

# Growing in God's Love

A Story Bible Curriculum

## Hopes and Dreams





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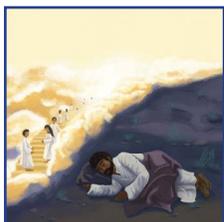
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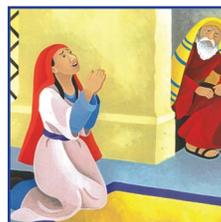
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First edition

Published by Westminster John Knox Press  
Louisville, Kentucky

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Printed in the United States of America

**Goal:** To explore promises God makes to God's people through Jacob's dream.

### Connecting with the Biblical Text

Jacob is on the run, trying to escape the threats of his brother, Esau. With the help of his mother, Rebekah, Jacob tricks his father, Isaac, and receives the blessing that should have gone to his slightly older brother. Tired from his travels, Jacob stops to sleep for the night and has a vivid dream. In his dream, he sees a staircase or ramp on which God's messengers are moving up and down. They are not speaking to him, but God is.

As you read this text in your Bible, take note of the eight promises God made to Jacob. When Jacob woke up, he realized God had spoken to him, giving him promises that had been given to Abraham. What do you think God's promises meant to Jacob? Jacob also realized that this ordinary place was now sacred because of God's presence. He took the stone he had used as a pillow, poured oil on it to bless it, and named this sacred place "Bethel," which means "house of God." In response to God's promises, Jacob also made a promise to God, holding God accountable to what God had said.

For additional background reading, look at this text and notes on it in *The CEB Study Bible*. For two commentary articles from Working Preacher, go to [bit.ly/GLGenesis28](http://bit.ly/GLGenesis28) and [bit.ly/GLJacobDream](http://bit.ly/GLJacobDream).

### Connecting with the World

- *Sacred Places* by Jane Yolen (Harcourt Children's Books, 1996) describes sacred places all over the world, such as Mayan temples and the wailing wall in Jerusalem.
- A cairn is a way to mark a special place with a stack or mound of small stones, similar to the stone altar Jacob built. Invite a child or children in your life to pick up stones when hiking or

walking and then leave them somewhere special to remember a person or an important event in their life.

- In her commentary on this text for Working Preacher, Juliana Claassens suggests listening to U2's song "Yahweh," which is about how the ordinary can be transformed into something special.

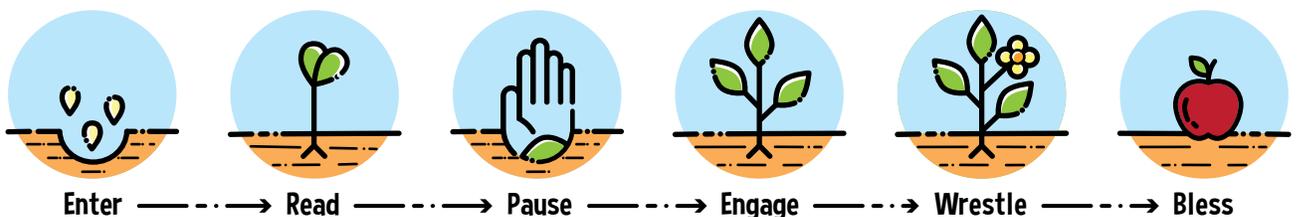
### Connecting with the Spiritual Lives of Children

God came to Jacob in a dream. This dream was so real that when Jacob woke up, he made a promise to God in response to God's promises to him. The children you are with may have dreams they want to talk about. When we listen to children's experiences, we are nurturing their lives of faith. This story also invites a conversation about what it means to make a promise and to break a promise. Jacob both makes and breaks promises in his life. Help children to know that God also promises to be near to them. Invite them to name something that they promise with all their heart.

### Connecting with the Spiritual Lives of Adults

Jacob made Bethel a sacred place. In doing so, he reminds us that God is not confined to a particular place. Where are the sacred places in your life, the places where you feel God's presence around you? Do you have a favorite park in which you walk? Is the local coffee shop a place that offers you sacred space? Or do you meet God in a garden? Be aware of the places in your life that nurture your own spiritual life. Visit them as often as you can!

*God, you surround me with your loving presence. Open my eyes to places where you are at work in this world and to places that need my promise of presence. Amen.*



## Gathering Supplies

Based on your choices, you will need:

- ✓ *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible*
- ✓ Floor pillows, cushions, or beanbag chairs
- ✓ Battery-operated candle
- ✓ Newsprint, marker
- ✓ Resource Page 1
- ✓ Copies of Resource Page 2
- ✓ Small poster with a heart drawn on it
- ✓ Construction paper torn into pieces (about 2" each)
- ✓ *I Promise* by LeBron James (HarperCollins, 2020)

## Preparing to Lead

Read Genesis 28:10–22 in your Bible. Engage the following questions as you read:

- ✓ If you are familiar with this text, how so? Was it a part of your Sunday school lessons or children's worship, or is this a text familiar to you as an adult?
- ✓ How does this text speak to you right now?

Read "Dreams and Promises" from *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible* (p. 88). Imagine hearing this story for the first time as a child. Be prepared for some of the children's questions that may arise in your time together.

- ✓ Why was Esau so mad at Jacob?
- ✓ Where is God in this story?
- ✓ What did God's promises mean to Jacob?
- ✓ What promises does God make to us now?
- ✓ What promises do we make to God?

As you prepare to teach, remember the names and faces of the children you will encounter. What do you know about them and their life situations? Pray for them, that they may feel safe, loved, and ready to learn in your group. Prepare the heart poster and construction paper pieces for the "Wrestle" activity.

As children gather, invite volunteers to make a comfortable seating area with items such as floor pillows, cushions, or beanbag chairs in a circle.



