

# HEAVEN ON THE EDGE OF NOWHERE

*SERIES: WRESTLING WITH GOD: THE JACOB NARRATIVE*

By Scott Grant

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## Dark night of the soul

The character in David Wilcox's song *If it Wasn't for the Night* speaks of a lonely "dark night of the soul" he experienced on Christmas Eve:

*If it wasn't for the night  
So cold this time of year  
The stars would never shine so bright  
So beautiful and clear*

*I have walked this road alone  
My thin coat against the chill  
When the light in me was gone  
And my winter house was still*

*When I grieved for all I've made  
Out of all I had to give  
On the eve of Christmas Day  
With no reason left to live.*

*Even then somehow in the bitter wind and cold  
Impossibly strong I know  
Even then a bloom as tender as a rose  
Was breaking through the snow  
In the dark night of the soul  
In the dark night of the soul (1)*

If Jacob had sung this song, he might have said, "That's my song." He had to walk a road alone--away from home and into exile. He well could have grieved for the mess he had made of things back home. He comes to his own dark night of the soul. Yet even then, a bloom, as tender as a rose, was breaking through the snow. A light shines forth in the darkness. Jacob finds himself in a difficult place of transition, yet the Lord transforms it. The Lord does the same with us. He transforms difficult places of transition into places of worship.

In Genesis 28:10-22, angels and the Lord himself appear to Jacob as he leaves the Promised Land. Structurally, the passage is balanced by the appearance of angels and a mysterious visitor when Jacob returns to the Promised Land (Genesis 32:1-2, 24-32).

Esau, Jacob's brother, wants to kill him because he stole the patriarchal blessing from him. Rebekah, concerned for the life of her son, convinces her husband Isaac that Jacob should leave the Promised Land to find a wife from among her relatives. So Jacob runs for his life--and for a wife.

## The Lord reveals himself

**Then Jacob departed from Beersheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place. He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. Your descendants will also be like**

**the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants 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.”** (Genesis 28:10-15)

Jacob leaves Beersheba, which is at the southwestern edge of the Promised Land, for Haran, which is north and east of the Promised Land. So Jacob, who has a stake in the land as the possessor of the birthright, has to walk the length of it as he leaves it. When the Lord first gave the land to Abraham, he told him to “walk about the land through its length and breadth” (Genesis 13:17). When Jacob walks the length of the land, he does so only as one who is leaving it. In contrast to Abraham who, in obedience to the Lord, journeyed from Haran to Canaan, now Jacob, who also carries with him the promises of God, is making the journey in reverse.

Everything is backwards. The promised descendant--who is the younger son, not the older son--is leaving the Promised Land and going back from where his grandfather came. It seems like a step back, not a step forward, in God’s plan to bless the nations through this family.

Jacob’s hope is that Esau’s anger will subside and that he’ll be able to return in a few days (Genesis 27:44). He doesn’t know what awaits him in Haran. At this point, he doesn’t know that Laban will enslave him. Nor does he know that a few days will turn into 20 years. Jacob prefigures Moses, who under threat of death left his people in Egypt and spent 40 years in the wilderness as a servant of Jethro (Exodus 2:15, 3:1). More importantly, he foreshadows the entire nation of Israel, which was twice exiled from the Promised Land and served both Egypt and Babylon. Jacob, whose name would be changed to Israel, has to go through what the nation would endure.

We’re told that he comes to “a certain place,” which the narrator does not yet identify. The narrator adds that he spent the night there “because” the sun had set. This otherwise unnecessary reference indicates that Jacob is entering a dark period. The next time the sun is reported as rising is 20 years later, when Jacob returns to the Promised Land (Genesis 32:31).

No one takes him in, so he’s either alone in the wilderness or an unfriendly city. He finds a stone and uses it for a pillow. This is a hard place. As he enters into this dark period, he arrives at a hard place. If he goes back, Esau will kill him. If he goes forward, Laban will enslave him. He’s between Beersheba and Haran, between Esau and Laban. He can’t go back. He can’t go on. With a rock for a pillow and no one to take him in, he can’t stay where he is, so this “certain place” is an impossible place. And, at this place, he has a dream. The world he inhabits when he’s awake is dark and difficult. When he goes to sleep, he sees a different world. The word translated “ladder,” which appears only here in the Old Testament, can also be translated “stairway” or “ramp.” The nature of this structure is uncertain.

