

Introduction: God is always waiting for us to turn our attention to Him: the Reason we all exist! Waiting for us to tune in to His truth, to listen for His voice! But He's not waiting *passively*! He's also *actively* pursuing us at the same time, longing to rescue us from vanity and the kingdom of darkness, longing for the light to come on in our brains and hearts. I sent a poster to my eldest granddaughter in Holland recently to see if she could translate the Spanish (she lived here for her first five years of life): "La vida comienza una vez que sabes que Jesús es la razón por la que vives." She speaks Dutch and English fluently, has studied French and German, and still knows a bit of Spanish, and she got it: "Life begins once you know that Jesus is your reason for being!" He's the One who made us, the One who gave His life to redeem us, the King of the universe! Why would we not want Him to rule our lives?! But we are often so **slow to awaken** to Him as our true *reason for being*. And this is not a new thing at all! Many people in the Bible were blind to God's presence until He met them in a special way, maybe in their adverse circumstance, in their neediness. C.S. Lewis writes, "We read to know that we are not alone" – well, we read the Bible for that reason too! So today we want to take a look at four examples of people whom God met up with in a special encounter and their lives were changed, their focus and direction; then we will also see the implications of their stories for us!

1) The first one we'll consider is **Jacob** when he first left his father's house. You'll remember things had not been too pleasant in his family home: there was a lot of strife, rivalry, jealousy, disagreement. Maybe they were sort of a typical family, rather dysfunctional? Jacob's role in the family relationships tells us a lot about him, and it's not nice! He had deceived his brother Esau, conspired with his mother Rebecca, in order to deceive and lie to his blind and aged father. What a sour atmosphere! Of course, it was also due to Esau's having taken a wife from the local Canaanites. So the Isaac and Rebecca decided together to send Jacob far away to his relatives so that he could take a wife from among them. So off he went, his first time away from home! And when night came and he lay down to sleep, using a stone for a pillow to prop his head up. Then he dreamed of a ladder to heaven: "**Behold**, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And **behold**, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And **behold**, Yahweh stood above it and said ..." [All that use of "behold" was simply calling attention to these remarkable occurrences, totally mind-boggling!]. What God said was even more astonishing: "I am Yahweh, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." [These were the same promises God had made to both Abraham and Isaac.]

When Jacob woke up, he realized something that had escaped him before: he thought when he left his father's home, he had left behind his father's God (the ancients typically believed in "territorial gods," so Jacob hadn't yet realized that Yahweh was the one true God). Jacob had no idea until now that God was right there with him: "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware." He was oblivious to the greatest presence in the universe! I can relate to that from my youthful vagabond years, wandering around Spain, France, and Holland, wondering what would become of my life, pondering whether God could ever do anything worthwhile with my unworthy little life. And it was in Aix-en-Provence, in my little attic room, that I felt God's extraordinary presence so clearly one day, answering my question: "In fact, I'm sure I can figure something out!" Oh, did the light ever come on for me in that moment – God was *there* in that faraway place, my life mattered to Him, and I hadn't even been aware of it! Even so the light came on for Jacob: God was in that place even though he'd been totally oblivious to Him, and that ladder and vision helped Jacob connect with his true calling and destiny. So he took that stone that he'd laid his head on that night and set it up for a pillar, poured oil on the top of it, and called the name of that place "Bethel" (Hebrew for "House of God"). Then he made a vow to the Lord right there, saying that if Yahweh would provide for him – food, clothing, eventually returning him to his father's house in peace – he would surely serve Yahweh all his days, and would even give back a tithe of all that God gave him.

2) The second story and personality we want to look at is from a little earlier in Genesis. **Hagar** was a simple handmaiden to Sarai, and her circumstances felt overwhelming. She had just been handed over to her mistress's husband (Abram, at 86 years old!) for the purpose of surrogate motherhood. The text says she was made his "wife," but she was still a slave and her owners wanted to "borrow her womb!" (Does that sound rather modern?) So she may have felt a bit taken advantage of, yet when she became pregnant, it actually gave her a feeling of superiority over her mistress and she couldn't hide it. So then her mistress complained to Abraham: "May the wrong done to me be on *you*! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!" We're **not** taking sides here, guys; we are mere spectators to this unfolding drama. Abraham was responsible for saying yes to his wife's suggestion! But what we see next is his wisdom, as he tells her "your servant is in your hands; do with her whatever you think best." So Sarah mistreated Hagar, dealt harshly with her (lit., bowing her down), to the point that Hagar couldn't take it any more and she fled the wrath of her mistress, running away into the desert!

