

ENCOUNTERS WITH GOD

JOHN 1:43-51

There are many different encounters with the Lord that are described in the Old Testament. God revealed Himself to man at many different times and in many different ways. One of the most dramatic accounts of an encounter with God took place in the life of Jacob.

Jacob had always been a con artist. He had come out of the womb holding onto his older brother's heel and it had set the course for his entire life. Whenever the birthday cake was cut, Jacob always had the bigger piece. He had tricked his brother, first out of his birthright and then out of his father's blessing. Finally, this same brother had enough and threatened to kill him.

Jacob was forced to flee for his life. He turned his steps northward to Haran. It would be a long journey of many days and many nights. He was camped along the road one night when he had a dream. It was a vision from God. In this vision, he saw a ladder reaching from the earth to heaven. God was at the top of the ladder and Jacob was at the bottom and angels were going up and down. From the top of the ladder, the Lord gave a promise of the future. He promised to make a great nation from Jacob's descendants. He promised to be with Jacob in his journeys and to bring him back one day to the land from which he was fleeing.

Twenty years pass before Jacob has another encounter with God. He has greatly prospered in Haran and is now a rich man. He has wives and he has servants and he has flocks and herds. He is returning with a large caravan to Canaan, the land of his birth. As he nears home, he hears the news that his brother is coming to meet him with a force of 400 armed men. Once again, he feels the old fear of his brother's unresolved anger against him.

He makes what preparations he can and then, that night, he goes out for a walk. Suddenly there is a figure before him in the darkness.

24 Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25 And when he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob's thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. 26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking." But he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." 27 So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 28 And he said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed." (Genesis 32:24-28).

This was Jacob's second encounter with God. This was no dream, although Jacob might have wished at the time that it had been. This time, his name was changed.

The name Jacob means "heel-grabber." It went all the way back to the circumstances of his birth. When Jacob and his twin brother were born, Jacob had followed his brother out of the womb holding onto his brother's heel. It was to be the patters of his life. Jacob had always been a heel-grabber. He was always out to pull someone's leg and to trip them up if it meant getting ahead himself.

Now his name is changed. He will be called Israel -- the one who has struggled with God. The Heel-grabber will become one who struggles with God. But God cannot be tripped up. There will no longer be any place for heel-grabbing. Jacob is going to become Israel.

These encounters with Jacob were a part of the basic formation of the nation of Israel. They were as ingrained to the Jews as stories about red, white and blue and cherry trees are ingrained into Americans. As we turn to John's account of the first week of the ministry of Jesus, we see some other encounters with the Lord. Just as Jacob's encounters were the basis of the nation of Israel, so these encounters will establish the foundation of the ministry of Jesus.

THE CALL TO PHILIP

The next day He purposed to go forth into Galilee, and He found Philip. And Jesus said to him, "Follow Me." (John 1:43).

This is the fourth day in the narrative of John. He has set forth four consecutive days, the last three of which have Jesus on the scene.

Focus	Events of that Day
John the Baptist gives testimony about himself and about Jesus	John speaks to the delegation from Jerusalem about his ministry (John 1:19-28).
	John publicly introduces Jesus and describes the events that took place at least 41 days earlier at His baptism (John 1:29-.34).
A weekend of encounters with Jesus	John points out Jesus to two of his disciples and they follow Him, spending the day with Him. Later that day, one of them brings his brother, Simon, to Jesus (John 1:35-42).

	Philip and Nathanael meet Jesus (John 1:43-51).
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Up to this point, Jesus has been in the area of Bethany by the Jordan River where John has been baptizing. This is not the same Bethany that is near to Jerusalem. It is described as “Bethany beyond Jordan” (John 1:28). The Jordan River flows from the Sea of Galilee and winds its way south all the way to the Dead Sea. Bethany beyond the Jordan was probably located near the upper parts of the river.

1. A Deliberate Encounter: *The next day He purposed to go forth into Galilee (John 1:43).*

Whereas the previous day has spent at the place where Jesus was staying, this day sees Jesus going out with all deliberation. He has a purpose. He is not just aimlessly gathering disciples and wandering through the hills of Palestine. There is a determination present. There is a definite plan as He purposes to go into Galilee.

There are some who tend to think that Christians ought never to make plans; that we ought to merely be like a soap bubble that blows in the wind. The Bible does not teach such a view. Jesus had a very specific plan and purpose in mind.