Angels employ the ladder to go back and forth between heaven and earth. Angels are “ministering spirits sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation” (Hebrews 11:14). Jacob will later call the place the “gate of heaven,” so the ladder represents a link between heaven and earth, and the means by which heaven accesses earth (Genesis 28:17).

This ladder, with its “top” reaching to heaven, was literally “placed toward the earth.” Remember the tower of Babel in which rebel humanity attempted to build a tower with a “top” that reached “into heaven” (Genesis 11:4). The ladder in Jacob’s dream, by contrast, brings heaven to earth. Humanity’s efforts to reach heaven are never effective. Men and women can access heaven only when it comes to earth or when God takes them to heaven. Jacob sees the heavenly world coming to the impossibly dark and difficult earthly world that he inhabits.

The Lord, positioned above the ladder, speaks to Jacob for the first time in Genesis. He spoke earlier to Abraham and Isaac and promised to bless them and their descendants. He identifies himself as “the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac,” recalling those promises. Some of those same promises were implicit in the birthright and patriarchal blessing that now belong to Jacob, but the Lord himself now affirms and fills out the promises.

The text by no means justifies Jacob’s methods in obtaining the birthright and the blessing. On the contrary, it shows that the blessings of God are his to give and that he cannot be manipulated. Up to this point, Jacob has operated

under the premise that nothing will be given to him and that he must take in order to get ahead. The Lord shows him another way.

The Lord promises to “give” to Jacob and his descendants the land on which he lies, which is the land of Canaan, the Promised Land. He promises a multitude of descendants. In promising that his descendants will spread out to all points of the compass, the Lord is promising dominion. Yet such dominion will ultimately be benevolent, for the Lord will extend his blessings to all the families of the earth through Jacob and his descendants. All this the Lord promised to Abraham and Isaac; now he speaks these same promises to Jacob, and in some ways even expands them, though Jacob for all the world seems like an unworthy recipient.

Then the Lord addresses himself to Jacob’s immediate concerns. He promises his presence and his protection to Jacob “wherever you go,” including and especially Haran, the dark and difficult place he is about to enter. The pagan gods were thought to be geographically limited, but the God of Abraham and Isaac crosses borders to be with his people. Although Jacob is leaving the Promised Land, the Lord promises to bring him back. Again, Jacob foreshadows his descendants. The Lord would bring the people of Israel back from Egypt, and he would bring them back from Babylon (Genesis 15:14, Isaiah 40:1-11). Jacob is going into exile, but he will return, and the Lord says that he will be present with Jacob “until” he has carried out his promises to him. In other words, the Lord will not abandon Jacob once he has fulfilled his promises; the Lord *will be with* Jacob to fulfill his promises.

## **Transitions in life**

This story relates to the transitions that occur in our lives. You leave some “land” of familiarity for the great unknown. You move from one place to another. You graduate. You leave your job. You leave behind a relationship. You go from single to being married, from being married to being single. You abandon a way of life. You go from full quiver to empty nest, from vigorous health to debilitating illness. Finally, you move from life to death.

Before you move on, you want to understand what happened in this place. So it seems as if you must walk the entire length of the land you’re leaving, so to speak, in order to understand your history in it. One by one, memories wave to you as you go by. You wonder if they fit into a coherent story line. Perhaps the new land will give you perspective on the old land, but for now, complete understanding eludes you.

As you move on, in some ways, it may seem as if you’ve moved backward, not forward. You know that the sun has set on a chapter in your life. Yet the sun has not yet risen on the new chapter. You’ve come to a dark place. The future looks dim. You’re confused. You wonder what God is going to do with your life, if you’ll be the blessing to others that you want to be. You find a rock and use it for a pillow; you’ve come to a hard place.

You may be lonely, possibly a little desperate. You can’t go back. You can’t stay where you are. You wonder how you can muster the strength to go on. You’ve come to an impossible place. You wonder if God himself has trapped you and you find yourself speaking to God as David did: “You have enclosed me behind and before, and laid your hand upon me” (Psalm 139:5).

The world you inhabit is dark and difficult. In this world, it seems that no one gives you anything and that you must take in order to get ahead. But the story of Jacob tells us that there is another world, one that has broken into this world, and that there is another way. The Lord is here, and you have a future.

The apostle Paul writes: “In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8). The enormous promises given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, which also come to believers in Christ, fill the horizon of the lives of those who long for the appearance of the Lord.

