

Back to Bethel

Recovery from spiritual decline

Text: Gen. 35:1-7

Introduction:

1. There are some triumphs and tragedies in this chapter.
 - Triumphs: Spiritual revival for Jacob and his family as they go back to Bethel.
 - Tragedies: Three deaths take place in Jacob's family – Deborah, Rachel and Isaac die. There was also the tragedy of Reuben's affair with Bilhah, Jacob's wife.
2. This chapter is quite a contrast the previous one. Wiersbe explains it this way, "Moving from Genesis 34 to Genesis 35 is like going from a desert to a garden or from an emergency room to a wedding reception. The atmosphere in Genesis 35 is one of faith and obedience, and the emphasis is on cleansing and renewal. God is mentioned ten times in chapter 35; and He used His Name El Shaddai which means "God Almighty, the all-sufficient One". "The thirty-fourth chapter of Genesis is God-less; the thirty-fifth is full of God." (Thomas)
3. There is a wonderful message of recovery in Jacob's return to Bethel. We will consider **four facets** of Jacob's return to Bethel and the lessons and challenges they teach us.

I. THE PROMPTING TO RETURN TO BETHEL (VS. 1)

There are two points about this to consider.

A. The Initiative of the Prompting (Vs. 1a)

1. The grace of God. What a testament to the mercy and grace of God when you consider the events that had just transpired as recorded in the previous chapter (Gen. 34).
 - a. God took the initiative in stirring Jacob to return to Bethel. God is interested in our spiritual progress as His children! Without this stirring of God, Jacob may have stayed on at Shechem indefinitely.
 - b. It reminds us that God is in the business of restoration and in His mercy and grace, He offers His erring children another chance!
2. The timing of God. We see God intervening in Jacob's life at key points. This was another key moment in the life of Jacob and God was faithful to reveal His will to him.

B. The Instructions in the Prompting (Vs. 1b)

God essentially exhorts Jacob to take **four steps** and they are the same steps you need to take if you desire to recover spiritually.

1. Rise – "Arise". God tells Jacob to get up! He has sat in that position for long enough. It was time to get stirred up afresh to go forward with God. Can you see yourself in Jacob? Have you sat in the one

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place spiritually for too long? Is God calling you to get up and get moving again?

2. Return – “go up to Bethel, and dwell there”
 - a. The direction of Bethel – “go up”. Bethel was ‘up’ geographically (Bethel was only about 15 miles (24km) from Shechem but it was 1,000 ft (304m) higher) but most importantly, it represented an upward move spiritually for Jacob. Bethel was higher ground! Which direction are you going spiritually? Are you going up, down, or have you just plateaued?
 - b. The destination of Bethel – “to Bethel”. The word ‘Bethel’ means “house of God”. Bethel was a special place in Scripture. God met Jacob at Bethel twice and even called Himself “the God of Bethel” (See Gen. 31:13; 35:1, 15). Bethel would therefore represent a return to fellowship with God. We can apply this in two areas:
 - i. Individual fellowship with God in my personal life. How we need revival in this area! Have you been neglecting the Word and prayer in your life?
 - ii. Corporate fellowship with God in church life. The meaning of the name Bethel (“house of God”) reminds us of the fact we have the same description in the New Testament for the local church. 1 Timothy 3:15 “But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in **the house of God**, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.” Get back to church (make sure it is a biblical one that belongs to God, is submitted to His authority and is seeking to be the pillar and ground of the truth). Want to know if a church is biblical or not? Apply the TRUTH TEST. Do they preach the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?!
 - c. The dwelling at Bethel – “dwell there”. Jacob was to make the house of God his home! He wasn’t to go back to Shechem.
3. Rebuild – “and make there an altar unto God”. Jacob had built an altar there well over 20 years prior (probably around 30 years by this stage) but now he was to go and build another altar. This speaks of the need to not only return to God but then to rebuild. It takes time and effort to rebuild and re-establish the altar of consecration in your life but it is worth the effort!
4. Remember – “unto God, that appeared unto thee when thou fleddest from the face of Esau thy brother”.
 - a. God stirs up Jacob by way of remembrance. The remembrance of the goodness and grace of God experienced in his life all those years ago at Bethel would encourage Jacob to return to Bethel. This was clearly something that was at the forefront of Jacob’s mind (See Vs. 3 & 7). Bethel would have reminded Jacob of:
 - i. The presence of God – God had met him there.
 - ii. The promises of God – God had spoken to him there.

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- iii. The protection of God – God had kept him there from Esau.
- b. Can you look back to times when you have personally experienced God's grace and goodness in your life? If you have been backslidden for a time, remember that you are being called to return to a God who is Good and Gracious. Remember His love, faithfulness, kindness and goodness, get up and return to Bethel!

