

Back To Bethel

Bethel is first mentioned in Genesis 12:7 and 8. It was the place located in the territory the Lord promised Abraham and his seed. It was the place where Abraham built an altar, calling upon the Lord's name. You might say it was the place where one of the most famous friendships of all time was sustained. James 2:23: "And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God."

In Genesis 28:11-22 we see that Jacob is fleeing from his brother Esau and "...he lighted upon a certain place..." (Genesis 28:11a). This place, which appears to be a happenstance, was a providential arrangement by God. It was Bethel. It was here that Jacob had a dream, angels ascending and descending. After awaking he declared the LORD was in that place and he did not know it. He recognized the place formerly known as Luz was now "The House of God" (Bethel), even the very gate of heaven. After this Divine encounter, Jacob traveled on his journey to Haran, located in Assyria. It was here he married into Uncle Laban's family and finally after 30 years and a large family of his own God calls Jacob back to Bethel. Genesis 31:13: "I am the God of Bethel, where thou anointedst the pillar, and where thou vowedst a vow unto me: now arise, get thee out from this land, and return unto the land of thy kindred." Knowing that he was coming close to his brother Esau's jurisdiction, he sent word ahead that he was coming, but he was afraid of how their meeting would end up. In Genesis 32:22-31, we read of the famous meeting and subsequent wrestling match with God. Genesis 32:30: "And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved." After this encounter with God and having received a new name, Israel moved to Succoth and then to Shalem, a city of Shechem. At Shechem, Jacob's family began to fall apart. The daughter of Jacob and Leah, Dinah became curious and in her venture into Shechem was defiled. An agreement to marriage was made and Simeon and Levi double-crossed the arrangement and murdered all the men of Shechem and plundered their households. Here is Jacob's assessment of their situation: "And Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, Ye have troubled me to make me to stink among the inhabitants of the land, among the Canaanites and the Perizzites: and I being few in number, they shall gather themselves together against me, and slay me; and I shall be destroyed, I and my house" (Genesis 34:30). After 30 years it's time for Jacob to go home - but not just to home - but home to God. He certainly was not living up to his name, Israel; there was still too much of Jacob in him and his family. So the only recourse is coming back to Bethel.

I. BETHEL, THE PLACE OF REFUGE

Genesis 35:1. Bethel was where God revealed himself to a wayward son who had obtained the birthright from his brother by tricking his father. It was the place of refuge after it was revealed that Esau was premeditating the taking of Jacob's life. So with the help of Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob is sent away to Padan-Aram (Haran in Genesis 27:43), to the brother of Rebekah, Laban. But in

Jacob's journey to refuge with Uncle Laban, he found life's greatest and surest refuge with God at Bethel.

In the original Bethel encounter, Jacob lay his wearied head upon the stone that he used for pillows and God gave him a dream. The dream was of angels ascending and descending. If you think of angels and heaven, you would think that the order would be angels descending and the ascending. Genesis 32:1 and 2 gives us insight: "And Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. And when Jacob saw them, he said, This is God's host: and he called the name of that place Mahanaim." "Mahanaim" means two hosts, two camps or two bands. The message is clear. Jacob has a camp and coinciding with Jacob's camp is God's angelic camp. This parallels beautifully with Psalm 91:11: "For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways." Here's the promise from the LORD (at the top of the ladder in heaven) to Jacob (upon the earth): "And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither 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). The promise to Jacob is the LORD alone is his source. This is reminiscent of the promise to grandfather Abraham: "After these things the word of the LORD came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward" (Genesis 15:1). King David also was able to lay claim to this promise: "He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler" (Psalm 91:4).

II. BETHEL, THE PLACE OF REPENTANCE

Genesis 35:2, 4. Repentance has been defined by many sources and many people. Let's examine the word "repent" as used in Matthew 4:17: "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Repentance comes to us from the Greek word, *metanoeo*. Breaking it down, we see *meta*, a prefix that means movement or change. The second part *noeo* refers to the mind and its thoughts, perceptions, dispositions and purposes. So repentance is a change of mind that involves perceptions, dispositions and purposes. I would esteem the definition of God's choice servants as those who know best what true repentance is. Charles Spurgeon said, "Repentance is a discovery of the evil of sin, a mourning that we have committed it, a resolution to forsake it. It is, in fact, a change of mind of a very deep and practical character, which makes the man love what once he hated, and hate what once he loved." J. I. Packer wrote, "Repentance means turning from as much as you know of your sin to give as much as you know of yourself to as much as you know of your God, and as our knowledge grows at these three points so our practice of repentance has to be enlarged." The Bible says in II Corinthians 7:10, "For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death." Repentance is not just being sorry for the sin we have committed, but sorry enough to change.

Jacob guides his family in three steps:

A. "...Put away the strange gods that are among you..." (Genesis 35:2a).

A few years earlier, Rachel took her father's gods and hid them under a camel's saddle, sat on it and fooled her father when he tried to find his false gods. After an angry and now calmed Laban left the company of Jacob's family, those stolen gods were not addressed - until now. So now Rachel must surrender these idols and so must anyone else.

B. "...Be clean..." (Genesis 35:2b).

John 17:17: "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth." John 15:3: "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you." Ephesians 5:26: "That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word."

C. "...Change your garments..." (Genesis 35:2c).

Dr. J. Vernon McGee in commenting on this verse says, 'The child of God's dress should in some way mirror who He is.' Jacob was saying, we are through reflecting the world; we are going to dress in such a way that brings glory to God.

III. BETHEL, THE PLACE OF RENEWAL

Genesis 35:3, 6, 7 and 14. Here we see a stone pillar is arranged, taking Jacob back to the original stone where God gave Jacob a personal revelation of Himself. Genesis 35:14: "And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he talked with him, even a pillar of stone: and he poured a drink offering thereon, and he poured oil thereon." This is the first drink offering of the Bible, which is prophetic of our Lord's sacrifice for our sins (Isaiah 53:12; Psalm 22:14).

From this point onward, wherever Jacob went, he took Bethel with him. That's why on the return to Bethel, Jacob called it *El-bethel* (Genesis 35:7), not just the House of God (Bethel), but now rather, The God of the House of God.

CONCLUSION:

In Genesis 35, Jacob made three graves. One for the idols (Genesis 35:4). One for his nanny, Deborah (Genesis 35:8). And one for the great love of his life, Rachel (Genesis 35:19). Jacob had no one else to lean on but the LORD.

Hebrews 11:21: "By faith Jacob, when he was a dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph; and worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff." After the wrestling match with the Pre-Incarnate Christ at Jabbok (Genesis 32:24-31), he always had to have a staff to lean on. Genesis 32:31: "And as he passed over Penuel the sun rose upon him, and he halted upon his thigh." This is a lesson we all must learn. We cannot happily live our life by our own plans and "best laid schemes of mice and men," (to paraphrase Burns). We must lean on Christ.

-Pastor Pope-