

# Intersections



SESSION 17: Passages from Genesis 28, Psalm 103, John 1, and Revelation 12

## *Beams of heaven as I go through this wilderness of woe...*

### **Comment 1**

In this, the last Bible study of the spring season, we will once again explore the “intersection” of four diverse but important biblical texts. And once again, as we explore the four texts, we will try to listen for the divine Word, whispering to us not only through the individual texts but also through the “intersection” of the texts.

Today’s texts had their origin in diverse times and diverse circumstances. But each has endured as a powerful witness to the Unseen Breath that forever seeks to fill us with life anew.

### **Genesis 28:10–11**

*From the Jewish Publication Society translation*

<sup>10</sup> Jacob left Beer-sheba and set out for Haran. <sup>11</sup> He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set.

∴

Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place.

### **For Discussion**

In what ways, if any, might the small details in these two verses speak to us today?

### **Comment 2**

Because many of us are familiar with scripture, we may already know where this story is going. And that can be both helpful and *not*

helpful, for when we focus only on the conclusion of a story, we can find ourselves racing over the opening details in a way that diminishes the overall power of the story.

As this particular story opens, we are told that it involves a man named Jacob. He seems to be traveling—and traveling alone. He’s left one named place, Beer-sheba. He’s heading to another named place, Haran. But while he’s on this journey, the sun sets. Light fades. Night comes. Jacob’s weary. He looks for a place to lay down.

### **Comment 3**

Three times in these two short verses, we hear this carefully crafted text refer to a “place.”

Jacob comes upon “a certain *place*.” Seemingly, it’s a *place* that has no name. We are told that Jacob takes a stone “of that *place*,” puts it either *under* or *next to* his head—the Hebrew word can signify either location—and then we are told that he “lay down in that *place*.” Beer-sheba is where he came from. Haran is where he’d like to be. But this “place,” the “place” with no obvious name, it perhaps feels frightening and confusing.

### **Comment 4**

At times, of course, we, too, can find ourselves feeling weary. We, too, can find ourselves in a “*place*” that feels as if it has no name.

It doesn’t have to be a geographic place. It doesn’t have to be a physical place. It can be a

spiritual “place.” It can be an emotional “place.” It can be a “place” of economic exploitation or financial betrayal. It can be a “place” where treasured human relationships have been broken. It can be a “place” of physical pain, ravaging cancer, or mental illness. Sometimes, it’s also a “place” of political despair or social oppression or environmental assault.

At times, like Jacob, we today can feel as if Light is fading, as if “Night” is coming, as if we are caught between a rock and a hard place.

### **Genesis 28:12–15**

*From the Jewish Publication Society translation*

<sup>12</sup> [Jacob] had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it.

:::

<sup>13</sup> And the LORD was standing beside him and He said, “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring.

:::

<sup>14</sup> “Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall be blessed through you and your descendants.

:::

<sup>15</sup> “Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised to you.”

### **For Discussion**

What details in these verses stand out for you—and why?

In what ways, if any, might this part of the story speak to us in our modern world?

### **Comment 5**

Genesis 28 tells us that in a strange and uncertain place—in a terrifying place for which there seemed to be no name, in a place where the sun

was setting and light was fading, in a place where he felt utterly alone and disconnected from all hope—Jacob had a dream.

In his dream, he saw that there was, in fact, a stairway that rose up from the very ground on which he was sleeping.

### **Comment 6**

Though Jacob himself felt weighed down with “stones” too heavy to bear, he saw that on this very staircase—mistakenly described as a “ladder” in some translations—angels of God were freely moving.

Divine agents were moving up and down, unhindered and unburdened by the oppressive “place” in which Jacob found himself.

### **Comment 7**

It’s a reminder that even when we, too, feel abandoned and alone—even when we, too, feel trapped in a place filled with heavy stones—there is a “staircase” that connects our lives with the realm of that which is holy and mighty.

It’s a “staircase” on which God’s Spirit freely moves.

### **Comment 8**

And then, before Jacob has time to make sense of it all, it’s as if he hears a divine Voice speaking to him.

“The ground on which you are lying,” says the Voice, “the ground that feels so alien and so empty, I will make it yours.”

In other words, this “hard place” will become a “home place.” It will become that personally connected “place” where Jacob and his descendants shall serve as God’s gracious and creative agents of blessing, not just for a selected few but rather for “all the families of the earth.”

### **Comment 9**

In his dream, Jacob also hears the divine Voice declaring that he and his descendants “shall be as the dust of the earth.”

To our ears, that may sound demeaning, but in the context of Genesis, the “dust of the earth”

is the very “stuff” from which God creates a humanity to tend and care for God’s own “garden.”

### **Comment 10**

Genesis 2 puts it this way: “Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed” (verses 7 and 8).

