

BACK TO GOD

"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 closely at the lives of some of the Old Testament characters because He knew that we would be so much like them. This is especially true of Jacob, who was one of the strangest and most unusual characters in the Old Testament. When he was cheating his brother, Esau, out of his birthright, he was at his worst. When he made his vows unto God, he was at his best. When he put on an animal skin and deceived his father, Isaac, he was at his worst. When he wrestled with the angel and prayed for a blessing, he was at his best.

Jacob took 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. With the assistance of his mother he deceived his father and obtained the blessing. Angry Esau determined that he would murder him at his first opportunity, so, to remain at home was no longer safe for Jacob. Quick counsel with his mother started Jacob upon swift feet toward the habitation of his uncle, Laban, in the northeast country. After a day's flight from his enraged brother the fugitive was overtaken by darkness in an uninhabited place, which was strewn with boulders. Fearing the results of the past and dreading the future, Jacob threw his weary body upon the naked earth and sought rest for his drooping head upon a stone of the field, while the stars shone down upon him and the night winds moaned about him. Lonely and afraid, he realized that his deception had not been profitable to him. Although he had been the recipient of the blessing, he had to regret the misery that followed his deceit and injustice. Sowing always determined reaping. Sin always comes home, and when it does sorrow and misery accompany it.

Low in spirit and weary from his journey, Jacob soon fell asleep. When all earthly help forsook Jacob, God visited the lonely spot. As he dreamed Jacob received a vision of God pushing a golden ladder out of the window of heaven and placing the base of it on the ground near the spot where he was lying. The angels of God kept him company that night as they made innumerable trips up and down that beautiful ladder. God connected heaven and earth for Jacob's personal benefit. In that marvelous vision he saw God standing by his side, and heard him say, "I am the God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac." When he awoke the next morning Jacob said, "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not." Jacob took the stone upon which his head had rested and set it up for a pillar or monument, and poured oil upon it. He then worshipped God, dedicating his life to him, and made his solemn vows to walk with him and serve him as long as he lived. He called the name of the place Bethel, which means the house of God. Jacob never forgot the night that he spent there.

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 the house of his uncle, Laban. 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 came upon him. While living with Laban Jacob was forgetful of the vows he had made and all the time he was growing colder spiritually. He became involved in the game of making money. Returning to his old life of dishonesty and scrambling for the things of the world, Jacob 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.

All of these things resulted from Jacob's living in the midst of worldly associations. Mixing with the world is always disastrous. We become like those with whom we associate. We imbibe their conception of things. We follow their example. It is almost impossible to become intimately associated with any group without imitating the characteristics of those individuals. Another result of association with the world is the breaking of connections with God. God's children lose fellowship with the Father when they walk with the world. When they lose connection with Him they always lose their testimony with men. Because Lot dwelt in Sodom he lost all of his power over his children and his influence over its citizens. He could not take a one of them with him out of the city as he fled from its coming destruction.

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." There was no other place to go. Man's extremities are often God's opportunities. Since Jacob wanted to avoid Laban, escape from Esau and get away from the men of Shechem, God called upon him to go back to Bethel, the place where he had first come to know the Lord.

God had graciously appeared to Jacob at Bethel in the first place. Thirty or more years had elapsed during which he had wandered and drifted from God. He was marred and God was ready to make him over. His absence from the house of God had wielded a tragic influence on Jacob's life. Nobody can stay away from God's house and be as spiritually minded as those who attend the services there regularly and have fellowship with God's people.

Jacob needed to get back to the place of dependence upon God. He had depended on God when he did not have anything, and when he was lonely and had only a stone for a pillow; but, like many others, when he became prosperous he forsook his dependence and his promises. Satan always tries to get God's children to depend on things rather than God. The best course for any child of God is to dwell at Bethel, which is the place of revelation, worship, companionship with God, dependence, protection, dedication, promise and blessing.

