

Israel: A Prince with God

The Story of Jacob Retold

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

BACK TO BETHEL

Genesis 35

“O God, man’s heart is darkened,
He will not understand!
Show him Thy cloud and fire;

And, with Thine own right hand
Then lead him through his desert,
Back to Thy Holy Land!”

- E. A. Proctor

IN itself, Bethel was not much. Imagine a long range of broken hills running north and south. The eastern slopes, bleak and tempest-riven, descend to the Jordan. The western slopes lie towards the more thickly-peopled parts of Palestine. In the valley at their foot runs the main thoroughfare of Palestine, which has been trodden by centuries of travelers a rough, broken mountain roadway, following the uneven course of the valley, and intersected by innumerable watercourses. From this track and upwards the mountain slopes are strewn with large sheets of bare rocks most prone as gravestones, some erect as Druid cromlechs. No house is within sight; no cultivated lands break the stretch of mountain pasture; no domestic animals share the rule of the eagle, the wild goat, and the rabbit. But to Jacob, Bethel was the most memorable and sacred spot in all the earth. It was there, on the first night of his flight from home, that the mystic ladder had seemed to link earth to Heaven, thronged by angels engaged in holy ministry.

Many years had passed since then - years of searching discipline, which had revealed the meanness, the craft, the weakness of his nature. He had fallen far below the promise of his early vows; his better nature had held but a spasmodic supremacy over his worse; even the angel-wrestle had only momentarily lifted him to the level of Israel, the Prince. And of late it would seem that even worse symptoms had begun to show themselves.

His life at the gate of Shechem had done much to lower his standard and aims; and to assimilate them to those of the people with whom he had been associated. He seems even to have winked at the idols which were in common request among his people, and of the presence of which he was perfectly well aware. There had been a time when, if his dearest wife wished for graven images, she must have them surreptitiously; but now he had become so lax himself, that there was no need for concealment on the part of any (ver. 2).

Alas! What a fall was this for the man who had built so many altars to The Lord; and was the chosen depositary of those truths for which the world was waiting! For the world's sake, and for his own, it was essential that he should be compelled to regain the ground which he had so grievously lost. It was then that he said to his household, **"Let us arise, and go up to Bethel."**

This impulse was natural. The emigrant who lives in the soft Bermudas, or in a Canadian log-house, as he reaches mature life, will find a strange yearning rising within him for the Highland glen in which he was born. He sends many a longing look towards the Northern stars; and at last starts on pilgrimage. He may find the scene desolate and deserted; yet he is not wholly disappointed: he needed the glut of reality to satisfy the long fever of his soul.

It was something like this that came to Jacob. A voice (shall I not call it an instinct, within him?) cried: Go and dwell for a season at Bethel; gaze once more on the familiar scene; put your head down again upon that stone which you set up for a pillar; and review the way in which the Lord thy God hath led thee.

But his untoward circumstances gave a yet further reason. He was in terrible trouble. He had settled himself down, and sunk a well for his supply, which became so famous as to be known through all succeeding time as Jacob's Well; he was intimately identified for several uneventful years with the life of the locality; and then his sons had made his name stink among the inhabitants of the land, by the frenzied passion with which they had revenged their sister's dishonour. He was in imminent danger of destruction from the infuriated tribes around him. He must go somewhere; and it was at this moment that the impulse came to him to go up to Bethel.

He might not have heeded it, if the waters of earthly comfort had sufficed for his urgent need. But now that they threatened to fail, and even to turn to poison, he was the more ready to try what Bethel might afford of comfort and safety, of satisfaction and restoration. A drying well will often lead the spirit to the river that flows from the throne of the Lamb. But, above all, that impulse originated in God Himself. **"God said unto Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there."**

No human ear now catches the tones of that majestic voice. Yet, God often speaks to us also through our own consciousness, and within our own souls. Yes, and He speaks oftener than most of us are aware. We do not always distinguish the voice within us to be the voice of God. We act on an impulse, we know not why.

But as we review our path from the sweet summit of religious revival to which we have been led, we recognize, with thankful awe, that the voice to which we listened was none other than that voice which Jacob first heard speaking to him in his angel-haunted sleep. Has it not been so with you? You have followed an inward impulse, not knowing whence it came, or whither it led; you have wandered blindly on, reaching positions of which you had never dreamed, but which are evidently your special sphere: and it is only on looking backwards that you realize how every step of your way has been ordered by a wisdom not your own; how the impulse originated in Him who prompts the swallows to follow the sun to warmer climes; and how the voice that called you was the voice of God.

But there is something better than this blind obedience; and it would be a happy thing if every child of God had reached it. God is always speaking to us in the incidents of daily life; He has a meaning, and transmits to us a message, in everything which He permits to happen. We are wise, therefore, when we set ourselves to decipher the hieroglyphics in which His meaning is enwrapped; and to question each event as to the tidings which He has entrusted it to bring. We are wiser still, when we lovingly, yea joyfully, accept, and unquestioningly obey.

And why did God wish Jacob to go back to Bethel? Because Bethel was associated with one of the most blessed spiritual experiences of his life. And the summons to go back to Bethel was equivalent to an invitation to return to that fervor, that devotion, and those holy vows, which had made that bare mountain-pass the very house of God and the gate of Heaven. "Come back; and be as near to Me as you were when you first set up that stone, and anointed it with oil."

There are some words which cannot be spoken in our ears without arousing in us an immediate and touching response. They come on us as a strain of music; or a whiff of perfume on the summer breeze awakening far-off memories, and exciting emotions long gone by. So must the word Bethel have sounded in the ear of Jacob: stirring all his better nature bidding it arise, and come forth from its long death-sleep; and lighting up the nobler spirit of his life. It met with an instant response: **"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 so he came to Bethel, protected by God's watchful care; and he built there an altar, and God appeared unto him again.

