



What were you looking for when God found you?

I know a guy who was trying to get his wife back, get his life together and in the process God found him. I know a lady—my wife Cassie—who was trying to find the Truth about world religions and in the process God found her. I know another guy who was looking for unconditional love, moving in and out of relationships and in the process God found him. I know another lady who wanted purpose in life and in the process God found her.

What about you, what were you looking for when God found you? Maybe you'd say that you're not quite sure God has found you yet, so you don't have an answer to this question. That's ok. If that's you, I'd bet you are in the process and today may be a significant step for you as we ponder this question together.

In our passage of scripture today, we're going to read about a man who is looking for something and in the process God finds him. To recap, Jacob is a main character in our Bible passage. We're picking up an on-going story of Jacob, Esau and God. Jacob has just stolen his brother's blessing. To do this he had to deceive and lie to his dad. To keep from being killed, Jacob is traveling to live with his uncle, Laban, until the drama settles down. He's looking for safety. He's escaping his hometown, running from Esau, his brother, who's threatened to kill him. He's looking for purpose and direction in his life. Hiding in a foreign land isn't a satisfying life purpose. Jacob is looking for a wife.

### God takes the first step.

**Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out [break out] to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Genesis 28:10–15).**

God's personal promises to Jacob are "I am with you." ". . . *and they will call him Immanuel which means 'God with us'*" (Matt. 1:23). "*Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you*" (Heb. 13:5). "I will watch over you," a promise of preservation and protection. "I will bring you back," in order to keep his promise to Abraham. "I will not leave you," refuting the common idea that deities were limited to geographic areas. God can and will travel to Haran with Jacob. And he will travel to the desert with Israel as they wait to enter the Promised Land.

Jacob is asleep, running for his life, using a rock as a pillow, coming off a major family split that he caused and God finds him and makes all of these amazing promises to him. God always takes the first step.

When I was 20 years old I spent a week in Glorieta, New Mexico at a Christian camp for college students. I had three priorities for the week that I'd rank in this order: 1) to win the volleyball tournament, 2) to meet some beautiful girls, and 3) to learn something about God.

On the first night of camp the speaker ended his message with this challenge. "If you're willing to do anything God calls you to this week, please stand up." While I felt like this was the equivalent to giving God a blank check, I stood up. Little did I know what God would call me to later in the week.

During the worship and teaching time Thursday night, one thought kept entering my head. One thought I had never thought before that night. One thought that scared me to death. "Shawn, I want you to go into ministry for your job." Me, a pastor? God you've got the wrong guy, certainly. I'm not very spiritual. And I have other plans for my life. You're in the plans but you're not the entire plan.

Yet, I could not escape the urging and calling of God. By the end of Friday night, I surrendered my will to His and committed myself to serve God with my whole life, including my job. This was one of the scariest moments of my entire life.

After the week, my parents asked me what happened at camp. How could I tell my parents this shocking news? Would they understand? Would they encourage me or discourage me?

After I made a stumbling and hesitant confession of what I had agreed to do for God, my father said, "I already knew. When I was out running this week, God told me, too." Then my mom said, "Yes, I knew, too. When I was reading my Bible this week,

God told me." Then when we called my grandfather he said he knew, too!

Three powerful supernatural confirmations for a fearful and uncertain 20-year-old man. I did nothing to initiate my call to ministry. I was not looking for it. God did it all. That's how God works. He always takes the first step.

Some people wrongly think of their experience with God. They think they are the pursuers and God is passively waiting to be found. They think they are seeking God, pursuing Him, trying to find Him. And certainly we are part of the experience but God always takes the first step. He is the relentless pursuer. He seeks and finds us. He rescues us.

Do you remember what you were looking for when God found you? Has God found you yet?

### **Jacob's response to God.**

**When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid (awe and respect) and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's household, then the LORD will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth" (verses 16–22).**

It kind of feels like Jacob is holding something back in this vow he makes. Not to pick on Jacob but the conditional agreement he makes with God—"If you . . . then . . ." —is certainly no formula for us to follow. When God finds us, He wants a wholehearted surrender from us. Jacob is in process here. But even with this, Jacob does model two appropriate responses for us.

The two responses we see in Jacob are worship and a vow of faithfulness. We'll look at each of them in detail, but note that no one is instructing Jacob how to respond. He's simply responding authentically from his heart in worship and faithfulness.

### **Worship**

In verse 17 we're told Jacob was afraid (awe, respect). That's always an appropriate attitude for us when we're thinking about God. *"I urge you brothers in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship"* (Romans 12:1).

