

Text of a message delivered by Dr Paul Jones at Windsor Park Baptist Church on Sunday 7th September 2025.
The written text may vary from the spoken/video version due to time and flexibility.



Good morning!

In the spirit of Father's Day, I thought we should kick things off with a dad joke today... I don't know if you're aware, but there are a lot of biblical dad jokes. One of my favourites has always been, 'Who are the 3 shortest men in the Bible?' Know that one? First, you've got Knee-high Miah (about this tall); then you've got one of Job's friends, Bildad the Shoe-height; but the shortest of all is in the New Testament - the Philippian jailer who fell asleep on his watch ... 😄

So, what does the Bible say about dads?! I wonder what comes to your mind? I think of those verses in Paul's letters:

- Ephesians 6:4, '**And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.**'
- Colossians 3:21, '**Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.**'

Good advice from Paul there ... don't wind up or antagonise your kids. Why not? It brings out the worst in them. And our job as dads, as parents, is to bring out the best in our kids, right?

So that was a solid 30-second sermon! But if we're looking for substance on any topic, we don't just look for a chapter and verse, do we? Nooo, that's not the best way to read the Bible. You may end up with some nicely worded statements picked from here and there but taken out of the context that gives them meaning.

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But the thing is, if you go looking for extended narratives about fathers in the Bible, the first thing you'll probably notice is their absence. Absent dads are everywhere - or perhaps I should say, dads are often nowhere to be found.

Absent fathers in the Bible

- Take the very first story about family for example in Genesis 4. Cain & Abel, two brothers with some real anger and jealousy between them. And where's dad/**Adam**? No mention of him at all. Completely absent from the story. By the way, do you know why Cain couldn't make a sacrifice that pleased the Lord? Because he wasn't Abel (and there are plenty more where that came from!).
- **Moses** is a really significant figure in the Old Testament. Surely his dad was present. Nope, his dad barely gets a mention. It's his mother Jochebed and his sister Miriam who save his life. Dad is nowhere to be seen.
- And Moses' successor, **Joshua**? Well, he's repeatedly referred to throughout Numbers as '**Joshua son of Nun...**' Another absent father... 🤔 - and another bad joke.
- What about... **Samuel**? He was a significant figure, what do we know of Samuel's dad? Well, his name was Elkanah. He had two wives, so he's not winning any points with us there. When Hannah is upset because she can't have children, Elkanah says to her, *'But you've got me! Aren't I worth more to you than ten sons?'* Sooo ... Elkanah's kind of a jerk. And we're not told much else, but we know that Samuel grew up without his dad around. He was brought up by Eli the priest in the Temple. Yet another absent dad...

Perhaps we should ask whether these well-known Biblical leaders were great fathers themselves? Perhaps we could look at someone like King David? He seems more well-rounded! He was a shepherd, musician, warrior, king. Well yes, but as a father, David just doesn't show up. In fact, if you look through David's life at the way he relates to his kids and resolves problems in his family, he's very consistent ... consistently absent, passive, and rather useless.

Now there are lots more absent dads in the Bible, but let's move beyond absent fathers (and terrible dad jokes...)

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In stark contrast to this persistent theme of human absence, I want to briefly note another theme that also runs right through Scripture. The opposite theme - of divine presence. In fact, it's arguably THE most important theme in the Bible: the promise of God's presence. The presence of our heavenly Father.

From Genesis 2, where God walks in the garden with us, to the end of Bible, which wraps things up with this proclamation: ***'And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! 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.'*** And everything in between is about God's desire to live among us.

This verse, ***'I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.'*** Variations on this verse occurs with 30-40 times throughout the Bible! Over and over, we're reminded that this is what God wants more than anything else - to be near us! Look at all these references:

Exod 6:7; Deut 4:20; 7:6; 14:2; 26:16-19; 27:9; 28:9; 29:13; 2 Sam 7:22-24; 1 Kgs 6:13; 2 Kgs 11:17; Pss 95:7; 100:3; Jer 7:23; 11:4; 13:11; 24:7; 30:22, 25; 31:1, 32, 33; 32:38; Ezek 11:20; 14:11; 34:30-31; 36:28; 37:23, 27; Hos 1:9-10; 2:23; Zech 2:10-11; 8:8; 13:9; also Gen 3:8-9; 17:7-8; Lev 11:45; 22:33; 25:38; Num 15:41; 2 Sam 7:14; Ps. 89:27-28; Jn 1:14; Rom 9:25-26; 2 Cor 6:16; 1 Pet 2:9-10; Heb 8:10; Rev 21:3.

