

**John 1: 50 and 51; “You shall see Heaven Open”, Sermon # 8 in
the series – “That all May Honor the Son”, Delivered by
Pastor Paul Rendall on January 27th, 2013,
in the Morning Worship Service.**

Becoming a Christian and being a disciple are both a matter of your “finding” Jesus Christ. You first find Him in turning to Him in faith for the salvation of your eternal soul. And then you continue to seek Him and to find Him in your everyday life as you follow Him. Those whom the Lord Jesus would have become His disciples are the same ones whom He saves from their sins. And so, the Lord Jesus, having called you into fellowship with Himself, He then begins to build your faith. I said to you last Sunday that He does this through the preaching of the word, and one believer sharing the Scriptures with other believers. Friendship and holy fellowship with other believers is a very important means of growth for those who have believed. 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.”

The 2nd thing that the Lord Jesus does in order to build faith in those who know Him is to let you see His Omniscience; His intimate and personal knowledge of all of your thoughts and hopes and dreams of what you want to do with your life. Jesus knew all of what was in Nathanael’s heart even before they were formally introduced. And so when Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward Him, He said to him, “Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael was a man who had a secret devotional life with God. He had his particular place of devotion – “Under the fig tree”. No human person could see what was going on there in the devotion of his heart except the God who “sees in secret”. There Nathanael poured out his heart to God. There he told God that he sincerely wanted to be wise and holy in all of His behavior. There he told God that he did not simply want an outward religion of ritual and duty; he wanted to know God in the greater sense of worshiping Him in spirit and truth. He wanted to walk with God on the path of righteousness. He wanted to be a man without guile before God. We saw that he received the answer to his prayers. “How do you know me Jesus?,” Nathanael says. And Jesus pointed out to him – “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” Thus it was proved to him that this Jesus was the Son of God; He was the King of Israel!”

Heaven was opening to Nathanael. The way that I want to open up this subject this morning is to give you the tale of two very different godly men. I want to show you 1st, the time when heaven was opened to the Patriarch Jacob and what this meant to him in terms of being shown greater spiritual things. And then I want to show you 2nd, what this phrase, “you shall see heaven open” meant to Nathaniel as a disciple of Jesus Christ. This will, I think, give you a greater understanding of how Christ works to build faith and obedience to Himself and His Word in the lives of His saints.

1st – When was heaven open to Jacob so that he knew that God would show him greater spiritual things? (This is the tale of the 1st godly man)

I would like you to turn with me over to Genesis Chapter 25. I wonder if you remember why it was that Jacob had to leave his father and mother and travel over to Haran? It was because he was as his name meant, a very tricky person by nature. Let me tell you the story here, even though it will take me a little time to unfold it. It has great relevance to our text here in John 1. I want to speak to you about guile; that is, being tricky and trying to manipulate other people to get what you want from them in relation to the great spiritual goals of your life. Nathanael was an Israelite in whom there was no guile, Jesus said. And this was so, because he believed that Jesus knew him as he really was, that he was straightforward and sincere in his relationship with God. So Jesus was able to say to him that he would be shown greater things yet. Now, let's think about this life of Jacob. Here's what it says in Genesis 25: 21 – “Now Isaac pleaded with the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived.” “But the children struggled together within her; and she said, “If all is well, why am I like this?” “So she went to inquire of the Lord.” (A very good thing to do when you are perplexed about yourself) “And the Lord said to her: “Two nations are in your womb, two people shall be separated from your body; one people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger.” That was the prophetic word that was given to her. You can see here, that even at that early point, in the womb, before either one of these twins had done anything good or bad, that the purpose according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls, it was said to Rebekah, “The older shall serve the younger.” (The Apostle Paul in Chapter 9 of Romans, verses 11 and 12, makes this very comment.) But back to verse 24 – “ So when her days were fulfilled for her to give birth, indeed there were twins in her womb.” “And the first came out red.” “He was like a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau.” “Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob.” (In the margin we are told that Jacob means “Supplanter”, or “deceitful”. Literally – “One who takes by the heel”.) This was what he was, in his sinful nature in Adam; he was a man would take the place of his brother by trickery and deceit. And this is indeed what he turned out to be by practice as he grew up. And yet he was the elect of God. I hope that you will understand that sometimes it is the case, often it is the case, that those whom God is intending to save, even if they are born in a household to believing parents, they have a lot to learn about life. They may end up making great mistakes as they grow up; sinful mistakes that they may not even see or understand the implications of, until they come to point where God saves them and reveals Himself to them through His word.