We read that Jesus *found Philip*. If you had asked Philip about his conversion experience, he might have said that he found Jesus. We talk about finding God as though He were lost and needed to be found. That is not the case. Jesus found Philip. He has found you and He has found me, too.

2. A Commanding Call: *And Jesus said to him, "Follow Me." (John 1:43).*

We are not told whether Jesus said anything else to Philip before He told him to follow. We are given only this simple command. It think there is a reason for this. It is because, even though we are each called in different ways, we are all called to do the same thing. We are all called to follow Jesus.

You may have been called in a church service. Or it might have been in a home Bible study. It might have been when there were a great number of people around you. Or it might have been when you were alone.

No matter what the circumstances, you were still called. The call is the same for all. It is a call to follow Jesus. When you follow someone, you cannot stay where you are. Following implies change. It involves a change in direction. You were going in one direction and then you began to follow and that took you in a different direction. It also involves a change in destination. There is a new goal to

your life that you did not previously have.

You might be thinking, “What if the Lord leads me in a direction in which I don’t want to go?” Let me say for the record that He WILL take you to a place you would not otherwise go. That is what a leader does. A leader leads in his own direction. One who tries to get out in front and to merely go where those behind are going is not a leader; he is merely an innovative follower. Jesus is a leader and He calls for followers.

Jesus says to you the same thing He said to Philip. He calls you to follow. The question is what will be your response to His leading. Your response will reflect the inner condition of your soul.

3. *A Common Connection: Now Philip was from Bethsaida, of the city of Andrew and Peter (1:44).*

The name Bethsaida is a Hebrew name. It means “the place of fishing.” It was located on the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee (Josephus, Wars 4:7:2; Antiquities 18:2:1).

Why is Philip’s town mentioned? It is to let us know that he was from the same town as Simon and Andrew. In a small town of that size, they would have known each other. Perhaps the testimony of those two brothers played a part in Philip’s becoming a follower of Jesus.

PHILIP’S TESTIMONY TO NATHANAEL

⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, of the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” ⁴⁶ And Nathanael said to him, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” (John 1:44-46).

As we see Philip bringing his friend Nathanael to meet Jesus, we should note how this account parallels the narrative of the previous section where Andrew brought his brother Simon to meet Jesus.

John 1:35-42	John 1:43-51
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Andrew meets Jesus and then goes and gets his brother Simon to bring him to Jesus.	Philip meets Jesus and then goes and gets his friend Nathanael to bring him to Jesus.
Jesus sees Simon and demonstrates that he has some knowledge about him by assigning to him the nickname “Peter” (“rock”).	Jesus sees Nathanael and demonstrates that he has some knowledge about him by describing him as “an Israelite in whom there is no guile.”

When Philip began to follow Jesus, he got excited. He got so excited that he wanted to tell someone else about it. I hear a lot of people who seem to think that Christianity should be a private experience that should never be shared. That is not the kind of Christianity that was held by Philip. He wanted others to share what he had experienced.

How can you tell a football fan? It is because he is always talking about football. He cannot get enough of it. When you listen to him, he is regularly demonstrating his excitement and zeal for the sport.

How can you tell a real Christian? It is because he is always talking about Christ. Nobody has to tell him to do it. He cannot help himself. When you listen to him, it is obvious that he is excited about the Lord.

1. Philip’s Motivated Search: *Philip found Nathanael (1:44).*

Can you imagine the scene? Jesus and His new followers are walking along the northern road that will take them to Galilee. Perhaps they stop along the way or maybe to eat lunch. Not so for Philip. He goes on ahead. He is going to find someone who he can bring to Jesus.

Meanwhile, far ahead, there is someone who is taking a rest from the day’s events. It is a young Jewish man named Nathanael. He is known in the Synoptic gospels as Bartholomew (“son of Tholmai”). Nathanael is relaxing under the shade of a fig tree. I don’t know what he is doing there. Perhaps he is meditating on a portion of Scripture from the Old Testament. Perhaps he is thinking of the story of Jacob and how God revealed Himself to him. Maybe he thinks to himself, “Jacob was such a con-artist and yet, God still revealed Himself to him. I’m not at all like Jacob, so why doesn’t God show Himself to me?”

