

BACK TO BETHEL

"And God said unto Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there: and make there an altar unto God, that appeared unto thee when thou fleddest from the face of Esau thy brother." Genesis 35:1.

Perhaps God has allowed us to look a little more closely at the lives of some of the Old Testament saints because He knew that there would be so many others in the world like them. This is especially true of Jacob, and surely God would have us to understand that if He could forgive the sins of Jacob and do for him all that He eventually did do, that some of us should not despair because we have failed, and are somewhat disappointed in our Christian experience, and may perhaps be sitting here now with the fragments of shattered ideals strewn about our feet. If there are those of us here who have been unfaithful and have gotten away from God, I want us to see the way in which God deals with His erring children, and along with Jacob go up to Bethel.

Jacob had taken an unkind and unfair advantage of his hungry brother in a moment of extremity and defrauded him out of his birthright and the coveted blessing. By the aid of his mother he deceived his father and obtained the blessing. The angry brother, Esau, determined that he would murder him at the first opportunity. So, to remain at home was no longer safe for Jacob. Quick counsel with his mother started him upon swift feet toward the habitation of his uncle, Laban, in the northeast country. The first day's flight was nerve-racking. At last came sunset and after that the dark.

Jacob was in the midst of a barren waste, strewn with boulders, and while the stars shone down upon him, and the night winds moaned about him, he threw his weary body upon the naked earth and sought rest for his throbbing head upon a stone of the field. His mother's hand was not laid upon his aching brow, and no friendly voice came to him in the dark. When all earthly help forsook him God visited the lonely spot. God pushed a golden ladder out of the window of heaven, and the foot of it touched the earth where this Hebrew exile lay. The angels of God kept him company that night, making trips innumerable up and down that beautiful ladder. God connected heaven and earth for Jacob's personal benefit. His desolate sleeping-place was guarded by the heavenly cohorts. In that marvelous vision he saw God standing by his side, saying, "I am the God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac." When he awoke the next morning he said, "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not." He was afraid, and exclaimed, "How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

Jacob took the stone upon which his head had rested and set it up for a pillar or monument, and poured oil upon it. Then he worshipped and dedicated his life to God. There and then he made his solemn vows to walk with God and to serve Him as long as he lived. He called the name of the place Bethel, meaning the House of God.

With such heavenly visitors honoring the spot and with such words of dedication marking it, Jacob started on his second day's journey. He went to Laban's house. For seven years he served Laban faithfully, whereupon he was defrauded out of his due, thus proving that "whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap." Jacob knew that he was to blame for all that had come upon him. While there with his uncle, Jacob became involved in the game of money making. Little by little his vows were forgotten and his altar was neglected. He returned to his old life of dishonesty and scrambling for the things of the world, and in his unfaithfulness he allowed his household to sink into idolatry, with never a thought of God. Business and pleasure held him, but he paid for it dearly. His daughter was disgraced and his sons got into serious trouble. When Jacob was in the deepest distress because of the idolatry of his family and the wickedness of his children, God spoke to him, saying, "Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there." That was God's advice to Jacob, the backslider. And Jacob was glad to go.

Spiritually speaking, Bethel is a real and soul-stirring experience with God. Every departure from Bethel into coldness, waywardness and sin brings the command from God to get back to Bethel and dwell there. It is so easy to get away from Bethel. We sometimes drift away unconsciously. And sometimes we are too stubborn to go back and God has to chastise us severely before He can get us back to the place of blessing. Some of us live like the man of whom Gypsy Smith used to tell. This man declared he had been serving God for twenty-eight years "off and on" but confessed that his experience had been more "off" than "on" God wants us to be "out and out."

Jacob needed to get back to a place of dependence upon God. He had depended on Him when he had nothing and was lonely and forsaken, with only a stone for a pillow; but, like many others, when he became wealthy, he forgot his dependence and his promises. Satan always tries to get us to depend on other things rather than upon God. With some religion is only an umbrella for the stormy weather of life. They discover later that it will not open on certain occasions, and when it does open, it leaks. The best thing for any child of God to do is to dwell at Bethel. Bethel is a place of revelation, worship, companionship with God, dependence, protection, dedication, promise and blessing.

God's command, "Arise, go up to Bethel," was: ---

1. A sad reminder.

The moment Jacob heard God say, "Arise, go up to Bethel," a flood of memories came back to him. He was reminded of his one great experience with God, of the vows that he had made, of the joy that filled his heart years before when God spoke to him and assured him of forgiveness, and of protection in the way that he was going. It also reminded him that he had vowed to be loyal to God and to give back to Him the tenth of all that God enabled him to earn. Evidently those memories stirred his heart. He saw that his folly and sin had robbed him of his own highest possibilities. He saw that he had made a terrible blunder. He thought of the immeasurable contrast between what he was and what he might have been had he remained faithful. This command, "Arise, go up to Bethel," was God's reminder to Jacob to get up out of his failure and sin, and to go back and start over again. Many church members are not happy, and the reason is they are reaping the harvest of their own backslidings. Then, there are those who have become discouraged in the Lord's service, and they, too, need to go back to Bethel.

