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The Promise

based on Genesis 28:10-22
by Ralph Milton

Fear does terrible things to a person. It distorts the vision, it contorts the body, it paralyzes and it pains.

Jacob was running. Running for his life.

Running because he had cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright.

Running in fear of God who would surely punish him for his sins.

Running in anger into the wilderness where Jacob knew there was no birthright for him or for anyone else.

Every few feet he looked back over his shoulders in fear of Esau. Esau would have no trouble catching him. Esau was the outdoor type, the hunter, who could easily out run him.

Jacob was a homebody, who didn't know the wilderness, who jumped and ran when a small lizard scurried out from behind a rock.

"Run to Haran!" Rebecca, his mother had said.

But where is Haran? Jacob had no idea. And the night crashed down on his head as he stumbled on and on, hitting his feet against rocks, scratching his arms on thorn bushes. From the corner of his eye, Jacob caught sight of a shadow, and trying to run he fell and crashed into a pile of sharp rocks. Stumbling on into the darkness, he cried and cursed and finally fell down in fear and utter exhaustion.

Jacob's body shook in terror and rage and pain. His head ground against the hollow of a rock, and there he fell into an exhausted sleep.

Or was it sleep?

Perhaps an hallucination?

Perhaps the wonder he saw really had happened. Was it imagination or a vision?

There was a ladder, a ladder connecting earth and heaven, with angels of God going up and coming down, and there beside him, Jacob sensed the presence of God, even the words of God:

"Jacob! I am the God of your forebears, the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of your father Isaac and your mother Rebecca. You carry with you a destiny. A promise! You will live and will have descendants as many as the specks of dust on the ground. And what's more Jacob, I will be with you. I will guide you, keep you, love you. That is my promise to you Jacob! That is my promise!"

The sun's first streaks turned the desert rocks blood red, as Jacob stood up strangely refreshed and rested. He did not know if he had slept. He did not know if he had dreamed. But Jacob knew that God had come to him that terrible night.

"God was here. With me. Right here in this awful place," he whispered.

It seemed important to do something then. So Jacob took the rock that had hurt and pillowed his head that night, and set it up on end. "This is the House of God, Beth-El!" he whispered. "This is the place where earth and heaven meet."

Jacob picked up his staff. His only possession now, except for the clothes on his back. He began to walk, this time with a sense of direction, even though he was just as lost as the night before.

"What does this mean?" Jacob wondered. "What does this mean for me and my life? If God spoke to me last night, then I should do something. I should be something. If God is with me, it should mean something."

Jacob devised a discipline, a way to remember. "Whatever I get in the future, whether it's a bit of food or a huge fortune, I'm going to give the first tenth to God. The first tenth of everything to God, to help me remember who I am, and that God is with me."

**Ralph Milton has written a number of books,
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