

Supernatural Surprises

By David Feddes

Have you ever had a supernatural surprise, a close encounter with God when you didn't expect it? If so, you're not the only one. A great many people say they've had unexpected, overwhelming experiences of God's presence. I'm not talking about weird rumors or wild fantasies but about real people in real life situations: children, grownups, women, men, farmers, truckers, prison inmates, college students, newspaper writers, people of every sort. These experiences aren't limited to people with too much imagination and too little intelligence. Some very brilliant, rational people tell of supernatural surprises they've had.

Alvin Plantinga is one of the world's leading thinkers. He has taught philosophy at Yale, Harvard, Chicago, Calvin, and Notre Dame. His powers of logic are staggering. But for Dr. Plantinga, God isn't just an abstract idea for debate. God is a living reality.

Dr. Plantinga grew up in a Christian home and believed in the existence of God and in the truth of the Bible. As a young man, he left home and went off to Harvard University. He says, "I was struck by the enormous variety of spiritual and intellectual opinion at Harvard, and spent a great deal of time arguing about whether there was such a person as God... I began to wonder whether what I had always believed could really be true. At Harvard, after all, there was such an enormous diversity of opinions about these matters, some of them held by highly intelligent and accomplished people who had little but contempt for what I believed."

But there—on Harvard's campus, beset by doubts, far from home, surrounded by people who didn't believe in God as he did—something stunning happened. Alvin Plantinga writes: "One gloomy evening I was returning from dinner. It was dark, windy, raining, nasty. But suddenly it was as if the heavens opened; I heard, so it seemed, music of overwhelming power and grandeur and sweetness; there was light of unimaginable splendor and beauty; it seemed I could see into heaven itself; and I suddenly saw or perhaps felt with great clarity and persuasion and conviction that the Lord was really there and was all I had thought. The effects of this experience lingered for a long time; I was still caught up in arguments about the existence of God, but they often seemed to me merely academic, of little existential concern."

If someone as brilliant and logical as Professor Plantinga could speak of such an experience and its long-term effect, then it's fair to say that supernatural surprises aren't just for weak-minded, illogical people. God is real, and God can come to anyone he wants anytime he wants in whatever way he wants. He may come when he's least expected. Alvin Plantinga found this out, and he wasn't the first.

The Lord is in This Place

The Bible tells of another young man who was far from home, in a grim situation, feeling alone, who encountered God unexpectedly. This young man, Jacob, was a sneaky cheater. One day when Jacob's twin brother Esau was hungry, feeling absolutely famished, Jacob refused to give him food until Esau agreed to give his rightful inheritance to Jacob. Later, when their father Isaac was old and blind, Jacob came to his sightless father pretending to be Esau, and he stole the blessing his father intended for Esau. Esau was furious and started making plans to kill Jacob. So Jacob fled for his life. Genesis 28 says,

When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in

which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it 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. Your 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. I 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."

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." (Genesis 28:11-17)

Jacob certainly got a supernatural surprise when he had a vision of a stairway to heaven and heard God speak to him. Jacob was a young man far from home, in a hard and lonely place, with no money or property, not sure what the future held, not even confident that he'd be alive much longer. When God came to him in a vision in that lonely place, it was so unexpected and so splendid that Jacob exclaimed to himself, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it."

Have you ever had a supernatural surprise, an unexpected, overwhelming sense of God's reality? Have you ever thought, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it"?

Many people encounter the Lord in powerful ways and in surprising places. For some people, this happens during the worst of times, maybe even when they come very near to death itself. They sense heaven connecting with earth in a way they never have before. More than one person has been able to say from an ambulance or an intensive care unit, "Surely the Lord was in this place, and I was not aware of it."

For others this happens at the best of times. A long-time atheist started to believe in God when his wife gave birth to their first baby. He held that baby in his arms, gazing at her, and his atheism collapsed. He was so amazed at the baby's marvelous design and so overwhelmed by love that he knew God was real and was right in that birthing room. God makes each baby in his image, so the birth of a new image-bearer can produce a powerful sense of God's presence. Again and again in delivery rooms and maternity wards, new parents whisper to themselves, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it."

Or consider another scene altogether. A prison inmate wrote about what happened to him while he was listening to one of my radio programs.

I was listening to the radio, and I was "flipping" between two rock-n-roll stations. I was going up the dial when my hand literally froze. There was a man preaching about Satan's power, and yet how Satan is still afraid of the gospel. I didn't know what to make of not being able to move the dial any further at that time. I listened to the program and prayed with the man. It was weird, praying with a radio, but I did anyhow! The stations then went into credits and weather, and all that time I was trying to figure out what had just taken place. Then it just hit me like a ton of bricks. I thought, "My God, I was just touched by the Holy Spirit." It was a remarkable feeling. I cried tears of joy. I'd heard stories but was always skeptical about them. Never again will I doubt the power of the Holy Spirit. Never again!

