

Back to Bethel

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And God said unto Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there: and make there an altar unto God, who appeared unto thee when thou fleddest from the face of Esau, thy brother. Then Jacob said unto his household, and to all that were with him, Put away the foreign 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. (Genesis 35:1-3)

Bethel is about twelve miles north of Jerusalem. Described as a bleak moorland in the hill country, it stands twelve hundred feet above sea level where the wild winds whistle about its large, exposed rocks. If you have driven over the narrow old roads between California's Yucca Valley and Apple Valley, you have seen a place much like Bethel. Although the topography was desolate and forbidding, it was where the spiritual high point in the life of Jacob occurred.

To understand this passage in Genesis 35, we must go back thirty years to the time when Jacob first went to Bethel. At that time he was fleeing for his life. His brother Esau was after him to murder him. Jacob was a fugitive, a runaway. He had no traveling gear whatsoever except the staff in his hand.

That first night away from home, Jacob spent at Bethel — his head pillowed on a stone in that bleak, lonely spot, with the winds howling about him. He dreamed of a ladder that was set up on earth, the top of it reaching to heaven, and God standing above the ladder.

What was it that brought him to this place? What kind of home did he leave? It was not an ideal home, but it was a home through which God was moving for time and for eternity. It was the home of Isaac and Rebekah.

Home and Family

Isaac was the son of Abraham and Sarah, the son of promise God had given them by a miracle in their old age. When the boy was grown, his aged father refused to take a wife for him from among the heathen in whose land they lived. Abraham instructed his servant to get a bride for his son from among his kinfolk back at Haran. The servant, unerringly guided by God, brought back Rebekah to be the bride of Isaac. We take up the thread of their story when they were expecting their first child.

And the children struggled together within her; and she said, If it be so, why am I thus? And she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be born of thee; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger. (Genesis 25:22, 23)

God said that two nations were to come out of this family, and two nations did come from these two boys. We shall follow them through the Word of God.

Not only can we trace the history of these two nations, but we are given the spiritual application to the life of the believer. You see, all truth in the Bible is germinated in Genesis. We find the seed plot of the Bible in the Book of Genesis, and we have the bud appearing there — much of the Bible is simply the unfolding. In Esau and Jacob we have a picture of the two natures in a

believer today. If you are a child of God, you have a new nature — but you did not get rid of your old nature, and because of this there is conflict. The new nature and the old nature are opposed to each other. Paul said that the flesh wars against the Spirit, and the Spirit wars against the flesh. Esau pictures the flesh, Jacob the spirit.

Esau, the man of the flesh, is outwardly far more attractive than Jacob. He was an outdoor man, the athletic type. He was the popular man, the extrovert, the *monsieur de monde*, the man of the world.

In contrast, Jacob was the man of the spirit — although that is not apparent at the beginning. When we first meet him he is actually much less attractive than Esau. He is clever, self-opinionated, crooked as can be, and above all he is mama's boy.

And Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison: but Rebekah loved Jacob.
(Genesis 25:28)

In this family both parents have their favorites, which invariably creates friction. As these boys are growing up you will notice that they are not identical twins — rather they are opposites. God said before they were born, so it would be of grace, “I have chosen the younger, and the older will serve him” (see Genesis 25:23). Jacob, knowing God's promise, still connived for the right of the first born.

The birthright may not seem very important to you, but it actually meant that the boy possessing it would be the priest of the family, and it guaranteed that the promises made to the father would be confirmed to him. The ultimate promise was that the Messiah would come through the line of the one having the birthright. Esau, a man of the flesh, did not care about what might happen a thousand years from his day. He was not concerned about anything beyond his present life. His philosophy was “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.”

Esau came in from hunting, hungry — but not starving to death. Jacob did not take advantage of a starving man. Do you think anyone could have starved to death in the wealthy home of Abraham or Isaac? Of course not. But when he smelled the aroma of his brother's cooking, he wanted it. Now, you get nothing from Jacob unless you pay for it, and Jacob bargained, “I'll let you have it if you will let me have that birthright you don't care about.” Esau so despised his birthright that he said, “You may have it, it means nothing to me.” Thus Jacob buys that which God had already promised to give him — he wanted to get it on his own. God could not, nor did He, approve this transaction.