She was really desperate: an unwanted pregnancy, miserable working conditions (slave), now wandering lost in the desert. But the biblical text says the Angel of Yahweh found her by a spring, as if He'd gone looking for her, like a shepherd seeking lost sheep. He told her she needed to go back to her mistress, correct her behavior, submit herself (lit., bow *herself* down!). Then He reassured her that He was going to multiply her offspring into multitudes without number. Besides that, He told her she was pregnant with a son, whose name she should call "Ishmael" (meaning "God hears"), because the Lord had listened to her affliction. So Hagar gave Yahweh a name (the only person in Hebrew Scripture to do so): "You are the God who sees me [*El Roi*]," for she said, "Truly here I have seen *the one who sees me.*" He opened her eyes to His caring and presence, totally changing her outlook and perspective. She was reassured that He saw her need and would provide for her sustenance!

3) For our third story we want to jump to the New Testament and review the disciple named **Nathanael**, who discovered that Jesus had already seen him in his personal life situation even before they met. Let's begin with the setting first: Jesus has just returned from His temptations in the desert. John the Baptist points Him out to two of his disciples who then approach Him (Andrew and John), asking where He's lodging, and Jesus answers, "Come and see." Andrew then calls his brother Simon Peter, tells him they've found the Messiah, and brings Him to Jesus, who declares to him, "You are Simon son of John, but you shall be called Cephas" (Peter). The next day Jesus calls Philip, from the same town as Andrew and Peter (Bethsaida, on the northern coast of the Sea of Galilee), and Philip goes looking for his friend Nathanael to tell him about the Messiah from Nazareth. But he says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" He's a skeptical fellow! So Philip tells him to **come and see!**

So when Jesus sees Nathanael coming, He says, "Here is a true Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit." This piques Nathanael's curiosity: how is it that Jesus knows anything about him before they've even met?! So he asks! And of course, Jesus responds that "before Philip called you ... when you were under the fig tree ... I SAW YOU!" Nathanael is blown away! This so impacts him, and so deeply, that he cannot do anything but begin to confess Jesus, not only as Rabbi, but as Son of God, King of Israel! He immediately commits to following Jesus from that moment on. So what *was* Nathanael doing under that fig tree? What was he thinking about, what were his feelings? Whatever they were, Jesus seemed to be saying, "I know your name, I know where you're from, I know what's going on with you, I'm for you, I've got your back!" And then Jesus gave Nathanael a promise of much greater things to come: "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' you believe? You'll see greater things than these!" Then he speaks a parable to him about "Jacob's ladder": how the angels would now descend and ascend on the Son of Man, as if He were the true fulfillment of Jacob's ladder! Jesus Himself is that ladder of connection with the God who *still* sees us under our fig trees! Jesus Himself is **the God who sees you too**, there under your fig tree! He knows your name and what's going on with you! He's inviting you to confess Him, to commit to Him!! Do you really have any reason not to?

4) Finally, we want to remember **Mary Magdalene** on resurrection morning, when she went to the garden tomb where Jesus had been buried, and found the stone rolled away! But the Synoptic Gospels tell us she actually was part of a group of women who found the stone rolled away, and they were all frightened, but Mary apparently, as we piece the story together, didn't even wait to see the angels and hear their message; she just went running back to tell Peter this awful news: the Lord's body was now missing and they had no idea where it was taken. Peter and John, the story tells us, have a foot race to the tomb in which the younger arrives first, but doesn't dare to enter, whereas Peter goes charging in, sees that the body isn't there and is bewildered, followed by John: what he sees convinces him instantly and he believes! Then these two disciples go back to tell the others, but Mary remains behind crying her heart out. John's Gospel tells us that as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, sitting where Jesus' body had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" She answered, "They've taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've laid him."

So then she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know it was He. So He said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" She confused Him for the gardener, so she said to him, "Sir, if you've carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will go and get him." Mary was blind to the one who was standing right in front of her. Only when He called her name did she realize, "Surely the LORD is in this place and I was not aware!" Now she knows He's alive, she knows He's truly LORD, and she falls at His feet, *on* His feet, in fact, clinging to them so tightly He has to say to her [not "don't touch me," which is a bad translation], "you don't have to keep holding onto me – I haven't gone anywhere yet! But I will ascend to my Father soon, and I want you to go tell my brothers and sisters that I am soon to depart and we must get together first!" Wow, that was like electricity in Mary's soul! She couldn't wait now to give them the good news! The first evangelist in the New Testament who gives witness to the resurrection!

Conclusion: In all 4 of these cases, the encounter with God that opened their eyes also provided them with a new vision of their true life purpose: "life begins once you know that Jesus is your reason for living!" Jesus knows your name and wants you to know *His* ... and to make use of it to call on Him – for salvation and in every circumstance of life – so that He can commission you with a fresh vision of your reason for being!