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## **Spiritual Awakening**

Genesis 28:16

Jacob had become a fugitive. He was on the run because his brother Esau wanted to kill him. But he was in fact running from much more than that. He was also trying to escape from a severely dysfunctional family. It was a family that was torn by conflict and Jacob was always in the middle of it. His parents were constantly at odds over Jacob's future. This warfare between the parents added a dangerous twist to the natural competition between the brothers. Over the years Jacob had reacted to his dysfunctional family by becoming a trickster. He discovered that he could get what he wanted by playing tricks on his father and brother. But these tricks were also a profound expression of the young man's pain.

The spiritual condition of Jacob was described by Paul in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans. There Paul writes about our inward groaning while we wait to experience adoption as the true sons and daughters of God. Until we experience God's love and acceptance we are people who thrash about for some kind of peace and wholeness. This longing for redemption is the unrecognized source of the groaning that takes place within Jacob. His desperate maneuvering for power within his family is a sign of deeper longing that haunts him. It is the longing for the redemption that only God can give.

The day came when Jacob played one trick too many. He deceived his father into giving him the blessing that was meant for Esau. When Esau found out something snapped inside of him. He was consumed by a murderous rage. Jacob had no choice but to flee for his life. But while Jacob was on the road something happened which changed his life.

Jacob was traveling as fast and far as he could to reach a place of safety. At the end of the day he must stop to spend the night. The place where he stops is in no way special. It was not where he wanted to be. It was a non-place. This was as far as he could go before exhaustion set in. But in this non-place Jacob has a dream which redefines his existence. In the dream he sees a staircase which leads to heaven. On the staircase he sees angels going up and going down. Then he hears a voice. It is the voice of God offering to Jacob a promise. The promise includes the gift of the land on which he is sleeping. This non-place is suddenly redefined for Jacob. When he wakes up from his sleep, he says, "Surely the Lord is in this place ... and I did not know it (Genesis 28:16)."

The presence of God transforms this unappealing piece of land into something very special. But the transformation of the land is a sign of the even more profound transformation that is offered to Jacob. From God, Jacob receives the acceptance that he has never found in his family. When God binds himself to this desperate fugitive, Jacob experiences God's redemptive grace. Jacob is transformed from an exile (a non-person) into someone who is central to God's unfolding purpose for humanity.

The intrusion of God into Jacob's journey confronts the fugitive with a crucial decision. This vision of God's presence demands from Jacob a response. Will he continue to live the life of a

trickster? Will he continue to be controlled by the dynamics of a dysfunctional family? Or will he let this be a spiritual awakening through which he begins to live by the redemptive power of God's grace?

Presbyterians were faced with a similar decision at the close of the Civil War. The war had created profound divisions in the church. As the war progressed Presbyterians on both sides became more alienated from one another as they tried to convince themselves that God favored their cause. The end of the war gave Presbyterians the opportunity to begin to heal the old wounds and bind up their broken relationships. This was the time to repent of the way in which both sides had demonized the other. This was the golden opportunity for everyone to re-connect with the redemptive power of God's grace. The church historian Mark Noll has described how Presbyterian church leaders used this opportunity:

... as the war ended ... Northern leaders insisted on treating the Union and its ideals as ... God's cause. They confidently claimed to see God's visible hand of providence behind the Northern victory. Southern leaders insisted on the uprightness of the Confederacy. They also insisted that treating African Americans as a subordinate subspecies did not violate biblical and confessional positions on the unity of the human race. With a confidence equal to that of the North, Southern leaders depicted the defeat of the Confederacy as God's manifest chastisement of his chosen people (Theology, Presbyterian History, and the Civil War, *Journal of Presbyterian History*, Spring/Summer 2011, pages 7-8).

The decisions made by leaders on both sides ensured that Presbyterians would continue to be a divided and dysfunctional family for many years to come. Some would say that we have not yet recovered from that missed opportunity.

But some Presbyterians refused to be constrained by their leaders. Samantha Neal believed that the redemptive power of God's grace was calling her to work for racial harmony. In 1865 in Amelia Courthouse, Virginia she set up a school for newly liberated African Americans. There was no building to accommodate the new school. Undaunted she gathered her students together under an oak tree. Like Jacob she understood that God shows up in unlikely places. Other Presbyterians joined her in this effort which soon led to the founding of a college in Charlotte, North Carolina that would eventually be known as Johnson C. Smith University.

This is the kind of challenge that confronted Jacob when he woke up from his dream. God was calling him to a spiritual awakening which would radically change the direction of his life. When Jacob declares his intention to live by the power of grace he has taken the first step in a spiritual journey. The trickster in Jacob will not die until much later when he is wounded in his all night wrestling match with God. But the process of redemption is underway.

The same challenge has been set before us by the God who meets us in the most unlikely places. We, too, can wake up and live by the power of grace.