We will live forever in the Promised Land--the new heavens and the new earth. We will be part of a great nation--fully redeemed believers in Christ who constitute the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We’ll have dominion over the new creation as we care for it in the service of our Lord. We will be a blessing to God’s creation and to all the families of the earth, which will come together as the family of God. This future, currently laid up for us, will open up for us on the day of the Lord’s appearing. Perhaps these promises have been spoken to others, but now, like Jacob, you understand that God is speaking them to you.

Until those promises are fulfilled, the Lord pledges his presence and his protection for your next step, and the step after that and the step after that. He will be with you wherever you go, including and especially the next place, even if it turns out to be as dark and difficult as Haran. You may feel as if you're going into exile--from a place, from a people, maybe from the Lord himself--but the Lord will be with you until he has carried out all his promises. You have a long-term future, and you have a short-term future.

This is what the Lord is also telling us through the book of Revelation. The apostle John's experience is similar to that of Jacob. John was living in exile on the island of Patmos when the Lord appeared to him. John records his experience in Revelation 4:1-2: "After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me, said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things.' Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne." God reveals himself to John so that he might write the book of Revelation to the seven churches in Asia. John tells them that heaven has broken into this world and that they have a future. Likewise, heaven has broken into this world, and we have a future.

In the next section, Jacob wakes up and responds to his night vision.

### **Jacob's response**

**Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." 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." So Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on its top. He called the name of that place Bethel; however, previously the name of the city had been Luz. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear, and I return to my father's house in safety, then the LORD will be my God. This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will surely give a tenth to you." (Genesis 28:16-22)**

Jacob responds to the dream in three ways. He offers a new interpretation of the place he has come to, he builds a memorial pillar and he makes a vow.

Jacob was on the run and this is the place he has come to. When he went to sleep, it was dark and difficult, but his dream opens his eyes to see this place in a new light. He now says, "Surely, the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." This would be the last place Jacob would expect to find the Lord, yet this is where the Lord reveals himself. As Jacob runs from Esau, he runs into God.

The realization of the Lord's presence causes Jacob to be afraid. Abraham and Isaac didn't respond with fear when the Lord revealed himself to them (Genesis 12:1, 15:1, 17:1, 22:1, 26:2). Jacob, though, has lived as a deceiver and manipulator. He has neither embraced the Lord nor his ways. When the Lord shows up in such a life, what is the reason? Perhaps he's coming in judgment. Often, when God reveals himself, people with an awareness of their sin respond in fear (Genesis 3:6, Exodus 3:6, Isaiah 6:5). Even though the Lord spoke of a future for Jacob, a troubled conscience may be prompting his fearful response. He was afraid of Esau, but Esau is now the least of his concerns. Now he's afraid of God.

The word translated "awesome" stems from the verb translated "was afraid." At one level, Jacob is probably saying, "How fearful is this place." But, given the Lord's own interpretation of the meaning of his presence and Jacob's response in verses 18 through 22, we should probably understand that Jacob is also experiencing a sense of wonder and astonishment at being in the presence of the Lord, particularly at this time and place. He now sees this place as the gate of heaven because this is where heaven opened its gate, so to speak. The tower of Babel represented a massive and coordinated human effort to break the gates of heaven. Yet this place, so insignificant that the narrator can only call it "a certain place" earlier in the text--to which one lonely and desperate man has come--is now called the gate of heaven.

Jacob also calls it the house of God because this is the place where God appeared. Although God appeared in other

places to Abraham and Isaac, neither of those men called those places the house of God. And, although Eden is described as if it were a temple, the language that Jacob employs for this place is more straightforward. The house of God, or the temple, is the place where God dwells. The narrator is developing the temple motif, which will be more fully developed in Exodus, where Israel will build the tabernacle in the wilderness. Eventually, the permanent temple would be built in the Promised Land, where Jacob now finds himself.

The narrator tells us that Jacob “rose early in the morning,” just as Abraham did after receiving visions of the Lord at night (Genesis 21:14, 22:3). He converts the stone that he had placed under his head into a pillar that memorializes God’s appearance. The word translated “pillar” (*masseba*) forms a word play with the verb that is used when the Lord “stood” (*nissab*) above the ladder (verse 13). The pillar in some sense represents the ladder of Jacob’s dream. The word for “pillar” also forms a word play with the verb that is used to describe the ladder’s being “set” (*mussab*) on earth (verse 12). The “top” of the ladder reached into heaven (verse 12), and now Jacob consecrates the pillar by pouring oil on the “top” of it.

