

BACK TO BETHEL

Genesis 35:1-5

One of the most helpful things about the Bible is that it portrays experiences that are so much like our own. Perhaps God has let us look closely at the lives of some of the biblical characters because He knew that we would be so much like them. This is especially true of Jacob.

Because of his sin it became necessary for Jacob to flee from the wrath of his brother whom he had wronged. When the fugitive was overtaken by darkness he was in an uninhabited place and his soul doubtless was in a desert state. Lying down on the ground, with a stone for his pillow and the canopy of heaven only for a covering, he fell asleep. During the night he had a dream in which he received a vision of God. His realization of the presence of God in that lonely spot was a soul-stirring experience for Jacob. Awakening from sleep the next morning, the patriarch took the stone upon which his head had rested, erected it as a memorial to his wonderful experience with God during the night, anointed it with oil and called the name of the place "Bethel," meaning "The House of God." To Jacob it was a sacred place. There he worshipped God, dedicated his life to Him, made solemn vows to walk with God and serve Him faithfully, acknowledged God's claims on his life and pledged one tenth of his income to God for use in His service. It was a real meeting which Jacob had with God.

Years passed, and Jacob had his dealings with Laban, with whom he had gone to live, and by whom he was defrauded of his due. He had deceived his brother and his father and Jacob was paid in his own coin. He discovered from experience the truthfulness of the statement, "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 he was forgetful of the vows he had made and all the time he was growing colder spiritually. He became involved in making money. Returning to his old life of dishonesty and scrambling for the things of the world, Jacob allowed his family to sink into idolatry, to the utter disregard of God. Business and pleasure held him, but he paid for it dearly. His daughter was disgraced and his sons got into serious trouble.

These things resulted from Jacob's 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. Another result of association with the world is the breaking of connections with God. When God's children lose connection or fellowship with Him, they always lose an effective testimony to men. Because Lot dwelt in Sodom he lost his influence over his children and his fellow citizens. He could not take out of the city one of them when he fled from its coming destruction.

From Jacob we learn that it is possible for the soul that has known the fullest revelation of God's purposes and grace so to drift that finally he finds himself at ease in an environment that is utterly foreign to the mind and purpose of God for him.

Three things marked Jacob's life at Shechem. The first was material prosperity. No longer was he a penniless fugitive without a roof over his head or any possessions to sustain him. Jacob was now a wealthy man. So often material prosperity and advancement are the real cause of spiritual decline. A man purchases a new car, moves into a new house or prospers in business, and soon merely material things assume an importance in his mind and a prominence in his thinking to the exclusion of the things of God. The second thing that marked Jacob's life at Shechem was his spiritual disloyalty. Even though he had erected an altar at Bethel and outwardly professed his allegiance to God, we read that he had strange gods in his household. While there was the outward acknowledgment of allegiance to God, yet within the inner circle of his life there was the acceptance of that which was unworthy and disloyal. The third thing that marked Jacob's experience at Shechem was moral tragedy. This tragedy not only affected the witness of Jacob, but also the wellbeing of his own family into whose lives tragedy and sorrow had come.

While Jacob was in the deepest distress because of the idolatry of his family and the wickedness of his children, God spoke to him at Shechem saying, "Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there." Bethel was the place where Jacob had first come to know the Lord more than thirty years before. The very word brought back to him a surge of memories of experiences that were written indelibly upon the pages of his memory.

Jacob's absence from the house of God during the years that had elapsed had wielded a tragic influence over his life. Nobody can stay away from God's house and be as spiritually minded as those who attend the services there regularly and have communion with God and fellowship with God's children.

God's call to Jacob to return to Bethel was a sad reminder. It reminded him of his one great experience with God, of the vows he had made, of the joy that filled his soul years before when God assured him of his forgiveness and protection. He remembered how he had depended on God when he was lonely and did not have anything, and then had yielded to the temptation of Satan to depend on things instead of God. Evidently those memories stirred his soul and made him realize what a terrible blunder he had made. He thought of the immeasurable contrast between what he was and what he might have been had he remained faithful. Many church members today are like Jacob, both in their conduct and in its resultant unhappiness. They are simply reaping the harvest of their own backslidings.

