



# God's Great Desire

Gen. 28:10-19

Be honest. How many of you would like a closer relationship with God than you have right now? (me too)

How many of you have ever thought that it seems as though God is distant or removed from your situation? (me too)

Over the next Sundays we are embarking on a great spiritual adventure. And I believe that every single person who authentically engages in this endeavor will discover that ... *God Is Closer Than You Think!*

- For some of us this will mean a course correction in our spiritual journey. Somewhere in the past we started to spiritually drift away from the vibrant relationship with God that we once knew.
- For others it's going to be a season of discovery. Maybe you've never been close to God - but you've desperately wanted to have a relationship with him.

I'm going to ask you to pray with me as we ask God's blessing on our spiritual expedition.

This is a JOURNEY; meaning that today will be a beginning and I can't share all I'd like to with you. But if you will come along on this journey, I know that in the next few weeks you will learn how to experience more genuinely and deeply, the God who is here.

Now, what we look at today is the first of some very important steps.

[PRAYER]

I am going to be sharing with you two images that will be the themes for this series. They will help you remember the important Biblical teaching you will hear. Today I'll share the first.

The first is Michelangelo's amazing painting of God and Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Looking at the painting, you notice that the figure of God, on the right, is rushing toward Adam on a cloud, propelled by the angels. His hand is extended toward Adam with great vigor. He twists his body to move it as close to the man as possible. His head is turned toward the man, and his gaze is fixed on him. God's arm is stretched out, his index finger extended straight forward: every muscle is taut.

God's entire being is wrapped up in his desire to close the gap between himself and this man. He can't wait. His hand comes within a hairbreadth of the man's hand.

The painting is traditionally called *The Creation of Adam*, but some scholars say it should be called *The Endowment of Adam*. Adam has already been given physical life—his eyes are open, and he is conscious. What is happening is that he is being offered life with God.

It pictures God, is as close as he can be. But having come that close, he allows just a little space, so that Adam can choose. He waits for Adam to make his move.

Adam is more difficult to interpret. His arm is partially extended toward God, but his body reclines in a lazy pose, leaning backward as if he has no interest at all in making a connection. Maybe he assumes that God, having come this far, will close the gap. Maybe he is indifferent to the possibility of touching his creator. Maybe he lacks the strength. All he would have to do is lift a finger.

That is the thought I want you to hold onto.

**GODS GREAT DESIRE**

First, this picture reminds us of the Bible truth that *God is closer than we think*. He is never farther than a prayer away. All it takes is the barest effort, the lift of a finger. Every moment—this moment right now, is one finger away from life with God.

### GOD'S GREAT DESIRE

And it also pictures something else. That the story of the Bible isn't primarily about the desire of people to be with God; it's the desire of God to be with people.

THE PRIMARY PROMISE: *"I WILL BE WITH YOU"*

The central promise in the Bible is not *"I will forgive you,"* although of course that promise is there. It is not the promise of *life after death*, although we are offered that as well. It is also not *"I will fix all your problems."* **The most frequent promise in the Bible is *"I will be with you."***

Before Adam and Eve ever sinned or needed forgiveness, they were promised God's presence. He would walk with them in the cool of the day.

The promise came to Enoch, who *"walked with God."* It was made to Noah, to Abraham and Sarah, to Jacob and Joseph and Moses and David and Amos and Mary and Paul and too many others to list.

- It is the reason for courage: *"Do not be terrified; . . . for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."*
- It kept them going in darkness: *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for you are with me."* (Ps. 23)
- God gave Israel the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant and manna and the temple and a pillar of cloud and another one of fire, like so many *Post-It Notes* saying, *"Don't forget. I am with you."*
- When God himself came to earth, his redemptive name was Immanuel—*God with us*.
- When Jesus left, his promise was to send the Spirit so that *"I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*
- At the end of time, when sin is a distant and defeated memory and forgiveness is as obsolete as dial telephones, it will be sung, *"God's*

*dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God."*

Dallas Willard (who lost his mother as a young child) writes of a little boy whose mom had died. He was especially sad and lonely at night. He would come into his father's room and ask if he could sleep with him. Even then he could not rest until he knew not only that he was with his father, but that his father's face was turned toward him. "Father, is your face turned toward me now?" And in the dark he would reach out with his hand to touch his father's face to be sure. When at last he was assured of this, he could rest.

I want to live with God's face toward me. I want to experience—in the dark of night as well as the light of day—the reality that Moses prayed for: *"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you."* Don't you?

### GOD WITH JACOB - Gen 28:10-22

Well, who is a candidate for such a life? Who can have that experience? Somewhere deep within we respond, "Only certain special ones, but not me." Isn't that what we feel. Saints and mystics, of course; the devoted and the wise.

I have news for you. Not just them. The Bible tells us it also include people who are chronically unsatisfied. Restless people and demanding people; whiners and complainers; the impossible to please.