We can see this if we look at verse 29. “Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he was weary.” “And Esau said to Jacob, ‘Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary.’” “Therefore his name was called Edom.” “But Jacob said, “Swear to me as of this day.” “So he swore to him and

sold his birthright to Jacob.” “And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils. Now it is apparent that there were sins in both of these young men. In the case of Esau it was his despising his birthright. He is called a profane man in Hebrews 12 because of this rash action. But the other sin, here, was in Jacob’s taking advantage of his brother’s hunger to cunningly obtain the birthright. He knew the prophecy that had been given to his mother, of his brother serving him, and so he was “lying in the weeds” so to speak, waiting for a convenient moment to actually take it from him. It showed a problem in his heart; of not being able to love his brother, even enough to give him even a common meal without thinking of how he could obtain the blessings which, as of yet, God was not pleased to bestow upon him. Timing is everything. There is a right and a wrong way to go about to obtain spiritual blessing. The right way is trust in the promise and looking for God to bring about the thing that He has promised. And the wrong way is impatience, feeling that you have to do something to bring about the fulfillment of the promise through manipulation of circumstances of life. You are going to make it happen! But this is not God’s way. God gets no glory from your life when you try to steal blessings from other people and make them your own, or by trying to force other people to your own conclusions regarding what God expects or what God has promised that He will do.

I say that, because there was another problem in this family. And that was the sin of favoritism on the part of the parents. Chapter 25, verse 27 – “So the boys grew.” “And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents.” “And Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.” I call this a sin because their favoritism led to two married believing people being deceitful to each other, and this led to some very dreadful consequences. Isaac thought Esau should continue to receive the birthright and the blessing because he was his firstborn. He had heard Rebekah recite the prophecy to him; the prophecy of the older serving the younger. But this prophecy had been given to Rebekah alone, and he felt that he could not violate the custom of the firstborn son being given the birthright and the blessing of his household by giving it to Jacob. And this, even though he knew that the spiritual promise of the coming Messiah went along with it in their particular household, because God had revealed this promise to his father Abraham and himself on Mt. Moriah. Besides, he did not care for the fact that Jacob was a simple and quiet son that loved to spend time at home with his mother. He thought that Esau’s manliness was better, and his hunting abilities wonderful, and so he would not consider God’s prophecy which was given to Rebekah meaning that it had any particular application to the actions which he would take as the father and the head of the household. If this were true, he probably reasoned, then God would tell me personally. But let us consider this seriously. Sometimes, even if our wife does not have the headship in the family, that nevertheless she may have a word from God. And if she expresses that word in complete submission to God and to her husband, it ought to be listened to and so I believe that Isaac had a responsibility

to find out more about it, through making his own inquiries to the Lord. But this Isaac did not do; one of the great sins of his life. And so, even though Rebekah no doubt had told Isaac about the prophecy, he refused to confer the birthright and blessings upon Jacob. This was indeed a problem in Isaac.

Rebekah therefore felt it her duty to try to bring about the promise herself in conjunction with Jacob. This, I believe, was Rebekah's great sin. She did not believe that God could bring about the fulfillment of his own prophecy in regard to Jacob's receiving these blessings without her using deception to do it. She felt that she had to take matters into her own hands to bring it about since her husband Isaac was not intending to act in accordance with it. Let us think about this for just a moment. I will not take the time to read you the entire story which is found in Chapter 27. We do not have time for it this morning. But I will relate to you what happened. Perhaps you remember. Isaac got old, and his eyes grew dim, and he couldn't see things clearly. So he thought that he better take care of this matter of his blessing Esau, his first-born, because he didn't know the day of his death. Actually he would live for over 40 more years after this. But he calls Esau and says to him, "Take your weapons, and go out to the field and hunt game for me." "And make savory food such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die." But you can see just how cunning and observant a woman Rebekah was. She was listening at the door when Isaac spoke. She still believes that she has to do something to make the prophecy come to pass that Jacob would receive the material and spiritual blessing of his father. So she immediately goes to Jacob and say, "Indeed I heard your father speak to Esau your brother, saying, 'Bring me game and make savory food for me, that I may eat it and bless you in the presence of the Lord before my death.'" "Now, therefore, my son, obey my voice according to what I command you." And she tells him to go to the flock and bring back to her two choice kids of the goats, and she would make savory food from them for Isaac such as he loves. And then you, Jacob, take it to your father. Jacob is willing to go along with this scheme, but believes that even though Isaac is blind, that he will feel his arms and hands to see if it is truly Esau, and the plot would fail. She convinces Jacob by going and getting some of Esau's clothes, and then she actually puts the skins of the kids of the goats on his hands, and on the smooth part of his neck, and then she gives him the savory food prepared in the way that Isaac likes it, and sends him in to Isaac. Just before this Jacob had said, "Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be a deceiver to him; and I shall bring a curse of myself and not a blessing." "But his mother said to him, "Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice, and go, get them for me." Now all this was done and said by a believing woman; believing that it was important enough a matter, that if she did not see how the prophecy could otherwise be fulfilled, except she and Jacob deceive Isaac, then they would deceive Isaac. Their plot worked, and Jacob was blessed by Isaac with the blessing of the first-born with all of the blessings related to not only material things of the land of

Canaan, but with the coming spiritual blessing of the Messiah. But I hope that you will notice, that they obtained these blessings by guile.

