

Finding Heaven's Gate
Genesis 28: 10-22

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The son of the son of promise was a scoundrel. Jacob cheated his brother of birthright and blessing. No redeeming qualities in this child have been revealed up to this point in the story. He had no known personal relationship to the living LORD, nor any sense that he would serve the heritage he had demanded for his own. We have no record that the adolescent Jacob was interested in anything but himself. So today's story opens with Jacob on the run. His brother Esau wanted to kill him. Now the mama's boy used to hanging around the tents had to strike out through the desert on his way to his uncle's land. Neither the army nor Outward Bound invented wilderness training as a character builder—the credit goes to the LORD who had Jacob just where he wanted him.

But we may well wonder why God let Jacob become such a rogue in the first place. If God is in charge, why does he let us do such bad things to each other? The Bible certainly recognizes the tension of this reality. Scripture recognizes the depth of human evil from beginning to end—we're not good, not any of us. And the Bible at the same time recognizes the power of God. The little band of Hebrew people, even as slaves, even as exiles, used to go around declaring that their God, their God alone, is the true God and Lord of all. Their captors must have laughed themselves off their chairs, just as the Romans laughed at Jesus' claims before they nailed him up. Nevertheless, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, God's people have said, "God is in charge. Ultimately, he has responsibility for it all and sovereignty over it all."

So why does a sovereign God let terrible things happen? Of course all answers are inadequate when we humans try to express the mind of God. But at the same time, we are not left without information. Do we want human freedom to be real? Does it really matter to God that our choices for him, our decisions to love, are true and not merely the action of robots or puppets? True human freedom means leaving open the possibility for human evil. Real choice means real peril. We must be done with the naïve notion that human nature is basically good, and that humankind is perfectible, moving steadily on its own towards greater progress and higher consciousness. Surely the last hundred years have put the lie to that idea.

The Bible unflinchingly recognizes that humanity has from the beginning chosen against God. As a result, death, decay and chaos entered the earth and taints everything we do, all that we love. Mercifully, a sovereign God did put a limit on our ability to do harm—he kept us from eternal life in this form. He put a cap on our lives so that there is a limit to what we may do to each other—we may destroy in this life, but no further. We may torture and hurt in this life, but only to the limits of the body. Beyond that we may not go. Death is our curse, but also a gift. It is the most we can do to each other.

We must be done as well with a “fix it” view of an all-powerful God. The expectation that God will write his love and his name on the sky for all to see arises from a mistaken view of human being. We are not little isolated blobs of independent souls who each decide for ourselves and must be addressed from without. We are made to be in relationship. We live in vital connection to others. True change, true transformation, happens not by a magic wand but in the grueling, glorious work of real relationship. For God to work in us while preserving our true freedom and addressing our real situation as people connected to people, his work must be the messy business of personal transformation in the face of bad, evil choices and their consequences.

So we are back to Jacob. The LORD had a plan for this self-centered, deceitful, greedy little adolescent. A little time in the desert would do him wonders. The very first night, Jacob stopped because the light was gone. In other words, Jacob was no place, the middle of nowhere with no markers. He was exhausted and moorless. Using a rock for a pillow, he went to sleep. And the sovereign LORD who can reach even into our dreams, decided to address the trickster. Jacob dreamed of a stairway that reached from earth to heaven. On this stair, angels of God were going up and down. There was steady commerce between heaven and earth. Jacob saw in his dream that there is far more to life than what our eyes see in this world. We are not alone. At the top of the stairs was the LORD. He had a message for Jacob. It was Jacob’s turn to see his place in God’s plan.

God spoke, “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of your father Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth...And in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, 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.” The LORD spoke to this spiritually weak, despicable lad, and promised him everything.

Jacob woke up. “Surely God is in this place, and I did not know it!” He started to shake with the realization of what had happened. His whole world view had been blown apart. “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God. This is the very gate of heaven.” When daylight came, Jacob took the stone he had used for a pillow, stood it up and poured oil on it. He named the place Beth-el, the house of God.

That’s kind of an odd thing to do in the desert. The sands were whipping around; the wind howled the loneliness of the place. Jacob looked at it and said, “This is the gate to heaven. God is here, and until now I had no clue about reality.”

Heaven’s gate can open in some strange places. The dawning in our souls of the reality of God can happen at the oddest times.

One morning you wake up with an oxygen mask over your mouth, a bright light in your eyes and a bunch of strangers talking and staring at you. What’s going on? Wait. I’m not dead. I tried to be dead. I washed down enough pills with enough alcohol to stop a train. But I’m alive. I am alive and I shouldn’t be. I don’t deserve to be. Why am I still here? *Surely God is in this place and I did not know it.* Nothing has been the same since.

For years an angry determination covered over the pain of the abortion. No one was ever allowed anywhere near that sealed off room in your heart. Then one night when you were so tired, you fell asleep and dreamed. There was a boy, a curly haired, fair-skinned boy of about sixteen floating in the air above you. He seemed to come from a faraway place. He was smiling at you. Such love in his eyes. He seemed to say that everything is fine where he is; he loves you; he’ll see you soon. You woke up and realized, “That was my son! My son!” You cried all morning. Couldn’t even go to work. My son is alive, and he’s fine, and he doesn’t hate me, and we will meet in heaven. *Surely God is in this place, and I did not know it.* That was the day the forgiveness, the healing, and your new life, began.