Jacob did not stop there. When old Isaac was about to do that which he should not have done — that is, bless Esau — the boy Jacob and his mother schemed. Actually they stole the blessing. Their father Isaac had said to Esau:

And make me savory food, such as I love, and bring it to me, that I may eat; that my soul may bless thee before I die. (Genesis 27:4)

Rebekah and Jacob collaborated in the deception:

And Rebekah took choicest raiment of her eldest son, Esau, which were with her in the house, and put them upon Jacob, her younger son. And she put the skins of the kids of the goats upon his hands, and upon the smooth of his neck. And she gave

the savory food and the bread, which she had prepared, into the hand of her son Jacob. And he came unto his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I; who art thou, my son? And Jacob said unto his father, I am Esau, thy first-born; I have done according as thou badest me: arise, I pray thee, sit and eat of my venison, that thy soul may bless me. (Genesis 27:15-19)

Isaac, his senses dimmed by age, was taken in by this clever ruse.

And he came near, and kissed him: and he smelled the smell of his raiment, and blessed him, and said, See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the LORD hath blessed. Therefore God give thee of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine: let people serve thee, and nations bow down to thee: be lord over thy brethren, and let thy mother's sons bow down to thee: cursed be every one that curseth thee, and blessed be he that blesseth thee. (Genesis 27:27-29)

The theft of the blessing was the straw that broke the camel's back. It turned Jacob's brother against him.

And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father blessed him: and Esau said in his heart, The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then will I slay my brother, Jacob. (Genesis 27:41)

My father is old, he thought, and I don't want to do anything that would put him in his grave; but the minute he dies, I am going to kill my brother.

Now when Rebekah hears about this threat to her favorite son, she says to Jacob,

Now therefore, my son, obey my voice; and arise, flee thou to Laban my brother, to Haran; and tarry with him a few days, until thy brother's fury turn away. (Genesis 27:43, 44)

She told him to go there for just a few days — but the days lengthened into twenty years, and in the meantime Rebekah died. She never saw her boy again. Her sin was judged.

The Encounter

This boy leaves home and spends his first night out at Bethel. That night he dreams of a ladder set up on earth with angels on it. If I had written this account I would have said that the angels come from heaven descending and then return, ascending. But the record does not read that way. It states that the angels were ascending and descending. What does that mean? God is telling this boy that He would answer prayer. The ascending angel, the prayer; the descending angel, the answer — and the ladder is our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the New Testament, when Jesus called Nathanael, He characterized him as “an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile” (John 1:47). He was no Jacob — none of his cleverness, none of his crookedness, none of his self-opinionatedness. Nathanael was a sincere man who had ques-

tioned the messiahship of Jesus. “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46) he had wisecracked to Philip. But Jesus said to him,

Before Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee. Nathanael answered, and saith unto him, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel. Jesus answered, and said unto him, Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? Thou shalt see greater things than these. And he saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man. (John 1:48-51)

Christ is the ladder, and when the boy Jacob pillowed his head on the stones at Bethel with the wild winds racing about him, he dreamed of that ladder. He thought he had left God back home. Listen to him:

And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not. (Genesis 28:16)

You see, though down deep Jacob has a spiritual nature, he is a conniver and a schemer, depending on his own wits and his own strength. He is far from God. This boy, when he left home and escaped from Esau, probably mopped his brow and said, “Goodbye, Esau. Goodbye, God.” He honestly thought he had left God back home. But the first night out, God has appeared to him. He is telling this lonesome, homesick boy that there is grace and mercy with God, that he still has access to God, and that his prayers will be heard and answered. God has not forsaken him.

In the section of Romans where Paul discusses the nation Israel, and especially this boy and his brother Esau, he says something in chapter ten that is quite interesting:

But the righteousness which is of faith speaketh on this wise, Say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down from above). (Romans 10:6)

You do not have to bring Christ down a ladder today. He is available to you — right where you are sitting.

