

Jacob's Dream

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"The Angels" after the work of the artist, Marc Chagall

Prayer of Illumination

O God, you know us better than we know ourselves.
As the scriptures are read, we will listen for your voice.
By your Spirit lead us out of our fears and into
the knowledge of your love, through Jesus Christ,
the Great Shepherd of our souls.
Amen.

Scripture: Genesis 28:10-19a (NRSVue)

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹² And he dreamed that there was a

stairway^[b] set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.¹³ And the Lord stood beside him^[c] and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring,¹⁴ and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed^[d] in you and in your offspring.¹⁵ Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."¹⁶ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!"¹⁷ And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

¹⁸ So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.¹⁹ He called that place Bethel.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – "Jacob's Dream"

A few years back, I was at a crossroads in my life and was wrestling with some big decisions. I'd spent a lot of time researching, praying, thinking, and quite a bit of worrying. But I still had no definitive direction. During this time I had a dream. I was out for a walk at night, but I wasn't alone. A fellow pastor from our presbytery was walking with me. I shared my struggles and questions, and this pastor listened and encouraged me along the way.

After awaking from the dream, I knew what I needed to do. I got in touch with my pastor friend and we set up a time for spiritual direction. That time was a key moment in my discernment process that ultimately helped me to make a wise choice.

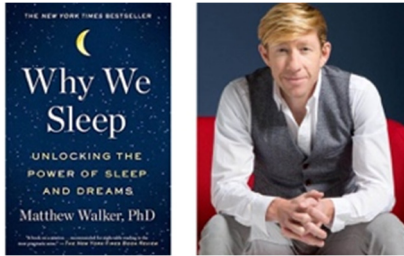
Amazing things happen in dreams.

- Mendeleev's (Menda-lay-ev) [Periodic Table](#) was conceived in a dream February 17, 1869.

- Two of Paul McCartney's songs "Yesterday" and "Let It Be" came to him during dreams.



- Our defenses are down when we're asleep and dreaming. We're more open, vulnerable, and our emotions are heightened.



Matthew Walker, Professor of Neuroscience and Psychology at UC Berkeley and the Director for the Center for Human Sleep Science, describes in his bestselling book "Why We Sleep: Unlocking the Power of Sleep and Dreams" that our dreams aren't merely a rehashing of the previous day's events.

Between 35% and 55% of our dreams deal with emotional themes and concerns of our previous day. Walker writes that our dreams are a form of overnight therapy, helping soothe and mend the pain from difficult, painful, or even traumatic emotional experiences we've been through.

In addition, sleep and dreams help us read our social world more accurately and look at our challenges with greater perception. So it's solid guidance to not only pray about something, but to "sleep on it."

The fugitive ran away from home. His twin brother Esau was ready to kill him. Jacob was definitely going through some intense emotional and family turmoil. For the first time he was on his own, alone and alienated from family. The journey from Beersheba to Haran was a several hundred-mile journey, and he had a long ways to go. It was getting dark, so he decided to set up camp for the night. He found a rock for a pillow. It didn't matter, Jacob was so bushed, he fell asleep before his head hit the pillow. The scheming, planning, jockeying Jacob was now vulnerable and sleeping. His guard was down. He was still before God. And then came the dream: Something that looked like a ladder—some sort of stairway or ramp to heaven appeared. It was firmly planted on earth and the top reached the heavens. Heaven and earth touched—it was like a portal to heaven. Upward to heaven and downward to earth angels of God went, back and forth. Then the Lord God stood next to Jacob. And he spoke. God didn't scold or chew out Jacob for his deception and the family drama he stirred up.

"I am the Lord God of your father Abraham and Isaac...and now *Jacob*. The land on which you rest I'll give to you and your offspring. I'm choosing you. You're a part of my family. You don't have to steal this—I'm giving it to you. Your descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth. You'll spread far and wide: north to south, east to west. All the families of the earth will be blessed in you and in your offspring. Instead of taking blessings, *you will be* a blessing to countless people. And I promise I'll stay with you. I'll go with you wherever you go. I'll protect and guard you. And I'll bring you back home."

So the Lord God thrice blessed Jacob in the dream with presence, protection, and homecoming. I will not desert you until I've fulfilled my promise to you. Then the dream ended.

Hearing these words, we can't help but think of Jesus—Immanuel, God with us. And his parting words before ascending to heaven,

"And lo, I will be with you always."