Even in prison, a person can end up saying, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it."

A Bizarre Bargain

Isn't it amazing how God so often finds us and connects with us right where we are? I met a trucker who told me the following story from his own life. He'd been ignoring God completely, and then one day he met one of his friends at a truck stop. His friend said, "What would happen if you smashed your truck and got killed? Would you go to heaven?" The trucker replied, "Hmmm. I don't know." His friend said, "Then you're in deep doo-doo, brother!" The trucker couldn't get his friend's question out of his mind. He thought, "What if God is real? What would he do with a guy like me?"

One day, he was driving down the road when he devised a bizarre bargain. The people who loaded his truck had overloaded it. It was carrying more than the legal weight limit, and he was worried. The first weigh station he came to, he would have to stop and have the load weighed. When they found his truck was too heavy, he'd have to pay a big fine and maybe even dump part of the load. That's when he decided to make a bargain. He said, "God, there's no way I'm going to drive hundreds of miles, past all those weigh stations, without at least one of them being open and catching me. But if none of the weigh stations are open, if I do make the whole trip without getting fined, I'll take that as a sign that you exist, God, and I'll start going to church beginning next Sunday."

As he continued driving, he saw not a single policeman. The first weigh station was closed ... and the next ... and the next. With every closed station the trucker passed, he felt greater relief and greater fear: relief that he wasn't getting caught, and fear that God had been listening to him. The further he drove, the tighter God's grip on him seemed to grow. He felt more and more overwhelmed with a sense that God was right there in that truck with him. When he finally made it to his destination, he had no choice. He went to church and took his wife along. Both of them ended up committing their lives to Christ. And they've never been the same since.

That bargain wasn't a very bright idea. It was not God's job to help that law-breaking trucker not to get caught. Later on, as the trucker got to know Jesus better and understand more about God and his ways, he realized just how silly his bargain had been. He doesn't try to use God to get away with breaking the law anymore. But the fact remains that God took him up on his bargain, and the change in this trucker's life has been real. You just never know when you're going to get a supernatural surprise. Even in the cab of an eighteen-wheeler, knowing very little about God and making a bizarre bargain, a man can find himself saying, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it."

A lot of you out there have your own stories. Maybe you don't talk about it much with people you know for fear of what they might say, but if you've ever had a supernatural surprise, you may still think of it one of the most important things that's ever happened to you.

Thinking Things Through

What should we make of supernatural surprises? Is there something wrong with people who have them? Is there something wrong with people who *don't* have them? Let's think things through by going back to the story of Jacob.

Jacob was as shrewd as any professor, as crooked as any convict, and as eager to bargain as the most desperate truck driver. But he was also a man chosen by God. The Lord used the remarkable dream of a stairway between heaven and earth to get Jacob's attention. Jacob had

heard about the Lord from his grandparents Abraham and Sarah, and from his parents Rebekah and Isaac, but now Jacob knew with absolute clarity that God was real and was addressing him personally.

God helped Jacob to see something that's true at every moment but is often hidden from us: there is a stairway, a connection between heaven and earth, by which God joins himself to his world and to his people. And on this stairway, God's angels are ascending and descending in constant activity. Angels are God's servants, working to accomplish his will; they are God's warriors, standing guard over his people; and they are God's messengers, bringing God's message to people who need it.

We don't usually see with our eyes the connection between heaven and earth, and we don't usually see the angels in visible form, but they are very real. Whether we realize it or not, we live each moment in the presence of the supernatural. One of the important effects of a supernatural surprise is to alert us to this and impress it upon us as never before: "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it."

But the impression or experience isn't enough. We also need a Word from God. We need God's Word to help us understand his plan and purpose, and we need God's Word so that we'll have solid promises to live by even after the experience fades.

In Jacob's dream, the important thing wasn't just what God showed but what God said. God made it very clear to Jacob that the Lord wasn't some brand new God that no one had ever heard of before. God declared himself to be the God of Abraham and Isaac, and he declared to Jacob the very same plan and promises he'd spoken to those who'd gone before. God spoke of a promised land, of a chosen people who would continue to multiply, and of using this chosen people to bring blessing to the whole earth. This wasn't just a private revelation to inspire and comfort Jacob. It was a revelation of God's plan for history and for the whole world, and it was a gracious declaration that God had a place for Jacob in that plan.

Then the Lord got more personal with Jacob. He spoke four wonderful words: "I am with you." When those four words from God take root in your heart, you can handle any situation. "I am with you"—with those four words God promised Jacob his presence, and then he promised his protection. He said, "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go." What a comfort, to know that you're living under the protection of the Lord and of his mighty angels! And on top of his presence and protection, God promised Jacob a homecoming. He said, "I 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 promised you." Jacob responded to all this by saying, "If God will be with me... then the Lord will be my God" (Genesis 28:20-21). Jacob took to heart what God promised, and Jacob promised to give himself to God.

