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## An Opened Heaven

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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There are many places in the Word of God where we find the heavens opened, that is, there were many people who experienced an open heaven. We might, perhaps, just refer to three or four occasions on which the heavens were opened in a special way.

Beginning with Jacob, Genesis 27, you remember that, on his flight from his home, because the day was spent when he alighted upon a certain place, he took a stone of that place for a pillow and laid down to sleep and he dreamed a dream, "and behold, a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the Lord stood above it" (Gen. 28:12).

Then we pass from that over to John 1, to the touch which Nathanael had with the Lord Jesus, when the Lord saw him coming and said, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" We have often said, He might have said, "Behold an Israelite in whom there is no Jacob", because these two things in principle are so closely connected. You have got Jacob and he must go on to be Israel. Nathanael says, "How do you know me?" "When thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee." Nathanael exclaimed, "Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel." Jesus said, "Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? ...I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man."

Now, we will keep those two things for a moment, and just go over to Matthew 3. Jesus, having been

baptized and coming up out of the water, the heavens were opened unto Him, and He saw the Spirit in the form of a dove. Once more in Acts 9 - Saul on the way to Damascus. As they journeyed, "suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven, and he fell to the earth and heard a voice".

Now, there are several quite general features of all these occasions of an open heaven. We mention them because they are the general features and must be noted. They indicate several things.

First of all, the most general is that there is such a thing now for man as an open heaven. I mean by that that there was a point in the history of man when heaven was closed. Paradise was sealed up and removed altogether from this earth and from man's reach and from man's hope of attainment. Heaven was closed, and heaven remains closed to all in Adam. But heaven has been opened and heaven is open, and, in the general sense, an open heaven is for all in Christ. That is true. The Lord Jesus has unlocked Paradise, as we sing. The Lord Jesus has opened the way to God and given us the way through. That is the comprehensive fact, not a light one, not a small one, even if we do not stay to dwell upon it.

Then there is this second fact, that all God's communications with man, and all man's communications with God; all God's administrations to man and all man's entering into the administrations or dispensations of God, are in the Lord Jesus. The ladder is the Son of Man, and the ascending and the descending represent the heavenly ministries by which men here are brought into what is in the heart of God and in the thought of God. Those thoughts were very briefly told to Jacob. The Lord spoke. Saul heard a voice and, as he came to a knowledge of God in Christ, God spoke in His Son, and here again the Lord Jesus, being that of which the ladder is a type, is God's means, God's way, God's channel, God's instrument of communication and intercourse with God between earth and heaven, and heaven and earth; between God and man, and man and God. All that is in the Lord Jesus alone. Well, I suppose we have no difficulty in accepting that. We move on.

Not only is there the great general truth of an open heaven, a heaven re-opened to those in Christ, and the great fulness of meaning that there is ministrations from heaven to man in Christ, but things become more specific than that as we go on, and, in our usage of the phrase, the term, 'an open heaven', we are not particularly thinking about the general meaning of the phrase. Paul, who had in the first instance that open heaven on the way to Damascus, found that the open heaven came to mean something very much more specific than that. That was for his salvation, that was his apprehending by Christ Jesus, but he came to see that the apprehending was not in a general way that he might be a saved man, but, as he said later, "that I may apprehend that for which I have been apprehended of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12), and if you look at the context, you will find that that means something very much more than salvation. That represented an elected vessel and that takes us back to Jacob; the election of grace reflected in him.

