

God Encounters Will Change Our Relationships, Both Vertical (With God) And Horizontal (With Others) Series

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Scripture: Genesis 28:17-22, Genesis 34:5, Genesis 34:13, Genesis 34:30, Genesis 35:1-3, Hebrews 11:21, Genesis 32:28, Matthew 5:23-25, 1 Corinthians 11:28

Denomination: Evangelical/Non-Denominational

Summary: In the Part 6 of this series Dr. Madana Kumar looks into the changes that will happen in our relationships when we encounter God. Our broken relationships will be restored when we encounter God and understand the true nature of forgiveness and Grace.

Encounter with God Series

Part 6

Change in Relationships

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Good morning.

This is the sixth part of the series on Encounters with God. We started off this series by realizing that one of the great reasons to come to church Sunday after Sunday is to seek and have an encounter with our God. I hope you have been having an encounter with Him in the past weeks we have looked at this topic.

I hope you remember some of the things we studied in the previous parts of the series.

1. If we are not watchful, we might miss an opportunity to have an encounter with God
2. It is entirely up to us to have the encounter. The first party is always there and always willing
3. God encounters are for everyone. It does depend on your level of righteousness or spirituality
4. God encounters are not a once-in-a-lifetime affair. We need to seek the encounter every day.
5. God encounters are intensely personal
6. God encounters always result in changes. It could be dramatic changes as we saw in Paul's case or subtle changes as we saw in Jacob's case, but changes will happen.
7. Three areas where changes happen due to encounters are Vision, Character and Relationships, as explained in my book Not-So-With-YOU (https://www.menorahleadership.com/not-so-with-you_book/).
8. Encounters with God will change our vision, enhance its scope and impact, and align it with God's vision for us. We saw this happen in Paul's life
9. God encounters will change our Character for good. We saw the Character changes that took place in Peter's life. We especially looked at two aspects, Pride getting replaced with Humility and Fear getting replaced with Confidence. We also saw the need to balance between humility and confidence

In this part 6 of the series, we are going to look at the third imperative of Relationships that will be impacted by encounters with God.

When we talk about relationships, we have to consider both the vertical relationship with God and the horizontal relationships with others. One will be incomplete without the others. The good news is that an encounter with God impacts both these relationships.

Let us go back to Jacob's transformation through the encounters he had with God. Before his first encounter with God in Genesis Ch 28, we do not even know if Jacob acknowledged God's role in his life. We can well imagine Jacob to be an obedient child, but there is no indication that he was a pious child. We see him seeking his father's blessings, but never blessings from God in the earlier chapters of his life. So, it is safe to assume that he was a passive "church goer". Again, this takes me back to my own conversion story. Before I ever started to go to church, I used to go to temples. But my going to temples had nothing to do with God, or spirituality. It was either because my mother wanted to go, or because I wanted to see someone else who used to go to the same temple. You get the drift, right. Not surprising then that Jacob was busy setting his own course for his life through deceptions and lies, sometimes aided by his mother. It was at Bethel v1.0 (I call it Bethel 1.0, because it was not yet named Bethel at that time, its name was Luz (Gen 28:19) and we will go back to this place later on) that he has his first encounter with God. We have seen this incident in the first second sermons of this series. God appears to him in the dream and then he wakes up and acknowledges God's presence. From a relationship status that says, "don't care about God" his relationship status changes to acknowledging the house of God. "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven (Genesis 28:17)!" This is the first change in relationship that we see as a result of an encounter with God. But as we saw earlier in the series, this change was very subtle. Even though he acknowledged the presence of God, he did it with several conditions. His vow tells the story. "If God will be with me and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, 21 so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God. 22 And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You (Genesis 28:20-22)." This is not an unconditional acceptance of God and His grace. This is very conditional acceptance of God's grace.

But as we have seen repeatedly, God does not give up on us once He makes a promise. He continues to encounter with Jacob and with each encounter, we see Jacob's quality of relationship with God improving. With each encounter, his trust in God improves. The vertical relationship between Jacob and God peaks when God calls Jacob to go to Bethel 2.0 in Genesis Ch 35. It is interesting to see the circumstances when God encounters Jacob this time. Genesis Ch 34 describes some horrid actions by Jacob's sons. Jacob's only daughter Dinah goes out for a party with other girls and prince Shechem sees her, falls in love with her (a case of love at first sight) and violates her. Shechem, however does the most appropriate thing under the circumstances. He does not abandon Dinah but wants to marry her. So, he approaches Jacob through proper channels, through his father Hamor. This is where Jacob's passive nature comes to light once again. 5 And Jacob heard that he had defiled Dinah his daughter. Now his sons were with his livestock in the field; so Jacob held his peace until they came (Genesis 34:5). Jacob kept silent and left the decision on what to do to his sons. His sons, true to Jacob's blood turned out to be masters at deception. 13 But the sons of Jacob answered Shechem and Hamor his father, and spoke deceitfully, because he had defiled Dinah their sister (Gen 34:13). Jacob's sons picked up where Jacob had left off, trying to run their lives through deception and cunning, and not taking God's guidance. They agree that Shechem can marry Dinah if all the men of city are circumcised. Hamor and Shechem agree and then once they were in pain Jacob's sons kill all