This is the BIG WHY! The why of creation and redemption. Why did God create the world? To live among us! Why has he saved us through the cross? To bridge the chasm, the rift of sin — and to be present among us! This is God's big WHY - as the Bible tells the story.

And if this is SO central, I wonder how you *experience* this truth? How IS God present to you, and among us, right now?

To get you thinking about this, let's play a little game. It's called 'Pick a preposition!' If I asked you, ***'How is God present to this community?'*** What would you say? ***'God is _____ us.'***

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- In us?
- Around us?
- To us?
- For/by/over/through?

Pick a preposition and tell someone near you. There's no correct answer. Or perhaps they're ALL correct answers! You have 30 seconds to share...

Excellent! Thanks for playing 'Pick a preposition'. I hope that got you thinking about HOW God is present to us.

Genesis 28.10-17, ***Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."*** Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, ***"Surely the Lord is in this place - and I did not know it!"*** And he was afraid, and said, ***"How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."***

Who'd like to look at a couple of Hebrew words? (I see that hand...). A couple of Hebrew words always makes life better 😊 .

The first is *sullām*, often translated "ladder," but is better translated "stairway" because the imagery comes from the Babylonian ziggurat, a temple tower that had brick steps leading to a small temple

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on top. You may have seen pictures from the ancient world of this kind of structure, it's a graded series of stages or levels that makes a stairway.

Why build a structure like this? Well, a ziggurat is effectively an artificial mountain. A man-made mountain. In ancient times, who lived at the tops of these cosmic mountains that touch heaven? The gods lived up there! So ancient people groups — Sumerians, Mesopotamians, Israelites, Canaanites, would build a great big mound, then put a temple structure on the top. And a stairway - or a series of levels - made it possible for people to ascend to the temple and worship there. “*Jacob’s ladder*” has a nice ring to it, but it’s probably not the most accurate image. So that’s *sullām*. That was worth learning, right?

Let’s look at one more... even more exciting! Our second Hebrew word is *hinneh*! Anyone know the meaning? The reason I say this word is exciting is because it means ‘*behold!*’ Everyone say, “*hinneh!*” Now ‘*Behold!*’ or ‘*Lo!*’ are a bit old school. It’s sometimes translated - ‘*Look!*’ My Hebrew teacher back in the day taught us that one of the best translations is ‘*Check this out!*’ 

The purpose of the word(s) is simply to call attention to something that is surprising. Think of it as a cue from the writer to the reader – “*Check this out... listen up! Don’t miss this...*”

Unfortunately, some Bible translations pick and choose when to include it. Here the NIV & NRSV do not include it, but the ESV has ‘*behold*’ all four times. But it’s an important part of the Hebrew text. And the reason I’m talking about it is that this little passage uses it A LOT. It occurs twice in Verse 12, once in Verse 13, and once in Verse 15. Let me read you those verses with the *hinneh*’s, ‘***And he dreamed — check this out! — there was a stairway/ramp set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and check this out! — angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And check this out! The Lord stood beside him and said, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. And check this out! — I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”***’

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Reads different, hey? The writer keeps saying to us - again and again - check this out! Pay attention! And if we look carefully, three of the hinneh's are about the dream, and the fourth is God speaking! That's right, God himself uses hinneh in Verse 15, **'Check this out! I will be with you... [and] I will never leave you!'**

Now we might wonder what the writer is getting so excited about. Is it just a beautiful sight? A fascinating dream? No, it's MUCH more than that! At the top of a ziggurat is the holy place/temple. People go up there to worship. The key thing to note is that in the ancient world, gods don't descend ziggurats! Now that's not a sentence you're gonna hear everyday, but say it with me: '*gods don't descend ziggurats!*' Humans do the work of ascending, climbing, striving! Gods are at the top, humans are at the bottom and let's be honest - we spend our lives trying to get up there!

So the writer is excited that this ramp, this stairway to heaven is covered in angels. And it's startling enough (as the writer notes with a hinne!) that you have angels ascending and descending. But you would expect from this that the task of these angels is to communicate between God (up there) and humans (down here). Right? The Hebrew word angel [*mal'akh*] literally means "messenger." So, angels symbolise communication between heaven and earth. Awesome! But what's even more striking is the fact that Yahweh, in this foundational Old Testament text, has bypassed the angels, the messengers! God himself has descended this stairway to stand beside or stand over Jacob and say directly to him, **'I am with you.'** Wow!