In any case, Nathanael is interrupted as he looks up to see Philip approaching. Did they already know each other? Once again, we are not told either way. But Philip does not hesitate to share with Nathanael the good news.

2. Philip’s Amazing Testimony: *“We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law*

and also the Prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." (1:45).

I can imagine Nathanael perking up as Philip begins to tell him how they have found the One promised in the Old Testament Scriptures. Nathanael realizes the implications of this. Philip is describing the Messiah. Perhaps God is going to reveal Himself after all.

Then Philip names the One. He is Jesus of Nazareth. Something is wrong. The Messiah is not supposed to come from Nazareth. The prophet Micah was very specific in his prophecy. The Messiah must come from Bethlehem, the city of David (Micah 5:2).

3. Nathanael's Rhetorical Question: *Nathanael said to him, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (1:45).*

Nathanael did not think too highly of Nazareth. After all, Nazareth was only a little out-of-the-way village. It was never mentioned in the Old Testament. Nobody of any importance ever came from Nazareth. Messiahs don't come from Nazareth.

Nathanael was from the neighboring village of Cana (John 21:2). Perhaps he would have been more receptive if the Messiah had come from Cana. But I don't think so. The truth is, Nathanael felt that Nazareth was too close to home. Messiahs don't come from next door. They always come from long ago and far away.

Jesus said the same thing when He said that no prophet is honored in his own country (John 4:44). You might believe that someone halfway around the world is the Messiah, but you will find it much harder to believe that the Messiah is someone with whom you attended high school.

There is a principle here that I want to apply on a very personal level. Is there a person whose ministry you tend to overlook because of your close proximity? Husbands tend to do this to their wives. And wives are sometimes prone to do this to their husbands.

There is a special exhortation that Paul gives to those who overlook the "guy next door." It is found in his epistle to the church at Ephesus.

And be subject to one another in the fear of Christ (Ephesians 5:21).

Somewhere along the line, we developed the idea that we should only be subject to the pastor or to the professional Bible teacher or to the person with a string of

degrees after his name. Here is the principle. Don't ignore the one who comes from Nazareth. You just might find that he has come from God.

4. Philip's Disarming Invitation: *Philip said to him, "Come and see." (1:46).*

Philip is a brand new believer. He has just met Jesus earlier that day and he has just come to faith. He has not yet taken a course on apologetics. He doesn't know a lot of facts and figures about defending the truth of Christianity. He doesn't have six reasons why Nathanael's objection can be answered. Yet he knows within himself that Jesus really is the Messiah and so, he invites Nathanael to come and see for himself.

There is a lesson here. You cannot convince men of the validity of Christianity on the basis of reason or logic. That is not to say that our faith is unreasonable or illogical, but those means will not, in themselves, convince anyone of anything. Our faith is rooted in a person. Our faith is rooted in Jesus Christ. It is not until a person meets Jesus that he begins to really believe.

A fear that there are many who have believed a set of facts about God and think it is enough. A set of facts cannot save you, even if they are true facts. Only the person of Jesus can do that. You need to come and see Him.

NATHANAEL MEETS JESUS

⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" ⁴⁸ Nathanael said to Him, "How do You know me?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you."

⁴⁹ Nathanael answered Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel." (John 1:41-49).

We do not know how far ahead Philip had gone to find Nathanael. I would imagine that it had been some distance away. Furthermore, Jesus and His disciples were still where Philip had left them.

As Philip and Nathanael draw near, Jesus speaks. Notice to whom He addresses Himself. He is not speaking to Philip or Nathanael. He is speaking to His disciples. But His words are nevertheless intended for Nathanael to hear.

1. Jesus' Accurate Assessment: *Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" (1:47).*

The word “guile” is translated from the Greek word δολος. It refers to deceit or fraud. It describes a falsehood. It is a word that brings to mind a con-artist. It is a word that would have described the character of Jacob in his younger days. Indeed, the Septuagint uses this same word in Genesis 27:35 where Isaac speaks of how Jacob came “deceitfully” to steal the blessing.

We would not be too far out of line in translating the words of Jesus: *"Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no Jacob!"*

Do you see what Jesus is saying? “Here is an honest Israelite! Here is a man who is the descendant of Jacob, but who is the very opposite of Jacob.”

2. Nathanael’s Surprised Response: *Nathanael said to Him, "How do You know me?" (1:48).*

Nathanael is surprised. Here stands One who has only just met him and yet who seems to know that he is like. He realizes that Jesus has made a correct evaluation, but he cannot understand how that could be.