## Enter into sacred space together.

As you gather, invite the children to share their name and the best part of their weekend so far. This invites the children to get comfortable with sharing in the space and helps make sure each of the children (and teachers!) know one another's names.

Turn on your candle as a way to mark this time and space as special, set apart, important, and holy. Remind the children that God is with us everywhere and that lighting a candle is a way to remember God is here with us right now.

Lead the children in the following prayer, inviting the children to repeat each line after you:

Holy God, /  
you are with us everywhere we go. /  
Even when we can't see you, /  
help us to remember /  
we are never alone. /  
Amen.



## Read a story of God's people.

Ask the children how many of them have ever been camping. Brainstorm together all the things that you need to bring if you are going on a weekend camping trip. Wonder what it would be like to go camping if you forgot everything on your list! You would have no sleeping bag, no tent, and no way to make a fire.

- ✓ How would your body feel?
- ✓ How would your mind feel?

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If the children in your group don't have experience camping, frame this question as what you would need in order to spend a night outside comfortably—a tent, blankets, something to start a fire, a favorite stuffed animal or blanket, and so forth.

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## Leading

Share with the children that today's story is a continuation of the story of Jacob. Ask the children what they know about his story. Invite a volunteer to record this knowledge on a sheet of newsprint.

Quickly summarize the story of Jacob and Esau, as noted in the "Connecting with the Biblical Text" section on page 9.

Read the story "Dreams and Promises" in *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible* (p. 88). With the children's help, fill in any additional pieces of information from this story about Jacob that you can add to the newsprint.



### Pause to let God's Word enter into hearts and minds.

Invite the children to close their eyes and picture the story in their minds. Encourage them to wonder about why this is an important story in the Bible.



### Engage curiosity and imagination with God's story.

Invite the children to reflect on the list of things they know about Jacob's life. Emphasize that lots of people are curious about what their dreams mean. Have a discussion using the following prompts:

- Why do you think Jacob saw messengers of God walking up and down a staircase?
- Where was God when God talked to Jacob?
- What kind of promises did God make to Jacob?
- What kind of promises did Jacob make to God?
- Why do you think God gave Jacob this dream in particular?

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Resist the urge to categorize Jacob as good or bad. His complexities might be the richest part of this story!

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#### ○ Drawing Jacob's Dream

- Explain to the children that some biblical scholars believe that the story refers to a different kind of ladder than the ladders we use to change light bulbs or hang Christmas lights. Instead, the ladder might have looked like a Mesopotamian ziggurat, as seen on Resource Page 1. Show

the children the picture and share with them that people in ancient Mesopotamia built these ziggurats to be able to connect heaven and earth.

- Encourage the children to wonder what Jacob's dream might have looked like if they could have seen it themselves. Invite them to wonder about what angels or God's messengers might look like too.
- Distribute copies of Resource Page 2, and invite the children to draw their ideas about what Jacob's dream looked like.
- Remind the children that nobody really knows what the dream looked like to Jacob, so there are no right or wrong answers!
- If time allows, invite the children to share their pictures with the group.



### Wrestle with our place in God's story.

Point out for the children that in this part of Jacob's story, we learn that God stood next to Jacob. God wasn't far away in heaven speaking to Jacob from the clouds. Instead, God was *right beside* Jacob, even though Jacob was far away from home in a strange place. Even there, God made promises to Jacob about where he would live, how his family would spread across the earth, and, most importantly, how God would always be with Jacob. God promises to always be with us too.

#### ○ Promises for God's People

- Explore stories in which God makes promises to God's people. When God makes a promise, we can trust it will come true, such as in the stories below!
  - Read Noah's story, "When the World Started Over Again," in *Growing in God's Love: A Story Bible* (p. 24). What promises does God make to God's people in this story?
  - Read Jesus' commissioning of his disciples in Matthew 28:16–20. Explain that this is what Jesus said just before he went to be with God in heaven. What promise does Jesus make to his disciples? How does this promise relate to us?

## Leading

- ✦ Share with the children that these promises are important to remember. Wonder together about what other promises God has made to us and how it feels to remember these promises.
- ✦ Create a visual reminder of God's promises with the heart poster and pieces of construction paper. Invite the children to write one of God's promises they find especially meaningful to them on one of the pieces of torn construction paper. Work together to glue the promises onto the heart, adding pieces of paper and promises to the heart until it is full of construction paper.
- ✦ Thank God for the ways God's promises fill our hearts and never leave us.



### Bless one another with God's grace.

Return to your circle in the gathering space, bringing your newly created poster with you. Share together all the promises that God makes to us. Emphasize that God loves us and promises to be with us always. When you have finished, close with the following prayer or one of your choosing:

Dear God, /  
we thank you /  
for all the promises you make to us. /  
We know they are all part /  
of your big, big love for us. /  
Thank you for loving us. /  
Amen. /



### Grow with more.

- *I Promise*
  - ✦ Read the book *I Promise* by LeBron James or show the YouTube video “I Promise—Storytime with LeBron and Nina” ([bit.ly/GLIPromise](https://bit.ly/GLIPromise), 4:04). Although this book is not about promises made by God, it details the impact that promises can have on one's actions. It highlights promises children can actually make that can have an impact on themselves and others.
  - ✦ Invite the children to join in conversation using the following questions:
    - What kind of promises do the adults in your life make to you?
    - What kind of promises can you make about how you will act and things you can do?
    - How can these promises show that you love God?
  - ✦ If you have additional time, invite the children to write a letter to God, making promises to God like Jacob did. These promises can be about different ways they can show that they love God and God's creation. Encourage the children to take these letters home with them and remember their promises throughout the week.

## A Mesopotamian Ziggurat





