

Stairway to Heaven

Genesis 28:10 – 22

Daniel 2:13 – 14

John 1:43 – 52

Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church

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Is the Universe Open or Closed - Psalm 121

¹I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? ²My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

Psalm 121 is well known and loved. It begins, ¹I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? ²My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. 'Inspired' by these words, the poet, D. H. Lawrence writes,

I lift up mine eyes unto the hills
and there they are, but no strength comes from them to me.

Only from darkness
and ceasing to see
strength comes.

In this and other poems 'inspired' by the text of the King James Bible, Lawrence writes to the void, draining the world and the word of meaning. His 'inspiration,' is, perverse, like that of a terrorist 'inspired' by that which he intends to destroy.

The Christian sociologist Peter Berger has written about how the 'sacred canopy,' those aspects of life in which God is relevant, has shrunk in the modern world. Pushing this idea even farther, the Christian philosopher Francis Schaeffer argued that modern art and philosophy have 'closed' the universe.' For many in the modern world, God no longer plays a meaningful part in the unfolding of life. The universe exists, but he does not. The lights are on, but nobody's home. There is no transcendent God who brings forth light to creation. There is no over-arching purpose to life: only a race to oblivion. There is no inspiration to be found in the hills, in the beauty of nature – only darkness.

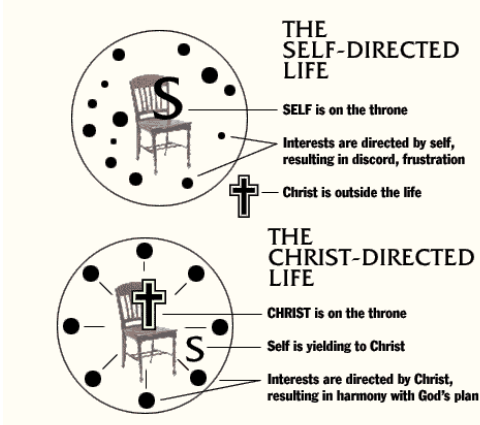
Ideas have consequences. What we believe influences how we act. The poet Emily Dickenson understood this truth. She wrote,

The abdication of belief,
Makes the behavior small

Closing the universe makes things small. The Psalmist looks to the hills and is inspired to place his faith in God, the maker of the hills. The reader of Lawrence's poems is not encouraged to ponder magnificence, seek for meaning, or move out beyond the transcribing limits of his own understanding. Why bother? Only

emptiness, meaninglessness, and darkness await any who would attempt to do so. The loss of faith makes things small. There is a cost to closing the universe.

These two circles represent two kinds of lives:



Which circle best describes your life?

There was a diagram often included in the evangelistic tool “The Four Spiritual Laws.” It illustrates two types of life. On the top is “The Self-Directed Life:” and, on the bottom, “The Christ-Directed Life.” Regretfully, our world today literally celebrates “The Self-Directed Life.” This is seen most starkly in the willingness of our world to celebrate those who cross gender lines. Think of Bruce/Caitlyn Jenner on the cover of *Vanity Fair*; or the transgender child, Avery, on the cover of the January 2017 issue of *National Geographic*.

Genesis 1:27 tells us a fundamental truth about humans and humanity. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. To be human is to be male or female. If someone is born male, but self-identifies – note the word ‘self’ – as female, then there is clearly a disconnect between the man’s biological reality and his psychological-social reality. Our modern secular age insists that the psychological-social self-understanding trumps the biological reality: the inner self rules. Money, time, effort, culture, medicine, surgery and even the law are harnessed together to assert that a person’s inner reality reigns supreme over their outward, biological reality. As a society, we have the wealth and technology to create such conformity between a person’s inner identity and his or her outward appearance. I learned a new politically correct phrase this past week. It used to be, when a man sought to become a woman, or vice versa, a woman sought to become a man, the surgical procedure was called *sex reassignment surgery*. That is an accurate statement: by the surgery a person’s sexual identity was reassigned from male to female or from female to male. The new, politically correct language is *Gender Confirmation Surgery*. The surgery confirms a person’s inner gender identity. The sovereign self is upon the throne.