Nathanael had a habit of speaking his mind. He did so when Philip said that the Messiah was Jesus of Nazareth. Nathanael could have been polite and smiled and nodded while thinking to himself, “This fellow is an idiot.” But Nathanael was not like that. He wasn’t very good at playing poker. There was no deceit in him. He said what he thought. Only he hadn’t had the opportunity to do so in front of Jesus. So how did Jesus know this quality about Nathanael? Though we are not specifically told, there is a hint that this awareness was supernatural.

3. Jesus’ Supernatural Awareness: *Jesus answered and said to him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." (1:48).*

Jesus makes a reference to Nathanael while he was under the fig tree. That doesn’t mean a lot to you or to me, but it carried some special significance to Nathanael. Something had happened under the fig tree. Something that Nathanael had not told anyone. Something about which we can only guess, for we still don’t know what it was.

Only Nathanael knew. But Jesus also knew. He realizes that Jesus is saying in effect, “I knew you before you ever met me. I knew you before you ever laid eyes upon me.”

Here is a special truth. It is that God knew you before you ever knew Him. He knew you before you knew anything. Before the foundations of the world, He knew you and He loved you and He sent His Son to die for you.

4. Nathanael's Confession of Faith: *Nathanael answered Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel." (1:49).*

This is a man who had been a skeptic. He had been convinced that Jesus could not possibly be the Messiah because Jesus was from Nazareth and Messiahs don't come from Nazareth. Suddenly that does not matter any longer. He has not been told that Jesus was really born in Bethlehem. It is not necessary to his faith to have that additional piece of insight. Nathanael is convinced quite apart from such details. As a sign of his newfound faith, he ascribes three titles to Jesus.

- Rabbi: This is the Hebrew word for "teacher." It literally means "great one." Nathanael realizes that this is One who is able to teach him about the Lord.
- Son of God: Nathanael realizes that this kind of supernatural knowledge comes only from God.
- King of Israel: Philip had already declared that Jesus was the One promised in the Old Testament. Therefore, He could be none other than the promised Son of David, heir to the throne of Israel.

THE PROMISE OF A HEAVENLY VISION

50 Jesus answered and said to him, "Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You shall see greater things than these." 51 And He said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you shall see the heavens opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." (John 1:50-51).

Jacob had once seen a vision of angels ascending and descending a ladder that reached from earth to heaven. That ladder had represented the connecting link between God and man. It had bridged the gap between earth and heaven. It had crossed the gulf between God and man.

Jesus uses the same words that described the experience of Jacob in the Old Testament to promise a future vision. This future vision also is one of a gulf being bridged between God and man. Again, we see angels ascending and descending. But there is also a difference. This time, it is not a ladder that spans the gulf between God and man. This time, it is the Son of Man who spans the gulf.

Jacob	Nathanael
His very name indicated his tendency to deception and guile	He was a son of Jacob in whom was no deception or guile
He had a vision	He will have a vision
His vision was of angels ascending and descending	His vision will also be of angels ascending and descending
The angels were ascending and descending on a ladder	The angels will be seen ascending and descending on the Son of Man

Following the vision of the ladder ascending to heaven, Jacob had erected a stone to serve as a memorial. It is fitting that earlier in this chapter, Jesus had met Simon and given him the nickname “Peter,” meaning “stone or rock.” As the stone of Bethel would serve as a memorial to the heavenly vision, Peter would stand before rulers and governors to tell them of the One who had come down from heaven.

Jesus is the fulfillment of Jacob’s ladder. He is the ladder that spans the gulf. He is the intermediary who brings man into fellowship with God.

If you have been trying to reach God apart from Jesus, then you have failed. There is a fundamental exclusiveness to Christianity. Jesus did not say that He is “a” way. He is not one of many different paths to God. He said that He is THE way.

You will likely object that this seems far too intolerant of other religions and beliefs. But that is the nature of truth. Real truth is always intolerant of error. Truth is always exclusive. Truth does not change to suit the mistaken belief of anyone.

Jesus is the ladder. He is the way of community between God and man. He offers that community to you. It is a free gift. It can be yours today. You can come to Jesus in faith, trusting in Him alone as your Lord and Savior. Then there will come a day when you also shall see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.