

“An Encounter With God” (John 1:47; Matthew 5:8)
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January 13, 2019
 Cornwall, ON

Jesus saw Nathaniel ... and said of him, ‘Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile’
 [Jn 1:47, cf. Ps 32:2, Ps 73:1]
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. [Matt 5:8]

The Promised Land for a Christian is a life lived in the fullness of God. Just as there was an exodus by the Hebrews from Egypt, so too there is an exodus for the soul when we leave our bondage to self-deception and enter the reality of a Christ-like life. In our exodus, as in Israel’s, self-deception must be exposed, and sin must die in the wilderness. Only then can we truly be qualified to possess our inheritance. During this time, we wrestle with God. In truth, only those whom God transforms can possess what He has promised.

Every one who follows Jesus needs to conquer the challenge of self-deception. Self-deception protects all our other sins from repentance. Indeed, we too must ask ourselves the question as did David in Ps 24: 3-4, *how can we ascend into the hill of the Lord if we have lifted up our soul to falsehood or sworn deceitfully?*

I confess that I believe in our human nature, many modern Christians may want to argue, *But I know the truth!* Knowing the truth, especially doctrinal truth of what Christ has accomplished is absolutely essential. But for us to experience personal transformation, we must possess the truth about ourselves. How can we change what we cannot or do not see? True confession leads us to admit that this process is not as simple as it seems. Jeremiah wrote, *For the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?* (Jer. 17:9 NKJV). We have internal mechanisms that automatically justify our failures and excuse our wrong behavior. We can see self-deception plainly in others but we are more often completely blind to the deceitfulness of our own hearts.

In my training and experience, I have learned that most people live in strongholds of self-deception. So to be free of this is a remarkable achievement. It does not mean we become perfect but that we become capable of seeing where we are imperfect. It means we can embrace the need to change. This is true of most other disciplines in life but is an essential for everyone who wants to experience what Paul wanted for all Christians: *Let that which was in Christ Jesus our Lord be also in you.* It means the Christian embraces change so that there will be change.

From the two Gospel verses we began with, we learn that a heart free from deceit attracts the gaze of God. It means we are serious about our transformation. Consider the words about Nathaniel: *Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!* Different translations of the Scripture use the words, *nothing cunning, nothing false, nothing phoney.* Guile means, craftiness and deceitful manipulation. In this one brief statement Jesus described a true Israelite as one in whom there was no guile.

If anyone is to become a follower of Jesus, a true Israelite, they will not only learn the truths about God, they will also discover the truth about the self – the real ME. God will confront each person. You may only want God to bless you, but instead you might find God poised to stand up to you, fight you or take you on. It is this confrontation, this discipline from God that validates us as His children. Paul, in Hebrews reminds us while quoting Proverbs 3, *My child, do not despise the chastening of the Lord. Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every child whom He receives.* [Heb 12: 5-6].

One of the most obvious examples of this divine confrontation is the story of the life of Jacob. He was a deceiver. His name in Hebrew meant, *supplanter*. And as was his name, so he was. Jacob deceived his brother

Esau, trading a bowl of stew for Esau's birthright. Jacob lied to his father Isaac, in order to defraud Esau of Isaac's blessing (Gen 27:36). Yet Jacob was also greatly loved by God. He was called to a singular place of historic significance. God visited Jacob in visions. He renewed covenants with him and gave him promises. In modern terminology, Jacob had been "*born again*" for nearly thirty years. He knew the Lord and believed in Him, yet Jacob remained detached from God concerning his sin.

After Jacob deceived Esau and Isaac, he fled to his uncle Laban. Laban was a deceiver as well and ten times over the next twenty years, Laban tried to defraud Jacob (Gen 31:7). As distressing as the relationship became, it was part of the dealings of God. For as Jacob deceived others, so his uncle was dishonest toward him, just as Jesus taught: *For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged: and with the same measure you use, it will be measured back to you.* (Matt 7:2). God was making Jacob come to hate deception.

