



## The Hedge

*Jn. 1:14*

**John 1:14** *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

**John 10:10** *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

Today I end our series entitled, "God is closer than you think." I want to tell you a story written down by a pastor named John Ortberg.

We are living in temporary housing these days with a small back- yard, and at the borderline of our yard is a hedge. It is growing over a fence, so we cannot see or pass through to the other side. It has become an obsession for Winston.

Winston is our Yorkshire terrier—not big enough to be a real dog, more like a cat with delusions of dogness. Winston is on constant patrol duty. He is sensitive to every creature that goes through our property. He hears sounds and smells scents that are undetectable to the rest of us. And Winston is convinced that there is Something on the other side of the hedge.

When he is in the house, Winston will assume his scouting position on the headrest of a large chair in front of a window that overlooks the backyard. His ears stand at attention; his head quivers like a Bobble Head doll; his muscles go stiff as a marine's. When we let him out back, he is frantic; he sniffs and barks and looks for an opening.

We don't know what it is. Maybe it's just rabbits and squirrels. Maybe it's a beautiful girl-dog pumping out canine Love Potion #9.

All we know is that some sense or instinct or reflex has Winston in its grip and won't let go. The other side is his Holy of Holy's; the hedge is a veil beyond which he may not pass. Winston truly believes that there's Something on the other side of the hedge—and he wants to go over and see what it is.

You and I are living in temporary housing these days. Our house gets a little grayer and more wrinkled and achy every year -- some of you young people don't notice it, but it's happening -- not-so-subtle reminders that sooner or later you will be evicted. Outside our door is a backyard called the Universe. And at the border of the universe is a *hedge*.

The hedge is a veil, a barrier that traps us in the aloneness of my backyard and cuts us off from what is beyond.

Every day, thousands of times a him day, a heart stops beating, a pair of lungs stops breathing, and the hedge ceases to be their reality. If anyone could figure out a way to come back and give us a description of the other side, they could make a nice living. Some folks say they have gotten close enough to see a bright light, but they can offer no details.

Some people are convinced that there is Nothing behind the hedge, that our backyard is all there is, that what you see is what you get. But rumors that there is Something are curiously stubborn. There seems to be in the human race an irrepressible instinct that there is more to existence than a swirl of molecules and atoms, that death is a gate and not a fence, that reality is bigger than just our backyard. So people keep poking and digging around the backyard—building pyramids and painting chapel ceilings and saying prayers to Someone behind the hedge.

Philip Yancey writes that "Celtic spirituality speaks of 'thin places' where the natural and supernatural worlds come together at their narrowest." The birth of a child, the sight of the sun rising over the rim of a sleeping world— the thin places can be as momentous as life and death or as tiny as a hummingbird. For some people the veil seems to be thinner than others — a hairbreadth, like the space between Adam and God in the Sistine Chapel.

Absolute Proof is hard to come by—at least when your in the backyard. Death will bring the

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ultimate answer, but once it does, you won't be able to tell anyone.

It is a great irony to me that the keenest minds in the world spend their lives thinking and probing and studying to answer this one question and never know for sure, *yet the biggest fool in the universe knows one second after he dies!* You find out for sure one second after it's too late to do anything about it. I almost always have this thought when I hear of someone who has died: "Now he knows."

Those who believe that Something lies behind the hedge must struggle with why the hedge is there at all. Why does the Something stay so hidden? Does the hedge serve a purpose? Is it possible that there is some good in not knowing?

Those who believe that Nothing lies behind the hedge must struggle with why the rumors of Something are so persistent. Harder still, they must struggle with what to do during our brief time in the backyard if the backyard turns out to be nothing more than a cemetery.

This much is certain: Every human being has lived in temporary housing. Every one of them has waited for their turn to leave the backyard.

## I. THE HEDGE-BREAKER

Until one day. . . a man who looked like all other men made a breathtaking claim. He said he came from the other side of the hedge. He said no one has to be alone anymore. No one has to live in fear. He said a new kind of life—life with-God—is now available to anyone who wants it. And he didn't bring this life just to give us comfort. He brought it to give us a mission. He said anyone who enters this life will join him in becoming carriers of this life to others in the backyard.

Jesus came as the Hedge-Breaker.

I believe there has been a twisting of Jesus' message in our day.

People have gotten the idea that Jesus' gospel—His Good News—is only about how to get ready for life on the other side of the hedge **rather than the announcement that the mysterious Being on the other side of the hedge has broken through the hedge and entered our own backyard.**

This misunderstanding has had the devastating consequence of keeping many people from seeking to experience God's presence in their lives here and now. They don't realize that God is closer than they think.

Karen Mains writes about a Sunday school teacher who wondered if her class understood the gospel, so she asked them:

"If I sold my house and car, had a big garage sale, and gave all my money to the church, would that get me into heaven?" No!

"If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would that get me into heaven?" No!

"Well, if I was kind to animals and gave candy to all the children and loved my husband, would that get me into heaven?" No!

"Well, then, how can I get into heaven?"

A five-year-old boy shouted out, "You gotta be dead!"

Here is the difficulty: If you "gotta be dead," then the gospel doesn't have much to do with today. However, when we look closely at what Jesus calls his good news, he does not put it in terms of something that only happens after you die. He speaks of something that happens on this side of the hedge.

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The good news Jesus announced was simply this: God has invaded our backyard and is making his presence and power available to anybody who wants him. Right here. Right now. "The time has come," Jesus says. *Now, God is closer than you think.*

The tragic truth is that many people have exchanged Jesus' "Gospel of Life-with-God Here and Now" for a gospel that doesn't kick in until later: "You gotta be dead."

