

# Setting Out on an Epic Journey with God

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Preacher: Joe Hall

[ 0 : 0 0 ] A few years ago now, me and some friends walked the West Highland Way. It goes from just north of Glasgow up to Fort William. It's about 96 miles. We take about five days to do it.

Foolish in retrospect. But it was pretty eventful on the way. Only two of us actually made it start to finish. One guy hurt his knees. One guy couldn't sleep.

And one guy just decided he'd had enough and went home. Although two of them actually came back for a comeback at the end and the final leg. Along the way, a mouse ate a hole in one of the bags and got into the peanut M&Ms.;

A couple of days, we got soaked to the skin. And for reasons I won't go into, the two of us who finished crossed the line wearing each other's boots. It was an epic journey.

Now, you don't do a journey like that with just anyone, do you? We knew each other pretty well. We trusted each other. But you also don't do a journey like that without getting to know each other a whole lot better.

[ 1 : 1 0 ] Our friendship grew. Our trust deepened. And now we have a history, memories to look back on, that say something about who we are and about our relationships.

This morning, we're opening up Genesis 28. And we find Jacob setting out on his own epic journey. Last time in Genesis, we saw how his brother Esau vowed to kill him when Jacob stole his brother's blessing.

And so, mom, Rebecca, kind of twisted dad Isaac's arm and got him to send Jacob away to his uncle to get him out of harm's way.

So, verse 10, Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. What none of them know yet is that Jacob's journey won't be measured in days or even years, but in decades.

In fact, mommy's boy Jacob will never see his mother alive again. It will be an epic journey. And he is totally on his own.

[ 2 : 1 7 ] Or is he? His first night away from home, he stays somewhere so far from civilization that it doesn't even have a name, just a certain place. But soon he will discover that, in fact, the Lord is in this place.

God says to Jacob, I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go and bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I've done what I've promised you.

Jacob's relationship with God will grow. His trust will deepen on the way over the next seven chapters or so. But you don't set out on a journey like that without knowing who you're going with, do you?

That's true for us, too. You might not be a walker. You might not have ever done anything like a big trek or a big climb. But we're all worshipers. And we can't set out on this journey with God without getting to know him first.

Whoever you are on that journey, whatever point you are on that journey today, but especially if you're at the beginning, perhaps this is one of your first or the first time you've been in church, we need to know who God is in order to know how to walk with him.

[ 3 : 3 7 ] There are three big questions that hang over that journey of faith for us and that follow us through these next seven chapters of Genesis. So let's open them up together with Jacob.

Firstly, our biggest question and therefore our longest point. Who is this God? Who is this God? We find Jacob not in a good place, do we?

He's in the middle of nowhere. The sun's gone down and he's got a rock for his bed. And remember, this is Jacob who, as Genesis puts it subtly, lived in tents.

Right? He likes his creature comforts. Now he is way out of his comfort zone. But as he slept, he had a dream in which God personally comes and speaks to him.

Now that is strange to us. God doesn't normally reveal himself to us in that way, but it wouldn't be the first time in Genesis. Back in chapter 15, Abraham, his granddad, had a similar dream. [ 4 : 35 ] When the sun had set, darkness had fallen, and the Lord came and made promises to him. So the dream isn't the weird bit here. In fact, one of Jacob's sons, Joseph, is going to be the dreamer.

Right? So we shouldn't get too fixated on how God comes to Jacob. What should stick out is the content of the dream. That God comes and what he says.

Who is this God? There are really two important things for us to see about God here. Both of them begin with an R. The first is that this is a God who reveals himself.

Jacob did not go looking for God. He's not on a spiritual pilgrimage. There's nothing special about the place that he's in. He's running for his life. We're not told he said his prayers by his rock before he went to bed.

And yet that night, he had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth with its top reaching to heaven. And angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

[ 5 : 43 ] There above it stood the Lord. Or it says in the footnote there, even in verse 13, another translation could be, There beside him stood the Lord.

Scholars are not sure, but the point is clear. Either God reaches down to him from his throne in heaven, or he has come down himself to meet with and speak to Jacob.

Jacob gets to see the spiritual reality that's normally hidden from us, that there is bustling traffic coming and going between earth and heaven, that angels come and go like planes coming down from the sky and taking back off into the clouds.