God's call to Jacob to return to Bethel was also a solemn rebuke. God rebuked him for failing to keep his vows to be faithful and obedient to Him. Like some of you, Jacob had thought that he could do wrong and escape the consequences, but at last he had learned better. After he had wasted the best years of his life in the service of Satan, he came to the realization that sin brings sorrow.

In His call to Jacob to "arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there," God was asking him for the same things that He asks of us. The first of these was immediacy of action, and was expressed in the word "arise." God wanted him to end the Shechem life at once. The second of these was integrity of life. Going to Bethel meant leaving Shechem; and that was not just a physical and geographical change, but it was a spiritual and moral one. To the members of his household Jacob said, "Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments: and let us arise, and go up to Bethel; and I will make there an altar unto God, who answered me in the day of my distress, and was with me in the way which I went. And they gave unto Jacob all the strange gods which were in their hand, and all their earrings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak which was by Shechem." I wonder if there are not some things in your life for which the only appropriate handling is that of burial. The third thing to which God called His servant, and to which He is calling us, was intimacy of heart. "Go up to Bethel, and dwell there." Bethel was the place of open vision and of glad dedication. That is the sort of life to which God is calling us; the life where we see Him and He speaks to us, and where in that response we make our vows and enter into the fulness of His purposes and will. God was waiting to be with him again at Bethel. It was as if God were saying to him, "Jacob, you don't belong here. You belong up yonder where I called you, where I first became real to you, where you trusted Me, where I forgave you, where you came into that close relationship to Me and where you made your vows of allegiance to Me."

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

"Lord Jesus, I long to be perfectly whole;
I want Thee forever to live 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, too, need to come back to God 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."

Jacob not only put away the idols, but he buried them. He did not turn them into gold and carry them with him, but he put them utterly out of sight. We, too, need to tear some things out of our lives and bury them forever.

Back to Bethel means back to the place of prayer. The prayerless Christian is powerless, but the praying Christian brings things to pass for the Lord. Back to Bethel means back to the enthronement of God in your life. Back to Bethel means back to the place of worship. Neglect of worship had created a serious condition in Jacob's life. He had lived in easy-going distance from Bethel for some years, and yet he had not gone there to worship a single time. He had lived in open violation of that verse which says, "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is" (Hebrews 10:25). Absence from the house of God had a serious and bad influence upon his own life. No child of God can stay away from the house of the Lord and be as spiritually minded as if he regularly attended the services there. As one might expect, because Jacob neglected to worship God his entire family followed his example and their family situation was deplorable.

Back to Bethel also means back to the better life we once knew. Back to Bethel means back to active service for God. From the day that Jacob went back to Bethel he lived a life of faithful service. Many professing Christians were formerly active in the Lord's service, but they quit doing anything for the Lord or for others. Since they have neglected their Christian duties they have not been happy, victorious or useful. There are too many "has-beens" in our churches today. All they want to talk about is what they used to do. Oh, for people who will actually serve God all the days of their Christian lives! What a pity that some forget God and go their worldly ways until God permits or sends some sickness, suffering, separation or sorrow into their lives in order to bring them back to Him and to the path of Christian duty! Come back to Bethel and learn anew the love of Christ and then go out to serve Him until He calls you home.

In response to the call and command of God, Jacob went back to Bethel. What did he find when he got back to Bethel?

1. The old protection.

During the days of his disobedience his life was 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 Solomon's statement: "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 right with God and lives within the circle of His will, God 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. When he turned to that sacred spot, 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 William Cowper:

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

If so, this blessedness and this soul-refreshing view are just where you left them. Therefore, go back to Bethel without delay.

3. The old princeliness.

God had previously called Jacob a "Prince of God." Meanwhile, Jacob had proved his unworthiness by living in the wrong manner. Wanting him to conduct himself henceforth as a prince should, God called and commanded him to "Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there."

4. The old promise.

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

5. The old prayer-life.

Verse thirteen says, "God talked with Jacob there." 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?" The boy answered, "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. If you will "arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there," you will discover that the Bethel life will be one of peace, purity, power and protection. It is the place where the happy, 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."