There is nothing in Jacob himself, any more than there was in Saul, who would say quite frankly, "In me, that is, in my flesh, dwells no good thing" (Rom. 7:18), there is nothing in them to account for that special dispensation of God. It was the sovereign act of God electing. It is very important for the Lord's children to understand the fact, as well as the nature, of election. Now, I am not going to embark upon that now. I simply mention it. It is not a thing you can overlook, and, because of certain schools which have made election a very hard and complicated matter, to brush the whole thing aside. It will not do. In our younger days, we got into such difficulties on the mere theological or doctrinal question of election that we were inclined to push it aside and say, 'Well, it is something

that altogether beats us. We can wrangle and wrangle and never get clear on this matter. We had better just trust the grace of God and get on with our Christian business.' But we have come to see that it is not so complicated a matter, and that it is a very important matter, and for your help now, I would just point out to you that election is not primarily a matter of salvation at all. Of course, it is far removed from that old idea that some people seem to have adopted (whether they really do believe it or not I often find difficulty in discovering) that some were elected from eternity to be saved and from eternity others were elected to be lost. Don't worry your heads about that sort of thing at all. But come to this point.

There is such a thing as election in the sovereignty of God, but election primarily relates to vocation and not to salvation. It is connected with purpose. God began everything with purpose. Man was created with purpose. The governing word from eternity to eternity with God is 'purpose'. The purpose was fixed and then man was created, and man was foreseen and foreknown and foreordained. The purpose was not that he should be saved, because that comes in subsequently. It is quite another matter - salvation. We are dealing with eternity, not with time, not with what has taken place in the course of events - that is something else. All that takes place in redemption only brings back on to the upper line of the eternal purpose, so that everything in God's mind relates to purpose.

Now the infinite grace of God is illustrated in Jacob's case, and, while there may have been one thing about Jacob which must not be overlooked, nevertheless here you have the question of purpose. It is what God chooses to do and in order to accomplish that, He chooses in relation to it. Of course, His choice is on certain grounds, and I think we are not contradicting the matter that it is not because of any good in man when we say that Jacob had at least some apprehension of the value of the birthright, as over against Esau, who, for merely fleshly gratification, would barter his birthright. How great a thing that was, is shown in the letter to the Hebrews. After he had sold it, he sought with tears to find repentance in his father and found it not. That has gone and that has gone irrecoverably, beyond recovery. Jacob evidently had some sense of the supreme significance of the birthright, and I think there you have a clue. God has two sides to His activity always. There is the side of His sovereignty and there is the side of appreciation in the one concerned. We may be nothing in ourselves, we may be veritable Jacobs, plenty of guile in us by nature and yet there may be at the heart of things a sense of the supreme, superlative importance of heavenly things, and that gives God at least a way in for His purpose, for He always lights upon that, and an opened heaven is there to begin with.

Now you see, it is divine purpose that is in view particularly with this open heaven. God is after something. God therefore must have instruments by which to accomplish that something, by which to reach that something, and God must find in such instruments, in spite of all that they may be themselves, a real appreciation and apprehension of the superlative value of God's eternal purpose; that they are not just concerned with the matter of salvation, of getting into heaven - that sense of having an opened heaven, that is, the redemptive side of things. Great as that may be, wonderful as redemption may be - the love of God in Christ, in redemption, in salvation. Do believe me that I do not take one little bit away from that when I say that, when you have said all that you can say about that, and when you have rejoiced to the full in all the meaning of redemption, of the Son of God becoming Son of Man, His life, His death, His resurrection, His redeeming Person, His atoning work - the Lamb; when all has been comprehended, it is only related to something else. It is related to eternal purpose, heavenly calling. It is related to a heavenly Man, and God is looking for those whose hearts are drawn out to something even more than salvation, more than redemption, more than all

that is included in the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus; He is looking for hearts that are drawn out to the object of redemption, which goes back before redemption and goes on after redemption.

Now then, Jacob. Jacob comes to the place which he calls 'Bethel' afterwards - the House of God - and, because he is in the way of the purpose of God, having some perhaps very imperfect sense, nevertheless, some sense of the value of spiritual things, the blessing, the birthright, the inheritance, being in the elect line of inheritance, God speaks to him there. He gets an opened heaven, but he does not come into the good and value of it. It is given to him for a fleeting moment like a dream, but it is a very real thing, and he erects the pillar and anoints it, and calls the name of that place, Bethel, the House of God. Now he must go on because, as we know, he in his state is not one with the idea of God's dwelling place, and he must be changed. That time must come when, through discipline, chastening with the hand of God upon him heavily, he is changed from Jacob to Israel, that is, the heavenly not the earthly, the spiritual not the carnal. That brings him into the *experience* of his open heaven, the active values of his open heaven. Then he can go back and reside at Bethel, with no more fleeting moments.