What was the outcome? Did it mean that Rebekah was not really a believer and she and Jacob were not of the elect of God. No, it did not mean that. But it would mean that God would so arrange the circumstances of their lives, that they would be taught the consequences of their sins and the true and right way. If you will recall, Esau when he found out that he had been tricked out the blessing, he was so angry that he wanted to kill his brother Jacob. Verse 41 of Chapter 27 – “So Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said in his heart, the days of mourning for my father are at hand; then I will kill my brother Jacob.” “And the words of Esau her older son were told to Rebekah. So she sent and called Jacob her younger son, and said to him, ‘Surely your brother Esau comforts himself concerning you by intending to kill you’ “Now therefore, my son, obey my voice: ‘Arise, flee to my brother Laban in Haran.’ “And stay with him a few days, until your brother’s fury turns away, until your brother’s anger turns away from you, and he forgets what you have done to him; then I will send and bring you from there.” “Why should I be bereaved also of you both in one day?” Little did Rebekah know that it would not be a few days; it would be 20 years before Jacob returned. And it is not said in the text of the Scripture that he ever saw his mother again. She was a true believer, but she took these matters into her own hands and she got the blessing for her son, but both she and Jacob would have to feel the consequences of it. What is the lesson? If you are true believer in Christ, you are person whose spirit has been changed by Christ. God’s spirit would teach you to have no guile in your dealings with Him or with other people around you. Psalm 32, verse 1 – “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” “Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.”

This is the spirit of the true Christian. But does that mean that a true Christian cannot fall into using tricky or cunning or forceful ways to try to bring about what they know to be right? No it does not. Does that mean that a true Christian must be perfectly passive then about what they see to be wrong in people around them, doing nothing but waiting for the Lord to act? No, it does not. What it means is that both Rebekah and Jacob had to learn that there is a right way and a wrong way to go about trying to see a good thing established, or a promised thing, come about. By faith we do need to not use guile. We confront other believers or unbelievers about the sins that we see in them, with a spirit of gentleness. If we have to use a stronger reproof we must ask the Lord and search the Scriptures to see whether we have the right and authority to do so. Rebekah was a woman who had tried gentle persuasion with Isaac. It had not worked. Therefore she turned to guile, which was plainly wrong. She should have quietly trusted in God to bring these good things about in a righteous way. But not seeing the evidence of that, she should have prayed and committed it to the Lord, and waited for a word from Him. And because of that mistake, Jacob her dear son, who learned to use guile

from his own believing mother, had 20 years of hard lessons ahead of him, his being placed providentially under her brother Laban's employ. Jacob did not even know the Lord at this time. Was all lost? Well, we need to see the kindness and mercy of the Lord which God showed to Jacob, even though he did not deserve it. This is what God does in mercy for all of His elect people, when He saves them; He shows them Christ. The way that God did this, links us to the text that we are studying in John 1.

Look over at Genesis 28, verse 10. "Now Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Haran." "So he came to a certain place and stayed there all night, because the sun had set." "And he took one of the stones of that place and put it at his head, and he lay down in that place to sleep." "Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." "And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, 'I am the Lord God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants.'" "Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed." "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you." "Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.'" "And he was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place!'" "This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." "Then Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on top of it." "And he called the name of that place Bethel; but the name of that city had been Luz previously."

This was Jacob's conversion experience at Bethel. This was when his heart was regenerated and his spirit began to be changed by Christ's powerful grace. How did God do it? By giving Jacob this mighty vision in his dream that night. He saw a ladder and was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven. This is how a person comes to know God, when God Himself makes a way for a man to climb up to Him. All the angels of God were going up and coming down the steps of this ladder. They are ministering servants sent out to render aid to those who will inherit salvation. Because God's plans for this world, and all the people in it, are so great, they have much business to do in helping the believer wend his way through this life. But I want you to see that they do all of their business for God by ascending and descending on this ladder; this set of steps which is made by God Himself. In our text in John 1: 51, Jesus says to Nathanael, "Most assuredly I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. Beloved brethren, this is the answer to the mystery of that night so long ago. Jesus Christ is the ladder that reaches up from earth to heaven. Jesus Christ is the only Mediator between God and men. He is fully man and so He is the ladder placed upon the earth in His Incarnation. He is

fully God, and so He is the ladder reaching up into heaven. And this is the way that all of God's elect, everyone who will trust in the Lord Jesus for their salvation come to heaven.