In verse 28 he takes the rock that was his pillow, stands it up as a type of monument and pours oil on it, signifying that this

was a holy place because he met with a holy God there. Bethel means "house [bet] of God [el]". Jacob returns to Bethel 20 years later when he returns to the Promised Land and God will meet him here again. In that exchange, God changes his name to Israel (Genesis 35:1–15).

We don't set up rock monuments during our time of worship on Sunday mornings. Instead, our action is to sing, clap, raise hands, stand, give—all actions of worship instructed in the Bible. Worship is certainly an appropriate response when we encounter God.

### **Vow of faithfulness**

In verse 20 Jacob makes a vow to God, the longest vow in the Bible. In it Jacob says, in essence, if you're going to be so good to me, then you will be my God and I'll give you a tenth of what I earn.

This is in essence what we do, too. God finds us, loves us despite who we are and what we've done, and the appropriate response is to make a clear commitment to God and live faithfully for Him. Every significant relationship we enter into is done with thoughtfulness, deliberation and a clear choice. *"If you confess with our mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved"* (Romans 10:9–10).

Notice the connection between the heart believing and the words that are spoken. The words of commitment reveal a heart that believes in God. They are making a clear choice, just like Jacob.

Now you might be wondering, what about people who say, "Jesus is Lord" but don't seem to live it? They aren't making a clear choice. They're purchasing death insurance. Certainly, some might try this. But the phrase "Jesus is Lord" is not a magical statement that saves any person who might utter it. The words reveal a heart of commitment and **no one** was saying these words casually in Rome. This was a specific three-word phrase that brought a death sentence. The Roman rulers were convinced that Christianity was a disruptive religion that must be crushed. To dissuade people from considering Christianity, the rulers decided to start killing them.

It worked like this. Someone would accuse you of being a follower of Jesus. You'd be brought before a Roman ruler in a courtroom and asked a simple question: are you a follower of Jesus Christ? A simple "no" got you off the hook, no further questions asked. A "yes," if affirmed three consecutive times, would result in an execution sentence. Execution happened in the arenas and coliseums. The Christians would be stripped, animal pelts would be sewn onto their skin and they'd be placed in the arena with the starving wild animals. These people were making a clear commitment to God and living faithfully for Him.

What emerges in observing the responses of Jacob and the Christians in Rome is this: they made a choice. Don't miss this; Jacob made a thoughtful and intentional clear choice to set up the stone monument and make a vow. Jacob woke up in the morning a different man.

The Roman Christians stood firm in the face of a death threat. This is the same pattern that happens with every follower of God: God finds us in all kinds of different spots in life and we respond by making a clear choice to worship Him and live faithfully. Have you made that choice?

Maybe God is working in your life. You've been looking for something but as you think about it today, God has found you instead. I'd like to encourage you to make a clear choice to worship God and live faithfully.

I didn't wake up one morning and realize I was married. My relationship with Cassie developed, deepened and one day I proposed. She said yes, we set a wedding date and we invited a bunch of friends to celebrate with us. A person's relationship with God is similar. The relationship develops and deepens, then a person makes a clear choice. We tell others about it and we get baptized in front of a bunch of friends to make the internal event public.

Think of how strange it would be if we had this conversation. "How long have you and Cassie been married?" "That's a hard question to answer. As we spent time together, we liked each other so much and then one morning I woke up, she was there and I guess I'm married now." It doesn't happen like that.

I've talked with people who have difficulty telling me of a time when they made a choice to follow God. They'll tell me things

like: "I've always been a Christian," or "my life was a real mess and I started coming to church," or "I feel really good when I come to church," and I keep waiting for the rest of the story – the part when they make a clear choice. But that's it. There's nothing more.

## **Conclusion**

Each of us, today, have the choice before us. How will you respond? If you've placed your faith in Jesus Christ take confidence that your decision changed the course of your life. And keep walking with Him today and all of 2011. Maybe you want to express your thankfulness to God this year with new devotion in worship or faithfulness.

For anyone who has never made a commitment to the Lord, maybe today is the day that will happen for you. As you think about your life, maybe you see that God has been working. You've been looking for something but, God has found you instead.

That's an awesome thing to recognize! Something that deserves a response like we see in the Bible today: Worship and Faithfulness. And I'm going to give you a chance to respond to God. No pressure here. It's your choice. You can do it by making a clear commitment from your heart that you believe in God, you want him to come into your heart and lead your heart.

Jesus Christ lived a perfect life, died on the cross and took the punishment for your sin and rose again from the dead so you can have eternal life. Accept the amazing forgiveness and love that Jesus offers.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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