

Running Away from God
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In 2002, Steven Spielberg made a movie called “Catch me if you can” about the amazing story of a man named Frank W. Abagnale. At the age of 16, Abagnale’s parents divorced and he was so devastated by it that he ran away from home.

Abagnale was no ordinary runaway, however. He became a con man who circled the globe living the high life and writing bad checks. One of his favorite ploys was impersonating airline pilots so that he could cash fake airline payroll checks as well as “ride the jump seat” for free, to anywhere in the world. And he was just a kid!

In his adolescence, Abagnale impersonated a doctor, a sociology professor, a cop, and a lawyer. His story has been called “the true story of a real fake.” But, all good runs eventually come to an end, and finally, an FBI agent caught Abagnale. Yet even after all of that, Abagnale’s life continued to be extraordinary. He now serves as a world-renowned consultant and lectures at the FBI’s Financial Crimes Unit on how to catch counterfeiters and how to spot an impersonator.

This summer we are journey through our Old Testament roots and spending some time with the legends of our faith. We start today with Jacob.

Before his name became Israel, before he fathered the 12 sons who would become founders of the 12 tribes of Israel, Jacob was just an ordinary kid for his culture and his time. Like Abagnale, Jacob ran away, but even in his running, God used Jacob in extraordinary ways. Jacob was the second born son to Isaac and Rebekah. In the Old Testament culture of Jacob’s childhood, the birthright—which meant everything the father owned (land, servants, personal possessions, livestock)... it all was passed down to the oldest son. Ironically Jacob was a twin, but Esau his brother was born first, which Jacob grasping his brother’s heel as he left the safety of the womb. But while Isaac loved Esau the most, Jacob’s mother Rachael loved him best. So she concocted a scheme to trick Esau into giving Jacob his birthright.

The plan worked! Esau came home starving from the hunt one day and Jacob made him trade his birthright for a bowl of stew. The plot to steal his brother’s blessing from his father Isaac was a great success...sort of. It was also very costly. Jacob disappointed his father and angered his brother Esau. Afraid Esau was going to kill him, Jacob ran away from home, knowing he may never get to come home again.

In another twist of incredible irony, Jacob got the blessing he wanted, but in running away, he actually had to LEAVE that inheritance with Esau. Jacob became a runaway, a vagabond, penniless and alone.

Jacob’s journey took him to a region called Haran. This was retracing his cultural heritage, retracing the steps of his grandfather Abraham, who came from Haran to the Promised Land many years ago. But Abraham left behind him a settlement of people that grew and prospered over the years.

So it was natural that his mother, Rebekah, would suggest he go to Haran for his safety. The journey from Beersheba to Haran would be far enough away that Esau would probably not follow Jacob there. But, Jacob had distant family at Haran, so he wouldn’t be alone. The hope was that after awhile Esau would forget his anger, Rachael could send for Jacob, and the family could be reunited. In the meantime, Jacob hoped to fall in love and start a family.

So, Jacob set out on the journey, heart heavy, not exactly sure what he will find when he got to Haran, not sure when he might be able to come home, only certain that things hadn't worked out quite like he had wanted.

Late in the day, Jacob came to the city of Luz. It was about 70 miles from home, and he must have arrived so late that the city's gates were already locked, because Jacob was forced to spend the night alone, in the dark, using a rock as a pillow. It was a bleak, low point in Jacob's life. From family to loneliness. From the warmth and light of his tent community to dark, cold of the wilderness.

I imagine Jacob had a hard time sleeping that night...and not just because he was sleeping on the ground with a rock for a pillow. Choked with regret. Wishing he would have made different choices.

When I first moved away from home, I remember staying up as late as I could so that by the time I fell into bed I was so tired I wouldn't have time to miss everything I'd left behind. When you are sad, or lonely, or running away from something, the night is always so much harder to get through than the day, isn't it?

As Jacob lay there trying to sleep, I wonder if he thought about his family. Did he worry about his elderly father? Did he miss his mother to whom he'd been so close all his life? Did he replay childhood memories of adventures with his twin brother, a brother he had tricked and harmed to get his own way.

At some point, Jacob finally fell asleep and he had the most extraordinary dream. He dreamed that a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and that God's angels were climbing up and down.

- *Physically*: Jacob was in a rocky wasteland, in the middle of nowhere.
- *Socially*: He was separated from his family and friends and all that he knew.
- *Materially*: He had nothing but the shirt on his back—although he'd just stolen for himself an inheritance that was now useless to him, *and*
- *Spiritually*: He was without hope.

Here in the wilderness, at the lowest point of his life, Jacob encountered God. In the middle of the night, God showed up and said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac." God promised to give Jacob and his progeny the land on which they stood and said that his descendants would be so many that they would cover the earth like dust. And most importantly, God assured Jacob that he would never be alone. God said—I am with you. Wherever you go, I am with you!