Or, Who shall descend into the deep? (that is, to bring up Christ again from the dead). (Romans 10:7)

He is already back from the dead, my beloved.

But what saith it? The word is near thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart; that is, the word of faith, which we preach. (Romans 10:8)

Such is the gospel that we preach today, the gospel of a ladder reaching to heaven. God is available. You do not have to go through a religious system, a church, or a preacher. There is nothing between your soul and God.

This is the frightening thing, and it is the thing that frightened Jacob. When you are running away from your brother because you have deceived him, when you are out of the will of God, such a discovery is frightening. God says to you and He says to me, “There is not even a tissue between your soul and Me. I am available.” The Lord Jesus says, “I am the way, the ladder.”

That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. (Romans 10:9, 10)

There is a ladder let down from heaven right where you are at this moment. All you have to do is bring your mouth and your heart into harmony so that they say the same thing. Trust Christ as your personal Savior today. Believe that God gave Him for your sin and that God raised Him from the dead, and you will be saved. The way is wide open for you today. No man is able to open it, but Christ opened it for you about two thousand years ago. Christ is the ladder.

You know, that is the reason some folk will not come to church or Bible study. They have a hundred excuses, but the real reason is they do not want to get that close to God. Actually, the reason multitudes of folk want to go through a ceremony, a ritual, a church, or a man is so that they will not have to go firsthand to God. But by Christ’s death and resurrection, God cut out the middleman, and now you go to Him directly.

Jacob found that ladder when he ran away from home. And God promised to be with him. Imagine God promising to be with this clever, self-opinionated boy who thinks he knows everything!

And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places to which thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of. (Genesis 28:15)

God says in essence, “I will not leave you, I will not forsake you. You did not run away from Me. I am going to continue to deal with you.” Believe me, God dealt with this boy — which we shall see.

Notice the reaction of this runaway boy — I told you he is frightened.

He was afraid, and said, How awesome is this place! This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven. (Genesis 28:17)

This is Bethel.

Such was his experience, and now he makes his vow:

And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace; then shall the LORD be my God. (Genesis 28:20, 21)

He can’t help but trade! Even after God promises to do it for him, he turns right around and

says, “If God will do this for me, then He will be my God” — always trading, always depending on himself to work something out. However, this experience at Bethel is the high point in his life. I believe it is his conversion.

On to Haran

On to Haran now, on to the place where his mother, Rebekah, had sent him — to her brother’s home. Jacob resumes his journey, cocksure, self-sufficient, conceited. However, unbeknown to him, he is moving toward college — the college of hard knocks. His Uncle Laban is dean and professor of all the courses, and, believe me, he is a good teacher.

When Jacob arrives in Haran, he meets a girl. Rachel comes to the well with her father’s sheep. Jacob waters the sheep, then (I have always been amused at this) he kisses Rachel, and lifts his voice and weeps. It is love at first sight. She is the only fine thing in this man’s life. She was at his side through all the hard years in Haran. After many years they had a son, Joseph. Later Benjamin was born at Bethlehem. His birth cost Rachel’s life, and it was at Bethlehem that Jacob buried his beautiful Rachel.

But now Jacob is a young fellow, he has just arrived at Haran and has met Rachel. She leads him to her home because she is the daughter of Uncle Laban. Jacob doesn’t know it, but he is in school now. Here he is, the nephew who has come from a far country. But he is a guest for only a few days. He had expected to be treated in style. He had been able to outwit everybody, including his father and his brother, but he has encountered Uncle Laban now, and Uncle Laban is smarter than he is.

One morning at breakfast Uncle Laban says,

Because thou art my brother, shouldest thou therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall thy wages be? (Genesis 29:15)

Laban sounds so magnanimous when he says, in effect, “Although you are part of the family, I’m not going to let you work here for nothing.” Who said anything about working? Jacob had not. He had not come to Haran to work. That boy lived, not by the sweat of his brow and the rough hands of toil, but by his wits. Yet here somebody is getting in ahead of him. Uncle Laban says, “I’m not going to let you work for nothing, but tomorrow morning you’re getting up with the other hired help and you are going to start working for me — and I’ll pay you.”

