



“Back to Bethel”

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One of the most conflicting characters in the Old Testament is Jacob. There is a lot of good and evil wrapped up in the life of this one man. At his best, he was one of the Bible’s great patriarchs and icons of faith; at his worst, he was a scheming, conniving, self-absorbed man who makes a great mess out of his life. It’s hard to believe that we’re introduced to the grandson of Abraham—the one through whom the great promises of redemption were continued—as such an unsavory and unlikeable character. But, truly, he is a picture of all of us. As you look into his life today, you may be confronted with a startling reflection of yourself. Today, we’ll look at an incident that occurred many years into his life.

Genesis 35:1-3 “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. Then Jacob said unto his household, and to all that were with him, 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.”

This would not be Jacob’s first visit to Bethel. He had been there many years before, and something wonderful had taken place the night he was there. But many years have passed now, and many tragic things have happened. There has been a great deal of upheaval in his life. God now steps in and tells him that it is time for him to go back to Bethel. It may be that the Lord wants YOU to go back to your own Bethel today. I want you to see some things from the life of Jacob that may be true of your own life right now. You too can return to Bethel.

Jacob is one of the strangest and seemingly most contradictory characters of the Bible. He was one of most important men in the unfolding story of redemption in the book of **Genesis** and God often refers to Himself as *the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*. But truth be told, Jacob came from a rather dysfunctional family and he didn’t do much better with his own household. You read through the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and every other character of the Bible so far as that’s concerned, except for

the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will find people who are flawed. People who sometimes made very terrible decisions, people whose faith faltered and who had to reckon with God because of sin in their lives.

That's one of the remarkable things about the Bible. Even in the lives of its greatest "heroes of faith," it doesn't gloss over their lives and picture them as people they were not. That's because the Bible is a book of grace. More specifically, God's grace shown to people who didn't deserve it, by the very definition of the term. You and I don't deserve God's grace. The lives of all these people from the beginning of time are really reflections of our own lives because the human condition has been the same down through the stream of time.

It's easy to take people like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and put them up on a high pedestal, but the fact is they were human beings. Though they had a relationship with God, they made some dreadful mistakes within their lives. Jacob was far from a perfect man. He had some very deep flaws. When we read about much of his life, we see a man who was sometimes dishonest, scheming, conniving, and a master of deception. In fact, the name *Jacob* means *deceiver*. Though we think of the Old Testament patriarchs as examples of faith, there were times when Jacob's faith seemed to be more in himself than in God.

Jacob was Isaac's son of promise, but instead of allowing God to unfold His plans and purposes in His way and in His time, Jacob jumped ahead and plotted to trick his father to steal his brother Esau's birthright. That decision alone brought much misery and suffering to his life because when Esau realized what had happened, he set out to kill Jacob. You recall that Jacob had to flee to his uncle, Laban. On the way to Laban's home, God broke into Jacob's life and it is there that our story really begins to unfold. The story of sin, redemption, facing the consequences of the life he had led and the poor decisions he had made, and trouble in his rocky relationship with God. One night on his way to Laban's, Jacob stopped for the night and camped out under the stars with a stone as his pillow. His sleep was interrupted by a strange and grand dream. He dreamed that a ladder was let down from heaven to earth and he saw angels coming up and down the ladder. Suddenly, the Lord appeared at the top of the ladder and began speaking to Jacob.

Genesis 28:13-19 "And behold, the LORD stood above it and said: "I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you." Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!" Then Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on top of it. And he called the name of that place Bethel; but the name of that city had been Luz previously."

That place would become sacred to Jacob and to his people. That would be an unforgettable night. That dream would be hard to get out of your mind. You might say that this wonderful experience was the beginning of Jacob's relationship with the Lord. Though he didn't deserve God's favor, God took this deceitful and scheming liar and thief and consecrated him for His purposes and for His service. But don't

get the idea that Jacob came to Bethel, met God, and lived happily ever after. If you look carefully at Jacob's response, you'll see that he was still a worldly man, living his life by his own rules and by his own resources, and was pretty much oblivious to God's involvement in things. Living his life his way got Jacob into a lot of trouble. It brought a lot of grief and heartache to him and his family, just like it will in your life and mine.

What takes place over the next several years as recorded in the next six chapters takes Jacob a long way away from Bethel where he made that commitment to God and ends up bringing great disappointment. The university of life ends up teaching Jacob some hard lessons. He went on to the house of Laban where he got tangled up in a web of deceit and treachery. Jacob ended up becoming rich, and consequently, in the course of all that he forgot about God and the vows he had made to Him that night at Bethel.