Now, there are two things opened up with that. One is this, the heavenly thing governing, making possible the active values of an open heaven, and the other, the way into that abiding experience, is the way of the cross. In principle we see it in Jacob. Leave it for a moment and come to the New Testament.

Paul got an open heaven on the Damascus road. That open heaven brought to him a fact, the fact of a living exalted Lord. It was a great experience for Paul at the beginning, but all that that meant had yet to be come into. The Lord said to Ananias a few minutes after, if we may speak in terms of time, "Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear My name before the Gentiles... I will show him how great things he must suffer...". Those things go together with Paul's open heaven. You will find that a spiritual history commenced then; if you like, a spiritual pilgrimage very much like Jacob's history from Bethel to his uncle Laban's house for the next twenty years. In a spiritual sense, Paul was on that journey. He had got his open heaven; he had heard, as Jacob had heard, a voice from heaven; he had come at that very point into the purpose of election, the electing purpose of God, but now there is something to be done, a spiritual process, in relation to that open heaven, and to put it briefly, it worked out in this way; that as the Jacob was dealt with, the Israel took shape; as the man was emptied and broken, the heavenly Man came in; as that which was down here was gradually let go, that which was up there was gradually apprehended. We must recognize the progressiveness of things in the life of Paul. There is a real progressiveness in Paul's life as to his revelation, and we know quite well that he did cling to things down here - for the Lord's sake, it is true, with the purest of motives. He clung to Israel, for his brethren, Israel's sake, he could wish himself accursed, and he clung for many years, right up to the end. He went to Jerusalem clinging still with consecrated self-will. Mark that phrase - consecrated self-will. That is a terrible contradiction, that phrase, nevertheless it was true. A consecrated self-will, but in his own heart he was clinging to Israel, and the Lord had said to him many years before, "Depart hence. They will not receive thy testimony concerning Me. Depart. I will send thee far hence" (Acts 22:18,21). But he went up and you remember the trouble he got into, compromise and difficulty, and had to go to Rome as a prisoner instead of a free man. However, he went, the sovereignty of God overruled, but the point is it was not until in Rome, in his imprisonment there, that he finally let Israel go. You have it in Acts 28. He finally let Israel go.

It is not until then that you get the full heavenly blaze of Ephesians. Ephesians and Colossians,

written in the Roman prison, mark the final spiritual translation of Paul from earth to heaven. He let go something of earth to which he had clung, and then the fulness of the heavenly thing came in, and at that time we get the values of those prison letters. I am only using this by way of illustrating the principle that is here.

An opened heaven is ours on the ground of salvation and redemption. The communications of God are for us in Christ, when we are in Christ, as soon as we are in Christ. But that opened heaven carries with it something very much more than being saved and going to heaven. It brings us into relation with God's purpose, eternal purpose, and in order that we may come into the fulness of that purpose, a continuous work, perhaps ever-deepening in its nature, has got to be done in us to turn us from the earth to the heavens, from the Jacob to the Israel.

With Nathanael - that is not the only time that you read the name Nathanael. You go on and very much later things are happening under an open heaven and you have Nathanael there. Nathanael had the assurance of an opened heaven, and he declared, "Thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel." He came into the experience of it later. But between the assurance and the experience lay the cross. Nathanael was one of the company that went through all the agonies of the cross, the days of the cross. He was one who had to see all his earthly hopes and expectations cut off in the death of the Lord Jesus, a kingdom as of this world made impossible for the time being, and he discovered that everything, all hope and prospect, was bound up with a risen and ascended Lord. The cross had to do a work of laying low everything of this earth, of this world, of getting translated spiritually.

