

# How can I connect with God?

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Now, if you have a Bible, you can turn with me to Genesis 28 on page 30 in the church Bible, and we're going to read verse 10 to verse 22. We're going to join the story of Jacob at this point where he has a dream in a place called Bethel, and we're going to think about Jesus being this true stairway to heaven that is captured in this dream. So again, let's hear God's Word. Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord, and he said, I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac.

I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you, and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it. He was afraid and said, how awesome is this place. This is none other than the house of God. This is the gate of heaven. Early the next morning, Jacob took the stone he placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz. Then Jacob made a vow saying, if God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's household, then the Lord will be my God, and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me, I will give you a tenth. Amen.

So I want us to think about this as a journey that is interrupted by God's grace. As we begin, let me tell you very briefly another story. There's a man called Olaudah Equiano who wrote the, he described it himself as the interesting narrative of his life way back in 1789. So this was a former slave who wrote the account of his life to present it to the British government. This was part of a campaign against slavery, and he tells the story of being kidnapped as a small child, age of 11, being sold into slavery, being transported across Africa, taken from Africa to Barbados, and then to Guernsey, and into mainland UK, where he lived for many years as a slave. And his story tells of awful conditions, of terrible cruelty, of almost unimaginable suffering, and yet we find him giving thanks, which seems remarkable. But he gives thanks because on this journey, and as he ended up in the UK, he met the God of grace.

He heard the good news that God had sent his son Jesus to be the Savior for sinners. A journey interrupted by grace. That's very much what we see happening in the story of Jacob. As we look at this text, we're going to learn from his journey the way God is pleased to interrupt in order to show grace and kindness. We're going to think about his dream of the stairway, reminding us that God has been pleased to make a way for sinful people like us to enjoy relationship with the living God. And we're going to think about his pillar, reminding us that we are invited to respond to God's goodness with wonder and with worship. So let's get into our text, and let's think about the journey. So we have jumped in as Jacob leaves Beersheba and heads to Haran. He stops at the end of the day, and he makes a bed out in the open with a stone as a pillow. But we need to know a little bit more about Jacob. Jacob's name literally means one who grabs hold, one who will take advantage of others, one who is a deceiver.

And in his life up until this point, he's absolutely lived up to that name. When he is born, he is born grabbing hold of his twin brother Esau's heel because he's fighting to come out first.

[ 5 : 50 ] At the age of 40, Jacob takes advantage of his brother Esau's hunger and impatience and lack of thought, and he steals his brother's birthright for a bowl of stew. And then some years later, we're not told how many years later, he then deceives his blind father. He takes advantage of him by dressing up as if he was his brother to grab hold of the father's blessing.

And as a result, chapter 27, verse 41, Esau, his brother, vows that he is going to kill him. And so this story is in danger of becoming Cain and Abel, part two.

And this journey that Jacob now finds himself on is in part a way to give him safety. So he is, on the one hand, he is off to go and find a wife among his father's family, but there is that understanding that this distance will be a source of protection.

So as we find him on this journey, he is on the run from a brother who hates him and would gladly kill him, and he's on the way to find a wife, and in the midst of that journey, God finds him.

He comes to what's described in verse 11 as a certain place. There is no particular significance where Jacob camps that day. It's just the end of the day, but it will become God's holy place, because God will enter in and meet with him, and life will change. Just as with that former slave, Olaudah Equiano, just as the story of many people here today, God is pleased.

[ 7 : 56 ] Even when we're not looking for him to interrupt the journey of our lives in order to show grace and to show his goodness. So even at this point, two truths for us to stop and to think about together. They're so important to the Bible. One, that God loves to show grace to sinners.

So we need to understand that the Bible is painting for us a really honest picture. Jacob is not a good man who earns his place in God's family and who deserves all these wonderful promises. No, he is a liar. He is a cheat. He is looking out for number one.

God saves by grace, not because of human performance. We know that even before these two twin brothers were born, it was God's plan that the promise would be carried through the family line of Jacob, not because of his goodness, but despite of his badness. Despite those actions, those habits of grabbing and deceiving and cheating, despite that, God will show grace. If you're new to the Bible, and I know some of you are new to the Bible, one of the things that the Bible does is it shows people as they truly are. It doesn't try and hide people's faults and failings. So we read of a character called Paul. And the Bible is very honest. He is a man who hated Jesus.

