

Back to Bethel

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Preacher: Rev James Maciver

[0 : 00] Now for a short time let's turn back to Genesis chapter 35. We'll read again at the beginning of the chapter, Genesis 35. God said to Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.

So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments. Then let us arise and go up to Bethel.

For most of us, if not all of us, I'm sure, going back to places that we associated with experiences, pleasant or otherwise, mostly pleasant we trust.

Places of our childhood, places where certain things took place that were significant in our lives. When we go and revisit these places, it awakens these, in our memory, these events, these incidents once again.

Whether it's a walk by the shore where we were as children, like I know myself, if I go back to Ertung there and go down to the bottom of the croft, which I haven't been at for years. I know that going there would awaken certain memories, a memory of certain things that were significant and remain significant still in my memory and in my life.

[1 : 19] And it would be the same for yourselves as well. And that's what it's really like here for Jacob when God is calling him to go back to Bethel. And he came to him here and said, Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there.

God is doing this for him so that he will again refresh not just Jacob's memory, but Jacob's spiritual state, Jacob's spiritual condition. Why did he here come and call Jacob back to Bethel?

What was significant about Bethel? And why was God now taking him back to Bethel after some 30 years or so away from the place? Well, we'll look at two things in relation to that, mostly in the first few verses of the chapter.

But we also notice near the end of the passage we read in verses 12 to 15 there, what Jacob did when he got back to Bethel. First of all, a return to Bethel.

And then secondly, a renewal at Bethel. Here is Jacob now at Shechem when God comes to speak to him and call him from there to go back to Bethel.

[2 : 27] We need to just remind ourselves of what had happened at Bethel and how Jacob came to be settled at Shechem rather than remain at Bethel. Remember that in chapter 28 we have a record of how God met with Jacob, first of all, at Bethel where he had this dream, where he saw the ladder that stretched up to heaven.

And where he woke from his sleep and said, surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it. And he said, how awesome is this place.

This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven. And then Jacob called the name of the place Bethel, which in Hebrew, of course, means the house of God, just like he had stated there.

This surely is the house of God. And then he set up a stone and poured oil on it and the top of it, consecrating the place to God and for the Lord. And then he made a vow.

If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God.

[3 : 33] And this stone which I have set up shall be for a pillar and shall be God's house. That was 30 years ago. And that vow seems to have faded from Jacob's mind.

And he seems to have settled at Shechem in a way that has really neglected the covenant promises of God to him and the promise that he made to God there at Bethel.

And a certain worldliness has crept into his life. There's been a waning in his spiritual condition. Things are not in good shape with Jacob at Shechem.

Not only himself personally, but his family isn't in good shape. We just read earlier of a previous chapter of a massacre that two of his sons carried out at Shechem in response to the rape of their sister Dinah.

Jacob himself is not in a very good condition. Obviously, he has not managed his household very well over these years. As we read in these verses, certain gods, foreign gods, idols, had to be disposed of before they went back to Bethel.

[4 : 48] So this is a real wake-up call for Jacob. This is Jacob being called back to where he had met with God and made his vow to God and made promises to God that he seems now over these years to have forgotten or at least neglected or put to the back of his mind.

And so he has to leave Shechem. And God comes to him in a way that, first of all, says, arise. Now, when you come across that word in the Bible, when it's used like this, it's loaded with meaning. It's loaded with powerful meaning. Because what it really means is, Jacob, this is a change. This is a point of change for you. Get up from where you're going. And that means not just physically to get up, but to actually leave the state that he's in.

To do something about where he's at spiritually and morally. You'll find it throughout the Bible in certain places where God came to people or where people said, such as the prodigal son, for example, in the parable that Jesus told about the prodigal.

You remember how the prodigal, when he came to himself, he said, I will arise and I'll go back to my father. He didn't just say, I'll now go back to my father. He said, I will arise. I'll get up from this place.

[6 : 02] Arising is a significant word because it means leaving something behind in order to go somewhere else. It means leaving the condition we're in to look to another condition.

Whether it's something that we've not done before or something that we've done before and neglected and have gone back and backslidden. God is saying, arise. You've got to get up. You've got to change from where you're at. And you've got to go back and retrace your steps. That's what he's saying here to Jacob. And go back to Bethel. And of course, Bethel, as we said, was such a significant point in his own experience.