“Remember that I am with you,” says the Voice to Jacob and, in effect, to us all, “for you are the ‘dust’ into which I have breathed life. So you can be sure of this: I will not leave you or forsake you.”

### **Comment 11**

In 1859, overwhelmed with a sense of thanks for God’s enduring promises, Joseph Gilmore wrote a hymn that included these words:

*He leadeth me: O blessed thought!  
O words with heavenly comfort fraught!  
Whate’er I do, where’er I be,  
still ‘tis God’s hand that leadeth me.  
He leadeth me, he leadeth me;  
by his own hand he leadeth me:  
his faithful follower I would be,  
for by his hand he leadeth me.*

*Sometimes mid scenes of deepest gloom,  
sometimes where Eden’s flowers bloom,  
by waters calm, o’er troubled sea,  
still ‘tis God’s hand that leadeth me.  
He leadeth me, he leadeth me;  
by his own hand he leadeth me:  
his faithful follower I would be,  
for by his hand he leadeth me.*

### **Genesis 28:16–19**

*From the Jewish Publication Society translation*

<sup>16</sup> Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is present in this place, and I did not know it!”

:::

<sup>17</sup> Shaken, he said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven.”

:::

<sup>16</sup> Early in the morning, Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. <sup>19</sup> He named the site Bethel [literally, “house of God”]; but previously the name of the city had been Luz.

### **For Discussion**

In what ways do these concluding verses add to our understanding of the story?

Why is it that we, like Jacob, are sometimes so unaware of God’s presence?

In what ways, if any, do you hear God speaking to us today through this story about a hard place that becomes an “awesome” place?

### **Psalm 103:1–14, 19–22**

*From the Jewish Publication Society translation*

<sup>1</sup> Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
all my being, His holy name.

:::

<sup>2</sup> Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and do not forget all His bounties.

:::

<sup>3</sup> He forgives all your sins,  
heals all your diseases.

:::

<sup>4</sup> He redeems your life from the Pit,  
surrounds you with steadfast love and  
mercy.

:::

<sup>5</sup> He satisfies you with good things in the  
prime of life,  
so that your youth is renewed like the  
eagle’s.

:::

<sup>6</sup> The LORD executes righteous acts  
and judgments for all who are wronged.

:::

<sup>7</sup> He made known His ways to Moses,  
His deeds to the children of Israel.

:::  
 8 The LORD is compassionate and gracious,  
 slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love.  
 :::  
 9 He will not contend forever,  
 or nurse His anger for all time.  
 :::  
 10 He has not dealt with us according to our  
 sins,  
 nor has He requited us according to our  
 iniquities.  
 :::  
 11 For as the heavens are high above the earth,  
 so great is His steadfast love toward those  
 who fear Him.  
 :::  
 12 As east is far from west,  
 so far has He removed our sins from us.  
 :::  
 13 As a father has compassion for his children,  
 so the Lord has compassion for those  
 who fear Him.  
 :::  
 14 For He knows how we are formed;  
 He is mindful that we are dust.  
 :::  
 19 The LORD has established His throne in  
 heaven,  
 and His sovereign rule is over all.  
 :::  
 20 Bless the LORD, O His angels,  
 mighty creatures who did His bidding,  
 ever obedient to His bidding.  
 :::  
 20 Bless the LORD, all His hosts,  
 His servants who do His will.  
 :::  
 22 Bless the Lord, all His works,  
 through the length and breadth of His  
 realm.  
 :::  
 Bless the LORD, O my soul.

### **For Discussion**

Which parts of this psalm speak to you most meaningfully—and why?

In what ways might we meaningfully connect this psalm with images or insights from the story about Jacob in Genesis 28? What added power do they have if we allow them to “intersect” in our hearts?

### **Comment 12**

The psalmist reminds us that we have been rescued from “the Pit.” Through God’s grace and compassion, we have been raised from those alien “places” that so often seek to entrap us. In even the most awful of “places,” our eyes have been opened. The “place” that we thought of as a “God-forsaken” place is actually at the base of an unseen “stairway to heaven.”

It’s not a “forsaken” place but a connected place.

### **Comment 13**

And the One to whom we are connected—the One who has called us to serve as a blessing to “all the families of the earth”—is the very One who has formed us from “the dust.” It is the very One who is even now breathing through us, inviting us to do God’s bidding in all the earth.