the men and plunder the city. Jacob is struck by fear and starts blaming the children for putting his life at risk (Genesis 34:30). It is under these circumstances that God encounters Jacob, and asks him to remember his vow that he took at Bethel 1.0. God asks Jacob to return to Bethel and fulfil his vow. And this has a profound effect on Jacob's relationship with God. Till this time, he had tolerated idols in his household, or to use a modern dating term, his relationship with YHWH was not "exclusive". If he had a Facebook page, his relationship status would not have shown an exclusive relationship with YHWH. It is after the Lord encounters him after the Shechem incident, when his confidence is completely shaken, and he is aware of God's grace and God's promise, and then he decides to make the relationship exclusive. "Put away the foreign gods that are among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments. 3 Then let us arise and go up to Bethel; and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me in the way which I have gone (Genesis 35:2-3)." Jacob wants to make sure that his household will worship only one true God, the God of his father Abraham, and Isaac. Jacob goes on and confirms the relationship by naming the altar as El Bethel, which means "God of the House". You see, with one renaming, he has changed the focus from the house of God (Bethel) to the God of the House (El-Bethel). His relationship is no more with a place, it is with the God that dwells in that place. You might recall that we started this whole series with a challenge to consider each Sunday as an encounter with God. This sure is the House of God, but you can come to the House of God for different purposes. It is more important for us to come to the House of God to meet up with the God of the House. Our comfort does not come from the House of God, our comfort comes from the God of the House. We can be in the House of God but miss the God of the House altogether. Jacob missed it the first time he was in Bethel. This time he makes sure that his relationship with God is cemented. We see the results of that in the remaining story of Jacob. He once again gets renamed as Israel, and God renews His covenant with Abraham through Jacob and builds up the 12 tribes of Israel through Jacob's offspring. So much so Jacob is mentioned in the hall of faith in Hebrews 11:21.

Let us be sure of one thing. God encounters will change our relationship with God. If we have been passive in our relationship with God, it is only through encounters with Him that we can get closer to him. Let that be a reason for us to seek and have repeated encounters with God, so that we don't become lukewarm in our relationship with God.

We also see that relationships with others get impacted due to encounters with God. It is during the wrestling encounter that Jacob's name changes for the first time. And He said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed (Gen 32:28)." I would like you to take a look at the second part of the dialogue. You have struggled with God and with men and have prevailed. It is a loaded statement. That is what Jacob was doing all this time. He runs away from Esau because he deceived him. He runs away from Laban because Laban cheated him multiple times. He is wrestling with men over and over again. God is telling Jacob through this encounter that his struggles with men are over. He has prevailed. Jacob was terrified of Esau. This is natural because Esau had vowed to kill Jacob. Jacob's encounter during the wrestling match changes things. Jacob ensures that he receives the blessings of God before he meets up with Esau. Jacob's confidence is restored. "For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved (Gen 32:30)." And we can see the result of this confidence in the meeting between Esau and Jacob. Instead of taking the sword to cut off Jacob's head, Esau embraces him and kisses him. The relationship between Esau and Jacob is already mended during the wrestling that Jacob had with God. When Jacob persevered and confessed his true identity before the Lord. At the end of the encounter Jacob knew that if God's grace has saved his life after wrestling with God, the same Grace will help him restore his relationship with his brother Esau. Yes, when we encounter God, our broken

relationships will be restored.

Actually Jesus says, this is a precondition. Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and then remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift (Matthew 5:23-24). Yes, when we have an encounter with God, we will be able to restore our broken relationships. Both Paul and Peter, the other two characters we studied in this series, write eloquently about restoring relationships in their epistles. In my book Not-So-With-YOU (https://www.menorahleadership.com/not-so-with-you_book/) , I explain the Emotional Healing that restores relationships. This is possible only when we are able to truly forgive and truly dispense grace. This requires a deeper understanding of grace. Justice is when we get what we deserve, we do good we get rewarded, we do bad, we get punished and the quantum of reward or punishment is proportionate to the severity of our good deeds or bad deeds. This is justice and the whole of humanity is based on this. But above justice is mercy. Mercy is when we are spared of the punishment that we deserve. Like in the case of mercy petition for people who have got the death sentence. Grace is above mercy . Because grace not only spares us from the punishment we deserve but rewards us instead. In the corporate set up whenever I speak about grace, I tell them plainly that it cannot be explained logically. It can even seem unfair. But what happened at the cross is not logical, it is unfair, and that is what released grace to us. That is what grace is. The fact is that to understand grace in its full extend and to be able dispense grace to others, we need to have encounters with God. It is not something that is humanly possible. Restoration of relationships is possible when we have an encounter with God.

This morning, Jesus is calling us to have an encounter with Him, and thus restore our vertical relationship with God and our horizontal relationship with others. Can we respond to His call?

So as we come to the table of communion today, let us use it as an opportunity to once again thank our Lord Jesus Christ for helping us to make our vertical relationship with God alright. Without the broken body of Christ, without the blood of the new covenant we would have had no part in the Kingdom. It is by His grace and His Grace alone that we can come to the table and partake in the Lord's supper. But we do have a responsibility before we partake in this. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup." 1 Corinthians 11:28. This advice is very important for us in view of the horizontal relationship that we have responsibility for. Paul is addressing this to people who are fighting among themselves. The message is clear. Approaching the Lord's table is an opportunity for us to examine our vertical and horizontal relationships and mend them. Let us use this opportunity to seek an encounter with Him this morning.

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