That said, does it not make **more** sense to focus on helping the inner person come to grips with and accept his or her biological reality? Male and female he created them: it is wise to seek to live within the world as God has created it; to live within the world as God has created you. But in our world today, with the sovereign self on the throne, that is not an acceptable option.

The Bible’s message is that God has created the world in a certain way, and that there is a seen and an unseen world. God is at work in both the seen and unseen world.

The Message of Jacob's Ladder: God is at work in the seen and unseen world

¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran. ¹¹ 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. ¹² He had a dream in which he saw a stairway ^a resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

Jacob was the second of twin boys born to the patriarch Isaac and his wife Rebekah. It was said that at his birth he came from the womb grasping the heel of his brother Esau. This story of his birth is intended to express a key element of Jacob's life and temperament. He is a grabber, a trickster, and a schemer. Jacob is one who lives by his wits and his guile. Jacob lived most of his life believing that God did not matter. Jacob relied upon himself, not God.

At this point in Jacob's story, Genesis 28, Jacob is fleeing for his life. His tricks and his conspiracies have resulted in a murderous anger in his brother, Esau. Jacob's mother, Rebekah, sensing possible impending tragedy, has sent Jacob away, to her brother Laban, far to the north. Jacob is a man on the run and in his exhaustion he stops for the night, taking stones for his pillow. He dreams. In his dream, he sees a ramp, a stairway to heaven, and on that ramp he sees the angels of God ascending and descending. When Jacob wakes from his sleep he names the place where he has slept based upon his dream. He sees that God is in this place. He calls it Bethel: 'house of God.' It is the place where earth and heaven meet.

What is the message of this image? What is God seeking to say to Jacob? Jacob learns that his fate is not in his own hands alone. In this dream, Jacob is taught that the universe is not closed. God is at work in the events of earth. There is a connection between the things of heaven and the things of earth. God is involved. God is working his will and purpose between earth and heaven. He sends his messengers, for that is what angels are, the messengers of God.

This is an essential message to men like Jacob, and to men and women of the modern world. It is a message to those who may speak religious words but who believe primarily in themselves alone. A word to those who live as if God has cast them loose, left them adrift, to make their own way in the world. This vision tells us that there is more at work in our world than what we ourselves can see, comprehend and envision. More is going on than he, Jacob, realizes. The things of God may be unseen, but they are not non-existent. There is a two-way street between earth and heaven, between the seen and the unseen.

There is a Two-Way Street between the Seen and the Unseen

⁴⁸ "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

Jacob's vision is of the angels of God ascending and descending. There is no wall of separation between earth and heaven. It is a two way street. God's sovereign purposes guide the unfolding of our lives. What we do on earth echoes in eternity. There are transactions between heaven and earth. Decisions made in heaven reverberate on earth. The choices on earth echo in heaven. Phillip hears the Lord Jesus issue the call, '*follow me.*' At this moment, Jesus is on his way to Galilee. But, before Phillip will leave with Jesus, he decides to go to find his brother, Nathaniel. Phillip's choice, made in time and space, has tremendous spiritual impact upon Nathaniel for it brings him to Jesus, enabling him to hear and believe.

Being told these things about Jesus, Nathaniel, at first, is skeptical. He asks, 'can anything good come out of Nazareth?' The presumption behind this rhetorical question is the same as the reason why the Magi in the story of Jesus' birth traveled first to Jerusalem. It is assumed that the great are born great: that kings are born in the palaces located in capital cities. Nazareth was a tiny town of no earthly importance. Why would anything or anyone of importance be born or raised there?

