

The Speaking God: I will not leave you.

“You alone, O God, are most high, you alone all-powerful, you alone all-sufficient and utterly complete, you alone are all-sweet and all-comforting, you alone are all-noble and all-glorious above all things; in whom all good things at the same time are perfect, always have been and will be. And that is why it falls short and is insufficient, whatever you give me, apart from yourself, and reveal about yourself or promise, if you yourself are not seen nor fully possessed; for, indeed, my heart cannot truly rest nor be completely content, unless it rest in thee, and transcend all gifts and every creature. Amen.”

--Thomas à Kempis¹

Genesis 28

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 resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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. 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 you."

¹⁶ When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." ¹⁷ 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."²



We have been talking about God as a *speaking God*, and yet have not defined what *speaking* means. We probably tend to think of speaking as one on one (or more than one) conversation or an address; speaking is making noise with our tongue that makes some sense to another! *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines *speak* as “To utter words with ordinary speech modulation.”³ When God *speaks* we may hear Him as “with ordinary speech modulation” but we can be sure that we are to listen. It is never trivial when God speaks. He never asks, “How’s your day?”

¹ *The Imitation of Christ*, p. 121.

² The immediate context of this passage is Genesis 28:10-22.

³ P. 1239.

The next time you read Acts 2, the account of the day of Pentecost, try to answer a question that has stumped biblical scholars. Did the miraculous speaking in tongues occur in the mouth of the speaker *or* the ear of the hearer? In Acts 9:7 St. Paul says that on the day of his conversion the men who were with him heard a voice but did not see anyone. In Acts 22:9, Paul, defending his right to preach the Gospel, said those men who were with him on the day of his conversion heard Jesus' voice like thunder, but could not make out individual words. If in a prayer meeting a sister says she heard the Lord speak to her I said "Good," though I probably did not hear Him myself. (I never have yet!) It seems that God speaks most of the time in private conversation. Let's move on....

O.K., try this. Do your dreams make sense? Well, most of them are out of your control and the content of dreams can not be duplicated in real time. It is likely that your dreams do not make sense, that is, tell a story or convey information in a clear, specific way. I have never heard anyone say they were called to preach in a dream; yet they use the word "called" freely, indicating speech of some kind on some level. But dreams were very important in some biblical narratives. Matthew 1:20 tells us that word came to Joseph that he should take Mary as his wife, notwithstanding her pregnancy. The details of the dream, such as we have them, could have happened in real time, contrary to the typical dreams we have.

Today's longest text, from Genesis 28, is about a dream, a dream that is also a theophany. It is possible you have had a similar experience at an important point in your spiritual life. Theophany is made up of two words, "God" and "manifestation." In the story, God appears at the top of a ladder⁴ on which spiritual beings (angels) go up and down⁵. From that exalted position, God speaks to Jacob. From Jacob's response to this whole event, we can tell that it made a vital impression on him. The words of God were especially significant in that Jacob's brother Esau wanted to kill him and what the angel said related to Esau's intent.

In the theophany God promises to give Jacob and his descendents the land on which he is lying. Furthermore, in keeping with the divine promise to Abraham⁶, God will bless the whole world through Jacob and his descendents. The Lord God promises His protection to Jacob until Jacob is established in the land. The fact that the dream is coherent indicates that it is genuine. There was no question to Jacob who was talking with him.

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."

There are several things we learn about our general subject of communing with God from Jacob's dream.

⁴ Some think God stands beside the ladder, at its bottom, more on a level with Jacob.

⁵ Angels are divine messengers as their position on the ladder indicates. Note the role of angels in the birth narratives of Jesus in Matthew and Luke.

⁶ See Genesis 12:1-3. Jacob could see the angels as well as something of God. There was a spiritual recognition that Jacob was indeed speaking with God; there was no question about it.

A. God wants all people to be blessed (happy, content). The people of Israel are His chosen, but only in the sense that it will be through them that the Messiah will come. And the Messiah comes for everyone, not just a special group.

B. God is aware of what is happening in our lives and is concerned about us. One of the enduring qualities of God's character is His "steadfast love," which is always bringing blessing out of our goof-ups! God never tires of loving!

C. God's speech to Jacob is about the future, both immediate and far-reaching. Blessing, unity, protection are all benefits of the love of God, in the present and in the future.

D. Places can be made holy because of the appearance of the Lord or by direction of the Lord through a person, such as a prophet. There is an interaction between heaven and earth presupposed in our passage.

E. God's promises do not fail. The only way for God's promises to be annulled is by sin on the part of His people. As long as a person seeks the Lord in sincerity, the promises of the Lord will come to pass in her or his life. You are important to God. His promise to Jacob must have seemed impossible, but God cannot fail. This ought to give us enormous confidence in our relationship with the Almighty. He sees us, knows us, hears us, and tends us, now and forever.

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Thomas à Kempis' book, The Imitation of Christ, is second only to the Bible in sales for Christian literature. This marvelous book of prayer has been of great help to unnumbered people across the centuries. It is a good book to use for meditation and prayer. Kempis' work on prayer shatters one of Jacob's false assumptions. Jacob thought that he traveled by himself. He was shocked to discover that God was with him all the time. This false notion will come up again when the Israelites think God lives in the Temple. God is, simply is. He always is, everywhere He is. God does not live anywhere and yet is everywhere at the same time with all of His power. And here is where a theophany falls short of pure truth. God is not a man or manlike. The power of prayer is in making us aware wherever we are, God is there too.

The prayer from Kempis that is used to begin our study today is one of many in Kempis' book. Read it carefully and see how much of it reflects your own desire for God. The last part of the prayer was inspired in Kempis by his reading of Augustine, a sixth century Augustinian monk. I find that in my own life, I am influenced a great deal by the writings and prayers of others. I suggest that you use the quote from Kempis as part of your prayer time. Take it line by line, perhaps word by word, and see what this man is saying. What does he say about God...about prayer...about you?

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The next installment of our series is entitled

The Speaking God: Singing Our Prayers

In preparation, please read carefully **Psalms 88** and **121**.

Please answer the following questions after reading the psalms.

1. What is the central idea of Psalm 88?
2. What is the central idea of Psalm 121?
3. How are these two psalms alike and how are they different?
4. Which psalm do you like best and why?
5. Would you feel comfortable singing these psalms as part of your worship?