

JACOB: RETURN TO EL-BETHEL
Scriptures: Genesis 28:10-22 and Genesis 35:1-7

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“Move on to Bethel now, and settle there,’ God said to Jacob, ‘and build an altar to worship me-the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.’ So Jacob instructed all those in his household to destroy the idols they had brought with them, and to wash themselves & to put on fresh clothing. ‘For we are going to Bethel,’ he told them, ‘and I will build an altar there to the God who answered my prayers in the day of my distress, and was with me on my journey.’ So they gave Jacob all their idols & their earrings, and he buried them beneath the oak tree near Shechem. Then they started on again. And the terror of God was upon all the cities they journeyed through, so that they were not attacked. Finally they arrived at Luz (or Bethel), in Canaan. And Jacob erected an altar there & named it El-Bethel (which means, God of Bethel), because it was there at Bethel that God appeared to him when he was fleeing from Esau.”
[Genesis 35:1-7].

Introduction

A Pastor, named Jerome Engles was making an announcement in church about the new hymnals. A man in the congregation stood up & also announced the annual Baptism service where all the babies could be baptized. Jerome, not hearing very well, thinking they’re still talking about hymnals added, “And if you want one of your own, you can get one from me for 75 cents.”

In Genesis 35:1, “Move on to Bethel now, and settle there,” God said to Jacob, “and build an altar to worship me-the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.” Jacob heard & went! This may not seem like any big deal unless you know that God had told Jacob to do this before in Genesis 31:3, ten years before Genesis 35. But Jacob wasn’t

listening. Jerome Engles had a physical hearing problem, but Jacob had a spiritual one.

Over 25 years had passed since Jacob vowed to return to Bethel where God had revealed himself to him [Genesis 28:10-17; Genesis 31:3]. Exhausted after fleeing from his brother Esau, Jacob had stopped to rest at Luz. While asleep he had a vision of a ladder extending from heaven to earth with angels descending & ascending on it. When he awoke he set up a stone pillar as a memorial & called the place, "Bethel (House of God)" [Genesis 28:18-19].

After serving Laban for 20 years, "Then the Lord said to Jacob, 'Return to the land of your fathers & to your family, and I will be with you'" (Genesis 31:3). Far worse, it was 10 years since Jacob left Laban to return to Canaan: "Move on to Bethel now, and settle there," God said to Jacob, "and build an altar to worship me-the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau." [Genesis 35:1]. Jacob settled in Shechem instead [Genesis 33:18-20]. Although Bethel was only 30 miles away, it took another 10 years for Jacob to return to Bethel. If you're in Shechem instead of Bethel, hear the Word of the Lord, "Arise, go up to Bethel!" There comes a time in our life when God invites us back to our Bethel, the place where God reveals his plans for us. Why? Bethel is

1. The Place Where We Meet God

Bethel is a place of dedication [Genesis 28:20-22; 35:14-15].

✚ It was at Bethel where God revealed Himself to Jacob & explained his plans.

✚ It was at Bethel where Jacob first dedicated himself to God & set up a memorial.

Yet, when God told him to return to Bethel Jacob lingered in Shechem [Genesis 31:3; 33:18-20].

- ❖ Jacob lingered while his daughter Dina was raped at Shechem [Genesis 34:2].
- ❖ Jacob lingered while Simeon & Levi killed all the Shechemites [Genesis 34:25-26].
- ❖ Jacob lingered while Reuben slept with his concubine at Shechem [Genesis 35:21-22].

2. The Place Where We Experience God

Jacob called Luz, "Bethel" (House of God). When he returned 25 years later he called it "El Bethel" (God of the House of God [Bethel])! This time he was not returning to Bethel (house of God), but to El-Bethel (God of Bethel). We've a house of God, but is God in the house? When we enter is it the gateway to heaven? Do our songs mingle with the voices of angels & saints above? When we leave, do we say, "Surely, we've been in the Presence of God? Some people think that salvation is found at "Bethel" (House of God). True salvation is found only at "El-Bethel" (God of Bethel). Third, Bethel is...

3. The Place Where We Promise God

To many of us the place where we met God's special. There, we pledged our life to God. The call to return to Bethel is a call to remember our pledge. This was the case with Jacob. "And Jacob vowed this vow to God: 'If God will help & protect me on this journey & give me food & clothes,

and will bring me back safely to my father, then I will choose Jehovah as my God! And this memorial pillar shall become a place for worship; and I will give you back a tenth of everything you give me!" [Genesis 28:20-22].

At Nazi's concentration camp in Dachau, Germany, where thousands of Jews were murdered, a haunting memorial commands visitors in several languages: 'Never forget!' How long has it been since you walked to this altar, knelt down, bowed your heart, bent your knees & surrendered your will to the God of El-Bethel; the God of Salem Wesleyan Church?

Conclusion

I want to make a few observations in closing.

a. First, ten years after telling Jacob to return Bethel, God was silent (Genesis 31:3). "Why did God wait so long to instruct Jacob to return to Bethel?" In spite of his dramatic face-off with God, Jacob still was not listening (Genesis 32:22-28). Only after sensing great danger did Jacob leave Shechem to return to Bethel.

The 10 years were of no spiritual value (Genesis 35:1, 10-13). They were lost years, marked by a time of disobedience. No real growth or progress in Jacob's spiritual life took place until he returned to Bethel. Whenever we choose to go our way, we must always return to the point where we departed from the revealed will of God. Jeremiah 6:16 says, "This is what the Lord says: 'Stand at the crossroads & look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.'" Revelation 2:5 says, "Think about those times of your first love (how different now!) & turn back to me again & work as you did before..." This was certainly the case with Jonah. The command he

received from God after the belly of the whale experience was the same command God gave him before. [Jonah 1:2, 3:2].

b. Second, I am deeply impressed with the idea of renewal. We seek to go from one mountain top experience to another. The best way to serve God is not in always trying something new, but in going back to our first love & 'doing our first works.'"

c. Third, even when we renew our relationship with God, things will not always go smoothly. Life, even the Spirit-filled life, has sickness (Philippians 2:25), suffering & sorrow (1 Corinthians 6:4-5; 12:7-10). Walking with God's no walk in the park. Until the rape of Dinah & the slaughter of the Shechemites, Jacob was content to remain at Shechem, and may have well become one of them.

d. Finally, may be I should not be urging you to "return to Bethel' if you've never been there before. If you've not recognized your sinfulness & impending damnation, or believed that the only way to God's through Jesus. If not, you must come to God by faith for the first time, you must be born again (John 3:3), you must be saved (Acts 4:12; 16:31).