Prejudice can be a barrier to belief. All of the Old Testament anticipates the coming of the Messiah. Phillip tells Nathaniel that he has found the one to whom Moses and the prophets point. He has found the Messiah. Nathaniel initially stumbles because the report of the Messiah's background is not what he expected. Many at the time of Jesus did not believe in him because he was not what they expected in a Messiah. He lacked the expected pedigree. He did not come from the expected social circles. He did not seem to have the expected ancestry of the king of the Jews. They wanted one who was great in the eyes of the world, a political and military leader, not a suffering servant.

Phillip, wisely, determines that some things are not worth arguing about. He tells his brother to 'come and see.' He wants him to check things out for himself. When Jesus sees Nathaniel he declares that he is '*an Israelite without guile.*' There is an irony in Jesus' declaration. In Genesis, when Jacob is finally brought to transforming faith, when his life is changed, he is renamed – '*Israel.*' It is from him that the Jews are also known as '*Israelites:*' they are the collective sons of Jacob, the one renamed '*Israel.*' Jacob was the first '*Israel.*' Jacob's life, until the point of his transformation, was one of unending guile and deceit. We say 'like father, like son,' but Nathaniel, thankfully, was nothing like his forefather Jacob/Israel.

Jesus knows these things regarding Nathaniel's character because there is no wall of separation between earth and heaven. Jesus knows about Nathaniel before he has met Nathaniel. In addition to his comment regarding Nathaniel's character, Jesus tells him that he had seen him '*under the fig tree.*' For Nathaniel, Jesus' supernatural knowledge is sufficient. His initial skepticism is overcome. He believes.

Confessing his faith, Nathaniel tells Jesus, “*Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.*” Jesus in turn expresses surprise at Nathaniel’s quick reversal and confession of faith. ⁵⁰ Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” Nathaniel will see the fulfillment of the dream of Jacob’s ladder. He will see the angels of God, ascending and descending. He will know the one in whom earth and heaven meet.

Jesus Christ – The One In Whom Earth and Heaven Meet

“Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

Jesus refers to himself, in his words to Nathaniel, as the ‘*Son of Man.*’ ‘*Son of Man*’ is one of the many titles of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the most titled person in human history. It is remarkable how many titles for Jesus have already been revealed in the opening chapter of John’s gospel: Jesus is the *Word (logos), the Christ, Rabbi, King of Israel, Son of God, Light, the True Light, the Preferred One, the Lord, the Lamb of God, Messiah and Son of Man:* twelve titles in all.

Of these titles the most commonly used one in the New Testament is ‘*Christ.*’ It means ‘*the anointed one*’ and it refers to the Messiah. The image of the Messiah is one of the deepest, most complex and richest of the Old Testament. The Messiah would be king, prophet priest and servant of God.

The second most common title for Jesus Christ used in the New Testament is that of ‘*Lord.*’ The word ‘*Lord*’ in New Testament times could have one of three meanings. At its simplest, it was a polite form of address, much like the modern English word ‘*sir.*’ Sometimes in the gospel stories when an individual addresses Jesus as ‘*Lord*’ we must realize that they are simply addressing him politely. The second use refers to a master who owned a slave. He was Lord of the slave. The apostle Paul often refers to himself as a ‘*slave*’ of Jesus Christ, referring to Jesus as ‘*Lord*’ in this sense of the word. The third use of the word ‘*Lord*’ referred to imperial usage and implied sovereignty. It was from this usage of the word ‘*Lord*’ that the early Christians fell afoul the Roman Empire. As a sign of loyalty Roman subjects would be required to confess ‘*Caesar is Lord:*’ a confession of sovereignty Christians could not and would not make.

The third most common title of Jesus Christ in the New Testament is ‘*Son of Man.*’ It is noteworthy especially because this is the title by which Jesus most often referred to himself. Of the twelve titles named in John chapter one, this is the title Jesus applies to himself. The meaning of this title is often misunderstood, in part due to a mistaken contrast between it and another common title: ‘*Son of God.*’

Jesus Christ – Son of God – refers to his obedience

⁴⁹ Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.”