God doesn't send a messenger down to say, '*God is up there but he's thinking of you!*' No, God himself 'comes down' and stands right by Jacob. The God of Israel stands over Jacob in his sleep and makes promises to him. No wonder Jacob wakes and says, **'Surely the Lord is IN THIS PLACE!'** and **'How awesome is THIS place!'**

Did you notice that? In Verse 16, Jacob is awake, right? He's not excited about the dream/vision. He's awake and makes a monument to THIS place because God was present here. In this place. And from here on, this becomes a theme in Jacob's life: the abiding presence of Yahweh. Jacob, whose dad favoured his twin brother. Jacob, who deceived his father and became alienated from his own

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family. To this man, God says, ***‘Check this out! I am with you and will keep you wherever you go ... I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.’***

Hold all of this in your mind and listen to Jesus’ first teaching moment in the gospel of John. In John 1:51 Jesus says this to Nathanael, ***“Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”***

In the gospel of John, Jesus refers to himself as the ‘Son of Man’ when he is speaking of the cross and its significance. And here, as you may have noticed, the Son of Man replaces the ziggurat of Jacob’s dream. ‘Son of Man’ in John refers to his death and exaltation. So when Jesus equates himself with the ziggurat of Genesis 28, it is exactly that - a kind of riddle for the listener or reader to think on ... to Philip and Nathanael who are standing before him, Jesus promises that they will ‘*see heaven opened*’. But where Jacob saw the gap between heaven and earth bridged by a ziggurat or stairway, the disciples will see Jesus himself bridging that gap and bringing the presence of God to live among and within us.

A few chapters later, Jesus says something similar to Nicodemus. Listen to this in Verses 13:16, ***‘No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”’***

As we think about who God is this morning, please hear this:

We don’t ascend to be with God. We don’t climb to be any closer. We don’t make our way... up! There is no way for us to do so. If you still think there is something you can do to climb a ladder towards God, then you haven’t yet understood the gospel.

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No, as John 3 puts it, Jesus ascends the cross on our behalf. He is lifted up, FOR us. He makes the promise of John 3.16 possible, ***“so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”***

Yahweh descends the stairway from his holy temple. Yahweh longs to live with us. It is only — ONLY — by our allegiance to Yahweh, our faith in Jesus, that divine presence is among us, in us, before us, around, through us — and yes (check it out!) within us.

This startling revelation about God from Genesis 18 deepens as we proceed through the biblical story, and the God who descends to stand beside us makes a way, through Jesus, to reside within us ... as temples of his Spirit. We are invited to become the very vessels - cracked, clay, earthenware vessels - in which God lives. And loves!

Amen.

And hallelujah!

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These questions are intended to help you think more about this message. We hope they might enable conversation, encouraging you to wrestle with how God might be challenging us to apply what we have heard/read.

Reflecting on Sunday 31st August 2025: In the story we look at in Luke 8:26-39, the man that was set free from demons was told to *“tell how much God has done for you.”* The challenge was for us to do likewise, if we say God has done things in our lives. How did you go? Who did you tell?

Questions from this week’s teaching:

1. Jacob woke up saying, *“Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.”* Where have you recently recognised God’s presence in your everyday life, and how did that change your perspective?
2. The message reminded us that God comes down to be with us rather than us climbing up to Him. How does this truth challenge the way you approach prayer, worship, or your spiritual disciplines?
3. If God’s presence is not just above us but within us, how might that reshape the way you engage with your workplace, family, or neighbourhood this week?
4. The gospel tells us we don’t ascend to God, but He descends to us through Jesus. What practical step could you take to help someone else experience God’s presence with them?

If you’d like to chat with someone about your spiritual journey or anything else going on in your life, please contact us at care@windsorpark.org.nz; **we’re better together and no perfect people are allowed.**

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Below are some further resources that may take the message further and deeper and enable you to explore other viewpoints on the same theme. We also encourage you to engage with the preacher if there are further questions you have or if you'd like clarification on anything. Email info@windsorpark.org.nz and we'll direct your query to the appropriate person.

1. The Bible Project has an interesting article written by Amber Dillon called, **How God's Presence Came to Dwell with All His People: Presence Pattern and Kingdom of Priests** that adds to this week's message and is well worth reading and reflecting on. Click here for the link: <https://bibleproject.com/articles/presence-of-god/>
2. **Renovaré** is an organisation that resources and advocates fullness of life with God experienced, by grace, through the spiritual practices of Jesus and of the historical Church. Christian in commitment, ecumenical in breadth, and international in scope. There are a bunch of resources on their website that will help you diver deeper into experiencing the presence of God on a daily basis. Check out their resources here: <https://renovare.org/>
3. The **YouVersion Bible App** is the world's leading app to not only read the Bible on, but to see a suite of other useful resources. Download the app and create your own account and then set Windsor Park Baptist Church as 'My Church'. Each week we recommend a short reading plan (you'll get a notification about a new plan each week). This week we recommend, **Nearer Than We Imagine: Meditations on Practicing the Presence of God.**