INTRO

Read This Week’s Passage:
Genesis 28:10–15

SELF-RELIANCE?

One night a college student was watching the starry sky while pondering about his future. He was nearing graduation, but he had not received any job offer so far. He was already engaged to a young woman, and the relationship was progressing well. But the income of his temporary job as a music teacher was too meager to provide even for himself! Filled with fear, he turned his thoughts to her for she was also struggling to finish college.

Additionally, they agreed that after having children, she would stay at home to care for them and to teach them the ways of the Lord. This was a top priority for them, but how could they accomplish this? He was completely surrounded by darkness, inside and outside.

But in lifting his eyes to the sky, he was reminded about how God asked Abraham to trust in His promises by counting the stars! Is there still a God in heaven? he thought. Or was He the God of Abraham only? He then recalled how God had challenged Abraham’s fears: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward” (Gen. 15:1, NKJV).

Overwhelmed by God’s warm presence, tears also warmed his face as faith took hold of His promises. Abraham was already dead, he thought, but God’s promises are for all, as God is no respecter of anyone.

This week we will focus on Genesis 28:10–22, following Jacob, Abraham’s grandson, on his journey. What were the steps that led him not only to thrive in his business and to provide for his family, but also to move from a fraudulent character to a virtuous hero in God’s kingdom?
Write out Genesis 28:10–15 from the translation of your choice. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map it.
**STARTING LIFE ALONE**

It was traumatic for Jacob to start living by himself. Fleeing from Esau and carrying little more than the clothes he was wearing, Jacob left behind his father’s protection and provision (Gen. 28:10). A right motivation (to get the birthright), followed by a wrong action (cheating to get it) led him to face many terrible losses at the same time! Conscience-stricken, he felt alone, abandoned even by God, fearing to have an invalidated birthright.

By it, however, God would entitle him to become the priest of his family and ancestor of the Redeemer, in addition to abundant possessions. On his side of the deal, Jacob would need to totally devote his life to God’s service, obeying all His requirements (not to cheat, for instance…) and consulting Him for all decisions in life, including whom to marry. The prohibition of marriage with those not committed with God was a protection against apostasy either of Jacob and/or his descendants.

A pillow of stone and terrible premonitions made that night unforgettable. Life was almost unbearable under the weight of the consequences of his fault. But at that horrifying moment He who took upon Himself all of our mistakes appeared to Jacob.

“I am the Lord God of your fathers,” said that heavenly Being, standing at the top of a ladder linking heaven to earth. The symbolism was now evident: the reconnection with God was still possible through Christ! Before any initiative on Jacob’s side, the Being solemnly promised him seven things, all related to his recent losses: possessions (v. 13), posterity, growth and success, a mission (v. 14), protection, and restoration (v. 15).

As always, God took the initiative to bless and to restore. So Jacob was assured that he could still inherit God’s blessings, provided he would trust completely in the Lord. In answer to God’s promises, Jacob worshipped Him, making a vow. It was not an attempt to earn God’s favor, but a response to His initiative to bless!

Anyone starting independent adult life will profit in studying Jacob’s vow. It comprises five conditions—almost a repetition of what God had promised to him: His presence with Jacob, supernatural protection, food to eat, clothing to put on, and a peaceful journey back to his father’s house. If God would accomplish His part, said Jacob, then the Lord would become His God, that place would become God’s house (Bethel), and of all that God would give him, he would surely give a tenth to Him! (See v. 22.)

By proposing to tithe (which means to return to God part of the income or increase given by Him), Jacob ratified a practice followed by his ancestors, and revealed a decision to live by faith, trusting in God as his provider. Vowing to tithe is intrinsically related to previously accepting God as “my God,” my provider and protector, a loving being who is willing to graciously act in my behalf. Conversely, not tithing when there is an income can mean that I don’t recognize Him as my provider and protector.
OPENING DOORS TO THE SPIRIT

Is it possible to become a Christian without ever vowing anything? Is it possible to marry someone and never promise anything? Have you ever thought about why some couples keep dating but never marry? Is it possible to spend one’s whole life only “dating” Jesus, and never answering His call for marriage—a decided commitment—and still inherit eternal life?