He is a man who made it his mission to destroy the church of Jesus. But again, on his journey, this sinful man, this cruel man met with the risen Lord Jesus, who saved him despite being an enemy of God and his people.

He wasn't looking to be saved. He wasn't looking to meet Jesus. And he was given a whole new mission and purpose. It's really the good news that we find throughout the whole Bible.

[ 10 : 12 ] There is that honesty as the Bible speaks to each one of us. It says that we have all sinned. We all fall short of God's glory. If we compare ourselves to God's commandments, summarize, love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself, we all fall short of that. And the Bible is honest and says that our sin separates us from a holy God. And our sin is an act of rebellion where we deliberately walk away from God.

And if we were left to ourselves, the Bible is honest, we would have no hope. We would be heading for judgment for all eternity. But there is hope, not in ourselves, but hope that comes from God. Jesus from heaven speaks.

And he says, I came and I died for you. My death means your sin can be forgiven. My life means you can enjoy life with God. And so Jesus comes and speaks hope, and he says, come to me, put your trust in me, and find forgiveness in your life. God loves to save sinners. And another thing we learn from Jacob's story which is fundamental is that God can meet us anywhere. For Jacob, as he left his family behind, that family that had received those covenant promises, as he finds himself far from home, far from security, as it doesn't seem like he's seeking God, this is the first time that God speaks to him in a very unexpected place. Before living in Edinburgh, we were working, living and working in Glasgow with international students. And one of the wonderful things about our job there is we had the chance to introduce many people to the Bible for the first time, introduce people to the good news of Jesus for the first time. We had the joy of seeing people come to church, read the Bible, learn about

Jesus, and be saved. While they were far from home, nobody came with the express purpose of wanting to become a follower of Jesus, but God had that purpose. And so they went home transformed. And God is pleased to do that. Some of us here, that's our story, coming from different

places to this church, meeting God, meeting Jesus, life transformed. Because God has this beautiful ability to turn any place into a holy place.

Often, as we gather together like this to worship, because God is here and God speaks. But wonderfully, God is not limited. Sometimes, God will meet us and speak to us because of our circumstances, in a conversation, even in a crisis, because God's love breaks through, and God loves to break through and make himself known. So as we think about this wonderful story, my prayer, my prayer this week, and my prayer for us as a church, is that God will keep on doing this. [13:42] He will keep on surprising, keep on interrupting people's journeys to reveal His glory and for our good. Well, having thought about the journey, let's now think about what happens as Jacob settles down for the night, as he has this dream of the stairway. We find it there, beginning at verse 12 to verse 15.

And as we turn to this dream, it deals with a massively important topic. And again, if you're new to the Bible, if you're new to church, and maybe if you've been around for a long time, you might still have the question, is God there? Is He real? Does God speak? Can we connect with God? Can we know God?

Perhaps for some of us, that's what brings us here, week by week. We have this longing. We want this taste of heaven. We know that we need to come, and we need to be in God's presence. We need to know that God is, and that He is for us. Well, the story of Jacob, and the truth of what Christians believe, is that our good God is so kind that He is willing to speak to us, to make promises to us, that God delights to save people for the sake of personal relationship.

This actually, this story really ties in with everything that we've seen in the Genesis story so far. Think about the first people, Adam and Eve. They were made in the image of God, and their experience in the Garden of Eden, they knew God personally, that God came and He spoke with them. But then sin came, as Adam and Eve turned away from God's Word, as they disobeyed Him and mistrusted Him, and that sin created separation. They were outside of the Garden. But even then, the God of grace comes near, the God of grace comes near. And God continues in the story of Genesis to make covenant promises. And it says to us, when we can't go up to God, when we can't draw near to God because of our sin, He comes down and He comes near in love and kindness to restore what was broken.

So let's look together, first of all, at what Jacob sees, and then let's listen together to what Jacob hears. So verse 12, Jacob had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. So again, let me take you back in Genesis chapter 11, there was another structure that we came across, a tower, a tower that was built by humans, a tower from the ground reaching up to heaven. It was built by humans in their pride to reach up to God, to seek to claim personal glory, to want to be like God. [17:02] And we discovered this is not how we get to God, by working ourselves up. God's way is the stairway.