2. A solemn rebuke.

This command was a solemn rebuke to Jacob. His whole life was under the shadow of a great grief and anxiety, and there was a veiled rebuke for failing to keep his vows. God had promised him rich rewards if only he would be faithful to Him. And Jacob had promised. but he did not do what he promised that he would do. He went his way, and forgot his vows. And God knew that Jacob had brought his sorrows upon himself.

Note what was necessary for Jacob to return to Bethel: --

1. Realization that sin brings sorrow.

He had thought that he could do wrong and escape the consequences of it. But he had learned better. He had seen the trouble of a sinful, worldly, wicked way of life. He realized that he had wasted in the service of Satan the best years of his

life. He was suffering the pain and sorrow of seeing his own children bring ruin upon themselves and upon him. He was seeing the family name dragged down to the very depths of shame: he was reaping the first fruits of his own sinful life; and he had learned that nothing else can take the place of God. He had learned that he could not trample God and His law under his feet without coming to judgment.

2. Complete surrender.

Jacob pleaded with his children, "Put away the strange gods that are among you." He thus referred to the little idols that Rachel had taken from Laban. It is strange that Jacob had tolerated such things. It is also strange that we can tolerate things that rob us of power and keep us away from God. An idol is something that takes the place of God, that one puts before God in his life. It is sad to think of those whose usefulness for God is gone due to the decay of the inner life. Jacob buried the idols under an oak at Shechem. Why didn't he keep them, but just refrain from worshipping them? He knew human nature too well, he wanted to forget the past, and the time for surrender to be complete was already past.

3. Complete separation.

He pleaded with them, "And be clean." He meant for them to wash their bodies, but this washing was a token of the cleansing of their hearts. They could not go back to Bethel, which was the place of blessing, and carry known sin with them. A boy died of diptheria in a Minnesota village. The family left the house and had it sulphurized. The one doing the job overlooked one small closet. Later the mother took a shawl out of that closet and wrapped her remaining child in it and went to visit some friends. Diptheria broke out in the family that was visited and carried off three children. Sin is also a deadly thing and no consecration is complete that does not offer God the whole heart for cleansing. If you would go back to Bethel say,

"Lord Jesus, I long to be perfectly whole;
I want Thee completely to dwell in my soul;
Break down every idol, cast out every foe,
Now wash me and I shall be whiter than snow."

4. Complete sanctification.

"And change your garments." Be set apart and wholly dedicated to the will of God. Some of you have said "no" to the will of God for you, and He has been waiting for you to say "yes." Won't you say it now? God is still calling you back to Bethel.

"Back to Bethel, I must go,
Back where the rivers of sweet waters flow;
Back to the true life my soul longs to know,
Bethel is calling, and I must go."

Now, what did Jacob find when he got back to Bethel?

1. The old protection.

During the days of his disobedience his life had been in constant peril. He had to leave Shechem or his enemies would have slain him. When one gets back to God He always takes care of him.

"I know not where His islands
May lift their fronded palms in air;
I only knew I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care."

2. The old pillar.

More than thirty years before Jacob had raised a pillar to commemorate his vision and his vows. What memories that old moss-covered stone must have brought back! Here on the same spot he built an altar and worshipped God. What a joy must have thrilled in his soul! Have you been saying,

"Where is the joy that once I knew,
When first I saw the Lord?"

It is just where you left it. Arise, and go back to Bethel.

3. The old princeliness.

God called Jacob a "Prince of God." Jacob had proved himself unworthy and had not lived as he should have lived. God wanted to make him a Prince again, so He said, "Arise, go up to Bethel."

4. The old promise.

It was at Bethel that God had first promised to Jacob and his seed all the blessings, all the privileges and all the high prerogatives of the birthright. Now that Jacob has come back the old promise is renewed with even a greater emphasis. What God has planned for you may yet be true if you will only go back to Bethel.

5. The old prayer-life.

We are told that "God talked with Jacob there." 35:13. A little child crawled into his father's lap and said, "Papa, is God dead?" The father replied, "No, son, Why do you ask such a question?" "Because I don't hear you talking to Him any more like you used to." The father's head dropped in embarrassment. Do you talk to God? Do you have any power in prayer? If you would go back to Bethel you would pray and get results. Why not arise and go back now? The Bethel life is the life of peace, purity and power. It is the place where the victorious life is lived.

"Back to God, Back to God,
Tho' tempted and tossed and hurled;
Back to the Book that tells of Christ
The only hope of the world."