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**PRESENCE**

November Devotional

**Broken**

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# Week 1

This Year we will be exploring the Presence Of God. Where is it? What is it? And why is it important to us? Follow along as we take a deep dive in to God's Presence!

Throughout, the Devotional, click on the words in **RED** to explore



## Did you know...?

### THE TREE OF LIFE

The lead tree in this story is undoubtedly the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That's the tree everyone remembers. But there was a second symbolic tree in the garden of Eden: the tree of life.

The tree of life was a popular motif in the literature of Israel's neighbours. The famous [Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh](#) involves a hunt for a magic plant that bestows youth and perpetual vitality, and ancient Egyptian literature refers to a sycamore that's considered life-giving. Archaeologists have even discovered old depictions of such a tree, like this potsherd fragment found in the borderlands between Egypt and Israel. It dates to the ninth century B.C. and is one of our earliest depictions of the tree of life.

The tree of life is a strategic prop in the biblical story. It's hardly mentioned, but its presence is significant. First, the tree of life is referenced as standing in the centre of the Garden of Eden. Then, at the very end of the biblical narrative, it's mentioned again in John's vision of the renewed creation: "On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." (Revelation 22:2 NASB)

It's important to note that Genesis 3 does not suggest the tree of life has magical powers to bestow life independently. The Bible is very clear that God is the giver of life. In the garden, the tree of life symbolizes the reality that being in close proximity to God's presence is life itself. To live near the author and source of all life is to live forever. To get that point across, the author of Genesis adapted a symbol familiar to his Israelite readers.

The tree of life also gets a nod in Proverbs 3:18, 11:30, 13:12, and 15:4, where wisdom is described as a life-giving tree that restores divine blessing.

# Focus Verses

Read Genesis 3:21. Consider the significance of the first death recorded in the Bible. God takes a life to spare and supply humans of warmth and clothing.

Imagine how Adam and Eve felt having an animal they may have taken care of be sacrificed for them.

## 1. Genesis 3:21

Read the verses after Genesis 3:21, what was the presence of God doing for humanity?

Now place yourself in God's position, how would you have handled this situation? Was the presence of God performing an act of mercy or cruelty?

## 1. Genesis 3

Listen to this explanation of Genesis 3 . Do the big 3 roots of temptation, “Good to eat, nice to look at and makes me wise” still happen today when we are tempted?

- Can you spot the subtlety by which the enemy tempts?

Now read Luke 4, and compare how Jesus succeeded where Adam and Eve failed.

## 1. Luke 4





# Group Discussion

Part of being in community is being free to share your feelings and opinions without fear of being judged. This is why we have group discussion time, your opinion and feelings matter

- 1. Share about a time in your life when you sacrificed something important.**
- 2. Was that decision easy or difficult? Explain.**
- 3. Share about a time when you experienced the benefits of someone else's sacrifice. What came of that decision?**
- 4. Do you think God was cruel for killing animals to clothe humans instead of killing Adam and Eve?**
- 5. How have you seen the theme of God's sacrifice evident in your life or in the world today?**