God's call to Jacob to return to Bethel was a sad reminder. The moment he heard God's call 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 assured him of forgiveness and protection. It also reminded him that he had vowed to be loyal to God and to present to Him the tenth of all that God enabled him to earn. Evidently those memories stirred his soul. 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 a challenge to go back and start over again. Many church members are like Jacob in that they are not happy. The only reason is they are simply reaping the harvest of their own backslidings. Those who are discouraged in the Lord's service need to come back to God also.

God's call to Jacob was a solemn rebuke. God rebuked him for failing to keep his vows. Jacob had promised to be faithful to God, but he had not kept his promise. He forgot his vows and brought his sorrows upon himself.

Jacob had thought that he could do wrong and escape the consequences, but he had learned better. He came to the realization that he had wasted the best years of his life in the service of Satan. In seeing his children bring ruin upon themselves and drag the family name down to the very depths of shame, Jacob was simply reaping the fruits of his own sinful life. He learned that he could not trample God's law under his feet without coming to judgment.

In addition to the realization that sin brings sorrow, Jacob learned that complete surrender was necessary before he could return to Bethel. He pleaded with his children to get rid of their idols. It is strange that he had tolerated such things. It is just as strange that we can tolerate things that prohibit our fellowship with God and rob us of power. It is sad to observe church members whose usefulness for God is gone because of the decay of their own inner lives. Jacob buried the idols under an oak at Shechem. Why didn't he keep the idols, but just refrain from worshipping them? He knew human nature too well. He wanted to forget the past, and he knew that the time for complete surrender was overdue.

Jacob knew that he who would enter into the presence of the Lord must have a pure heart and clean hands. Knowing that they could not go back to Bethel carrying known sin with them there, he pleaded with them for complete separation -- "and be clean." If you would come back to God, 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."

When Jacob said, "And change your garments," he was challenging them to complete dedication to the will of God. Some of us need to come back to God today in real dedication of heart and life, saying,

"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."

Back to God means back to active service for Him. From the day that Jacob went back to Bethel he lived a life of faithful service. Many Christians were formerly active in the Lord's service, but they have quit their work for Him and are not doing anything for Him or for others. There are too many "has-beens" in the churches. Oh, for people who will actually serve God all of the days of their lives!

Did it pay Jacob to go back to Bethel? Yes, he received a glorious compensation. What did he find when he got back?

1. The old protection.

During the days of his disobedience Jacob's life had been in constant peril. He had to leave Shechem or his enemies would have slain him. As Jacob journeyed toward Bethel his enemies ceased to pursue him. This reminds us of the words of Solomon: "When a man's ways please the Lord, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him" (Proverbs 16:7). When one gets back to God and lives within the circle of His will, He always takes care of him.

"I know not where His islands
May lift their fronded palms in air;
I only know 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. His soul must have thrilled with joy. Have you been saying, with Cowper:

"Oh, for a closer walk with God,
A calm and heavenly frame;
A light to shine upon the road
That leads me to the Lamb!

Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view
Of Jesus and His Word?

This blessedness and the soul-refreshing view are just where you left them.

3. The old princeliness.

God had previously called Jacob a "Prince of God." Meanwhile, Jacob had proved himself unworthy by living in the wrong manner. Wanting him to conduct himself as a prince should, God called him to return to Bethel.

4. The old promise.

At Bethel God had promised to Jacob and his seed all the blessings, privileges and high prerogatives of the birthright. When Jacob returned the old promise was renewed with even a greater emphasis. What God has planned for you will yet come true when you come back to Him.

5. The old prayer-life.

We are told that "God talked with Jacob there" (Genesis 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." Naturally, that father's head dropped in embarrassment. Do you recall how you used to pray? Have you quit praying? Do you have any power in prayer? If you will come back to God, you will pray and get results. Why not arise and come back to Him now? The Bethel life is one of peace, purity and power. It is the place where the victorious and useful 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."