II. THE PREPARATION TO RETURN TO BETHEL (VS. 2-4)

These verses record Jacob's response to God's moving in his life. Take note of:

A. The Example in the Preparation (Vs. 2a)

1. Having heard from God, Jacob calls his household together and seeks to lead them in the pursuit of God's will. This is a breath of fresh air after Jacob's lack of leadership in the previous chapter.
2. It is a wonderful thing when heads of homes will lead their families to Bethel! It is hard for the family to move ahead spiritually if dad still wants to hang around Shechem. It is not impossible but it is very hard.
3. Abraham was a good example of a godly leader in his home. God could say of him. "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him." (Gen. 18:19)

B. The Exhortation for the Preparation (Vs. 2b-3)

Jacob issues a clarion call to his family to take steps towards spiritual revival. There was a call to:

1. Clear out their idols – "Put away the strange gods that are among you".
 - a. Jacob called out the presence of idols in his household. We know that this would have included Rachel who had stolen her father Laban's gods when they left Haran (Gen. 31:19, 30). But clearly the problem had spread beyond Rachel's tent to others. When the sons of Jacob looted Shechem, they likely brought back Shechem's false gods amongst the other treasures they took. Clearly the idolatrous atmosphere of Shechem had affected Jacob's household in a negative way. Some members of Jacob's family "were trying like so many professing Christian people today, to worship God while at the same time hanging on to some of the superstitions and practices of the world around them." (Morris)
 - b. Jacob commanded the purging out of idols in his household. Jacob knew that they couldn't take those idols with them to Bethel. Bethel was all about devotion and consecration to the One True God. False gods could have no place at Bethel nor would they be tolerated by a God who demands no rival (A Jealous God).
 - c. There is a powerful lesson here. If you would know spiritual revival in your life from returning to the Lord, you can't bring your

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- junk from the world with you. The idols must be dethroned in your life and the way made clear for King Jesus to rule in your life! Going to Bethel to build an altar unto Jehovah would permit no idols.
- d. What idols are in your life that you need to give up? Idols come in other forms besides statues! There are idols of the heart (Ez. 14:3). An idol is anything that usurps the rightful place of God on the throne of your heart and life.
- i. Is it the idol of materialism? That is one of the biggest idols in our nation! You have no time to give to the Lord but you can be consumed in the pursuit of financial gain.
 - ii. Is it the idol of ungodly media? You can't find time to come faithfully to God's house each Sunday and struggle to sit through a 1-hour sermon when you do but you have no problem staring at a screen for hours and consuming the world's media. You can't find time to spend in God's Book but you can waste hours of Facebook!
 - iii. Is it the idol of worldly music? Are those albums on your iTunes or Spotify account holding you back in your spiritual progress? Is that collection of records, tapes or CDs an idol in your home?
 - iv. Is it the idol of unwholesome literature? E.g., books and magazines that unholy fanaticizes in your life.
 - v. Have you made an idol out of a hobby? This is another big area of idolatry in our day. Hobbies, while not sinful in themselves, can turn into idols if we let them take God's place in our lives. There are Christians who can't give an hour on a Wed night for prayer at God's house with God's people but they can find hours to watch their favourite sport's programs or hours to watch tutorials on YouTube for their favourite pastimes. You can't get in the car to come to church faithfully but can spend hours working on your favourite car in the back shed. You can't find time to go out soul-winning on a Saturday but can find time to crack out the surf board or the fishing rod. If none of these fits you, then fill in the blank for your personal favourite hobby/pastime that could become an idol if not kept in its proper place.
 - vi. Don't let the toys and trinkets of Shechem (the world) keep you from returning to Bethel. It will be well worth you giving them up and, in their place, knowing close fellowship with God and His blessing.
- e. Illustration: The Ephesian bonfire – Acts 19:18-20 “And many that believed came, and confessed, and shewed their deeds. Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all *men*: and they counted the price of them, and found *it* fifty thousand *pieces* of silver. So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed.”
- i. Salvation for the Ephesians meant a new life! The ‘books’ were likely what were know in antiquity as the “Ephesian

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- letters” which “appear to have been amulets, inscribed with strange characters, which were carried about the body for the purpose of curing diseases, expelling demons, and preserving from evils of different kinds.” (Adam Clarke)
- ii. Challenge: Much of today’s technology has changed but the principle is the same. For you it might mean a purge of the DVD cabinet, a cleanup of your iTunes account, a wipe of a hard drive, deleting songs and movies that dishonor the Lord, discontinuing your Netflix subscription and disconnecting from destructive social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. It means a clean-up of the wardrobe, the closet and the home. Books, posters, pictures, statues, clothing; all must be reviewed in the light of God’s truth and holiness.
 - f. May our prayer be in the words of the hymn “O for a closer walk with God”, “the dearest idol I have known, Whate’re that idol be; Help me tear it from thy throne, And worship only thee.”
2. Clean up their lives – “and be clean”. Physical cleanliness would be important as they prepared to meet with God but above all, spiritual purity and personal holiness would be vital. This represents the call to personal separation and holiness.
 - a. We are called to purity as believers – 1 Peter 1:15-16 “But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy.”
 - b. We have two powerful cleansing agents available to us as believers.
 - i. The cleansing of the blood (1 John 1:9).
 - ii. The purifying of the Word (Ps. 119:9, John 15:3, Eph. 5:26).
 3. Changeover their clothes – “and change your garments”. There are at least two truths conveyed in this picture of the changing of their cloths. There is a need to:
 - a. Change the clothes of your inner life – the “put off” and “put on” principle we read about in the New Testament. For example, Ephesians 4:22-24 reads, “That ye **put off** concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye **put on** the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.” A specific list of what needs to be put off then follows (Vs. 25-31) and includes things like lying, anger, stealing, corrupt communication, bitterness, wrath, clamour, evil speaking, malice and so on. Colossians 3:8-17 contains a similar exhortation and includes in the “put on list” things such as mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering, forbearance, forgiveness and love. With God’s grace and power, seek to put off the dirty garments of self and sin and to put on the pure garments of holy living.
 - b. Change the clothes of our outer life – this is no doubt the main thing Jacob was instructing his family to do. They were to dress