Nathaniel tells Jesus that he perceives that he is '*the Son of God*.' Commonly this title is assumed to refer to the divine aspects of Jesus nature: i.e. that '*Son of God*' is a reference to his divinity, his divine nature. But this is not quite right. The emphasis in the title falls not upon 'God' but upon '*Son*': with the corresponding idea of a son's obedience to his father. Thus the accent refers to Jesus' obedience to God's will. In declaring Jesus to be the '*Son of God*' we are saying that he lives his life in a manner that pleases God, which fulfills all the expectations of his heavenly Father. He is God's son because he is obedient to God's will.

Ironically, the next title for Jesus: Son of Man – refers to his divine authority!

Jesus Christ – Son of Man – refers to his Divine Authority

⁵⁰ Jesus said, "You believe ^a because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that." ⁵¹ He then added, "I tell you ^b the truth, you ^c shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

In surprising contrast, Jesus' reference to himself as '*Son of Man*' is in fact a bold claim to divine authority. To understand why this is so, we must note that the title '*Son of Man*' comes from Daniel 7:13 -14.

¹³ "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

In this passage, the '*Son of Man*' boldly approaches God's presence, '*the Ancient of Days*' and from God receives '*authority, glory, and sovereign power*.' He becomes the object of worship of all nations, peoples and languages. His kingdom and dominion are everlasting. In light of this passage we learn that '*Son of Man*' is an exalted title, claiming a deeper level of authority than might have been expected.

This is the title Jesus most often applied to himself. When we know its reference and meaning we find that what is being claimed is bold and arresting. Why did Jesus chose to reveal himself in this way, according to this term? My sense is that the Lord avoided applying the title Messiah, Anointed One, to himself because the age in which he lived was ripe with Messianic expectation. As we read last week, in vs. 19 – 28, the religious leaders in Jerusalem sent an investigative delegation into the wilderness to question John the Baptist in order to see if he was claiming to be the Messiah. The ancient world was ready and expectant. Nonetheless, truth must often be revealed slowly, in stages. As Emily Dickenson has written,

the truth must dazzle gradually,
or every man be blind.

Fireworks reveal their explosive beauty only when lit in proper sequence and timing, not when exploded all at once. The revelation of Jesus' true identity needed to unfold in its proper time in order to be clearly seen. Early in his ministry Jesus tells those whom he heals that they are not to tell people of their healing. He does not want things to get out of hand. The realization that he was the Messiah would come in its own time.

At the same time, the title Son of Man, boldly asserts Jesus Christ's divine authority and mission, but it does so without immediately exciting the popular imagination of the common people of the day. The expectation of the coming 'Son of Man' was not obscure by any means, but it was not as widely anticipated as that the imagery of the coming Messiah. This title permitted the Lord to refer to himself and his mission in all of its fullness without sparking a premature popular uprising of messianic fervor and rebellion among the common folk in ancient Palestine.

Close

In his dream Jacob saw a stairway to heaven, revealing to him that there was indeed a connection between the things of earth and the things of heaven. They are not independent. They are linked. Earth and heaven are linked most significantly in the person of Jesus Christ. He is God incarnate. He is the Son of Man. He is the one who has descended from heaven at God's command and for his sovereign purpose. It is Jesus Christ who, after his death and resurrection, ascended into heaven to receive all authority from God the Father, declaring him to be the King of kings and the Lord of lords. As Paul tells us in Colossians 1:15 – 20 Jesus Christ is:

the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

We began this message noting how everything in the modern world lifts up and affirms the sovereignty of the individual. As we close, I want to circle back and ask the question: "Who sits on the throne of your life?" Is your life directed by your own desires, beliefs and intentions? Or is Jesus Christ the Lord of your life? Who rules your heart? Your dreams? Your desires? Submit yourself to Christ today. Give him the key to your life. Let him take charge.

Say 'Amen' Somebody