Do you see why God's words were even more important than the vision? Long after the vision faded, Jacob's mind rang with the message of a redemptive blessing that would reach down through history and all around the world. In all the ups and downs of his life, Jacob's mind echoed with God's promises of his presence, protection, and an eventual homecoming to a promised land.

Jacob lived very early in the unfolding of God's plan. Today you and I have the Word of God in all its fullness in the Bible. The Bible gives us truths that continue to uphold us long after the sensations of an experience have faded. We need the Word of God to provide our faith with staying power, and we also need God's Word to explain and evaluate our experiences.

If an experience leads you to contradict the God of the Bible and form your own pet notion of God, then you are mistaken. It may have been a demonic delusion, rather than a divine encounter. And even if it was a divine encounter, you've misunderstood it and twisted it and made an idol of it if you're ignoring what God says in his Word.

However, if the experience alerts you to the reality of the Lord, as it did with people I've mentioned, and if it opens your mind to God's plan of salvation described in the Bible, and if it opens your heart to receive personally his promises declared in the Bible, and if it gives you a deepening desire for fellowship with the Christ revealed in the Bible, then your experience is indeed a great blessing from God.

Stairway to Heaven

But what if you haven't had an astounding experience at all? Does that mean something is wrong with you? Not necessarily. The Spirit of God moves in many different ways. Not everybody needs the same experiences. But everybody needs the same Lord, everybody needs the same Word of God, and everybody needs the same Savior. Just believe God's Word, accept his promises in Christ, and trust that his Spirit is at work in you. That's what matters, not what experience led you to that point.

You and I need faith in Jesus, not faith in experiences. The stairway Jacob saw in his dream represents Jesus Christ himself. Jesus made this very clear when he told one of his friends, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (John 1:51). That echoes what the Bible says about the stairway Jacob saw, with angels ascending and descending on it. Jesus is the stairway who makes possible all the business between earth and heaven. Jesus connects heaven and earth, because he is a child of earth and at the same time the Lord of heaven. Jesus brings God to man, and man to God, because he is both God and man. Jesus is the ultimate meaning of Jacob's dream, and Jesus is the ultimate meaning of every genuine supernatural experience.

You and I need to respond the way Jacob responded. Jacob believed what God said to him, he took God's promises to heart, and he said, "If God is going to do all the things he's promised me, then the Lord will be my God." That's the most important thing you or I can say: "The Lord will be my God. Jesus is my Savior and my Lord."

Let me share with you how I came to that point. I grew up in a Christian family, but as I was growing up, I began to ask hard questions. Does God exist? Is Jesus really alive? And if so, where does that leave me? Do I belong to him? Or will he reject a boy who has so many sins and questions and doubts? If I can't be sure he's even there, how can I possibly be sure I belong to him? These questions filled me with dread, and I cried myself to sleep nearly every night.

One night I couldn't take it any more. I went to my mom and asked her what I should do. She told me, "Jesus says in the Bible that if you open the door and ask him to come in, he will come in and live with you. So just pray and ask him." And that's what I did. I got on my knees and talked to Jesus and asked him to be my Savior and to live in me.

In that moment my fears and my sadness evaporated. I went to bed and slept soundly. I woke up with a sense of warmth and joy and security and peace that I really can't put into words. I think it was a taste of what the Bible calls "the peace of God, which transcends all understanding" (Philippians 4:7).

Two nights later, as I slept, I had a dream of heaven. When I woke up, I couldn't remember many details of the dream, and I still can't. I recall a tremendous radiance and

splendor, and a vague sense of the presence of angels or some heavenly beings, but to tell the truth, the particulars don't seem to matter all that much. More important was sheer delight and amazement that God is everything the Bible says he is, and that I am his child.

My experience doesn't add to, or change, anything the Bible says about God or heaven. It was just God's way of confirming his love and his truth to a confused kid who cried out for salvation in Jesus. Since then, I've never had another dream like that one, and I seldom have the overwhelming, almost tangible sense of God's nearness that I had then. But I believe by faith what God says in his Word, and I know I belong to Jesus.

I want you to know the Savior I know. It doesn't matter what particular feelings or experiences you have or don't have. Maybe your experiences far surpass mine or the experiences of other people I've talked about. Then again, maybe you haven't had any experience that was especially striking. Either way, it doesn't matter. What matters is this: God is real, the Bible is true, Jesus is Lord, his Spirit is at work, and his promises can be yours by faith. You have heard the good news that Jesus Christ offers himself as your Savior and friend. You don't need anything more dazzling than the good news of Jesus. I pray that you will put your faith in him. I pray that you're able to say, "Surely, the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it. I believe his promises in Christ, and from this time forward, the Lord will be my God."

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