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**“Big Place”**  
**Genesis 28:10-19**

<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>

In the world of mathematics and architecture, there are some equations or designs called “impossible problems.” Even if you’re not a mathematician, or you flunked geometry, you’ll probably recognize some of these problems because many of them were made popular by the artist, M.C. Escher.

They call these things impossible problems because they are visual tricks that are impossible in reality but made possible by an artist. It messes with dimension, size, angle etc.

One of these problems I find completely fascinating is called the “Pembrose Staircase.”

Maybe you’ve seen it before. It really plays with your mind. You follow the staircase up one side and then the other, and then the other and then the other and then the other and then other.... Yeah, you see what I mean.

You never reach the top. It’s a never-ending staircase.

The story that was just read, was a story about Jacob’s dream of a “stairway” or, as it says in the translation that was read today, a ladder that is set up on the earth with the top of it reaching to heaven. And it says that the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

For Jacob, this dream was inspiring, bringing him great comfort and joy; and compelling him to establish a great memorial on the spot where he had been sleeping.

But for us today, who desire and long for the assurance of heaven, I wonder if that ladder to heaven feels more like a “pembrose staircase,” than an object of comfort or security.

I wonder if it feels more like a never-ending, exhausting exercise... in futility.

Huey Lewis and the News sang about the frustrating “Jacob’s Ladder” back in the eighties when he talked about a young dancer resisting the persuasive efforts of a televangelist.

Coming over the airwaves  
The man says I'm overdue  
Sing along, send some money  
Join the chosen few  
Well mister I'm not in a hurry  
And I don't want to be like you  
And all I want from tomorrow  
Is to get it better than today

Step by step, one by one, higher and higher

Step by step, rung by rung climbing Jacob's ladder

And who can forget the classic by Led Zeppelin:

There's a lady who's sure all that glitters is gold  
And she's buying a stairway to Heaven  
When she gets there, she knows if the stores are all closed  
With a word she can get what she came for  
Ooh-ooh-hoo, hoo-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh  
And she's buying a stairway to Heaven

Both of these songs emphasize the longing we all have to get to heaven, this eternal paradise; and how desperate we might be to get there.

And Jacob’s Ladder represents that hope we have in getting to heaven. Here we have a sign that access to heaven is possible and that it might be as easy as...

Step by step, rung by rung,

Buying a stairway to heaven...

But with respect to Huey Lewis and Led Zeppelin... I’m not so sure that getting to heaven is like that. And I don’t think the stairway in Jacob’s dream symbolizes a way for us to get to heaven either.

Jacob, Genesis tells us, was the son of Rebekah and Isaac who was the son of Abraham – the father of all nations.

Jacob had a twin brother named Esau who was slightly older (by a year), and according to Genesis, the two of them fought and competed against from the womb through adulthood.

Esau, who was Isaac's favorite, was a wild, hairy, red-headed hunter, while Jacob - Rebekah's favorite - was more of a homebody who enjoyed cooking and work around the camp. But Jacob was sneaky, crafty and devilishly smart and he uses that to his advantage to get what he wants from his brother who was a bit of a meat-head.

Now, in Jacob and Esau's culture, it was a big deal to be the oldest son, because that meant you would receive the sweetest inheritance from your father. So, Esau was sitting pretty waiting for his father to bequeath him his inheritance through a blessing.

But, to make a long story short (read about in **Genesis 27** (<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>)), Jacob uses his sneaky and conniving skills by disguising himself as Esau, stealing the blessing due to Esau.

Well, you can imagine that when Esau finds out that his blessing and inheritance has been stolen, he's pretty angry.

This is an ancient version of what we call, "identity theft" today.

Now, most of us who have visited internet sites, have experienced some sort of identity theft. An e-mail, Paypal, or Flickr account has been hacked and we have to deal with the inconvenience of having someone make purchases on your credit card. Or you've had to deal with the momentary embarrassment that comes from having inappropriate pictures posted or messages come from your account.

And, I'm sure there are some of you who have had worse - where hundreds if not thousands of dollars was spent using your account information.

But, what if you were the victim of an identity theft scam that robbed you of your life savings, your property, your status and your possessions?

That's kind of like what happened to Esau. Jacob rips him off and he's mad. Mad enough to want to kill his brother for stealing what rightfully belonged to him.

So, Rebekah tells Jacob to "get out of Dodge" and the sneaky homebody scurries away to his uncle until Esau has settled down.

The journey to uncle's camp is a long one, and Jacob stops to rest for the night. He lies down on the ground, uses a stone for a pillow, and promptly falls asleep; and that's when he has the dream of a stairway to heaven.