If a couple tries to enjoy the best of two worlds—of being single and of marriage, of freedom and of intimacy—they may find themselves in a dysfunctional, halfhearted, less-than-meaningful relationship. It unfits them to experience deep intimacy and love, which is possible only in a lifelong commitment provided by marriage.

Those who embrace an uncommitted attitude with Christ, refraining from advancing from the “dating” stage to the “married” one, will never enjoy the full privileges experienced by those who left all behind to “marry” the Bridegroom—for life—in a no-turning-back decision. On the other hand, those who by faith commit themselves to follow Jesus’ footsteps of self-denial and sacrifice will enter into an eternal covenant with Him. All the blessings of this and the coming world will become available to them!

Some spiritual decisions or initiatives are key if we want to grow in intimacy with Him, knowing Him better. According to the Bible, the following ones are included: to be baptized and to become a regular member in a local church; to spend regular time daily in communion with Him; to keep the Sabbath; chastity until marriage; lifelong faithfulness to one spouse; observance of God’s dietary, entertainment, and other lifestyle regulations; and regularly returning tithe and offerings.

What happens if someone never vows or purposes anything after hearing invitations from God’s Word? By not vowing, many, who waver between duty and inclination, will ultimately lean toward unfaithfulness and will leave God’s ways. But to become “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22), we must follow the Spirit’s promptings, submitting our decisions and actions to God’s Word and denying self. Then by faith in Jesus we need to ask for a heart that is willing to obey, while implementing the radical steps that are lovingly proposed by Him—all for our good.

When it comes specifically to giving back to God in tithes and offerings, and gifts to the poor, we should never expect it to be something spontaneous. If not vowed (Gen. 28:22), or purposed in the heart, as suggested by Paul (see 2 Cor. 9:7), our giving will become inconsistent or spasmodic, guided by our selfish nature. As Jacob well understood, our giving frequency should be prompted by God’s giving, and not by our inclination, emotions, a call, a good project, or even a need.

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Instead of bragging about his own strength, Jacob made his vow while deeply regretting his human frailties. By vowing while still under the strong influence of the Lord’s special presence, he avoided the traps of the selfish heart when the deep impressions of God would later vanish.

Vows are like doors that we open to the Holy Spirit, providing us with the desire and the ability to do what is right. By vowing by faith in Jesus’ power and in constant prayer, we are telling ourselves and the heavenly Beings that we want our original selfish heart to be replaced by a new one, willing to obey and act by principle according to His will. After all, “it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).
AN EXERCISE OF FAITH

While still heavy laden with guilt and in a (literally) dark moment in his life, Jacob was found by the Lord, who was standing at the top of the ladder. That marvelous Being opened His mouth and promised him far more than what he could expect! By seeing the Lord’s goodness, forbearance, and long-suffering, Jacob suddenly understood what grace and forgiveness meant, and was led to repentance (see Rom. 2:4).

It was only after meeting with the Lord and trusting in Him that Jacob made a vow. Only then could he leave all fears behind and trust that “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?” (Rom. 8:31, 32). As the saying goes: “If your fears are big, then your God is small; if your God is big, then your fears are small.” He who created the worlds can accomplish whatever He promises! Therefore, vows should be seen as evidence of trust.

When he met the Lord, Jacob’s anchor moved from the material to the spiritual, changing his whole perspective on life! Therefore, Jacob’s mouth burst in expressions of allegiance, finalizing his vow with a promise of giving the tithe “of all that You give me” (Gen. 28:22), evidencing that he already knew about that practice from his ancestors (Gen. 14:20). Note how inclusive is that vow. No one will vow about tithing unless that person meets Jesus and by faith rests in full assurance that God would provide for their needs! Tithing is evidence of trust and a patent sign of voluntary, positive allegiance to Jesus.