In Jacob's dream, they're doing that on a kind of stairway or ladder. Again, it's not clear. But like the dream, we've heard of something like this before in Genesis, haven't we?

Remember a tower with its top reaching up to heaven. Remember this, the tower of Babel. The difference is that that time it was people who said, Come, let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens so that we may make a name for ourselves.

[ 7 : 03 ] People tried to get up to God to take a share of his glory, to get a name for themselves. How did that go? God put it to an end. The Lord scattered them all over the earth, and they stopped building the city.

Now that same God makes a tower himself that reaches down from heaven to earth. It's a little glimpse, isn't it, of what we celebrate at Christmas.

An angel comes to a poor young woman. A confused new dad has a dream. And in the night, a baby is born who is Emmanuel, God with us.

While humanity is busy trying to find a way to God, God quietly came down to us. How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given.

So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven. We can't get ourselves up to him, but he brings himself down to us.

[ 8 : 19 ] Friends, that's still how we get to know God. The world is so busy trying to find some ultimate meaning, significance, and truth, something to live for. And you might have come today to church trying to find God.

But God is not hiding. He's not waiting for you to find him. He has come and revealed himself fully in his son, Jesus Christ.

Like the stairway in the dream, Jesus connects earth and heaven because he is God in the flesh, God with us. Jesus said that himself. We would see angels descending and ascending on not a stairway, but on him.

The God of the Bible reveals himself to us through his son. Which leads on to the second really important thing about God here, our second R, which is that this God is all about relationship.

Relationship. Just look how he introduces himself there in verse 13. Look, I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham, and the God of Isaac. Now, if you ever had someone come up to you at a party, maybe after church, and say, you don't know me, but I know your mom and dad.

[ 9 : 34 ] You ever had that? But I think this is what's happening here. Someone that you wouldn't have picked out of a crowd, a total stranger, comes up to you, and suddenly they're a close family friend.

One of you pointed out rightly last time, Jacob does not yet know God personally for himself. Back in chapter 27, when Jacob's pretending to be his brother, and his dad asks him how he manages to

find meat so quickly, he lies, and he says, the Lord your God gave me success. Now, that's a really telling lie, isn't it? Not only does he use God's name to back up his lie, which shows no respect for God, but he calls him your God, not my God, right? He's dad's God, but he's not properly his own God. And the Lord confirms that. Now, he calls himself the God of your father, Abraham, and of Isaac. It's only when Genesis ends that God will introduce himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Yet it's clear that the Lord is a God of relationship. He wants to know Jacob because of his relationships with his dad and granddad. There is a history there. [10:52] It's as if he comes and says, I've been through a lot with your family. He wants his faithfulness to his dad and his granddad to form his opinion of him. He wants to be known for his relationships.

Think for a minute how else he might have introduced himself to Jacob. He could have said, couldn't he, I am the Lord who made heaven and earth the creator. Or I am the Lord who rules over the nations as king.

Or I am the Lord who judges sin as the judge of all the earth. He's all those things. But he chooses to introduce himself here in a different way.

He wants to be known above all as the faithful God of his people. Remember how I chose to love Abraham and I chose to love Isaac even when they didn't love me.

Remember how I kept my promises to Abraham and I kept my promises to Isaac even when they broke faith with me. I am the Lord, the God, of your father Abraham and of Isaac.

[12:00] The God of the Bible puts relationships first. And now he's holding out that same relationship to Jacob.

He's giving him the same promises, showing him the same love as he's shown his family in the past. So what will Jacob do? Well, his first reaction is not that inspiring.

When he wakes up, he's more awestruck about the place than the person, isn't he? See that?

That's right. Imagine seeing God come and hearing him speak to you and saying the Lord is in his place and then saying, verse 17, how awesome is this place.

Sorry, Jacob, but this God is not the God of places. He's the God of people. In fact, if you'd listen carefully, he's just promised you that he will be with you wherever you go.

The house of God and the gate of heaven are not in a certain place like the pagan gods, but in a person, a relationship. His son, Jesus, through him, God chooses to reach out with relationship to people.

[13:13] The question is, will you take hold of that relationship? Perhaps God has always seemed to you a bit like a distant uncle, uninterested in you, kind of there, but not a part of your life.