Upon waking, Jacob was overcome with emotion: awe, fear, amazement, reverence, even giddiness. He couldn't believe that God cared about him after all that he'd done to his family. "The miracle," says Walter Bruegemann, "is the way this sovereign God binds himself to this treacherous fugitive." God is able to make straight lines out of crooked sticks. We don't have to be perfect for God to work with us. God's grace "rocked" Jacob's world:

Surely, the Lord is in this place—and *I had no clue*.

How awesome is this place, this is none other than the House of God.

God is the Divine Breakthrough, often showing up where least expected. Touching the seemingly untouchable. We just need to pray and to ask God for eyes to see it. Heaven is wherever God is. Heaven isn't shut off from us until we die, it's also here in our midst. Earth is not left to fend for itself. Heaven is not reserved for the gods. There is always potential for heaven no matter where we find ourselves. With Christ, even if you find yourself in living hell, Christ, the door of heaven, is open to you. Any place you find yourself, you can be transformed. God is all around us. We can connect with God in our daily routines, in the car, while taking out the trash, in the shower, in the gutter and maybe, just maybe even in church!

God is everywhere, but God is present in different places in different ways. Sometimes God is working, sometimes speaking, sometimes silent, sometimes saving, other times serving or refreshing, other times challenging, and calling us. God is on the move.

Jacob rose early in the morning, and made the pillow into a pillar, a memorial. He Christened it with oil, and named the place Bethel, which means "House of God." Thousands of pilgrims would one day enter this holy city.

God spoke to Jacob in his dream, but Jacob made a vow to God when he was wide awake:

If God will be with me,
and protect me on my journey,
And *if* he will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear,

So that I return to my father Isaac's house in peace,
THEN the Lord shall be my God.
This very pillar will be God's palace.
And I will surely tithe to God of all he gave me.

Now Jacob was changed, but he was still Jacob. He remained human—like us. Notice how he put those asterisks, ifs, ands and buts in there?

IF you will be with me, **IF** you will feed and clothe me,
IF I do get a homecoming, **THEN** you will be my God.

I like how the ancient rabbis raised their eyebrows at Jacob here:

*"And if God *doesn't* do this for Jacob, *he won't be God?*"*

Jacob is still the suspicious bargainer. Yet God still loves this flawed hero.

There's this sense in the Hebrew language that Jacob became "lightfooted" after the dream. He "lifted up his legs" when he got up. Jacob felt a little lighter, there was a spring in his step as he continued his journey to find his wife. He was no longer alone. No, now he just realized that he was *never* alone to begin with. The God of Abraham, Isaac, AND Jacob was with him every step of the way. The world was off his shoulders. He was still a part of God's family.

In the first chapter of John's gospel, when Jesus calls the disciple Nathaniel, he says,

"Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Jesus is telling us that HE'S the ladder to God, Jesus is the true "ladder of success."

He's the gateway and the pathway to heaven.

He's the *Axis Mundi*—the world pillar connecting heaven and earth.

And this experience of Jesus oftentimes happens in the most unexpected of places and with the most unlikely of people, even today.

And I'd like to close with this story.

One of my favorite hip hop artists is Maya Arulpragasam, who goes by M.I.A. Her most famous song is *Paper Planes* that was featured in the excellent movie *Slumdog Millionaire*. This song has over 630 million listens on Spotify. She was born in London and her parents are from Sri Lanka—her father a revolutionary and her mother a seamstress. She's recently shared her story of faith awakening in several interviews.

It was around 2017 and MIA was in a place of need. She was in the middle of nowhere, with no cell phone service. She doesn't go into all the details, but someone put her in a vulnerable and dangerous position. She needed help right in that moment. And that's when she had a vision of Jesus. It's still hard for her to put words to this encounter that changed her life. But M.I.A. says this unapologetically: Jesus is real.

All I know is that "when I had no belief in Jesus Christ and Christianity, and even when I was 100% comfortable in Hinduism, it was a Christian God that turned up to save me."

"I literally got saved in a very physical sense...When you need saving, the person who turns up—no matter who you are and no matter what religion or no matter what status or what you are—if you are in need of saving, the person who turns out to save you is Jesus. That is what he is known for."

Like Jacob, M.I.A. is on a journey. She's still working through what this change means for her and her music.

"Jesus turned my world upside down...even if it costs me my career, I won't lie, I will tell the truth."

Amen.

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