

## “The Ladder”

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Fourth in a series on the Gospel of John, chapter 1

John 1.43-51

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The next day Jesus wanted to go into Galilee, and he found Philip. Jesus said to him, “Follow me.” Philip was from Bethsaida, the hometown of Andrew and Peter.

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law and the Prophets: Jesus, Joseph’s son, from Nazareth.” Nathanael responded, “Can anything from Nazareth be good?” Philip said, “Come and see.”

Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said about him, “Here is a genuine Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” Nathanael asked him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered, “Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree.”

Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are God’s Son. You are the king of Israel.” Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these! I assure you that you will see heaven open and God’s angels going up to heaven and down to earth on the Human One.”

John 1.43-51  
Common English Bible

What Jake wouldn’t have given for a blasted pillow!

Roughing it was not in his resume. His style was warm meals, pressed shirts and, yes, soft pillows. All loving dotted over by his precious mother. (Would he see her again?)

He shifted his head, trying to buy a moment of comfort. For all his money, he could buy nothing out here.

If he had the humour to see the irony – he was richer than ever, but had nothing to spend – he might have chuckled. But no. Laughter was more his father’s game. Jake played far more seriously.

He had won! (With Mom’s help.) Distract his dull-witted older brother. Easy. Fool his aged-sighted father. That proved more difficult – Dad was sharp – but with some cold blood and quick lies it had worked. The blessing, the legacy, the inheritance were all Jake’s now. Esau, the oldest and rightful heir (by a minute or two), was now cut out. Jake had engineered his hostile takeover perfectly.

So why was he out here, a fugitive with no place to lay his head? Jacob neglected to calculate in his brother's bullheaded wrath and violence. He'd barely escaped.

He was living up to his given name: Jacob. The Reacher. The Grasper. Add Con-Man, Fraudster, Deceiver. And now, Alone and Homeless.

Dead-tired fatigue eventually won over the rock-pillow's hardness and Jake drifted.

Was it a dream? A hallucination? A vision? He was never quite sure. Real? Make-believe? It sure made him believe.

He saw a ladder reaching up. Radiance pouring down. Figures, solid and clear, bursting colours of light, ascending and descending. A Voice, the Lord Almighty, spoke to him powerful words of reassurance and promises of the future.

*"The Lord was there, certainly!"* he would always insist. *"And I did not know it. What an awe-filled place! God's house, and the gate of heaven!"*

Later, they would call Jacob, "Israel." A new name God gave him, this deceiver and trickster. From him would come God's people, through whom God would rescue and redeem the world. The Lord must have seen something in Jacob.

## II

Would you want a vision like that? I'd probably pass it off as a weird dream I have. Or, an undigested bit of beef.<sup>1</sup> I prefer God to show up in ways more explainable, certainly less astonishing. Or maybe I like God speaking to me in ways I can more easily dismiss. With messages I can choose to ignore if I don't want to hear.

Jacob was desperate. I wonder if we might notice God most when we are desperate. When you're at rope's end, are you more likely to reach for another?

Then again, Jacob was a hard case. He was ambitious, prided himself on his skills and cleverness. He wanted to be self-made. Jacob was the sort who God needs to wrestle to the ground to get anywhere. Or, hit over the head with a vision, a message he can't miss.

How does God need to encounter you?

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<sup>1</sup> An allusion to Ebenezer Scrooge's attempt to explain the appearance of the ghost of Jacob Marley. Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1843).

### III

We meet Nathanael, in today's reading, as he meets Jesus. To understand Nathanael, we need to remember Jacob.

Nathanael<sup>2</sup> was immersed in the Scriptures. The voices of the prophets spoke in his ears, and in his heart rested the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Israel (that's Jacob). So when Philip rushed over, bursting out, "*We have found the one foretold in the Torah and Prophets,*" Nathanael knew what he had in mind.

He also knew the notion that Israel's redeemer-king would come from a hole like Nazareth was preposterous. But Philip insisted, and Nathanael went along, still skeptical.

When Jesus acted like he already knew him, Nathanael was intrigued.

I imagine Nathanael earlier in the day, deep in prayer, alone at his favourite spot, under the tree. Praying through the Scriptures he had memorized. I'm just imagining here, but let's say that today it was – you guessed it – the story of Jacob, that Deceiver whom God named "Israel." Nathanael was so unlike his ancestor.

The Lord must have seen something in Nathanael. "*Look! An Israelite (a Jacob!) in whom there is no deceit!*"

*"Have we met?"*

*"I saw you earlier today. Under the fig tree."*

But Nathanael had been alone. Just him and . . . my God!

His hard face changed into joy and astonishment. "*You're the one! God's Son! Israel's King!*"<sup>3</sup>

Jesus just chuckled.

*"You're impressed because I saw you under the tree. Wait! That's only the beginning. You'll see the opened heaven, and God's angels going up and down on the Human One."*

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<sup>2</sup> Nathanael means "God's gift." It's the sort of name you'd give a first-born, or a child long-awaited. I imagine Nathanael always made his parents proud. Most unlike Jacob.

<sup>3</sup> "Son of God" and "King of Israel" were seen as equivalent, in the messianic expectation of Israel. Frederick Dale Bruner, The Gospel of John, A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 112.

Sounds like Jacob's vision of reassurance and hope. A ladder to heaven, angels going up and coming down.

Jesus calls himself the Human One (or, the "Son of Man"). At one level, it simply means a person. More deeply, it remembers something from the prophet Daniel. Daniel saw a vision of a "Human One" who was presented before God. And God gave him authority, glory and an everlasting, indestructible kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus says he is this "Human One," standing before God, representing us all. Jesus says he is the Ladder who, in himself, has opened and brought together God's Realm and our reality.<sup>5</sup>

#### IV

But how will we know? He says to Nathanael, "You will see greater things." What? What signs will we see, to tell us who Jesus is?

When we return to John's Gospel (after Christmas), we'll see things like a party saved from disaster, illnesses healed, a hungry crowd fed, a funeral disrupted, and much more. These are not simply proofs. They are revelations, unveilings of what Jesus is all about.

We'll see a wooden sign raised to the heavens, and the Human One placed upon it, and crucified. Another revelation, the greatest and most troubling, of what Jesus is all about.<sup>6</sup>

How do you need God to encounter you? Do you prefer God to show up in ways less astonishing, more explainable? In ways less easy to ignore?

Jesus has grabbed hold of me. Not because of what he can do for me, though I treasure his gifts. Not simply because I have found him to be the Way of life, though life in him is truly abundant. Not only because he has forgiven me, is healing me, and is making all things new, though all of that is wonderfully true.

Jesus grabs me because of who he is. God's fullness rests on him. God's new creation flows from him. Jesus is the Ladder who brings God's realm into our world.

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel 7:13-14.

<sup>5</sup> The Greek for "opened" indicates an action that has already been completed.

<sup>6</sup> C.H. Dodd wrote, "The whole series of 'signs' which follows [in this Gospel], culminating in the supreme sign of the cross and resurrection, is the vision of the heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on upon the Son of Man." Quoted in Bruner, 122.