Jacob names the place Bethel, which means “House of God.” Now, for the first time, the narrator lets us know where Jacob is. The “place” is a “city”--Luz, which the first readers would know as a large Canaanite city on the northern edge of the Promised Land. We now know that when Jacob had arrived at this place, he had walked the entire length of the Promised Land and was on the verge of leaving it. The narrator considered this city, which was also a Canaanite cultic center, to be meaningless, reduced to the designation of “a certain place.” Any meaning that it now has concerns God’s disposition toward this city. His presence, in a sense, transforms it. Now it’s Bethel, the House of God.

The identity of the city, now revealed, shows this to be an even more dark and difficult place than we first imagined. No one in this city, where they worship other gods, has extended hospitality to Jacob. He spent the night alone in an unfriendly border town on the edge of nowhere. But the Lord has promised to be with Jacob and to keep him and to bring him back to the Promised Land. Jacob now vows that he will make the Lord his God if the Lord keeps these promises.

For Jacob, the Lord is not yet his God. When he was talking to his father, he called the Lord “your God” (27:20). Even in the middle of deceiving his father, he was honest about his relationship with Lord: The Lord was his father’s God, but not his God.

Food to eat and garments to wear would be implicit in the Lord’s promise to keep Jacob, but Jacob, true to form, wants everything in writing. Food (literally “bread”) and garments have played an integral part in the Jacob narrative up to now. Jacob bought the birthright when he “gave Esau bread and stew” (Genesis 25:34). He stole the blessing when he wore Esau’s “garments” and brought his father a savory meal (Genesis 27:15-17). Jacob gave food to others and took the garments of another in order to get what he wanted. He’s not sure he can trust the Lord to “give” him bread and garments. In seeking to get the upper hand with people, Jacob bargains and deceives. It should not be surprising then that he is suspicious of the Lord’s promises and that he enters into negotiations with him.

As was mentioned earlier, Jacob had converted the stone into a pillar that symbolized the ladder of his dream. Now he envisions the pillar as representative of God’s house, which, of course, would eventually be made of stones. The temple is the place to which people brought their tithes, or their “tenths.” A temple, a place of worship, is more permanent than a ladder, so the change in symbolism probably represents Jacob’s commitment to make the Lord his God. If the Lord fulfills his promises, Jacob will embrace the Lord as his God, as evidenced by his commitment to give a tenth of his possessions to the Lord. If the Lord and Jacob both fulfill their promises, Jacob would be converted from a grasper to a giver. Jacob has converted the stone. The completion of his conversion, though under way, is still in the future.

Jacob, though he bargains with the Lord, is at least responsive to the Lord. The Lord is not yet his God. He’s more in the investigative mode right now. His journey, prompted by his brother’s anger and the need of a wife, now becomes a spiritual one. We wonder: What will happen to this man? Will he find a wife? Will he return to the land? Will he reconcile with Esau? More importantly, we wonder: Will he embrace the God of his fathers?

## **Transitions in a new light**

Perhaps you've come to a dark and difficult place. Now, the Lord opens your eyes to see it in a new light. This is the last place you'd expect to find the Lord. But now, even as you consider Jacob's vision, you realize that the Lord is here. And you say, "Surely, the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." There may be something big you're running from, and something big you're hoping for. Jacob was running from death and hoping for a wife. On the run, you run into God. You relate not only to Jacob but to David once again, who envisions running from God. Psalm 139:7-12:

Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, you are there.  
If I take the wings of the dawn,  
If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,  
Even there your right hand will lay hold of me.  
If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me,  
And the light around me will be night,"  
Even the darkness is not dark to you  
And the night is as bright as the day.  
Darkness and light are alike to you.

Whatever you were running from and whatever you're hoping for--no matter how imposing the threat or how luminous the hope--there's something bigger you have to confront: God. When you run into him, at first you're frightened. You know he's larger than anything you've ever encountered or hoped for, and you're not sure what his presence means. At some point, however, fear gives way to wonder and astonishment at being in the presence of the living God.

This "certain place" that you have come to in your loneliness and desperation then becomes, for you, the house of God and the gate of heaven. It was, in some sense, an unfriendly border town on the edge of nowhere, but now it becomes the place where heaven breaks through, the place where you meet with God. And you say, "How awesome is this place."