The first lesson we learn from Jacob is no matter how far we run, we never can run away from ourselves. You've heard that old adage, right, wherever you go, there you are! We can run from our problems, our fears, our insecurities, but in the middle of the night, they always catch up with us.

The second lesson we learn is that no matter how far we run, we can never outrun God. In the great mystery of who God is, in all that we understand and don't understand about our Creator, one thing I remain certain of is that God is always present in and with us. Many generations after Jacob, Paul will write in his letter to the Romans, chapter 8, For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God.

Jacob provides us with a wonderful example of how God chases after us, woos us, seeks us no matter what, even when we are caught in schemes of our own making. God breaks through

lonely, empty, broken moments and reveals to us God's purpose for our lives, promising above all to remain with us through everything.

The image of the stairway in this passage is really powerful because I envision heaven coming down to earth when we are the most in need of God, a pathway to connect to our Creator when the chasm between heaven and earth seems uncrossable.

It was a life-changing moment for Jacob. He woke up and exclaimed, How awesome is this place! God is here! THIS is the gate of heaven!

God spoke to Jacob at the moment of his deepest desperation. All that has happened before this is simply prologue. It is unimportant. Even his deception and trickery was used by God to bring him to this precise important moment in life when he would see God's purpose for him. Now that Jacob was literally running for his life, now that he was leaving the Promised Land, now that he had disgraced himself, now that he had finally reached the bottom, at that very moment, God chose to reveal himself to Jacob.

C.S. Lewis, the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, said "God whispers to us in our pleasure and shouts to us in our pain. Pain is God's megaphone to rouse a sleeping world." Jacob was very dear to God, and in the midst of Jacob's very real, very overwhelming pain, God reached in and revealed Godself to Jacob.

What does all this mean to us? Friends, we are living in dark times. The news is full of unspeakable acts of cruelty, terror, violence, oppression and devastation. Politically our nation and the world are divided. We are incredibly fragile environmentally, socially, and economically. It seems like the world is coming apart in our hands and we aren't sure what to do about. We are living in dark, dark times.

But Jacob's story reminds us that we are not alone in darkness. We who claim the promises of the God of Jacob as our own know that God is real and present, intervening into the darkness with moments of unspeakable hope and incredible joy, where a single act of courage can undue a wealth of evilness. We who believe in the promises of Jesus Christ, an offspring of Jacob, know that God is not done with us or with this planet. Hope remains as long as we, in love, stay and continue to fight.

And that's the second thing we must take away from Jacob's story—that running away never solves the problem. Jacob is going to learn over the next few years that his problems are going to catch up with him. We must remain engaged, speaking peace and light into the chaotic darkness. When people are persecuted because of their beliefs, their culture or backgrounds, their ethnic, racial, sexual or gender identities, their status, when people are treated as less than human, you and I are the ones who must do something about it.

I mean, of course, Running would be easier. It would be easier to say, let's just wait out this current administration and get back to work in a few years when there is less opposition. It would be easier to think, you know, the planet will heal itself, and my tiny bit of effort would be useless anyway. It would be easier to say, I have to take care of my family first and I can't afford to risk it all for someone I don't even know. Easier.

But kingdom-building work is never easy. Running away will not rebuild or restore. We must stay even in the wilderness, even when all we have is a rock for our head and the darkness is pressing in, we must stand in solidarity with those who are persecuted, we must speak out for truth, we must fight the good fight, knowing that God stands shoulder to shoulder with us, speaking into the darkness, **YOU ARE NOT ALONE.**

There is a stairway here today, in our midst. It's called the Holy Spirit. The spirit is our gateway between heaven and earth. The spirit comforts us when we are alone with our private problems. The spirit encourages us when it feels like the fight is useless. The spirit gives us the words to speak when we have no idea what to say. And the Spirit assures us that we are never without hope, we are never alone.

Do not be discouraged by what you see in the news. Do not lose hope. In the darkness, it's easy to lose perspective, but if we keep our hand on that stairway, if we keep in continuous contact with the Spirit, we will come to recognize that God is always with us and that the Light always follows the darkness.

Two men were having an intense public debate about God. After making a brilliant argument about the nonexistence of God, the first man walked to the whiteboard behind the podium and printed in large letters, "GOD IS NO WHERE." What proof do you have to refute this? He asked.

Quietly the other man rose to offer his rebuttal. He walked to the board and changed one letter, moving the beginning of the fourth word to the end of the third. As he turned to face the crowd he said, You See, it's all about perspective. And he pointed at the statement which now read,

"GOD IS NOW HERE."

Amen.