# Sacrifice

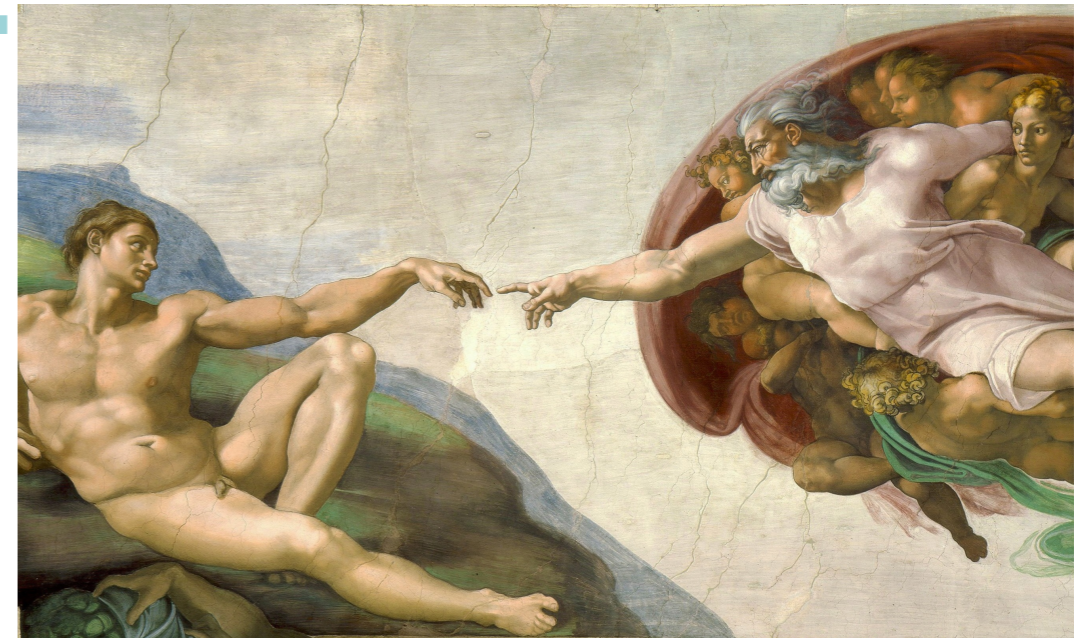
## God pays the price

The day we humans broke the overlapping connection between heaven and earth, was the day we broke God's heart. All He ever wanted was for us to trust and love Him enough to willingly let Him direct human development according to His will. To love Him so much we were willing to learn how to choose and define good or evil with His direction. Humanity is not capable of wielding the authority to rule over nature without God. We can see that by the way our planet is polluted, over used and fraught with war, disease and poverty.

The immediate result of disobeying God's command and eating from the fruit was not god-like wisdom, or intelligence as the serpent had promised. It was shame. Adam and Eve were perhaps the only humans to ever experience what it truly feels to be cut off from God's presence while alive. They were bare. Exposed. Even the coverings they made from leaves were not enough to cover shame. Humans broke God's heart and for that they felt unbearable shame.

Yet God had mercy. You must understand that God had no reason to let us live. We broke the rule, and we were doomed to die. Yet loves us too much. Instead of pouring His anger on the two humans, He used a substitute. He took two animals and made clothes for humans from their skins. Thus, the first sacrifice was made by God. The lives of those animals bought a temporary reprieve from the death penalty. Sin had entered the garden.

People miss this tiny, seemingly unimportant verse in Genesis where God made clothes out of the very animals humans were tasked with caring for. Here we see that the presence of God was active in setting up a system by which the Law kept and the penalty was paid. It all had to do with Love. The Love that God embodies. God was the one that created a clean space first. He started the system that would cause Heaven and Earth to overlap and eventually become one.



**Learn about Genesis. This painting on the Sistine chapel by Michelangelo is famous. Not only for its beauty but due to the question it raises: are God and man reaching for each other or has man withdrawing from God's hand? What do you think?**

Sin cannot exist in God's presence. If anything that carries sin were to walk into God's presence it will be eradicated immediately. God would not bend the rules on this, because that would make Him an unjust judge. Instead, He set a plan into motion by the killing of those animals, that one day the penalty for sin would be paid like this: "A Human, one without sin, must willingly choose to pay the penalty of death by being a substitute for the sacrifice required and taking all of humanity's sin, just like those animals sacrificed in Genesis 3, give up his life willingly, raise himself back to life and cure humanity's shame forever."

Until the time came for that Human to enter creation, God would institute the rite of animal sacrifice as a way to create a "clean space" where He and humans could meet. And then He waited and watched until out of the descendants of Noah's son Shem a man named Abram was born. This man would be famous for his faith and called "God's friend" and to his family the "sinless human" would be born. God set His plan into motion to fulfill His greatest plan, to restore what was broken and rejoin His Presence to ours.

# Week 2



## Did you know...?

### Babel = Babylon, Confusing!

Our English Bibles translate the name of the city and tower in Genesis 11 as “Babel.” This is the Hebrew word *babel* that occurs 262 times in the Old Testament, and every other time its translated “Babylon.” So why do all modern English translations render this word as “Babel” in Genesis 11? It’s because of a clever Hebrew wordplay that’s hard to reproduce in English.