Now Laban had already seen Jacob eyeing Rachel. He knew what Jacob wanted, and he knew what he intended to give him. Jacob fell right into line, saying, “I will serve you seven years for Rachel, your younger daughter” (see Genesis 29:18). The record gives us a brief glimpse into Jacob’s heart during these years — “they seemed only a few days to him because of the love he had for her” (see Genesis 29:20). Oh, how he loved her!

The seven years pass and Jacob comes to claim his beautiful Rachel. An evening wedding is arranged, and the bride comes out heavily veiled. The wedding night passes, and in the cruel light of day Jacob sees his bride — Leah!

But Laban is right there to explain everything. “I forgot to tell you, Jacob, that in our country it is the custom that the oldest daughter must be married first. I forgot to tell you that. You will have to take her first.” (See Genesis 29:26.)

May I say to you, this boy is beginning to learn now. This is really his first big lesson. He

refused submission to God at home, and he now must submit to his uncle in a far country. Jacob had deceived his father, he had stolen the blessing of the first born, now he has been deceived because of the right of the first born. He is learning the truth of the old saying, “Chickens come home to roost.” They always do. And you will find that God puts it in different language later on:

Be not deceived, God is not mocked, for whatever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. (Galatians 6:7)

Jacob deceived his old father about the favorite son, and many years later when he himself is old, his sons will bring to him the coat of Joseph, his favorite son, dipped in the blood of goats to deceive him into believing that his son had been slain. It is arresting to notice that every crooked thing this man did came back to him in the same coin. The Word of God promises that it will work that way.

After Jacob had been tricked into marrying Leah, he served seven more years to get Rachel. He served an additional six years to get his sheep. After dealing with Laban for twenty years, he took his leave — and Laban took out after him. Laban would have put him to death had not God intervened. When he caught up with Jacob he stormed, “What do you mean by taking my daughters and taking my grandchildren? You didn’t even let me kiss them goodbye.” (See Genesis 31:26-30.)

As Jacob defends his action, listen to his wail,

Thus have I been twenty years in thy house; I served thee fourteen years for thy two daughters, and six years for thy cattle; and thou hast changed my wages ten times.
(Genesis 31:41)

Jacob is through at Haran now. He has had an excellent education and has finished all of Uncle Laban’s courses.

Heading Home

Jacob resumes his journey, and one memorable night he is left alone to wrestle with God. God is beginning to deal with Jacob directly in order to bring him into the place of fruit bearing and of real, vital service and witness for Him.

And he commanded them, saying, Thus shall ye speak unto my lord, Esau: Thy servant Jacob saith thus, I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed there until now... and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find grace in thy sight. (Genesis 32:4, 5)

He remembers the last time he saw Esau, twenty years ago. Esau was breathing out threatenings against him. Notice that Jacob sends servants and instructs them, saying, “When you get to Esau my brother, say to him, ‘My lord, Esau.’” Of all things! And then he has them refer to himself as “thy servant Jacob.” That’s not the way Jacob had spoken before. He had manipulated for the birthright and had stolen the blessing. He had been a rascal, but now his talk is different. I guess he had learned a few things from Uncle Laban. “My lord, Esau...thy servant Jacob.”

And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, We came to thy brother, Esau, and also he cometh to meet thee, and four hundred men with him. (Genesis 32:6)

This message absolutely frightened poor Jacob because he didn't know what all that meant. Esau did not indicate his intentions to the servants at all. I suppose that Jacob quizzed them rather thoroughly and said, "Did you detect any note of animosity or bitterness or hatred toward me?" And I suppose that one of the servants said, "No, he seemed to be glad to get the information that you were coming to meet him, and now he's coming to meet you." But the fact that Esau appeared glad was no comfort to Jacob. It could mean that Esau would be glad for the opportunity of getting revenge. Anyway, poor Jacob is upset.

Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed: and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks, and herds, and the camels, into two bands. (Genesis 32:7)

He reasons that if his brother strikes one group, then the other one can escape.