It was at that moment that Jacob became a tither, even while not yet owning anything. We don’t need to own anything to become tithers. A vow to tithe points to the future, to expected or unexpected blessings that have not yet been received. For Jacob, tithing would be an exercise of faith in the God that holds the future in His hands. As it should also happen with us, the act of tithing became a witness to himself and to the spiritual realms (both sides) about which side of the spiritual war he belonged to, and in whom he was trusting to thrive in life!

After spending twenty years far from his father’s house (fourteen of them working just to pay the dowry for Rachel and Leah), Jacob returned to his homeland “exceedingly prosperous” (Gen. 30:43). Now with a changed heart, he generously shared part of the goods with Esau, his brother.

But from where did Jacob’s inheritance come from—all this wealth in just six years? Because of the distance from his father’s house, Jacob was unable to take any advantage of his estate. Laban, who was supposed to help his son-in-law, tried to deceive and harm him many times! No, his inheritance didn’t come from any other human being, but from Him who, from the top of the ladder, promised: “I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you” (Gen. 28:15). This inheritance, which doesn’t require any other human assistance, is resistant to injustices and plots from the wicked.

The same will happen to all those who cling to the Lord and turn their foot from breaking the Sabbath: “I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, and feed you with the [inheritance] of Jacob your father. The mouth of the Lord has spoken” (Isa. 58:13, 14).
**WHOLLY THINE**

We do not belong to Christ unless we are His wholly. It is by half-heartedness in the Christian life that men become feeble in purpose and changeable in desire. The effort to serve both self and Christ makes one a stony-ground hearer, and he will not endure when the test comes upon him. (Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship* [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1940], 197.)

To give or to labor when our sympathies are moved, and to withhold our gifts or service when the emotions are not stirred, is an unwise and dangerous course. If we are controlled by impulse or mere human sympathy, then a few instances where our efforts for others are repaid with ingratitude, or where our gifts are abused or squandered, will be sufficient to freeze up the springs of beneficence. Christians should act from fixed principle, following the Saviour’s example of self-denial and self-sacrifice. (E. G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, 25.)

When a pledge is made by you, be sure that God expects you to pay as promptly as possible. Do not promise a portion to the Lord, and then appropriate it to your own use, lest your prayers become an abomination unto Him. It is the neglect of these plainly revealed duties that brings darkness upon the church. (E. G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, 78.)

That which has been set apart according to the Scriptures as belonging to the Lord, constitutes the revenue of the gospel, and is no longer ours. It is no better than sacrilege for a man to take from God’s treasury in order to serve himself or to serve others in their secular business. . . . Let no one, when brought into a strait place, take money consecrated to religious purposes, and use it for his advantage, soothing his conscience by saying that he will repay it at some future time. Far better cut down the expenses to correspond with the income, to restrict the wants, and live within the means, than to use the Lord’s money for secular purposes. (E. G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, 79.)

Some of you have been stumbling over your pledges. . . . Under the heavenly, inspiring influence, you saw that selfishness and worldliness were not consistent with Christian character, and that you could not live for yourselves and be Christlike. But when the influence of His abundant love and mercy was not felt in so marked a manner in our hearts, you withdrew your offerings, and God withdrew His blessing from you.

Adversity came upon some. There was a failure in their crops, so that they could not redeem their pledges; and some were even brought into straitened circumstances. Then, of course, they could not be expected to pay. But had they not murmured and withdrawn their hearts from their pledges, God would have worked for them, and would have opened ways whereby everyone could have paid what he had promised. (E. G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, 310, 311.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

Why was Jacob’s vow not a way to earn merit, or a “salvation by works” initiative?

Is the mandate to date or marry only a God-fearing person who keeps His commandments still applicable to those entering into a covenant with God in the New Testament era? Explain.

How do wedding vows, made before any physical intimacy, in the presence of God, the church, and family members, contribute to the marriage’s health? Or don’t they?

If Jacob’s vow would not help him to earn merit, or even produce a change of heart, why did he make it?

In what ways may someone become selfish while giving? In which ways will an increased frequency of giving following God’s giving help the worshipper avoid the trap of “self-centered giving”?