We know that when the Babylonians got too cocky, God chose to confuse their language. The Hebrew word for “confuse” is *balal*, which sounds like “Babel.” Here’s the key line with its Hebrew transliteration to get the point across: “Therefore the city’s name was called *babel* because there the Lord *balal* the language of the land.” (Genesis 11:9) Our English versions translate *babel* as “Babel” to honour the wordplay, but in so doing they obscure an even more important connection: This story is about the genesis of Babylon, the most infamous “bad guy” in the Old Testament.

After Babylon grew into an empire, it came to represent the worst of humanity’s pride and rebellion. The Israelite prophets railed against the kings of Babylon, accusing them of having delusions of grandeur. The empire is later responsible for the Israelites’ exile and was described as a larger-than-life enemy. The legacy of Babylon even lived on after the empire collapsed in 539 B.C. Much later, in the New Testament, Peter called Rome “Babylon” in a letter to churches experiencing persecution from the Romans. And in the final book of the Bible, the Revelation, all the nations unified against God are called “Babylon.” The story in Genesis 11 shows how pride was at the centre of Babylon’s roots. After the story of the great split between God’s domain and our domain, Genesis flies through human history. By Genesis 11, the population in ancient Mesopotamia had swelled into a civilization. At this point in the narrative, humans had recently innovated the mass production of bricks, which means they could build cities faster, stronger and taller than ever before.

Between fertile fields and new technology, humans got used to abundance pretty quickly. This led to a culture marked by arrogance—the same arrogance that prompted Adam and Eve to declare independence from God in the Garden. In Genesis 11, we see the human desire to be divine rear its ugly head in a big way. In their arrogance, these people set out to build a city called “Babylon” and construct “a tower whose top is in the heavens.” They thought the tower would empower them to “make a name for [them]selves.” This, of course, was the tower of Babel.

Notice the use of “the heavens” here. Remember, the Hebrew word literally means “the skies.” They were building a tower so tall that the top was in the sky. But also recall that “the skies” was one of the most common ways ancient Israelites referred to the place where God lived and ruled. In the context of this story, the author is clear that the people weren’t just building the tower for a good view; they were trying to reach the realm of the divine. Immediately after the story about the tower, the author launches into a genealogy that tracks a family affected by the scattering—the family of a man named Abram.

# Focus Verses

Read the following Scriptures, in which God promises to bless Abraham. Write down the exact promises God makes.

1. [Genesis 12:2](#)
2. [Genesis 17:5–8](#)
3. [Genesis 18:18–19](#)
4. [Genesis 22:15–18](#)

Israel's prophets promised a day when people from all nations would become part of God's covenant people. Read the following passages and note how the prophets describe this promised day.

1. [Isaiah 2:1–6](#) and [56:3–8](#)
2. [Zechariah 8:20–23](#)
3. [Micah 4:1–3](#)

Read [Jeremiah 31:31–34](#) and [Ezekiel 36:31–34](#), where the prophets foretell that God would create a new covenant people. Then, read [Luke 22:14–23](#), where Jesus claims to fulfill this prophecy. What similarities do you see?

Read [Galatians 3](#) and [Romans 4](#). Notice that the Apostle Paul firmly believed God's new family was not defined by ethnic lineage from Abraham anymore. Rather, God's people were identified as those who share Abraham's faith.





# Group Discussion

Part of being in community is being free to share your feelings and opinions without fear of being judged. This is why we have group discussion time, your opinion and feelings matter

- 1. In what ways do humans today use technology as a means to make ourselves like God?**
- 2. Has God ever disrupted a project of yours in order to protect you from yourself?**
- 3. As followers of Jesus, Paul would define us as spiritual children of Abraham. If God's plan is to reunite heaven and earth through Abraham's family, then what does that mean for you?**

# Salvation begins

## The Family root of the saviour.

The introduction of Abram in Genesis 12 represents a big shift in the biblical story. Up to this point, the lens has been zoomed out to include the entire human race. Now, it zooms in on one man and the family that will come after him. Abram's story marks the beginning of God's long-term strategic response to human rebellion, and the author of Genesis uses a few key words here to help readers understand how this new character fits into the bigger narrative. In Genesis 12:2, God says he will make Abram's name great, which connects to Genesis 11:4, in which the people of Babylon attempted to make a name for themselves by building a tower. In contrast to humanity grasping at divine power for their own honour, God will grant the honour of a great name to this no-name family of Abram. God also says he will bless Abram, and what follows is a replay of God's blessing on Adam and Eve: a multiplying family, a fruitful land, and abundance.