You bump into him at weddings and at funerals, sometimes on a Sunday, but you're not in contact with him. Or you come to church to see him, but he's not someone who's going to go home with you or go to work with you or school.

Friends, if that's what we think, we've got God so wrong. God is like a dad who you've cut off contact with.

The Bible tells us that God is a God who is constantly reaching out, wanting a relationship with us personally to be in contact and communication. What would he do to have that relationship again?

Then, the Bible tells us he even gave up his own son on the cross to die so that we could come to him as his children and so that he could hear us call him our father.

[14:26] He is more than the God of the past or the God only of a certain place. He is the God of his people right now and his people, those who have a personal relationship with him through Jesus.

In Christ, God is not just mom and dad's friend or granny and granddad's friend. He is my friend now because he's come and he's reached out to me in his faithful love and with his promises and he invites me to put my heart in his hands and set out on a journey with him through life into eternity.

And I've done that and I'm walking with him. If you can say that yourself, if you can own those words today, that is what makes you a Christian.

It isn't more complicated than that. It's a personal relationship with God through Jesus. That's it. If you can't say that yet, there's nothing stopping you today from setting out with him and getting to know him personally as your God and Father.

If this is all brand new, you're not quite sure about it, that's okay. It takes Jacob another seven chapters to get to that point. But now, now you know who you have to go on the journey with. [15:52] Start getting to know him because he is the God who reveals himself and he is the God of relationships. And that's the biggest question for us, our longest point.

But a big way that Jacob will get to know God, a big way for us too, is by learning to trust in his promises. This is the next question that hangs over this section. Our second point, will he keep his promises?

Now, if you've been with us in our series through Genesis so far, these promises will be familiar, but that's really the point. God makes the same promises now to Jacob as he has to Abraham and to Isaac.

Just look down at these verses with me, verse 13. Let's remind ourselves. He said, I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac.

I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south.

[16:58] All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go and I will bring you back to this land.

I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. So far we know that Jacob's inherited the blessing from Isaac, but we've not yet heard God confirm those promises to him.

Now he does that in full. He gets the promise of a place, verse 13, the promise of a people, verse 14, and the promise of God's presence, verse 15.

And sandwiched in the middle the promise that through his family all peoples on earth will be blessed. That is, people from all over the world would be put back into a right relationship with God through one of Jacob's distant descendants, even Jesus.

Now not that Jacob has earned those promises by being clever enough or devious enough or special enough. God is giving him these promises by his grace.

[18:08] But will God keep his promises to Jacob? Now given that Jacob's never met God personally before, he's not yet convinced. Right?

His dream is a lot more special than this, but imagine if you walked out onto the street after our service and somebody bumped into you who promised you the whole earth and a worldwide family and protection wherever you went.

You would not immediately sign your life over to them, would you? God is not just anyone. He deserves our trust. But like Jacob, we are slow to learn to trust him.

Look what Jacob does in verse 20. Then Jacob made a vow saying, if God will be with me and will watch over me on the journey I'm taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so I return safely to my father's household, then the Lord will be my God and this stone I've set up as a pillar will be God's house and of all that you give me, I will give you a tenth.

See that? He says, he will worship and live for the Lord if God keeps his promises. Now I wonder what's your gut reaction to that? If you're a Christian, possibly it's to want to correct Jacob's theology, right?

[19:28] You should not put God to the test. Who do you think you are? Get down off your pedestal and bow at his feet. He's made you promises. It's not for you to rate his performance way up whether or not he deserves your trust and worship.

There might be some of that here. It is wrong to put God on probation. But I think there is also something right about Jacob's response. God wants to be trusted on his record.

He comes and says, look how I've dealt with Abraham and with Isaac. He's never let his people down. We sit here today and we trust the Lord because he keeps his promises, right?

That is a good reason to trust the Lord, isn't it? Christianity is not blind faith or a leap in the dark. It's treading confidently on the path laid by God's work in the past.

We sit here and we trust God today, don't we, because of his faithfulness to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Because of his faithfulness at the cross and at the empty tomb.

[20:37] We look back at his record and we see his faithfulness and we put our trust in him. Jacob is doing the same thing, but where we can look back in faith, he has to look forward in faith.