Finally, just as the Lord promised, the time arrived for Jacob to return to his childhood home. To do so meant Jacob would have to face Esau whom he had defrauded twice and who intended to kill him. Still, God was orchestrating the events of Jacob's life. By divine providence, Esau and 400 armed men were approached the route Jacob was traveling on his way home.

There are times when our fears serve God's purposes and Jacob was extremely afraid. When we study this account, we find the Lord used Jacob's fear not only to deal with his sin, but also to deal with his servant nature. God have given Jacob promises of prosperity, life and family. But the only way to that destiny meant passing through the very thing that threatened it the most: Esau. As Jacob neared home he sent hundreds of livestock ahead as gifts. He brought his encampment to rest while he himself remained alone. In that fearful night, God appeared to Jacob. But in what manner does the Lord appear? Is He gently cradling Jacob? Is He reassuring him of His promises? No! The Lord confronts Jacob and wrestles with him.

In the meeting with God two things ultimately happened. The Lord blessed Jacob and then renamed the former deceiver, *Israel*, translated, *Prince of God*. The Lord blessed Jacob and then struck him and dislocated his thigh so that for the rest of his life, he walked with a limp. Jacob was blessed, but he was broken. Every time Jacob was tempted to rely upon deceit, his limp reminded him that his strength was not in manipulation, but in the Lord. This is the nature of the new Israel.

Many of us are in the exact same place as Jacob was; we want reassurance and peace. Instead, God is requiring that we deal honestly and humbly with the areas where we were wrong or hurtful in the past. Many of us may think we are wrestling with the devil but perhaps the One striving with us is God. There exists two natures in all of us: an old "Jacob" nature, and a new nature, blessed and called by God. Just as the oak tree grows in the grave of the acorn, so we die to self, that which is new rises within us. We then become a new creation, or the new Israel, Prince or Princess of God.

Jacob named the place where he wrestled with the angel, *Penile*, which means, *face of God*. He said, *I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved.* (Gen 32:40). The fight ended, the sun rose up and Jacob opened his eyes. There on the horizon, standing with his army of men was his greatest fear, his brother Esau. Jacob sent his servants, maids and wives ahead, each bowing low to the ground before Esau. Finally, Jacob himself went forward, bowing low to the ground, rising and bowing again, seven times before his brother. As he knelt in repentance, he called his brother, "*lord.*" Amazingly, Esau ran to Jacob and for perhaps the first time in their lives, they embraced and wept together. (Gen 33: 3-4).

If you have ever studied this passage you no doubt at one time will have asked the question, *Why didn't Esau kill his brother as he said he would do?* Because God already had. In the twenty years of trials with Laban,

in the night of wrestling with the Lord, Jacob had died to himself. The person Esau met was not Jacob, but Israel. The deceiver was dead, at least crippled. When we truly trust God, we do not need self-deception or manipulation to protect us. Such is the nature of the new creation in God, - the new Israel.

As we reach out for our destiny, we discover that the door to our future often lies in our past. There may be people whom we have defrauded or hurt. There may be a child with whom we were impatient, or a spouse towards whom there have been harsh words. There might be a fellowship that caused strife and division. While we should not dig up issues that are truly buried, we need to ask the Lord to search us and see if there is any hurtful way within us. (Ps 139: 23-24). *Search me, O God. And know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties; And see if there is any wicked way in me. And lead me in the way everlasting.*

Esau forgave Jacob. Jacob's response was profound: *I see your face as one sees the face of God, and you have received me favorably.* (Gen 33:10). In Esau's acceptance, Jacob sees the face of God.

We seek encounters with God, yet there is a time when God will hide behind the face of those whom we've hurt. The Lord will resist us until He can reconcile us to our past. The thief on the cross beside Jesus received his pardon upon his recognition of his state, followed by his confession.

Jesus called Nathaniel, *an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile.* We all begin our journey to God with self-deception in our hearts. If we will truly become like the new Israel, those who have wrestled with God and prevailed, we will then become the new Israelites in whom there is no guile. Amen.