But this ladder has steps. And so there are stages, or steps of learning which take place in the course of our being brought to be with God in heaven. There are mighty lessons of truth to be learned; many steps to be taken in obedience to God's word so that we become more righteous, keeping the commandments of God; and more holy, being separate from the world, and learning God's purpose for our life. All this is bound up in Jacob's vision in his dream, of this ladder. This was his heaven open, to him. The promises that he was given were of his physical descendants who would be as the dust of the earth. But the promises given were also of all of his spiritual descendants through Christ who is the promised Seed, through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed. This is where Jacob learned for the first time that God was Omniscient. He now knew that he did not need to be tricky to receive blessings, but God would show him this in many ways over the next years. And so he makes a vow, saying that if God would be with him, and keep in the way that he was going, and give him food and clothing and safety, then the Lord would be his God. But the Lord was going to give him much more than that. He was going to make him over into an Israelite indeed in whom there was no guile. Jacob would become Israel. It would take 20 years to do it, but God would patiently and faithfully work with Jacob. After God's working with him and teaching him many valuable lessons of how to patiently endure and bear with the sinful tendencies in people around him, he would again meet Esau. But before that, he would meet with Christ. He would wrestle with "a man" at the fords of the Jabbok, when his brother Esau was coming to meet him. He thought that Esau was going to kill him, but instead Esau embraced him. God had worked to restrain him. 2 companies of angels accompanied Jacob, watching over him. Dear believer, he will do the same for you. He is doing the same for you. You have many things to learn, and you will learn them much faster the less guile that you have. You do not have to be a tricky person to live the Christian life. You simply have to be willing to be taught by Christ Himself the steps to greater obedience. The Christian life is begun by the exercise of faith, and it continues by faith in Christ, taking steps of obedience, asking to be taught by God, learning from the Scriptures and the good example of people around you. That is the tale of the first godly man Jacob.

Now for the tale of the 2nd godly man – Nathanael.

I haven't left myself much time left to tell you his tale. Really, there is not that much that I need to say about Nathanael, for in all of the gospels his name is only mentioned in one other place. And I think that where it is mentioned will help us to understand this statement of Jesus' to him; that, "Hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. Turn with me over to John Chapter 21. "After these things Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and in this way He showed

Himself: Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together.” This same Nathanael, who saw that Jesus knew that his heart was without guile or deceit, also saw the Lord Jesus die on the cross. And here, he saw the Son of God, the King of Israel, raised from the dead, and helping them in their fishing. At the beginning of Nathanael’s interest in finding the Messiah, he was told by Philip, “Come and see”. Now here we find Jesus Himself saying to him and the other Apostles – “Come and eat.” They thought only of going back to fishing for physical fish before Christ’s appearance to them. By the end of Jesus’ conversation with them over breakfast, they knew that He was going to make them into fishers of men, and shepherds of His sheep; tenders of His lambs. Heaven was open to them.

I think it is correct exegesis to say that when Jesus told Nathaniel that he would see greater things yet; the greater things that Jesus would show him, that He was referring to how He the Son of God could die upon the cross and thus fulfill the prophetic dream of Jacob. He would become by means of His death and resurrection, that ladder reaching from earth to heaven; the only Mediator between God and men. The work of the angels, ascending and descending upon Christ, refer to their being sent by Him to minister aid to believers at many points where they need it. The angels of God attended to the Lord Jesus at His birth, His temptation in the wilderness, His trials in the Garden of Gethsemane, and even when he was on the cross. They were His joyful attendants at His resurrection, rolling the stone away and sitting in the tomb where He once lay. They preached the gospel of His resurrection from the dead to the disciples of the Lord. They were there when He ascended to heaven, and they descend to minister to us now in many ways which we as believers will never know until we meet them in the glory. But I hope that you will not think it too great an exegetical stretch to say that when Jesus told Nathanael that he would see the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man, that He might also be referring to him and the other Apostles. For the word angel means “messenger”. And the word “Apostle” means “a person sent by another; a messenger; and envoy.” (Easton’s Bible Dictionary). And so, I believe that the Apostles of our Lord can also be legitimately seen as the “angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man”. They are the messengers and ministers of the New Covenant. To the prophets of old it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven—things which angels long to look into. These Apostles preached the righteousness of faith and Christ being the end of the law of righteousness to everyone who believes. When they preached they said, and we also can say, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (That is, to bring Christ down from above) or, ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).” “But what does it say?” “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith which we preach) I think

it is no exegetical stretch to say that Nathanael, as one of the Apostles of our Lord, may have been one of those “angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man”. The word of God the Bible is in our mouth, and in our heart today.