He's saying he is willing to rely on God's presence, protection, and provision as he sets out on his journey with him. And if God is as good as his word, then he will be Jacob's God and he'll worship

him and live for him.

Now, there's no risk in that in a sense because if God isn't as good as his word, then he's simply not God. And if he is as good as his word, then he is God and so he should be our God.

Now, as we go on in the Christian life, through the years, through the highs and lows, we learn that God is always faithful. Jacob is at the start of that journey, but he's willing to let God show him.

I think this is a great example of a beginner's faith in God. To say to God today, I'm open to you proving yourself in my life.

[ 21 : 49 ] I want to set out with you today and see you at work. Right? There's a risk that along the way we misinterpret the evidence.

That's why it's important we also walk with more experienced Christians too. But that's a great starting place. isn't it? To say, if God's got my back and he's going with me, there's nowhere that I won't follow.

If you're not sure today which side of the line you fall, or maybe you're right in the kind of starting blocks of the Christian life, let me say, you can set out with God this morning knowing that he will never leave you and never let you down.

He promises that. Start walking with him and let him prove it to you. Let him show you his faithfulness and as he does, rest more and more of your trust and confidence in him.

Let him tell you how to live, where to go, how to worship him, what to do with your money, who to marry, where to work. Because if he's as good as his word, then you can trust him fully with your life.

[ 22 : 59 ] Maybe you're really struggling this morning to see how God's keeping his word for you. Sometimes it can be hard to see, can't it? Just be careful as you go to hold God to his own word and not your standards.

You sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that God has failed because he hasn't done what we wanted him to do or thought that he would do when in fact he's done no more and no less than what he said he would do.

It's just not what we were hoping for. When things are really hard we need to be in the habit, don't we, of working out the difference between what we might be praying for on the one hand and what God has promised on the other.

Hold God to his own word as Jacob does and you will come to the conclusion that Jacob comes to you which is that he is worthy of your whole life because he is faithful even when that is hard to see. If you're not sure about that it's a question that we'll come back to repeatedly in our series. Happy to talk more about that with you so don't think that that's the last word on it. But for now the final question as we set out is this how can we walk with him?

[ 24 : 19 ] How can we walk with him? We've seen on our way through haven't we that while we won't necessarily have dreams like Jacob we do have something better to go on than he had because we know that what Jacob saw in his dream was only a shadow of Jesus.

Jesus said very truly I tell ye bank on this you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the son of man which is how he spoke about himself which means that everything we've seen here leads to the Lord Jesus it's in Jesus that God reveals himself supremely it's in Jesus that God reaches out to us with relationship it's in Jesus that God keeps his promises to us and all those things come together supremely at the cross when Jesus died and rose again understand God was keeping his word to Abraham Isaac and Jacob he revealed himself by putting his wisdom love and justice on full display as his own son took the punishment for the sins of his family so that we could be forgiven he reached out to us with a new right relationship at the cross by paying that unpayable debt serving our sentence so that we could be right with him again and because

Jesus died and rose again God's family which started out as just a handful in the desert is today as many as the dust of the earth and exists north, south, east and west across the globe in Jesus he is with us to the end of the age he watches over us wherever we go and he will not leave us or forsake us and in Jesus he will bring us back to a promised land a world made right again a new creation where he will be our God and we will be his people which means that we can walk with God today by putting our trust in Jesus and following him and walking with him day by day is a lot simpler than Jacob's journey you'll be pleased to hear you don't have to go on a spiritual retreat to the desert or set up special rocks or visit holy places you only have to let him lead you day to day through life live for him honour him with the decisions that you make thank him for his good gifts worship him with

his family as we are today

Jacob gives us one example of that at the end he says whatever the Lord gives him he will give back a tenth as we walk with Jesus we show our gratitude to him and let him lead us in what we do with our money how we use our homes what we do in our work how we live in our families we bow to him in those areas of our lives because he's given us our money our homes our work our families so wherever you are on that journey with the Lord today you can take the next step with the Lord Jesus this week full of confidence in him whether that's your first step or your last step or whether you're in the heights or in the depths because the Lord Jesus is God and he is faithful to his promises and he is with us to the very very end let's commit ourselves to him as we pray together let's pray to him you you you you you you you