The place you've come from or the place you're going to may be awesome because of the Lord's presence in those places. But you didn't think this place was awesome. Now you know that God's presence has transformed it. His presence has also transformed your journey. Earlier, your goals were to ward off threats and get what you wanted. Now, your journey is a spiritual one. You know that this God is here to stay no matter where you go or what you do.

Now that the Lord has made himself known to you, will you make him your God? Jacob was suspicious. Jacob was a negotiator. He related to God the way he related to people. He would not make the Lord his God until the Lord fulfilled his promises. There may be in you something of the suspicious negotiator, which makes you hesitant to commit to this God who has shown up at this place in your life. The way you relate to people is probably some measure of the way you relate to God.

Hear Jesus' words to Thomas, and hear them spoken to you: "Stop doubting and believe" (John 20:27, NIV). Stop being a grasper, and start being a giver. Embrace the Lord. Convert the stone into a temple: Convert the place of transition in your life into a place of worship. See it as the gate of heaven and the house of God.

This text prompted me to remember dark and difficult places of transition in my life. When I came to those places, I was not aware of the Lord's presence. But the Lord, in giving me a glimpse of himself, transformed those places. Each of them became a holy place where the Lord called out of me a deeper, sweeter kind of worship. Those places are memorialized in my mind. And I say, regarding each of them, "How awesome is this place!"

## **A new ladder**

When Philip told Nathanael about Jesus of Nazareth, Nathanael said to him, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Yet when Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, he said, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit." The Lord, of course, changed the name of Jacob, who was a deceiver, to Israel. Now Jesus calls Nathanael,

who unlike Jacob hides nothing and says what he thinks, a true Israelite.

Jesus sees Nathanael as a typical member of the reconstituted Israel, telling him, “Truly, truly I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” (John 1:45-51). Nathanael is something of a new Jacob, who will see not a ladder but the Son of Man. Jesus, the Son of Man, becomes the link between heaven and earth.

Humanity can build its towers, but the only human structure ever built that reached into heaven was no more than a few feet tall. It was erected in a matter of minutes, probably by one or two soldiers at the most. They never thought of reaching into heaven; they only thought of executing a rebel on earth. Two pieces of wood and a few nails were all they needed. The rebel, as he died there, threw open the gates of heaven. After all, he is the gate of heaven. He is heaven’s ladder. He is the house of God. He is the place where God reveals himself, the place where we meet with God. *The importance of a place, then, is superseded by the importance of a person.* If we say, “How awesome is this place,” it is only because our eyes have been opened to see Jesus in this place.

What about this place, the place where we gather today to worship the God of Jacob and the God of Nathanael? As the body of Christ, together we constitute the house of God (Ephesians 2:19-22). There’s nothing special about this piece of dirt. It has been noted on many occasions that there is nothing special about the design of this building. Yet people have been coming to this place week after week for more than 50 years to worship the living God. You make this place special because the living God has taken up residence in you, and you have come to this place.

We pray, week after week and year after year, that God would reveal himself among us in this place on Sunday mornings--that we would, in a sense, see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man, that we would see Jesus as the meeting place of God. When those prayers are answered, this place in a sense becomes the house of God. This place becomes the gate of heaven. This place becomes Bethel. So I say, today as we worship the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ, “How awesome is this place.”

Some of you may be in a place of transition from seeking to finding, from unbelief to belief, from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. Such a place can be as dark and difficult as anywhere else. Today, perhaps, you have seen the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man, and you have heard the Lord say to you, “Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.” If so, this place of transition can become for you a place of worship and the sun will arise on a new chapter in your life.

Near the end of David Wilcox’ song, thoughts of a baby illuminate his dark night of the soul on Christmas Eve:

*If it wasn’t for the babe  
Lying helpless on the straw  
There would be no Christmas Day  
And the night would just go on*

*When it seems that death has won  
Buried deep beneath the snow  
Where the summer leaves have gone  
The seed of hope will grow*

*If it wasn’t for the night  
So cold this time of year  
The stars would never shine so bright  
So beautiful and clear (2)*

When we see the Babe, illuminating the sky as the morning star and the Son of Man, we can even be thankful for the night, which makes him shine all the brighter.

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## NOTES

(1) *If it Wasn't for the Night*, © 2002 David Wilcox.

(2) Ibid.

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Genesis 28:10-22

5th Message

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