The years pass and Jacob decides to go home, but on the way, he has another moonlight encounter with God in Peniel—an encounter that would change the tenor and direction of his life at last. It is a rather strange episode recorded in the word of God. An angel appeared to him in the night. Not just any angel. The Bible tells us that it was *the angel of the Lord*. It was a *Theophany*. If you study 'the angel of the Lord,' it appears that this was a reincarnate appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ. God appeared in human-like form even at that time. The record tells that famous story of how Jacob and the angel began to struggle, and they wrestled all night. Jacob stubbornly fought, refusing to give up. When he was prevailing over the Lord, the Bible says the Lord reached in and touched the socket of Jacob's hip, removing it from its joint. Suddenly, Jacob's attitude began to change.

You know, you can wrestle with the Lord and you can do so for a long time. You may think that you're getting away with your sin and that you've got the upper hand, that you've silenced and removed God from your life. But the fact is, God will have the last word. Nobody overpowers God. Nobody outsmarts God. When Jacob had his hip taken out of joint by the angel of the Lord, his attitude begins to change. Oddly enough, the angel asks Jacob his name. Now, the Lord knew Jacob's name, so why did He ask him? Because remember, the name *Jacob* meant *deceiver*. When Jacob replied with his name, what he was saying was, *I am deceiver*. He was now having to confess to God who and what he really was. Perhaps for the first time in his life, he was coming to grips with what he was and how he appeared in the eyes of God. The last time he was asked for his name, he had lied and said it was Esau. Now, he is forced to admit who and what he really is. Instead of wrestling and grappling with God, as the sun comes up after that exhausting night, he is begging God to bless him.

Genesis 32:31 "Just as he crossed over Peniel the sun rose on him, and he limped on his hip."

Jacob is now a broken man—not only physically, but spiritually. The consequences of sin have broken him. The years of rebellion, a night and a lifetime of wrestling with God have broken him. Jacob finally begins to change. He limps away from Peniel and he would carry that limp with him as a reminder of his need for God, just like God allows trouble and sometimes suffering into our lives to get our attention, to discipline us. The scars of sin are carried with us throughout our lives. If we allow them to, those scars and injuries from the life we have lived can make us humbler and more mindful.

Jacob left that encounter with God a changed man. He meets his estranged brother Esau and is reconciled, but is still not filled with peace, for his sin is still on his heart. He is undergoing a change, but the change is just beginning. Jacob has suffered a tragedy in his home, he has failed miserably and lost control of his family. He has paid a high price for getting sidetracked from Bethel, the house of God. He

has been knocked down. But now, God tells him to get back up. To arise to Bethel, dwell there, and serve the Lord. That was a transformational moment in his life. God tells him to *go back to Bethel where he made his vow. Go back to where the promises were made and where it all began. See where you are now? See where life has brought you living life your way? See what it has done to you? It's time now for you to get up and go back where you belong. Start your life over again.*

By this time, Jacob was glad to go. He had wandered far too long, and he now knew that he needed God's mercy. He had cheated others, been cheated himself, and had finally learned that life on his terms could never bring true peace of heart. Tired of a life of turmoil, Jacob heard God's call and he went back to Bethel and rededicated his life at that holy place. We then see a much-needed revolution and transformation in the character and attitude of Jacob, consequently.

Genesis 35:1-4 "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. Then Jacob said unto his household, and to all that were with him, 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."

Here is a man who not only let sin invade his own life, but that of his whole family. He had by this time lost complete control over his house, to the point where they had become idolaters. But in his renewal of faith, Jacob says, *we're leaving all of that behind. We're going back to Bethel to rededicate ourselves to God.*

As I talk to you today, perhaps your family is a spiritual wreck. Maybe you've lost your children spiritually. Your marriage is on the rocks. Your home is worldly, invaded and saturated with carnality because of choices you've made and the poor example you've been setting down through the years. Your children don't know what it is to go to church service on Sunday. They don't know anything about God's word, they place no importance on spiritual things because they've been raised to love and live for the things of this world. You need to lead your family back to Bethel while you can, like Jacob did long ago.

I'm sure I'm talking to someone today who is far away from God. That person may be you. You once knew and served the Lord, but the years have come and gone. Temptation came along and led you astray. Things distracted you and drew you away from the path of righteousness. Your spiritual life and perhaps about everything else in your life is in ruins today, and you need a fresh start. You, like Jacob, need to clean house. You need to realize that you're not going to win against God. You're going to come out on the losing side when you live for self, for the flesh, and for this world. You, like Jacob, need to come back to Bethel.