Consider what happened to **Jacob**. He was no spiritual giant. His dad never cared for him much and preferred his other son, Esau, who, while not the brightest bulb on the chandelier and having a serious body hair problem, was a jock with hunter-gatherer potential.

One night Jacob was running away from Esau, who was trying to kill him because Jacob had cheated him and deceived their father. Jacob stopped for the night at *"a certain place."* That's a Hebrew way of saying no place in particular. Toledo, maybe. (Or Bucksport, TN.) It could have been anywhere.

Jacob had done nothing to merit what was about to happen to him. But that night Jacob had a dream. He saw a ladder (vv.12...) *"resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it."* God said to him:

*V. 13 -"I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. . . . (v. 15) I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go. . . ."*

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought (vv. 16-17), *"Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it. . . . This is none other than the house of God, this is the gate of heaven."*

The Bible tells us that each moment that we live outside the awareness of God's presence is a kind of sleepwalking, which is why Paul wrote, *"Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."* Here somebody's eyes get opened to the fact that God is right here in this ordinary place, with this ordinary person.

The striking phrase of Jacob in v. 16 is *"and I was not aware of it."* Somehow he was looking in the wrong direction. **Apparently it is possible for God to be present without the person recognizing that he is there. Apparently it is possible that God is closer than you think.**

This is Jacob's discovery.

Jacob calls this place where he had the dream "Beth-el," that is, *"the house of God, the place where God is present."* It is transformed for him from "a certain place"—nowhere special—to the place inhabited by God himself.

#### WE AREN'T CLIMBING JACOB'S LADDER

There is an old children's song: *"We are climbing Jacob's ladder. . . . Every round goes higher, higher..."*

But the song gets the story wrong. It's not a ladder for human beings to climb up. It's a ladder for God to come down. All the way down to where we live.

This is the story of the God of the Sistine Chapel. God is still in the business of coming down to earth: this job, this hospital room, this car, this bed, this vacation. Any place can become Bethel, the house of God. Toledo, maybe. Or the chair you're sitting in as you hear these words.

*Jacob's life starts to change*, but not all at once. God's presence does not mean he is exempt from problems or character flaws. Yet his journey has begun. *Eventually* he decides to take the enormous risk of reconciling with his brother. Instead of ripping him off, he wants to give back to him. He sends on ahead extravagant gifts: 220 goats, 220 ewes and rams, 30 camels, 50 cows and bulls, 30 donkeys, and a cat. (Actually, there is no cat in the

story. The cat is not a biblical animal. Apparently even God doesn't like cats.)

Jacob sees his brother after two decades of separation and hatred. We wait to see whether Esau will kill him. *"But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept."*

After a whole childhood of living as enemies, and two decades of living as strangers—now they are brothers. And Jacob makes one of the great statements of Scripture: **Gen. 33:10** *"To see your face is like seeing the face of God. . . ."* (underline that)

**Because once you meet God at Bethel. Once you see God in an ordinary moment at no particular place, you never know where He will show up next!** You could start seeing him anywhere—even in the face of someone who's been your mortal enemy for twenty years.

God is closer than you think. . . .

ELISHA - 2 Kings 6:13-17

In a city called Dothan, a servant of the prophet Elisha was terrified because he and his boss were surrounded by Israel's enemies. (v.15) *"What shall we do?"* he cried. Elisha told him to chill out, for (v.16) *"those who are with us are more than those who are with them."* Then he prayed ( v.17) for him: *"O LORD, open his eyes so he may see."* And the Lord opened his eyes, and he saw that he was surrounded by horses and chariots of fire—the power and protection of God.

What if this were to become your prayer as well - *"Lord, open my eyes"*? What if every time you are challenged or burdened, you too are surrounded by his power and protection? And what if God should open your eyes?

SAMUEL - 1 Samuel 3

In the temple, in the night, a young boy named Samuel heard his named called out. He thought it was the priest, Eli, and kept running into his bedroom. Finally Eli realized that it was God speaking to Samuel, but Samuel didn't recognize God's voice. So Eli instructed him that the next time he heard the voice he should invite God to speak further—and then be ruthlessly obedient.

What if God has been speaking to you, calling your name—only you didn't know it?

EMMAUS - Luke 24:32

Two early followers of Jesus were walking on the road to Emmaus after the crucifixion. They were joined by a third man. It was Jesus, walking and talking with them — but they didn't know it was he. Until he began to pray. And then they knew. And then they said, "*Didn't our hearts burn within us as he explained the Scripture to us?*"

What if when you are on the road to Emmaus—maybe the road on which you commute to work or school or home— Jesus is walking beside you? Wouldn't you like to join those with "burning hearts" and actually experience his presence?

### HOW CLOSE HAS GOD COME?

Frederick Buechner writes, "*There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize him, or not.*"

How close has God come? So close that he can flow in and through your life from one moment to the next like a river. God is closer than you think.