Notice what Jacob does now. He appeals to God in his distress:

And Jacob said, O God of my father, Abraham, and God of my father, Isaac, the LORD who saidst unto me, Return unto thy country, and to thy kindred, and I will deal well with thee; I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast shown unto thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands. (Genesis 32:9, 10)

This man now appeals to God and cries out to Him on the basis that He is the God of his father, Abraham, and the God of his father, Isaac. I begin now to detect a little change in Jacob's life. This is the first time I have ever heard him say, "I am not worthy of the least of Your mercies." For the first time, he is acknowledging that he might be a sinner in God's sight. Do you know that there are a great many "Christians" who do not acknowledge that they are sinners? For years I knew a man who was incensed that I would indicate that he was a sinner. He told me all that he had done and that he had been saved and now was not a sinner. My friend, he is a sinner. We are all sinners, saved by grace. As long as we are in this life, we have that old nature that isn't even fit to go to heaven. When any man begins to move toward God on that basis, he will find that to be true.

That night Jacob sends all that he has across the Brook Jabbok, but he stays on the other side so that, if his brother Esau comes, he might kill Jacob but spare the family. And so Jacob is left alone.

And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. (Genesis 32:24)

There are several things I would like to get straight as we come to this wrestling match. I have heard it said that Jacob did the wrestling. Actually, Jacob didn't want to wrestle anybody. He has Uncle Laban in back of him who doesn't mean good at all, and he has his brother Esau ahead of him. Jacob is no match for either one. He is caught now between a rock and a hard

place, and he doesn't know which way to turn. Do you think he wanted to take on a third opponent that night? I don't think so.

This is the question: Who is this one who wrestled with Jacob that night? There has been a great deal of speculation about who it is, but I think He is none other than the preincarnate Christ.

And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him.
(Genesis 32:25)

Jacob is not going to give up easily; he is not that kind of man — and he struggled against Him. Finally, this One who wrestled with him crippled him.

And he said, Let me go; for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. (Genesis 32:26)

What happens now? Jacob is just holding on; he's not wrestling. He is just holding on to this One. He found out that you do not get anywhere with God by struggling and resisting. The only way that you get anywhere with Him is by yielding and just holding on to Him. My friend, when you get in that condition, then you trust God. When you are willing to hold on, He is there ready to help you.

And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob. And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel; for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed. (Genesis 32:27, 28)

He is not Jacob anymore — the one who is the usurper, the trickster — but Israel, “for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.” Now the new nature of Israel will be manifested in the life of this man.

And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel; for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved. (Genesis 32:29, 30)

Jacob had seen the Angel of the Lord, the preincarnate Christ.

And as he passed over Peniel the sun rose upon him, and he limped upon his thigh.
(Genesis 32:31)

God had to cripple Jacob in order to get him, but He got him. This man Jacob refused to give in at first — that was typical of him. He knew a few holds, and he thought that after awhile he would be able to overcome. Finally, he found out he couldn't overcome, but he would not surrender. And so what did God do? Certainly, with His superior strength, in a moment God could have pinned down Jacob's shoulders — but He wouldn't have pinned down his will. Jacob was like the little boy whose mama made him sit in a corner in his room. After a while she heard a

noise in there, and she called to him, “Willie, are you sitting down?” He said, “Yes, I’m sitting down, but I’m standing up on the inside of me!” That is precisely what would have happened to Jacob. He would have been standing up on the inside of himself — he wasn’t ready to yield.

Notice how God deals with him. He touches the hollow of Jacob’s thigh. Just a touch of the finger of God, and this man becomes helpless. But, you see, God is not pinning down his shoulders. Now Jacob holds on to Him. The Man says, “Let me go,” and Jacob says, “No, I want Your blessing.” He is clinging to God now. The struggling and striving are over, and from here on Jacob is going to manifest a spiritual nature, dependence upon God. You will not find the change happening in a moment’s notice. Before we are through with him, we will find that he is a real man of God.

The next day Jacob meets Esau and discovers that his brother is not angry at all. Thus Esau reveals himself to be a bigger man than Jacob. Esau invites him to make his home with him, but Jacob does not want to live near his brother. He has something else in mind.