To Abram, this promise was downright outlandish. He and his wife had never been able to have children, and they were already in their 70s. It seemed like God was maybe a tad too late. To make matters worse, God requested that Abram and Sarai leave their land. You can imagine Abram making a list of the hurdles that blocked the way to becoming

a great nation: "No children, no land. Are you sure, God?"

But we're told that Abram was a man of radical faith, and he left his land despite those hurdles, trusting God implicitly. When the family arrived in Canaan, God gave him a new name—in effect, a new identity that reflected the promise he bore. He became *Abraham*.

What makes God's commitment to Abraham truly remarkable was that the blessing served a strategic purpose: God promised that the blessing and abundance given to Abraham's family would overflow to all the other families of the earth. At that moment, Abraham's family became the carrier of the original blessing and vocation given to humanity in the garden so that every nation on earth might one day be reconnected to God.



**Abraham Hears God's voice. Scene for the movie "ABRAHAM"**

Now, Abraham and his family were not chosen because they were particularly great people. Many stories that follow highlight Abraham's frailty and his family's dysfunction. This reality makes a profound statement. Whatever the reunion of heaven and earth is going to be like, it won't be something humans achieve by their own power or deserve because of their own goodness.

Humans can't go back to the garden to get eternal life. They can't build up to the sky to attain it. No. Eternal life has only ever been possible as a gift. And that's precisely what God wants to give humanity.

God wants his domain and our domain to completely overlap once more. To make this happen, he graciously calls an unlikely candidate

# Week 3



## Did you know...?

### Abraham's Name

When we first meet Abram in Genesis 11:26, his name means “exalted father.” In Hebrew, his name consisted of two parts:

*ab* = father, *ram* = exalted

But then Abram got a new name, and the selection is surprisingly

playful.

In Genesis 17:5 (NRSV), God said, “your name shall be **Abraham**; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations.”

There are two things happening here, and the first is so simple we tend to overlook it completely. As a sign of his promise to “increase your numbers,” God increases the syllables in Abram’s name.

The second part of the wordplay isn’t apparent in English. The Hebrew word for “multitude” is *hamon*. God takes the first letter of the word for “multitude” and sticks it into Abram’s name, like this:

*ab-ram* —> *ab-rah**am***

So, Abraham’s new name is actually the result of a Hebrew wordplay: God increases the length of his name by adding the first letter of the word for “multitude.”

# Focus Verses

Read **Genesis 15:8-18**, What do you think about Abraham asking God for a guarantee on the promises he was made? Compare this guarantee with the original promise God made. Are there any differences?

## 1. **Genesis 18:9-15**

Abraham is called a 'man of faith' because he never witnessed the fulfillment of God's promises in his life time. Search the following scriptures for characteristics of someone who lives by faith.

## 1. **Numbers 34:1-15**

## 2. **Romans 4:13-25**

Look at **Genesis 15:11**. What do you think these birds of prey signify in relation to the promise God was about to guarantee?





# Group Discussion

Part of being in community is being free to share your feelings and opinions without fear of being judged. This is why we have group discussion time, your opinion and feelings matter

- 1. What images come to mind when you think about God's promises?  
Where do those ideas come from, and what emotions do they conjure up?**
- 2. Describe the feelings and thoughts you have when you see God going to through such lengths to prove how trustworthy His promises are.  
Discuss the quality of promises God makes vs the promises Humans make.**
- 3. What are some obstacles that humans face when waiting for God's promise?**