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appropriately for their audience with God. No doubt with the inroads of idolatry in Jacob's family had come a deterioration in their dress code. God is concerned about both the inner adornment of the heart and the outward adornment of our bodies which are His temple. If you are going to meet with God at Bethel (the house of God), then you should dress accordingly. It is a pity that we have to talk about something that should be so basic but, in a day when the concept of a sloppy, messy, even outright immodest approach to worship is encouraged, we need to emphasize it. When you get saved you don't talk the way you used to talk, go to the sinful places you used to go or dress the way you used to dress. The inward transformation of salvation DOES have an effect on the outside, even if it takes time.

4. Come forward to Bethel (Vs. 3). God had told Jacob to "arise, go up to Bethel" and now Jacob issues the same call to his family – "let us arise, and go up to Bethel". Jacob emphasises the goodness of God that He had been gracious to him all those years ago by answering him in the day of his distress and being with him on his journey.

C. The Execution of the Preparation (Vs. 4)

1. The totality of it – "all the strange gods". There was a total giving up of the idols in their lives. God would have first place! This was total surrender.
2. The specificity of it – "all their earrings which were in their ears". They not only gave up their idols but the pieces of jewellery that were associated with it. The earrings they were wearing must have had some connection to their pagan gods. Perhaps they were like an amulet or charm.
3. The finality of it – "hid them under the oak". They gave them up and left them behind!

III. THE PRESERVATION IN THE RETURN TO BETHEL (VS. 5-6)

A. The Dread used in the Preservation (Vs. 5)

1. A supernatural fear from God came over the surrounding nations so that they did not attack Jacob and his family as they journeyed to Bethel. This was of God as the Canaanite nations would have easily outnumbered Jacob and his band.
2. We are reminded that the path of submission to the will of God is the path of spiritual safety. We need to remember this as when we are challenged and convicted to return to the Lord or go forward for God, we can hold back because of fear of the unknown. The devil wants you to think the path to Bethel is too hard and too dangerous for you so you will stay in defeat at Shechem. In reality Bethel wasn't too far away. It was within reach if Jacob would only step out in faith! God's hand of preservation will be upon us as we walk the walk of faith in obedience to Him.
3. We are reminded that the path of purity is the path of spiritual safety. Jacob and his household had just had a clean-up! Matthew

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Henry noted, "While there was sin in Jacob's house, he was afraid of his neighbours; but now that the strange gods were put away...his neighbours were afraid of him."

B. The Duration of the Preservation (Vs. 6)

God's protection ensured they arrived safely.

1. Jacob arrived safely in Bethel.
2. Jacob's whole household arrived safely in Bethel. His obedience to God had a positive influence on his family and "all the people that were with him".
3. We are reminded of the truth that God keeps those He saves all the way until they arrive safely in the house of God in heaven. Praise God for His hand of preservation upon us throughout our earthly walk of faith. – "Who are kept by the power of God" (1 Pet. 1:5); "Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, To the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen." (Jude 1:24-25)

IV. THE PERFORMANCE AFTER THE RETURN TO BETHEL (VS. 6-7)

A. The Arrival of Jacob (Vs. 6)

1. Jacob followed through on his commitment to obey God and go to Bethel. Many start on the journey but then give up along the way. Praise God Jacob went all the way.
2. Maybe you have started on the pathway of spiritual revival and restoration. Don't quit! Keep going! Getting to Bethel is worth it!

B. The Altar of Jacob (Vs. 7)

1. Jacob builds a new altar and calls it 'El-bethel' which means "God of the house of God". It is interesting to see how there is a greater focus in Jacob's life upon his God at this time. He is at Bethel, the house of God, but it is the Person of God that makes the place so special.
2. In like manner, it is the presence of God that makes your personal Bethel (your fellowship with God) so special and it is the presence of God in the New Testament house of God, the church, that makes it so valuable and precious.

Conclusion:

1. Are you saved? Maybe you have never even started on the walk of faith and need to turn from your idols and receive God's gift of salvation (1 Thess. 1:9).
2. What idols in your life need to be removed? Will you remove them with God's help?
3. Are you in a place of apathy or even a backslidden place? Will you respond to God's call and allow Him to revive and restore you?