I. MANY CHRISTIANS ARE SUFFERING FROM SPIRITUAL DECLENSION

They hardly realize it, it has crept on them so quietly; but they have drifted far away from their Bethel and Peniel. Grey hairs are on a man before he knows. Summer fruit is beginning to rot within, long before its surface is pitted with specks. The leaf's connection with the branch is severed, even when it looks green.

The devil is too shrewd to make Judases at a stroke; he wins us from the side of Christ by hair-breadths. We would never think of letting in the lion; but we spare the little foxes, which break down the hedge through which the lion comes presently. We would never think of letting Delilah cut off our seven locks of hair; but we do not so much object to her binding it with her green withes, though she will creep on to the other. So insensibly have you been slipping back; until you are infinitely farther from God than you were in the sacred, happy days that are past.

II. IDOLS ARE THE INEVITABLE SYMPTOM OF INCIPIENT DECAY

Go at autumn into the woods, and see how the members of the fungus tribes are scattered plentifully throughout the unfrequented glades. All through the long scorching summer days their germs were present in the soil; but they were kept from germinating by the dryness of the air, and the heat of the sun.

However, there is now nothing to prevent it; nay, the dank damp of decay is the very food of their life. Where the shade is deepest, and the soil most impregnated with the products of corruption, they love to pitch their tents.

Wherever, therefore, you find these fungus growths, you may be sure that there is corruption and decay. Similarly, whenever there has set in upon the spiritual life the autumn of decay, you will be sure to find a fungus growth of idols the sorrowful symptoms that the bright summer time has passed, or is passing away from the soul.

You may hide your idols, like Rachel; but they will not remain hidden: they will work their way forward, until what was hidden as a sin becomes paraded as a boast. It may be that some backslider shall read these lines, conscious that things are not now what they were between him and God. Such an one will bear witness from his own bitter experience, that in proportion to the decay of the inner life there has been the growth of some idol-love.

You have set your heart on making a reputation, or a fortune; you have loved some worthless friend with an inordinate affection; you have lavished yourself on something or someone outside of God and as your energies have waxed in this direction, they have waned in the other.

“No man can serve two masters: either he will love the one, and hate the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other.”

III. THESE IDOLS MUST BE SURRENDERED BEFORE THERE CAN BE VICTORY OR PEACE

The reason for Jacob's flight before those alien tribes was, of course, the censurable and merciless action of his sons; but above and beyond this, lay the fact that Jacob had been giving some measure of countenance to the existence of idolatry in the camp.

I always find, in Christian experience, that failure and defeat indicate the presence of some idol somewhere, and the need of more complete consecration to God. It may be a hidden idol; and it may be hidden by the Rachel of your heart, lovely and beloved: but if it be there, it will be the certain cause of disappointment. You say that you do not find yourself able to overcome besetting sin; that you are tripped up before you look to Christ; that you are sometimes hot as juniper-coals, and then cold as ice; you talk about your experience as if Christ had failed no such thing! Get down on your knees; search out the idols; ransack all the camel-baggage, in spite of all that Rachel may say; bring out the accursed things, and bury them. Put away the garments spotted with the flesh; only thus will you enter upon the life of victory, or will God appear unto you again.

How wise it was for Jacob to bury those idols right away! If he had kept or carried them with him, he might have been tempted to bring them out again. It was so much better to leave them right there, under the oak in Shechem, before he started for Bethel. I do not think he could have counted on God's delivering care, if he had not acted with such promptness and decision. God would not have been the escort of a pack of idols!

- Burn the books that have polluted your mind.
- Cut off the hand that has made you offend.
- Renounce the drink that has obtained such a power over you; and
- Pour the contents of your cellars down the gutter, lest you be tempted to return to them again.

Burn your bridge behind you. Hide the idols under the oak. "Mother," said a betting man, "I have taken the first step to Christianity; I have burnt my betting-books."

We cannot be surprised at the mighty work of God in Ephesus after the splendid auto-da-fe that took place in the market-place (Acts 19:19).

What a man is, that in most cases his family will also be.

When Jacob's camp saw that he was himself in earnest, they gave him all the strange gods that were in their hand, and all the earrings that were in their ears. What a solemn responsibility rests on us all in our family life, that we should not, by our silence, connive at either follies or sins.

If those around us see that we are consistent and determined, they will not let us go to Heaven alone. Christiana and her children will sooner or later follow Christian. **"Jacob came to Luz, that is, Bethel, he and all the people that were with him"**

This, then, is our closing message: put away your idols, and get back to Bethel. Repent, and do the first works.

- Pray as you used to pray.
- Study the Bible as you used to study it.
- Spend the Lord's day as you used to spend it.
- Build an altar now on the same site on which you built it years ago.
- Give yourself again to God.

True, a sad life of wasted opportunities lies behind you; but do not waste more time in fruitless regrets. Forget the things that are behind; stretch forward to those that are before. And God will appear to you again; and will renew the Princely Name and the Princely Blessing to which you might have thought that you had forfeited all right; moreover, He will promise you marvellous fruitfulness in service, and far-reaching possessions in the Land of Promise (verses 11, 12). All these things are in store for you if only you will bury your idols, and go up to Bethel, and dwell there. **"Goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life; and you shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."** **"Return, ye backsliding children; and I will heal your backslidings. Behold, we come unto Thee; for Thou art the Lord our God."**

~ end of chapter 11 ~

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