The God makes Himself known as God Himself comes down as the God of glory reaches down to earth in an act of grace. This is what makes Christianity unique. We don't tell people, do better and try harder, and if you're good enough, God will accept you. We say God is so good that He has come down as Jesus, and He has done everything we need, and we're invited to trust Him and His work.

So we have this picture of this stairway, and the angels of God, the messengers of God, going up and down, and we're being told this is the meeting point between heaven and earth, between God and people, that the God of heaven makes Himself known for the sake of relationship.

And we know that because of what Jacob hears. So remember, this is a runaway. This is a rebel who's receiving wonderful promises from God. Verse 13, I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham, and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying.

All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. This is the Lord who is speaking. Whenever you see in the Bible the word Lord all in capital letters, this is God's personal covenant name. The personal God is speaking personally to Jacob, still working out his promises. [19:01] And as he speaks, he restates that promise that we've encountered in the Abraham story, in the story of Jacob. I will give you the promised land. You'll become a great family. You will enjoy special relationship with the one true God, and one of your family members, one of your offspring, the seed, he will bring blessing, God's blessing to the whole world. So remember at what point in

Jacob's life this comes. He has no wife, he has no child, and he is no good. Yet God is faithful and gracious and very good for Jacob, and by extension, for the whole world. And if Jacob was prone to doubt, listen to how God promises his presence. Verse 15, I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised. Do we hear the personal commitment of God? His active personal presence to ensure faithfulness to fulfill his covenant promises. Here's Jacob's hope. Here's the good news. When his grabbing for blessing in the past has brought him trouble, God comes down and graciously saves him, calling him into personal relationship.

And so this stairway represents God's desire to bridge the gap, to restore relationship between sinful people and a holy God. And as the New Testament makes clear, and as Jesus makes clear, he comes to fulfill what was anticipated. He is the true stairway to heaven. Remember when we listened in on that conversation that Jesus had with Nathaniel back in John chapter 1, when Nathaniel was really skeptical? Nazareth, that's not an important place. Can anything good come from Nazareth? Can Jesus really be God's promised king? But then he's amazed by Jesus' personal knowledge of him.

And he begins immediately to praise him. You're the son of God. You're the king of Israel. And Jesus in response says to him, Nathaniel, you've seen great things, but you're going to see greater things. You will see heavens open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. Jesus says, I am the true stairway to heaven. Now how does that help us to answer the question, is God there?

Does God speak? Can I know him personally? Jesus is saying to us, I am the meeting place between God and people. In order to meet God, in order to know that he is real, and that he loves us, and that he would speak to us, and enter into a relationship, that doesn't come by going to a particular building, or performing a certain religion, or ritual, or practicing a form of obedience. It comes by knowing a person, Jesus, as Lord and as Savior. That the Bible makes clear that the meaning for our lives is the meaning of Jesus, Jesus is the bridge, the way sinners can return to the holy God. That what we lost in the Garden of Eden, personal relationship, fellowship with God, is secured for us once again by the Lord Jesus Christ. As Jesus comes to reveal God to us, he welcomes sinners to come to him.

He forgives sin, and he makes wonderful promises. Jacob saw the glory of God in this vision. Jesus reveals the glory of God in a greater way, through his identity. Through his identity. Who is Jesus? He is the eternal Son of God, who became one of us. Jesus makes the invisible God visible. He is the true and perfect image of God.

[ 23 : 53 ] If we want to know God and what he is like, we discover him in Jesus in the Gospels. Think about how he displays the glory of God in his miracles. We see the authority of God over nature, over sickness, over disease, over evil, even over death itself. We have this wonderful combination of the power of God and the love of God as Jesus performs miracles. And we see the glory and the love of God in the death of God in the death of Jesus also. One of the things about the God of the Bible is that he must always be true to himself. The holy God must take sin seriously. And we see that at the cross, as Jesus, the Son of God, takes our place, and he bears our punishment, and he experiences the death and separation that we deserve. But the God who is just and holy is also the God who is loving and gracious, because it is God himself who provides the sacrifice, as we thought about last week. God himself acts by giving his Son to die on the cross to bridge the gap, to forgive sin, so you and I can know him. Our holy God,

God sent his Son, Jesus, sent his Son to die on the cross for our sins, so that we can know God personally, that we can hear his promises for ourselves, that we too are promised that by faith we are part of a great family, the family of God, the church, that we too have a promised land. It's heaven and the new creation, and we have a special relationship. We have God with us always. So how do we respond to that? It takes us to the pillar and verses 16 to 22. This was a remarkable night for Jacob. As he met the God of glory, all of a sudden, unexpectedly, as he received these wonderful promises for himself. But now it's a new day. The Son comes up, he gets up from his sleep, but he's also a new man. How do we know? Because we see wonder, and we see worship in his life.

