

GRACE FOR RUNAWAYS

Genesis 28:13-15

¹³There above the stairway stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

This event in Jacob's life reminds me of one of my favourite stories, told by Philip Yancey in his book What's So Amazing About Grace. So I thought I'd share that story with you, then a few reflections on us being 'runaways' from God.

The Runaway

A young girl grows up on a cherry orchard just above Traverse City, Michigan. Her parents, a bit old-fashioned, tend to overreact to her nose ring, the music she listens to, and the length of her skirts. They ground her a few times, and she seethes inside. "I hate you!" she screams at her father when he knocks on the door of her room after an argument, and that night she acts on a plan she has mentally rehearsed scores of times. She runs away.

She has visited Detroit only once before, on a bus trip with her church youth group to watch the Tigers play. Because newspapers in Traverse City report in lurid detail the gangs, drugs, and violence in downtown Detroit, she concludes that is probably the last place her parents will look for her. California, maybe, or Florida, but not Detroit.

Her second day there she meets a man who drives the biggest car she's ever seen. He offers her a ride, buys her lunch, arranges a place for her to stay. He gives her some pills that make her feel better than she's ever felt before. She was right all along, she decides: Her parents were keeping her from all the fun.

The good life continues for a month, two months, a year. The man with the big car—she calls him "Boss"--teaches her a few things that men like. Since she's underage, men pay a premium for her. She lives in a penthouse and orders room service whenever she wants. Occasionally she thinks about the folks back home, but their lives now seem so boring that she can

hardly believe she grew up there. She has a brief scare when she sees her picture printed on the back of a milk carton with the headline, "Have you seen this child?" But by now she has blond hair, and with all the makeup and body-piercing jewellery she wears, nobody would mistake her for a child. Besides, most of her friends are runaways, and nobody squeals in Detroit.

After a year, the first sallow signs of illness appear, and it amazes her how fast the boss turns mean. "These days, we can't mess around," he growls, and before she knows it she's out on the street without a penny to her name. She still turns a couple of tricks a night, but they don't pay much, and all the money goes to support her drug habit. When winter blows in she finds herself sleeping on metal grates outside the big department stores. "Sleeping" is the wrong word—a teenage girl at night in downtown Detroit can never relax her guard. Dark bands circle her eyes. Her cough worsens.

One night, as she lies awake listening for footsteps, all of a sudden everything about her life looks different. She no longer feels like a woman of the world. She feels like a little girl, lost in a cold and frightening city. She begins to whimper. Her pockets are empty and she's hungry. She needs a fix. She pulls her legs tight underneath her and shivers under the newspapers she's piled atop her coat. Something jolts a synapse of memory and a single image fills her mind: of May in Traverse City, when a million cherry trees bloom at once, with her golden retriever dashing through the rows and rows of blossomy trees in chase of a tennis ball.

God, why did I leave? she says to herself, and pain stabs at her heart. My dog back home eats better than I do now. She's sobbing, and she knows in a flash that more than anything else in the world she wants to go home.

Three straight phone calls, three straight connections with the answering machine. She hangs up without leaving a message the first two times, but the third time she says, "Dad, Mom, it's me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I'm catching a bus up your way, and it'll get there about midnight tomorrow. If you're not there, well, I guess I'll just stay on the bus until it hits Canada."

It takes about seven hours for a bus to make all the stops between Detroit and Traverse City, and during that time she realizes the flaws in her plan. What if her parents are out of town and miss the message? Shouldn't she have waited another day or so until she could talk to them? Even if they are home, they probably wrote her off as dead long ago. She should have given them some time to overcome the shock.

Her thoughts bounce back and forth between those worries and the speech she is preparing for her father. "Dad, I'm sorry. I know I was wrong. It's not your fault, it's all mine. Dad, can you forgive me?" She says the words over and over, her throat tightening even as she rehearses them. She hasn't apologized to anyone in years.

The bus has been driving with lights on since Bay City. Tiny snowflakes hit the road, and the asphalt steams. She's forgotten how dark it gets at night out here. A deer darts across the road and the bus swerves. Every so often, a billboard. A sign posting the mileage to Traverse City. Oh, God.

When the bus finally rolls into the station, its air brakes hissing in protest, the driver announces in a crackly voice over the microphone, "Fifteen minutes, folks. That's all we have here." Fifteen minutes to decide her life. She checks herself in a compact mirror, smooths her hair, and licks the lipstick off her teeth. She looks at the tobacco stains on her fingertips and wonders if her parents will notice. If they're there.

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She walks into the terminal not knowing what to expect, and not one of the thousand scenes that have played out in her mind prepare her for what she sees. There, in the concrete-walls-and-plastic-chairs bus terminal in Traverse City, Michigan, stands a group of 40 family members—brothers and sisters and great-aunts and uncles and cousins and a grandmother and great-grandmother to boot. They are all wearing ridiculous-looking party hats and blowing noisemakers, and taped across the entire wall of the terminal is a computer-generated banner that reads "Welcome home!"

Out of the crowd of well-wishers breaks her dad. She looks through tears and begins the memorized speech, "Dad, I'm sorry. I know ... "

He interrupts her. "Hush, child. We've got no time for that. No time for apologies. You'll be late for the party. A banquet's waiting for you at home."

Obviously that story is meant to parallel the Story of the Two Lost Sons, as told by Jesus in Luke 15 (also known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son).

The thing I want to pick up on is God's grace for runaways.

Or, to put it another way, God the Father's aching heart for sinners.

We see the same aching heart in the story of Jacob.

Jacob was no innocent runaway. He deserved to be kicked out of home because of the rotten things he got up to. Tricking his brother and father. All the underhanded sneaky things he got up to is related in Genesis Chapters 25 to 36.

He is now running away so that his brother won't kill him.

The point is, Jacob does not deserve God's grace at all. He doesn't deserve grace from anyone, let alone God!

And yet, right at this very low point in his life, God comes to him, in a dream and gives him two promises:

I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying.

I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go

Like the runaway girl who received grace when she returned home, Jacob received grace at the beginning of his running away.

And what about you and me? How have we each runaway? And what grace do we need?

Whatever that grace may be, we need to latch onto the truth that God is a love-sick Father, who longs to hold his children close to him.

It is, after all, why the Father sent his Son into the world.

What God did with Jacob was just a prefigurement, a hint, at what God would do in Jesus Christ.

Still looking for some kind of easy moral in this story of Jacob's vision of a stairway to heaven? It's time to forget it. There just isn't one.

What there is, instead, is the remarkable tale of the God who insisted on sticking with the likes of people like Jacob.

The message of the Gospel is that that is precisely what God has been doing all along, what he did most clearly in Jesus of Nazareth, and has been doing ever since for a world, for a church, and for people like you and me who, most days, behave more like runaways than people who dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

This God who grants us blessed dreams, precisely when we need them, and to give us everything we have never and could never deserve.

It is what the Bible means by grace; because in the Bible it is not anything about us that makes God stick with us; it is something about God.

Amen.