# God's Guarantee

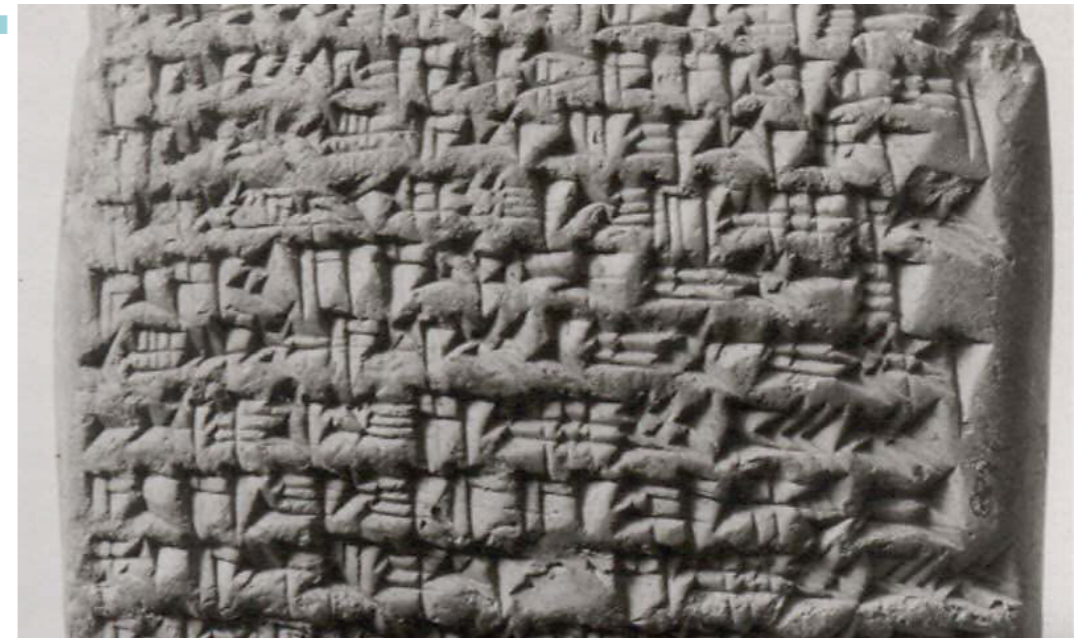
## Iron-Clad Contract

The word for "contract" found in the bible is "**Covenant**." There are eight of these covenants made by God in the bible. These "**covenants**" were used to make a promise tangible while also attaching a solid guarantee that what was promised was resolute.

Archeologists have found clay tablets in the area where Mesopotamia stood. Simple, small tablets with the cuneiform writing of the Mesopotamian nations. They were translated into the dialects of each person named in the contract to ensure all parties were fully aware of each transaction's details. Each party was to bring one animal from their livestock. Both of these animals would be killed, and the parties entering into a contract would say: **"May it be done to me like it was done to these animals if I break the covenant"** It was serious business to break a covenant, and the level of seriousness equalled the number of animals killed.

God once entered into a covenant with Abraham. He did this to give Abraham a solid guarantee that the promises God made were definite and would not be forgotten. God used the method familiar to Abraham, which is still in use today in nomadic middle eastern communities. He had Abraham bring three types of livestock animals, a dove and a pigeon. God had Abraham cut these animals in half and place them on opposite sides of a small groove in the ground, enough to pool blood. This is where we get the term "cut a deal" from. This is called a "**Blood Path.**" Traditionally, both parties would then take turns walking barefoot in the blood, the greater party first (in this case God) and then the lesser party (Abraham). This made the contract binding, through a "blood pact." God walked the Blood Path alone. Twice.

God did something unique: He did not require Abraham to walk through the blood! God walked through the blood twice: once for each of them, seen here as the smoking pot



**Cuneiform contracts. Fragments found in Mesopotamia in the care of the Met Museum.**

and a blazing fire, these signified the presence of God. With this act, God was telling Abraham: "My promise and covenant are so solid that I will die for you if you fail. I will pay any penalty, and I will guarantee that every promise will be fulfilled." You see if Abraham walked the path, he would have condemned himself because God required that Abraham and his descendants be perfect people and God would grant Abraham land, descendants and the Messiah. There was no way Abraham and his descendants would fulfill that. We have proof of their failure in scriptures. God gave the promise as a gift.

When God makes a promise, you can be assured that it is ironclad. He will not forget, nor will the promise fade. God went through all the trouble of doing this so that it would be apparent to us that ANY promise that comes from God's mouth is guaranteed. You can count on God to keep His promises, including the promise that heaven and earth will become one again.