You swirl a third drink into the ice in the glass on the tray table in front of you. It is no longer locked and stored in an upright position. Neither are you. 33,000 feet above the Pacific Ocean, flying far away from all you know and everyone you love, you wonder, “What am I doing? What am I doing with my life? What’s it all for?” Without warning the voice inside your head sounds, “I will not leave you until I have done that which I have promised you.” There is a plan. God has something for you to do. These people back home matter far more

than you realized. You matter to them more than you ever knew before. It's time for a change in priorities. That was a long time ago, and today when you get on a plane, and unfold a tray table, you laugh to yourself—this little plastic table was once a gate to heaven.

Yes, heaven's gate opens in the strangest places. Just a few more examples:

- In a stinking hole on a battlefield with rain pouring over your helmet and shells bursting on either side, a feeling of peace underneath it all seeps inside your soul. "I am with you wherever you go," echoes in the tranquility within the battle. God is even in this place.
- On your bed when your body aches and you seem like nothing but a big pain to everyone in your family, you lie awake wondering, "Why am I still here?" Inside your mind, or outside in the air--you'll never know which--a voice speaks, "My dear, you are saved for a reason." A reason, there is a reason for my being here encased in this decaying carcass. Very well, God, just show me what to do.
- In the midst of dealing with crooked, greedy people day after day wearing down your soul, you have no choice but to depend on your heavenly Father to sustain you with spiritual daily bread. And he does. Looking back, you realize that the wretched time of trial was actually heaven's gate, an entryway into the love of God for you.

God is here. In charge. Working, working to win and to woo a wayward humanity back to himself. He is at work in you. From time to time, you see heaven's gate open. You realize that he will not leave you until he has done what he has promised. What he has promised is not the consumer paradise you always imagined for yourself. No, there is no guarantee of that. You already know that it wouldn't fill your soul anyway. What he promises is to conform you to the image of his Son Jesus Christ, to make you anew and lead you home. It's a long, uphill path that seems so much more boring and plodding than the broad way of self-pursuit. But we know from experience that the path to being made like Christ has the most breath-taking views, the most glorious surprises around every turn. It costs us not less than everything to follow it, but in exchange we get the fresh spring expanses of everlasting life.

Heaven's gate may well open in very odd and unlikely places. In these moments we are sent back to what is true and most important. But our lives are not lived only in the desert, in emergency rooms, in dreams or on airplanes. We yearn for a house of God where we may receive more information about this God who has come to us. We long to enter heaven's gate through our worship and

study, our fellowship and our planning for mission. In short, the unlikely gateway to heaven sends us to the more usual meeting place with God—to his house of prayer, to the communion with his people, right here.

Through the years, we have named this place, this church, Beth-el, the house of God. For we have fled to these pews to pour out our grief in the time of loss and to hear the hope of the resurrection. We have felt the gates in our souls open when the music and voices have created a stairway to heaven—upon this music the angels have descended and ascended. Here we have come to meet with God over his Word—he has named our lives until we were so convicted we thought we could not stand it. And then he has named his love until we realized that the God who works with a Jacob can surely work with us. Here we have gathered in groups for prayer, for sharing, for study and fellowship. For many of us, we have oriented our whole lives around this house. We love the church because here we meet God, and here we connect with his people and here, then, we are changed, loved, transformed. Here we are sent into the world with a purpose.

I remember the first time I was made aware of these verses from Genesis 28. In my most self-centered early twenties, I was traveling in England. I went to visit a friend of my brother's, a retired bishop in the Church of England. Bishop John was in his eighties. He was that rare combination of a scholar's mind, a pastor's heart, and a mystic's soul. John was a great bishop, especially in the original meaning of that word as an overseer of souls. Over dinner, I found it easy to pour out my twenty-something soul to him. I was on the verge of entering ministry. But my beliefs were all over the place. I was passionate for God but so, so young. My behavior was not worthy of the pulpit. My love-life was a tangled mess.

Amidst all the wonderful sympathy he gave me and the great words he shared, Bishop John repeated Genesis 28:15 over and over. He insisted that I learn it. "I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." I clung to that verse. It filled me with hope. It has been one of my favorites to share with people ever since.

But it was not until years later that I realized the humor in the bishop's wisdom. Of all the places in Scripture where God promises he is with us, why did Bishop John pick the Jacob story for me in that season of my life? It took me so long to get it. The good bishop must surely be laughing now. For on that summer night, there sat before him as self-centered a momma's boy as there ever had been. Here was a privileged kid who had gone to a far country to search his soul for the will of God. While still enjoying all his privileges, mind you. Here was guy who

just might have betrayed a few hearts who loved him. Here was a guy in whom God needed to do some serious work!

The dear bishop gave me a word of comfort. But it was laced with wisdom. Look at the whole story, my boy. Look who that word came to. The young Jacob. The kid on the lam. The son of promise who needed to get his life together. Within the promise of comfort is the demand for transformation. You're going to change, young lad. The LORD has to purify you of your narcissism—it's going to take a godly wife and four, count 'em, four children to turn your head outward. It's going to take some hard knocks and some hard work. It's going to take learning wholly to rely on me. Listen, golden boy, you're going to be a lot more effective when you shine with less glitter but stand with more iron.

Am I the only one? Or do you find this to be true as well? Looking back can you see the power of the words, "I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." He's going to make us like his son. It takes years. Sometimes it hurts like the hell we often choose. But his work is sure.

What can we say to such news except what Jacob said, with great thanks, "Surely God is in this place, in this world, in my life, in these circumstances. I did not see at first, but now that I do, I look upon these trials and tribulations and declare with thanksgiving, this, even this, is the very gateway to heaven!"