Where are you spiritually? Are you still dwelling in Bethel or have you wandered away? Maybe you haven't even seen yourself and realized that you've been wandering away from that sacred place. Jacob had allowed many corrupt and worldly things to creep into his life and his family. For you, going back to Bethel may mean returning to your first love because you've simply become indifferent and cold in your love for the things of Christ and the church. Maybe you've not even realized it. Jacob's first love was for

God when he met Him there at Bethel and made all those commitments to God and God made all those promises to him. But Jacob had forgotten God in the mad rush of life. That happens to many people. When Jesus wrote to the Ephesian church in **Revelation 2**, He said, *You have left your first love*. That's true of many of us, isn't it? Maybe there was a time in your life when your greatest joy was serving Jesus and living for Him, but other loves have entered. The reality is that God has been pushed out of your heart to stand in the cold. The words used to describe many a Christian life. Maybe yours. *I used to be part of the church. I used to pray. I used to read the Bible. I used to go to church services every week, even three times a week...* But as time has gone on, we find ourselves drifting and getting stale, our love growing cold.

In some marriages, love grows cold. Where love, affection, excitement, and dreams for the future once dwelt, now the house feels cold and empty in a loveless existence perhaps even pointing to a future divorce. In other marriages, love grows stronger, warmer, and more vibrant and the couple loves each other more today than they did the day they married. How is it with you and Christ? What's your relationship with Him like today? How is it with you and Christ's bride, the church? If you're honest, are you headed for spiritual divorce? Is your love and commitment to Christ glowing more each day or fading as time goes by? Well, perhaps you need a revival of faith. You need to rekindle the fire that once burned within because you're drifting away from Bethel in your apathy and indifference. The encroaching worldliness that's getting into your heart and your life is taking a spiritual toll on you. Going back to Bethel may mean that you need to get back in service altogether. You need to find your way back to the church, back to a spiritually centered life. Maybe you left it a long time ago. Tear down the idols that you've since built and consecrate yourself to the Lord. Going back to Bethel may mean you need to repent of the lifestyle you've been living and give up the sins you've been holding onto and the worldliness you've been flaunting in the face of God. Like Jacob, you've been wrestling with God, resisting Him, trying to defeat His influence in your life. I can tell you this: you are NOT going to win. Maybe you've learned that the way of the transgressor is indeed hard (**Proverbs 13:15**) and that you truly reap what you sow (**Galatians 6:7**). Perhaps you've learned that sin leaves you ruined and empty like the prodigal son of long ago (**Luke 15**). Isn't it time you get up and go back to Bethel? Do you have a Bethel? If you're a Christian, you do. There is a time and place where you once met God through the eyes of faith, and you committed your life to Him. It may have been during some gospel meeting years and years ago. In a winding stream on some summer night or some pond. Maybe you can think back to the cold waters of some baptistry where you let that gospel preacher lower you into that water and raise you up to newness of life.

Sitting right where you are today, you can remember how that felt. You can remember the faces of those loved ones—parents, people you'd known for years, or the church members who had just become excited to meet you who were aglow with joy, thankfulness, and excitement. You can remember the resolves and vows you were making to the Lord that night, how it felt to be a new believer in Christ—born again, a new creature with a new beginning, the past forgotten, sins washed away. That's your Bethel. But my, my, you're a long way away from that place today.

Let me ask you, is God as real to you today as He was that day at Bethel? Do you even really know God anymore? Do you know what the story of Jacob tells us? It tells us that where you are now doesn't have to be the end of your story. God gives second chances. Jacob left his past behind and went with his family back to Bethel and God met him there. Jacob served the Lord faithfully throughout the rest of his life.

Genesis 35:14-15 “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. And Jacob called the name of the place where God spake with him, Bethel.”

That is very significant. The *pouring of a drink offering thereon* is the taking of a liquid, such as wine, and pouring it all over the altar and letting the fire burn it up; in this case, it covered the ground and the ground soaked it up. This is the first time a drink offering is mentioned in the Bible, but it later became part of the Levitical system. Much later, the apostle Paul when facing death for his service to Christ would refer to his own life on at least two occasions as *a drink offering, ready to be poured out* (**Philippians 2:17; II Timothy 4:6**). In other words, Paul was saying that he was ready to pay the ultimate price and had given Christ everything he had. Every drop of life within him was given to the Lord. Jacob had never done that before now. But now, he has returned to Bethel and is finally giving it all to God. He would spend the rest of his life in faithful service to God. God is calling you back to Bethel as well. Leave the mess behind. Come back to the house of God. Make a new start with Him today.

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