This open heaven is for us all, and, in the general sense, it is ours as soon as we are in Christ, but there is something more bound up with the open heaven than salvation. It is seeing, and he saw; it is hearing, and he heard. Whenever you get an open heaven, someone sees something and hears something. It is what we mean by 'revelation'. Now, we may be very true to the Word of God. We may be what is called 'a fundamentalist'. By that we mean one who believes that the Bible is the Word of God from cover to cover, in every word it is inspired; in the Person of the Lord Jesus as God, very God; you know all the creed of the fundamentalist. We may be fundamentalists ready to lay down our lives for those verities of the faith, and we may be absolutely without a trace of revelation. It may be something in a book to which we swear - no open heaven. There is all the difference between having this Book as a book and believing all that is written in it, and having the Holy Spirit giving us God's meaning about it. That is the extra thing, that is the open heaven. One means hard labour with what is in itself after all only dead material; the other means that that same material comes to life and we see. We see God's thoughts.

Now, that sort of thing, that open heaven, that revelation, that ministry, is come into by a spiritual process in which the Jacob is destroyed and broken, undercut and dealt with; the you and the I; where we are set aside, and the Lord is taking the place. Now, that is the process and that is the work of the cross. It is not just dealing with our sin in that specific sense, dealing with us as sinners. Of course, we are sinners, and it is no use trying to push a wedge between ourselves and our sin. But you will understand when I say it is not sins the Lord is dealing with in order to give revelation. It is more particularly, when it is a matter of His own children, with us - not with *us* on that side which is most manifestly bad and evil and wrong - it is what we are in our own natural limitations.

Here is one whose nature, whose make-up, whose constitution, is to be occupied with the small things of life, always the small, near-at-hand things, details and little matters all lying around. God

forbid that we should say that it is wrong to have concern for the details immediately to hand. That is not my point, but there are some who are made that way. The greater vista - that is another world, and they have no interest in that world, their whole reaction is to go back to their own little circle. 'We have all these things immediately around us, these are the practical things of life.' That is how they are made. Another may be made just the opposite. They may be occupied with the great things beyond and not concerned at all with the things lying immediately to hand. It is a matter of make-up. Whichever it is, it may represent a handicap to the Lord. Both may need to be dealt with, so that the one who is small in outlook, immediately local, and always concerned about the little things, has got to be broken open, and you cannot change human nature and human make-up, constitution, without breaking it. Something has got to happen to cleave it open, perhaps to grind it to powder, and the other applies. The other person has to be brought to realize that there is a practical application of great universal things. That also means that something has to be done. It is a matter of the break up of what we are, making us other than what we are by nature, and therein lies the pathway of suffering, the working of the cross so that it deals with man by nature and brings in the heavenly Man.

The Lord Jesus is never too visionary to be practical, and never too practical to lose vision. It is the matter of the Lord taking our place, and that is a process of pain, for there is never an increase of the Lord Jesus in any life without the displacement of something, and that displacement comes through some fresh phase of suffering, not all physical suffering, but some kind of suffering, some kind of travail. So the open heaven, in all its greater fulness of meaning and value, to become a practical thing of experience, lies along the pathway of the cross where that which is of ourselves, our own disposition, and that to which we cling here, that which is our own hold, all has to go. It has to be broken down, and an Israel has to take the place of a Jacob and a Paul the place of Saul, and in all the Christ takes our place. The open heaven is that, the Lord Jesus supplanting us.

Now, I have to stop there, though I know I have not finished, but I do trust that you just catch a glimpse of this. The Lord would have us all have an open heaven, a life in revelation, but believe me, while the way to heaven is open for us in the Lord Jesus when we believe, there is purpose governing it in the thought of God, tremendous purpose for which we are chosen in Him, and that purpose carries with it something far more than is possible to us in apprehension or transaction in what we are. It is only possible for Christ, and He must take our place, and the deeper the work of the cross, the greater the values of an open heaven; the deeper the suffering in relation to God's eternal purpose, the greater the fulness of our knowledge of heavenly things.

The Lord give us grace!