Look at the sense of wonder in verse 16 and 17. As he woke, he thought, surely the Lord is in this place. He was afraid and said, how awesome is this place. This house is none other than the house of God.

He has that sense of, oh, God has come near. Even though I am a sinner, he has shown kindness and drawn near. This is God's house. Though I am sinful, God has invited me in as an act of mercy and hospitality. Sinner though I am. His life has been transformed. And with a sense of wonder, he transforms two things himself. Notice first in verse 18, he turns his pillow into a pillar. There's something really significant about it. So imagine a big hunk of rock. That's a terrible pillow. But as he meets with God and has this night to remember, he then turns it so that it's now on the ground but pointing to heaven. He wants to remember that stairway, that encounter with God, the God who has met with him.

[ 27 : 54 ] And he also transforms the place name. Used to be called Luz, now called Bethel, the house of God.

This is a place of worship and wonder for Jacob. And we hear it as well in his vow. Sometimes that if can be heard as doubt or bargaining, it's better to hear a sense of amazement. He throws himself on God's mercy. Knowing he can't demand anything, but he's heard God's promise. If God will be with me and will watch over me so I return safely, then this stone that I've set up as a pillar will be God's house.

And of all that you'll give me, I'll give you a tenth. Here is true worship. For God's people, the giving of a tithe was always an expression of giving back to God as an act of worship all the kindness that they had received. He is responding to the God who has given him everything.

And Jacob discovers that God loves to give and loves to give in ways that we don't expect or bargain for. What did God give Jacob? New life, life with God. These wonderful promises from God, the reality of God with him, the reality of God. And so Jacob responds with wonder and with worship. He sets up this monument to God's mercy because that mercy is something he wants never to forget.

Now as we close, let's ask this question. How do we experience what Jacob did for ourselves? I hope as we come to a text list, we get a sense of wonder that this God is real and he is personal and he actively seeks people out and he delights to show kindness and he delights to draw near. But how do we enjoy it? How can the journey of our life be like the journey of Jacob's? Well, we started with a former slave. Let's think about the story of a former slave trader, a famous figure in church history, John Newton. So John Newton was a notorious man. As a slave trader, he was a cruel man. He was drunk.

[ 30 : 39 ] He was abusive. His life was a wreck. Well, one day he was sailing and the boat hit a storm and he was about to go overboard and somebody rescued him by sending a harpoon into his leg to pull him back into the boat. And on that journey, God met with him and saved him. And Newton would then give his life to following Jesus and preaching about and writing letters about and writing songs about the wonderful grace of God, famously expressing his wonder and worship in that hymn, Amazing Grace.

How sweet the sound that saved a wretch, a terrible person like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see. For you and I to have the story of Jacob, for you and I to have the story of Newton, we need to come to Jesus ourselves and to trust him, to understand that he is our true stairway to heaven. He has laid down his life to bridge the gap between a holy God and sinful people. He is the one who descended to save us, making peace by his sacrificial death on the cross. And now he has ascended to heaven, our perfect mediator, sitting on his throne, the work of salvation completed, issuing an invitation to come to him. For Jacob that night, he saw a stairway and it changed his life. For us, when we look, we're invited to look to see the cross. The cross. The cross is God's way to save us, to draw us into relationship, his monument of mercy and grace for us.

In the gospel, we hear Jesus say, I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you. He is the one who dies on the cross for us. He is the one who comes to us by his spirit. He is the one who will return one day to complete his plan of salvation. And every step of the way, he is with us.

When we see that reality, when we experience that reality, that's where we find wonder and worship from a new identity and a new mission. May that be true for us all today. Let's pray together.

[ 33 : 42 ] Lord, we thank you that you're the God that doesn't leave us to ourselves and in our sin. But that in the Lord.