# Week 4

## Did you know...?

### BETHEL

Jacob had this incredible encounter with God, and, in response, he did something that strikes modern readers as really odd: He took the stone he'd used as a pillow, propped it up, poured oil on it, and named the place **Bethel**. Setting up a stone pillar as a memorial marker was common cultural practice in the ancient world. And, actually, it still is today, though our modern memorials are polished and professionally engraved with explanations.

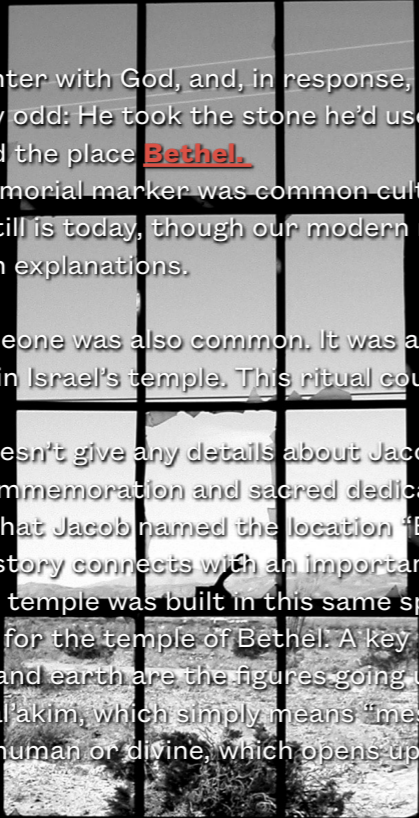
Pouring oil on something or someone was also common. It was a way to consecrate or set something aside for service in Israel's temple. This ritual could set apart people or items, like a memorial stone.

While the story in Genesis 28 doesn't give any details about Jacob's intent, his actions seem to fit those patterns of commemoration and sacred dedication.

What the text does highlight is that Jacob named the location "Bethel," which means "house of God" in Hebrew. This story connects with an important moment later in Israel's history when an Israelite temple was built in this same spot. The author of Genesis is telling an origin story for the temple of Bethel. A key part of Jacob's dream about the stairs uniting heaven and earth are the figures going up and down it. They're called "angels," or in Hebrew, mal'akim, which simply means "messenger." The word can refer to any kind of messenger, human or divine, which opens up a fascinating can of worms.

At this point in the story of two domains, humans didn't have the option to enter God's personal presence. They could pray. They could see visions of God and hear from him, but they couldn't experience his presence as it was in the garden. Next month, we'll see God remedy this situation by establishing a mobile tent-temple where humans can enter his presence, at least on a limited basis.

Read about the origins of Israel's sacred anointing oil in Exodus 30:22–29.



## Did you know...?

### ANGELS

What if God wanted to reach out to someone who wasn't looking for him? On a handful of occasions in the Bible, God appears as a human who walks and talks with people, as in the story of God having a meal with Abraham. Sometimes, God sends a human messenger to carry a divine announcement on his behalf. In Israel, these figures were called prophets, and they acted as God's spokespeople. And even though it's strange to our ears, the prophets were often called **God's angels**, that is, his **mal'akim**. One of them was even called "my messenger," or in Hebrew, mal'aki (we know him as "Malachi").

But there's a third way that God could reach out to people. It's one step removed from a personal appearance, but it's more direct than sending a prophet. This is our traditional concept of angels, God's heavenly messengers. They're not human, but they're not God either. They share characteristics of both. **They are creatures who inhabit God's domain**, and essentially they serve as his executive staff team. Sometimes, they simply carried messages; other times, they performed miracles. If temples were inanimate, symbolic spaces that bridged heaven and earth, then angels were their animate counterparts. Sometimes in the Bible, these figures are simply called "a man." Other times, they are called "an angel" or "a messenger," and occasionally, they are called "sons of God," or even "gods."

The existence of these creatures that live in God's domain raises many questions that the biblical authors never address. How many are there? When were they created? How exactly do they bridge heaven and earth? Do they relate to our space-time dimensions the same way we do? The Bible offers no answers, mainly because it is focused on the function of angels instead of their nature or origins. What mattered to the author of the story about Jacob's "stairway" in Genesis was that the angels showed heaven and earth were interconnected.