So perhaps it’s not surprising that inspired in part by this psalm, Robert Grant wrote a hymn in 1833 with these words:

*O worship the King, all glorious above,  
 O gratefully sing his power and his love:  
 our shield and defender, the ancient of days,  
 pavilioned in splendor and girded with praise.*

*Your bountiful care what tongue can recite?  
 It breathes in the air, it shines in the light;  
 it streams from the hills; it descends to the  
 plain,  
 and sweetly distills in the dew and the rain.*

*Frail children of dust, and feeble as frail,  
 in you do we trust, nor find you to fail;  
 your mercies how tender, how firm to the end,  
 our maker, defender, redeemer, and friend.*

*O measureless Might, unchangeable Love,*

*whom angels delight to worship above!  
Your ransomed creation, with glory ablaze,  
in true adoration shall sing to your praise!*

### **John 1:45–51**

*From a translation by scholar Thomas Brodie*

<sup>45</sup> Philip finds Nathanael and says to him, “The one of whom Moses wrote in the law, and the prophets also—we have found him—Jesus, the son of Joseph, from Nazareth.”

:::

<sup>42</sup> Nathanael said to him, “From Nazareth can there be anything good?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.”

:::

<sup>47</sup> Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him and said of him, “Behold, a true Israelite in whom there is no guile.”

:::

<sup>48</sup> Nathanael said to him, “From where do you know me?” Jesus answered and said to him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.”

:::

<sup>49</sup> Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

:::

<sup>50</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, “Because I said, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You shall see greater things than these.”

:::

<sup>51</sup> And he said to him, “Amen, amen, I say to you [plural], you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of humanity.”

### **For Discussion**

In light of what we’ve seen in the other two passages today, what strikes you as significant or meaningful in this brief scene from the Fourth Gospel?

When the world around us seems barren or strange—when we’re overwhelmed with rising anger or deep despair—how do we *learn to see more deeply*, as if heaven itself were being opened

before us, so that there, on a “staircase” to glory, we might perceive “angels of God,” moving up and down, unburdened and unhindered, seeking to breath in us and through us? How do we learn to *see* that way, even in the hardest of times?

### **Comment 14**

The scene here in the opening chapter of the Fourth Gospel is remarkable. We’re told that Philip goes looking for Nathanael. “We’ve found him!” Philip cries. “We’ve found the Promised One, the one for whom we’ve been longing. It’s Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth.”

But Nathanael is stuck. He’s in a “hard place” under a fig tree. His eyes are closed. The sun is setting. Light is fading. Nathanael, like all of us sometimes, is in despair. For him, it’s as if all hope is lost. “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” he sighs.

“Come and see!” cries Philip. “Come and see!”

### **Comment 15**

Ultimately, then, the scene is about seeing. It’s about seeing heaven opened. It’s about seeing the pearly gates, as it were, swung wide so that we might enter in—not just on some future day but so that right now we might begin to “see greater things” than we ever imagined.

Like Jacob, we all need to sense the “staircase to heaven” on which God’s Spirit is moving, the connection that stands ready to transform our soul, stands ready to transform our whole being, so that we might be the “dust” through which God’s Spirit lives, the “dust” through which a divine blessing is imparted upon “all the families of the earth.”

### **Comment 16**

Perhaps with some of that in mind, a preacher named Frederick Blom wrote a song in 1917 with these words:

*Love divine, so great and wondrous,  
Deep and mighty, pure, sublime,  
Coming from the heart of Jesus.  
Just the same through tests of time!*



*He the pearly gates will open,  
so that I may enter in;  
for he purchased my redemption  
and forgave me all my sin.*

*Like a dove when hunted, frightened,  
as a wounded fawn was I;  
brokenhearted, yet he healed me—  
he will heed the sinner's cry.  
He the pearly gates will open,  
so that I may enter in;  
for he purchased my redemption  
and forgave me all my sin.*

*Love divine, so great and wondrous,  
all my sins he then forgave;  
I will sing his praise forever,  
for his blood, his power to save.  
He the pearly gates will open,  
so that I may enter in;  
for he purchased my redemption  
and forgave me all my sin.*

*In life's eventide at twilight,  
at his door I'll knock and wait;  
by the precious love of Jesus,  
I shall enter heaven's gate.  
He the pearly gates will open,  
so that I may enter in;  
for he purchased my redemption  
and forgave me all my sin.*

**Revelation 12:7–12  
and Revelation 14:6–7**

*From the New Revised Standard Version*

<sup>12:7</sup> And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, <sup>8</sup> but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven.

∴

<sup>9</sup> The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown

down with him.

∴

<sup>10</sup> Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,

“Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.

∴

<sup>11</sup> “But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.

∴

<sup>12</sup> “Rejoice then, you heavens, and those who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

∴

<sup>14:6</sup> Then I saw another angel flying in mid-heaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live [or more literally, “sit”] on the earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people.

∴

<sup>7</sup> He said in a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.”

**For Discussion**

What strikes you as especially important or meaningful in these startling, dream-like images and in these loud, dramatic voices?

In what ways, if any, do these verses meaningful “intersect” with the other passages that we’ve examined today?

What lessons for our own day can we take from the “intersection” of these four passages?