A scene in a certain film expresses the way many people think of the gospel. In *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, King Arthur and his knights have to get across a bridge to complete their quest. The bridge is guarded by an old man who tells them they each must answer three questions in order to cross; if they get one answer wrong, they are plunged into the abyss.

The first knight steps up. "State your name" (he does). "State your quest" (he does). "What's your favorite color?" ("Red.") He crosses the bridge, amazed it was so easy.

Second knight's turn. He is asked to state his name and quest, but his third question is, "What's the capital of Assyria?" "I don't know that—ahhhhhh!" He is thrown into the abyss.

Finally it is King Arthur's turn. Same drill on the first two questions; the third one makes for a running gag throughout the film: "What is the air-speed velocity of a coconut-laden swallow?" Arthur responds with the standard reply throughout the movie: "That depends—is it an African or European swallow?"

"I don't know that—ahhhhhh!" and the bridgekeeper is cast into the abyss.

*Many people have reduced the gospel to this:* When you die, there will be a bridge to the other side. "Jesus" is the correct answer to the question that will mean they have to let you cross. If you don't know the right answer, you get cast down into the Abyss. The gospel is the *secret password* that gets me through the hedge.

Now that is true as far as it goes. The problem is, where in the New Testament does Jesus say, "*Now I'm going to give you the minimal requirements you have to meet so that you can get into heaven when you die*"? He doesn't.

Jesus' gospel includes forgiveness of our sins as a gift of grace. It includes the promise that death will not have the last word, that our eternal life with God will never cease.

**BUT IT IS MORE THAN THAT! BETTER THAN THAT!** Jesus said, "*Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.*"

### JACOB'S LADDER REVISITED

Remember Jacob's dream in Gen. 28, which we talked about the first week? He had a vision of a ladder that stood on the earth while the top of it reached to heaven, and the angels climbed up and down on it; it was a vision of a "with-God" life here on earth. He named the place Beth-el. "House of God". At the beginning of his ministry, in **John 1:51**, Jesus explained his mission to a man named Nathanael: "*I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.*"

Jesus is referring, of course, to Jacob's vision. What Jacob dreamed of was now a reality to anyone

who wanted it. Jesus himself came as "Jacob's ladder" that now reaches down to your life and mine.

Many people think the only real reason Jesus came to earth was to die on the cross. But death on the cross was just one part of his mission. **His overall mission was to bring the reality of God's presence and power over to our side of the hedge.**

Listen please! You and I have a privilege to have a real experience with God on this side of the hedge because Jesus makes it possible. He is more than just an insurance policy for heaven. But we must make him more than simply an object of our belief. We can believe in and historical event, but Jesus is more than an historical event -- he is a Living Savior! He is alive.

If you want to experience God's presence, and spend time with Jesus. In prayer. In the Bible.

### II. MAKE UP THERE COME DOWN HERE

Now, there is another key way that we experience God's presence in the here and now. Not only did Jesus come as the Hedge-Breaker, but he told his followers that they were to *devote their lives to his project*. His mission.

In his most famous prayer he said we are to pray,

*"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."*

Sometimes people pray a version of the Star Trek prayer to Scottie: "Beam me up." Many people think our job is to "get my afterlife destination taken care of, then tread water till we all get beamed up and God comes back and torches this place. But Jesus never told anybody—neither his disciples nor us—to pray, "Get me out of here so I can go up there." His prayer was, "**Make up there come down here.**" Make things down here run the way they do up there.

God doesn't reveal himself to us just to make us happy or to deliver us from loneliness. He also comes to us so that we can in turn be conduits of his presence to other people. He invites us to join him in making things down here the way they are up there.

This is maybe the most dangerous, exciting, life-altering prayer a human being can pray: "God,

make up there come down here." Every time you pray it, your life becomes Beth-el, the place where God dwells, and the "with-God" life breaks through the hedge.

### A PLACE TO START

Start by asking yourself this question: "Where do I want to see God's presence and power break into my world? Where would I especially like God to use me to make things down here run the way they do up there?"

God, make up there come down here. It can happen.

- Every time you are in conflict with someone, want to hurt them, gossip about them, or avoid them, but instead go to them and seek reconciliation and forgiveness ...

The kingdom is breaking into this world.

- Anytime someone has an addiction and wants to partner with God so much that they're willing to stop hiding, acknowledge the truth, and get help from a loving community

The kingdom is breaking into the world.

- Every time a workaholic parent decides to stop idolizing their job, rearranges their life to begin to love and care for the little children entrusted to them

The kingdom is breaking into the world.

- Every time a followers realized that God has him on this earth to serve Him and he/she begins to see their life as an opportunity to serve God. Every time a follower begins to faithfully serve...

The kingdom is breaking into this world.

- Every time you love, every time you include someone who's lonely, every time you encourage someone who's defeated, every time you challenge somebody who's wandering off the path, every time you serve the needy...-

It is a sign that the kingdom is once more breaking into the world.

When Jesus entered humanity, when the baby was laid in the manger, the kingdom of God had a tiny little beachhead in this world. He formed a little community; and when he left, there was a toehold in

Jerusalem. Then it started to spread— to Judea, to Samaria, to Athens, to Rome. To every country. From ancient cathedrals in England to underground house churches in China to storefront churches in inner-cities. To right here, right now.

One day a little beachhead got formed in your life. It doesn't matter whether your life seems messy to you. It doesn't matter if you don't fully understand how the kingdom works. Someone has come from the other side of the hedge. And he uses you and me. He lives in our backyard now.