The word "angel" is actually the Greek word (*angelos*) spelled with English letters. It means "messenger," and the first Jewish scholars who translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek used the Greek *angelos* to translate *mal'akim*.

# Focus Verses

Read Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush in Exodus 3. Observe similarities between this story and Jacob's dream. Notice in verse 5 how the space around the bush is called "holy ground," as in physical space that is marked by God's presence.

## 1. Exodus 3

Read the story about Joshua near Jericho in Joshua 5:13–15.

## 1. Joshua 5:13-15

Check out the encounter Moses and the elders of Israel have with God's presence on Mt. Sinai in Exodus 24:1–18. Notice the similar language and imagery that appear in all these stories, and pay attention to what's different. Clouds, smoke, fire, and light are all featured in these moments where heaven and earth meet. What is the significance of this common imagery?

## 1. Exodus 24:1-18





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# Group Discussion

Part of being in community is being free to share your feelings and opinions without fear of being judged. This is why we have group discussion time, your opinion and feelings matter

- 1. Share a moment, however ordinary, in your story where you unexpectedly encountered God.**
- 2. How has the God of Abraham pursued you in your life?**
- 3. In what ways have you seen God use unlikely circumstances in your life to reveal himself?**

# Stairway to Heaven

## Ladders and the house of God

The story known as “Jacob’s ladder” is among the most popular Old Testament narratives—right up there with the parting of the Red Sea and Daniel’s survival in the lions’ den. And, like many other popular stories, its richness often gets lost as it’s boiled down, over and over, into a children’s story. If you grew up in the church, your memory of this story might go something like this: Jacob, who once conned his brother out of the first-born inheritance, goes on a trip and apparently does not pack anything that will work as a pillow. He manages to fall asleep with his head on a rock, and has a wild dream about angels going up and down a flight of stairs between earth and heaven. Then he wakes up and pours some oil on the rock and gives it a name. What in the world?

First things first, we know from the Hebrew words used in the text that what Jacob saw was a large stone staircase, not a ladder with rungs.

In fact, what he saw was likely very similar to the massive stairways found on ancient temples that led up to the platforms where worshippers sought connection with their god. But in Jacob’s dream, the staircase was not attached to a temple—at least, not to a building. It was just stairs resting on earth, extending up to the skies. The meaning of this was clear to Jacob: This thing was a bridge, so to speak, between God’s domain and humanity’s domain. It was a pathway into God’s heavenly throne room. “This is the gate Of heaven,” Jacob said. The angels, who were God’s messengers, were going up and down the stairway, showing that this place was a kind of portal between heaven and earth.

The God of his grandfather, Abraham, was following Jacob around and had revealed his divine presence out in the middle of nowhere. This was a God who chases people around. [Check this out in Genesis 28:17.](#) It’s a good thing God was committed to pursuing Jacob, because Jacob hadn’t exactly led a life of devotion to his Creator. He was known as a deceiver, and earlier in life had tricked his blind father into giving him the family inheritance that should have been for his older brother.



**Jacob's Dream 1639 by Jusepe De Ribera. Ribera was a master of painting faint, ghost-like details into his paintings and he does that here where the “ladder” is barely visible behind the sleeping Jacob.**

Fortunately, the role of Abraham’s family was not to be a model of upright behaviour, but to carry divine blessings to the rest of the world. Apparently, God likes using insufficient people to do his work. It’s a reminder that God does not need us to succeed, but rather that he succeeds despite us.

The key takeaway from Jacob’s dream is that, somehow, God’s domain and the human domain still overlap, that heaven chases people and touches down in the most unlikely of places. Jacob thought the spot where he was sleeping was a mundane space, but his vision helped him see that there was much more going on. This story is about how the presence of God, which we thought was left behind in the garden, comes bursting into the wilderness. There had been a rift between heaven and earth, and we no longer had access to God’s presence, yet there it was.

Jacob’s encounter shows that God was on a mission to reunite heaven and earth, that God was still among humans if they had eyes to see it— which is still true today. The story teaches us that God’s character and his movement in our lives are often surprising.