or wrongdoing." — **Emily Belle Freeman**, Don't Miss This

"This is not the same man who schemed for a blessing twenty years ago. This is a man who has been broken enough to know he can't get there on his own." — **Emily Belle Freeman**, Don't Miss This

"Because I have experienced grace, now I can also give grace." — **David Butler**, Don't Miss This

"Temples are to us what Bethel was to Jacob." — **Kerry Muhlestein**, *The Scriptures Are Real*

George Q. Cannon: "He required Abraham to submit to this trial because He intended to give him glory, exaltation and honor; He intended to make him a king and a priest." (*Gospel Truth*, 1:113) — OT Institute Manual

Joseph Smith: "Paul ascended into the third heavens, and he could understand the three principal rounds of Jacob's ladder — the telestial, the terrestrial, and the celestial glories or kingdoms." (TPJS, p. 304–305)

Dr. Jeffrey R. Chadwick (Follow Him): "If you had asked me, what are the chapters of the Old Testament I would most like to talk about, it's exactly these. Genesis 28 is my favorite chapter in all of Genesis."

"If you have something to contend against, that strengthens you... that seems to be the proper relationship with God — the contending, the battling — rather than some sort of loose, weak statement of belief." — **Jordan Peterson**, Biblical Series XIV

"He gets blessed, he wins, but he doesn't get away scot-free — that's an indication of just how dangerous that contention actually is." — **Jordan Peterson** on Jacob's limp, Biblical Series XIV

"The whole kingdom of the chosen people is composed of those who contend with God. That's a hell of an idea." — **Jordan Peterson**, Biblical Series XIV

Links to Existing Notes in This Vault

- Genesis 24–27: The Covenant Is Renewed
 - Abraham
 - Jacobs the patriarch
 - Jacob's Ladder and the Abrahamic Covenant (YouTube)
 - Anointing
 - Atonement
 - Forgiveness
 - Holy of Holies
 - Jesus the Christ
 - 12 oxen in temple
 - Goel HaDam - Jesus Christ as Redeemer of Blood
 - Temple Symbols: A New Name
 - Temple Symbols: Anointing
 - Temple Symbols: Significant Temple Connections
 - Temple Covenants: The Law of Consecration
 - New Name
 - The Temple Book
 - Understanding the Symbols, Covenants, and Ordinances of the Temple
 - With Uplifted Hands
 - Unshaken — Genesis 28–36
 - Don't Miss This — Genesis 28–33
 - The Scriptures Are Real — S5 E17
 - The Scriptures Are Real — S5 E18
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Source Links & Further Reading

Podcasts

- Follow Him Podcast — Episode 10: Genesis 28–33 with Dr. Jeffrey R. Chadwick [↗](#)
- Unshaken — Genesis 28–36: Jacob’s Ladder [↗](#) — Jared Halverson on generational corrections, trickster mirrors, the permanent limp
- Don’t Miss This — Genesis 28–33 [↗](#) — Freeman & Butler on the circle diagram, five-finger promise, Leah’s journey, reconciliation formula
- The Scriptures Are Real — S5 E17 [↗](#) — Kerry Muhlestein on Jacob prevailing, trickster archetype
- The Scriptures Are Real — S5 E18 [↗](#) — Kerry Muhlestein on Jacob’s ladder, endowment, and the house of the Lord
- Gospel Lessons — Jacob’s Ladder and the Abrahamic Covenant [↗](#)

Church Resources

- Come, Follow Me Manual: Old Testament 2026 [↗](#)
- Genesis 28 (KJV) [↗](#)
- Genesis 32 (KJV) [↗](#)
- OT Institute Manual — Chapter 7: The Covenant Line Continues with Isaac and Jacob [↗](#)
- Marion G. Romney — Temples: The Gates to Heaven [↗](#)
- Russell M. Nelson — Let God Prevail (October 2020) [↗](#)
- Jeffrey R. Holland — The Ministry of Reconciliation (October 2018) [↗](#)

Scholarly

- Jeffrey Bradshaw — “Faith, Hope, and Charity: The Three Principal Rounds of the Ladder of Heavenly Ascent” (Interpreter Foundation) [↗](#)
- Jamie J. Huston — “The Integration of Temples and Families” (Interpreter Foundation) [↗](#)
- Andrew C. Skinner — “Jacob in the Presence of God” (BYU RSC) [↗](#)
- Jared T. Parker — “Cutting Covenants” (BYU RSC) [↗](#)

Next Chapter

→ Genesis 37–41: Joseph and the Coat of Many Colors