As soon as Esau has turned his back and started home, Jacob takes his family down to Shechem. It is a tragic move — Jacob is still depending on his own cleverness. There Dinah, his daughter by Leah, is raped. Then Simeon and Levi, her full brothers, go into the city of Shechem to the prince who is responsible. Though the prince wants to marry Dinah, they murder him, and the sons of Jacob conduct a slaughter that would make a Mafia shooting in Chicago look pretty tame! When they come home Jacob says, “You’ve made my name to stink among the people of this land” (see Genesis 34:30). He should not have gone to Shechem. But he learned his lesson.

Some believers have yet to learn that sin will catch up with them. It always does. God said this in Galatians 6:7, 8:

Be not deceived, God is not mocked, for whatever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.

You sow corn, you reap corn; you sow wheat, you reap wheat; you sow cotton, you reap cotton; you sow sin, you reap sin. You reap exactly what you sow. Old Jacob, when he left Shechem a broken-hearted man, knew then that whatever a man sows he will reap.

Back to Bethel

God called Jacob back to Bethel, back to a fresh start, a new era.

And God said unto Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there: and make there an altar unto God, who appeared unto thee when thou fleddest from the face of Esau, thy brother. Then Jacob said unto his household, and to all that were with him, Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments.
(Genesis 35:1, 2)

Rachel, you may recall, had taken the idols from her parental home and had concealed them while Laban searched the entire camp. I suppose she continued to worship those idols, for she had come from a home of idolatry. Jacob loved her and was too indulgent with her. It seems that

idolatry was an accepted part of family life. Now God says, “Go back to Bethel. That’s where I started with you, Jacob. You have to go back.”

You have to be clean. That means confession of sins. My friend, you have to deal with sin in your life. Don’t think that you can just rub out the sins of the past. You are dealing with God. You’ve got to confess your sin. God has said, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). He can cleanse you today. You cannot go back to Bethel unless you clean up. That is what it means.

Then, “change your garments.” Garments in Scripture are habits. We use the same expression today when we speak of riding habits or golfing habits. Jacob is God’s man, he is going to change his habits and start living differently. And as far as I can tell, from the day he went back to Bethel he started living for God.

Jacob said to his family,

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.

(Genesis 35:3)

He remembered that as a boy running away from home, homesick and lonesome, he had come to Bethel and God had appeared to him. God had said, “I’ll be faithful to you.” But Jacob had gone on his way, not depending on God’s faithfulness, but on his own ability. He fell on his face, and disappointment and tragedy came to him. Yet through it all God was with him, and God blessed him. Now He says, “Go back to Bethel. You have to go back to where you started, Jacob. You have to go back.”

Your Bethel

How about you, my friend? Do you have a Bethel in your past? Do you remember the day you came to Christ? It was exciting, wasn’t it? You were filled with wonder. Thrilling times those were! You may have wandered far since then. You may be at this moment actually away from God, living by your own wits, trusting in your own ability. Perhaps your life even blends in with the lives of those in the world.

Yet in spite of it all, God has blessed. Remember how it was with you at the beginning. You may not have had much then, materially speaking, but you had fellowship with your God. I call you back to Bethel today, back to the House of God.

Put away your idols. You may protest, “You’re wrong, preacher, we don’t have any idols.” Are you sure you don’t? Materialism and secularism are our idols today. To some of you, your home is your idol — you have spent more in redecorating your home this past year than you have spent for God’s work. And at the same time you speak of looking for the Lord to come. Your neighbors know you don’t mean it.

Some have made pleasure an idol. Actually, your interest in the church is in the entertainment it offers. You do not go to pray, you do not go to study the Word of God — you go to be entertained. Some have made television your god. You spend more time there on Sunday nights than you spend in the House of God. To some of you, business has become your idol, and you have no time for your God. Some of you have made a child or your family or even church activity your idol. Good things, you know, can keep you from the best things.

Put away your strange gods if you are going back to Bethel.

Be clean. There will have to be confession of sin.

Change your garments — change your habits.

Come back to Bethel, the House of God, back to the ladder which is Christ, through whom we have access to God, fellowship with Him.