Set aside for now the question of to what extent any of us is capable of experiencing God's presence in our current spiritual condition. Set aside your past failures or future worries.

The teaching of Scripture is that God really is present right here, right now. Michelangelo's picture really does express spiritual reality. The Spirit of God is available to you and me: flowing all the time. And every once in a while, somebody somewhere wakes up.

### GOD WITH THE KITCHEN GUY

There are real people who claim it has happened before. It happened to a man named Nicholas Herman. Nick was in the food service industry. He was the cook at the monastery, and a monk. He became deeply dissatisfied with his life; he worried chronically about himself, even whether or not he was saved.

One day Nick was looking at a tree, and the same truth struck him that Jesus taught so long ago: the secret of the life of a tree is that it remains rooted in something deeper than itself. He decided to make

his life an experiment in what he called a "*habitual, silent, secret conversation of the soul with God.*"

He is known today by the new name given to him by his friends: *Brother Lawrence*. He remained obscure throughout his life. He never got close to becoming Pope, or Bishop or even the leader of his monastery. He stayed in the kitchen. But the people around him found that rivers of living water flowed out of him that made them want to know God the way he did. "*The good brother found God everywhere,*" one of them wrote, "*as much while he was repairing shoes as while he was praying with the community.*"

After Lawrence died in 1691, his friends put together a book of his letters and conversations. It is called *The Practice of the Presence of God* and is thought, apart from the Bible, to be the most widely read book of the last four centuries. It's still in print today (I got this photo from Amazon.com). This monastic short-order cook has probably out-sold novelists John Grisham and Tom Clancy and J. K. Rowling put together. Will hear more from him in this series.

### NOW IT'S OUR TURN

The offer of this *with-God life* has not expired in our day.

Now, according to the clear expectation the Bible, it's our turn. What happened to a con-man named Jacob, what happened to a servant of Elisha and a young boy named Samuel and a couple of discouraged disciples on the road to Emmaus, what happened to Brother Lawrence in a kitchen in France can happen again.

It can happen in an office in Hartford, a home in South Windsor, at a desk in a classroom in East Hartford or Glastonbury. It can happen for an engineer at work. It can happen at the factory, or for homemakers and retired folks.

It can happen in Toledo. It can flow through the life of a young, single mom with all the demands of raising young children. It can surge in a hospital bed where a solitary individual lies in the valley of the shadow of death.

**It can happen for you.** (I hope you believe that.)

And as we get started on this journey, I want to give you some help. As you leave today I want you to take one of these to keep with you. On it are some *guiding principles for practicing God's presence*. I would encourage you to read them each morning for the next two weeks as you make your own experiment in this "with-God" kind of life. (next week Pastor Russell will be preaching, then I am going to continue to share with you how "God is closer than you think.")

For centuries now, people have stood in line to view the picture of God and Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. *But what if the miracle that is hinted at on that fresco became a reality in your life?* All you have to do is "lift a finger." God is closer than you think.

### CONCLUSION

Now listen to me. God's great desire is to be "with you". But in order for God to touch your life, he has to first cleanse your soul. He must first save you. That's why Jesus Christ came.

So in his love, Jesus came and died for your sins. He didn't have to, but if he didn't you and I would have no way to connect to Him. So we wouldn't stay separated from God forever.

And we touch God's salvation by faith. By placing her complete trust in what Jesus did for us on the cross. Paying for our sins.

If you have never truly received Jesus that way, then you must start there. Lift a finger of faith and trust and receive God's salvation.

LET'S PRAY. ( bow heads, closed eyes)

If you are believing the testimony of God's Word that he is closer than we think, and in obedience to that, if you want to experience more of his presence in your life, would you please indicate that right now by lifting up a hand? I want to pray for each of you right now.

If you have never touched God in salvation, by placing your complete and total trust in Jesus Christ, and receiving him into your life as your Lord and Savior, AND YOU WANT TO DO THAT TODAY, would you please let up your hand?

### [COPY OF HANDOUT]

#### FOUNDATIONAL TRUTHS OF MY LIFE WITH GOD

- God is always present and active in my life, whether or not I see him.
- Coming to recognize and experience God's presence is learned behavior; I can cultivate it.
- My task is to meet God in this moment.
- I am always tempted to live "outside" this moment. When I do that, I lose my sense of God's presence.
- Sometimes God seems far away for reasons I do not understand. Those moments, too, are opportunities to learn.
- Whenever I fail, I can always start again right away.
- No one knows the full extent to which a human being can experience God's presence.
- My desire for God ebbs and flows, but his desire for me is constant.
- Every thought carries a "spiritual charge" that moves me a little closer to or a little farther from God.
- Every aspect of my life—work, relationships, hobbies, errands—is of immense and genuine interest to God.
- My path to experiencing God's presence will not look quite like anyone else's.
- Straining and trying too hard do not help.

Review these truths once a day for two weeks as you cultivate the practice of God's presence.

NOTE: This series is based on the book of the same name by John Ortberg..