### **Comment 17**

The book of Revelation is filled with eye-popping, heart-pounding images—some of them scary, some of them surprising, some of them deeply reassuring.

In these dream-like verses, we are asked to envision a battle breaking out “in heaven.” Angels are battling for God against “the dragon” and against all those who are in league with “the dragon.” We are told that “the dragon”—the ancient deceiver—is utterly “defeated.” There is no room for evil and destruction in the realm of the holy.

### **Comment 18**

So the “deceiver of the whole world,” that “dragon,” is “thrown down.” And even though the deceiver’s “time is short,” it nevertheless brings “woe” to the earth and to the sea. It’s a reminder that if we open our hearts and our eyes only to those lonely, stony “places” in which we sometimes feel oppressed, we, too, will be deceived.

Like Jacob—and Nathanael—we often need to open our hearts and our lives to “greater things.”

### **Comment 19**

Revelation 14 asks us to envision an angel flying in mid-heaven. This angel is moving, as it were, up and down that shining “staircase” that forever connects heaven and earth.

This angel is proclaiming “an eternal gospel” for all of us who “sit on the earth.” This angel sings good news for those us of every nation and tribe and language who are sometimes stuck, like Jacob, in a terrifying “place.”

### **Comment 20**

Immersing ourselves in the deeply revealing visions of this book we call Revelation, we eagerly wait for some dramatic announcement. What is this good news of which we hear? What is this “eternal gospel”?

Finally, in a loud voice, the angel simply cries, “Fear God and give God glory!”

### **Comment 21**

In other words, open your eyes, the angel seems to suggest. Yes, anger and despair sometimes race through your soul. Yes, at times you will feel abandoned and alone.

But look deeper. See fuller. For there in the very midst of you stands a “stairway to heaven.” There in the very midst of you is the One who made heaven and earth, the sea and every refreshing spring.

### **Comment 22**

There in the very midst of us is the One who formed us from the “dust” of the earth so that we might live and thrive as God’s agents of blessing.

And there in the very midst of us are beams from heaven, shining bright, even now, even while “dragons” roam and devils pounce.

Here in this wilderness of woe, we may not know what tomorrow holds. For now, it may seem as if clouds will forever hide tomorrow’s sun. For now, it may seem as if that which is right is being forced, once again, to yield to the dragon’s might. For now, it may even seem as if Satan’s cause will forever gain.

### **Comment 23**

But as a hymn written more than a hundred years ago by Charles A. Tindley so powerfully reminds us, there is a God who rules above with hand of power and heart of love.

And if we allow God’s Jesus to lead us—if we open our eyes and our hearts to the Promised One who saw Nathanael and indeed all of us languishing in “a hard place” on painful stones under a barren fig tree—then we shall surely see “greater things” someday.

### **Musical Recording**

In closing, we will listen to—or perhaps sing along with—a recording by a choir of young adults at a church in the African nation of Uganda. They are singing Charles Tindley’s famous song, using these words:

*Beams of heaven as I go*

*through this wilderness of woe,  
guide my heart in peaceful ways,  
turn my midnights into days.  
When in life's shadows I would grope,  
faith always finds a star of hope,  
and soon from all life's grief and danger,  
I shall be free someday!*

*I do not know how long 'twill be,  
nor what the future holds for me,  
but this I know: if Jesus leads me,  
I shall get home someday.*

*I do not know how long 'twill be,  
nor what the future holds for me,  
but this I know: if Jesus leads me,  
I shall get home someday.*

*Often times my sky is clear,  
joy abounds without a tear;  
though a day so bright begun,  
clouds may hide tomorrow's sun.  
There'll be a day that's always bright,  
a day that never yields to night,  
and in its light, the streets of glory  
I shall behold someday!*

*I do not know how long 'twill be,  
nor what the future holds for me,  
but this I know: if Jesus leads me,  
I shall get home someday.*

*Harder yet may be the fight,  
right may often yield to might,  
wickedness awhile may reign,  
Satan's cause may seem to gain.  
There is a God that rules above,  
with hand of power and heart of love.  
If I am right, he'll fight my battle.  
I shall have peace someday!*

*Burdens now may crush me down,  
disappointments all around.  
Troubles speak in mournful sigh,  
sorrow through a tear-stained eye.  
There is a world where pleasure reigns,  
no mourning soul shall roam its plains.  
And to that land of peace and glory,  
I want to go someday!*

*I do not know how long 'twill be,  
nor what the future holds for me,  
but this I know: if Jesus leads me,  
I shall get home someday.*

*I do not know how long 'twill be,  
nor what the future holds for me,  
but this I know: if Jesus leads me,  
I shall get home someday.*

*I do not know how long 'twill be,  
nor what the future holds for me,  
but this I know: if Jesus leads me,  
I shall get home someday.*