As a child when I would have scary or powerful dreams, I would go to my mother. Mom would listen and then she would interpret them for me. Many times she would claim they were warnings, and sometimes they were words of direction or comfort.

But whether they were troubling or uplifting, mom wanted me to know that God was speaking.

When Jacob had this dream, he knew that God is speaking. It meant something to him. So much so that he called it a holy place. So, what is it about this dream? What's so important about it?

Well, let's act like we're my mom and do some interpreting. Let's look at the image of a stairway. While the text for today translates it as a ladder, most scholars say the better way of saying it is a "stairway."

The top of this stairway is in heaven, and the bottom of it is on earth. And angels, messengers from heaven, are going up and down on this staircase. That's all he sees.

Now, a stairway symbolizes a couple things: status and access.

There's a BBC comedy that came out in the seventies and it recently was remade as a new television series last December. It's called, "Upstairs Downstairs," and the show is set in a mansion in post-WW II England depicting the life of the servants who lived downstairs and their masters who lived upstairs.

You see, where one lived in relation to the stairs determined someone's status.

But unlike the sitcom, the stairs in the dream aren't there to remind Jacob of his place in relation to God. Stairs are also a connecting point, a way for those downstairs to access those who are upstairs.

Jacob sees a stairway, a channel between that which is below and that which is above. The distance between those living downstairs and those living upstairs could be crossed. Now, those who were up could go down and, hypothetically, those who were down could go up. This is good news - this is good news indeed!

But I think what's interesting about this stairway in Jacob's dream, is that it's not a stairway for us. It's a stairway for the angels who are carrying God's message to the earth and then returning to heaven.

The message of the dream for Jacob isn't that he can "buy a stairway to heaven," or that he can take "step by step, rung by rung, climbing" his ladder. The message is that heaven is making its way down to us, and there are angels descending into our finite world reminding us that there is a God standing at the top of the stairs shouting promises about how God will take care of us and provide for us; and how God will take care of our future - Just like God did in Jacob's dream.

In our interactions with other people who don't believe in God, or those who don't believe that Jesus Christ is the Messiah and the source of salvation for the world, the subject of heaven is what gets us in trouble the most.

The subject of heaven is almost like a bait in a trap. I've seen it happen repeatedly. "You're a Christian?" someone may ask. "Yes," you respond. "So, if I don't believe in Jesus, am I still going to heaven or will I burn in hell?" The question can sometimes come that fast.

And our answer to this question will determine whether or not the remainder of the conversation will be confrontational or congenial.

Some people feel compelled to stick to their guns - "No, I don't believe unbelievers will go to heaven." Others want to be a little more diplomatic, "Well, it depends on what you mean by heaven." Some people may respond like a psychologist, "Heaven is important to you. I wonder why it's important." And others try a little Jedi mind trick, "You don't need to know about heaven, move along."

And yet the question remains: How does one get to heaven?

Jacob's dream answers the question this way: Heaven comes to us.

Heaven it appears is much bigger than was previously thought; more expansive and more accessible.

But then, thousands of years later, we read in the Gospel of John about a man named Nathanael who goes to meet a man he calls, "Rabbi." And the man tells Nathanael that he will see great things and that he will see "heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending" once again.

Sound familiar? Who do you think said this? Jesus. Jesus told Nathanael that he would see Jacob's dream become a reality. In essence, Jacob's ladder would be found in him.

Nathanael was intrigued, thinking this was something he had to see, so he agreed to follow Jesus as one of his disciples.

Jacob was given a vision that God and heaven was not far away, that it was coming to us. A heavenly

stairway was connecting the two realms and that God was speaking freely for all humanity to hear.

But now, heaven had a face, heaven had hands and feet, heaven was a person; and that person was Jesus.

So, how does one get to heaven? The good news from Jacob's dream is that the communication between heaven and earth is wide open and that God is speaking to us all the time. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning put it, "Earth is crammed full of heaven."

But if you really want to be in heaven, then I invite you to follow Jesus. Not because Jesus gives you assurance that when you die you'll go to heaven. But because following Jesus is heaven. Knowing Jesus is knowing that we have access to God.

My favorite Children's Music CD is by a group named, Butterflyfish. And they write a song called, "Heaven's Coming Down Here":

*I ain't goin' up to heaven in the sky  
I ain't flyin' with the angels when I die  
I ain't gonna rise up in the clear  
Cause I do believe my dear  
Heaven's comin' down here*

*That's the gospel story  
That's the gospel plan  
Kingdom of glory's right here at hand  
So don't you worry, woman and man  
That's the gospel story  
That's the gospel plan*

That's heaven. Heaven is knowing Jesus, following Jesus and living like Jesus, who is the true stairway to heaven.