That's where he had met with God in this remarkable way. That's where he had actually said, this is the house of God and this is the gate of heaven. Surely the Lord was here.

And I did not know it until he revealed himself to me. And so, he's going back to the place that he himself had called the house of God.

[7 : 04] Not only that, but God is saying, make there an altar to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Jacob. And when you go to verse 3 where Jacob responds, let's arise and go to Bethel that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.

You see, God is reminding Jacob as he comes to make that renewed confession or a response to God's call. God is reminding Jacob, the God that you've been neglecting, the God whose covenant you've been neglecting, the God to whom you made this vow is the God who's looked after you. The God who has been true to his promises. The God who has not changed even though you have changed. And so, God is reminding Jacob that when he's going back to Bethel to renew his relationship, as it were, with God and to renew his vows, he's reminding Jacob that this, in fact, is the God he knows, the God he needs to have another meeting with and to renew his vows to. That's the God, the caring God, the covenant God, the faithful God that he's put somewhat to the back of his mind and that he now needs to come back and actually re-engage with.

There's somebody here, maybe more than one person, who's in a similar condition. God spoke to you as you look back over your life.

[8 : 42] God spoke to you. Maybe it was in church. Maybe it was listening to a sermon. Maybe it was something somebody said to you. Maybe it's an incident in your life where something significant happened and where you said about yourself, I've got to do something about my relationship with God.

But you've not carried that through. You've not followed through on it. Maybe it's when your children were being baptized. Maybe it's an event like that that produced in you the thought that you've got to be serious about your relationship with God.

But like Jacob, you've allowed certain things to come into your life and to your thoughts and to your habits. And that has gradually waned.

So God is saying to you again today, if that's you today, Arise. Go back to Bethel. Go back to that moment. Go back to that incident.

Think about what you said to God, what God was saying to you. Get serious again with God. Don't leave it at just an outward, formal thing and church attendance. Maybe you're a Christian here today who's allowed, like Jacob, certain things of the world to invade your life.

[10:07] Maybe there are gods in your life that weren't there when you met with God, first of all, and that you were very glad to get rid of then, and that you found relatively easy to turn away from then, but you've allowed them back.

Certain worldly interests, certain activities, certain thoughts, certain concerns, certain influences. They've been back into your life.

And the more these have come into your life and my life, what happens is that God is edged out. And bit by bit, God is put to the periphery, to the outside, to the circumference of our life, not at the center, not at the heart of things.

And the promises we made to God, maybe it's when you were ill, maybe it's when you felt eternity quite near. You made a promise to God.

You said you'd be serious about your life. But you didn't follow it through. And now you're at Shechem. There's a Shechem in your life, instead of a Bethel.

[11:14] Well, God is lovingly today saying to you, Arise. Go back to Bethel. Go back to that place where you first met with me, where you had these first thoughts, where you began to get serious with your life.

Arise. Go to Bethel. Make there an altar. Go back to your vows. Renew them. Re-establish that kind of relationship and contact with God.

And so Jacob's response, you see, is there. When he heard God's call here, Jacob said to his household and to all who are with them, Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your garments.

Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress, and has been with me wherever I have gone.

And so they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears, and associated with the pagan worship of those gods, which had come to infiltrate their family life, and now had to be given up.

[12:25] And Jacob hid them under the terebin tree, hid them in the sense of not just temporarily hiding there. He was just putting them away. He was burying them out of sight. And they followed him in that.

Whatever we allow to accumulate in our lives that are alternatives to God, that crowd God out of our lives, in order to go back to Bethel, we have to deal with these.

These foreign gods would not fit into what Bethel really is associated with. These foreign gods would just be inappropriate if they were to go and try and carry them back to Bethel.

Bethel is no place for foreign gods. Bethel is God's house. It's where God had established with Jacob his covenant. It's where Jacob had said, this is my God.

This is his house. The only solution for Jacob is to just bury these gods, to get rid of them, to leave them at Shechem. So what is the major influence in our life, in my life, and yours today?

[13:37] What is it that's dominating our thoughts and our actions? Is it God? Is it Bethel? Or is it Shechem? Is it something foreign? Something foreign in the sense of not really belonging to that meaningful spiritual relationship with God?

What is it that's interrupting, in your own case and my case, I have to put it to myself too, what is it that's interrupting our relationship with God? What is it that's come between us and God?

What is it that's caused us really to have only a faded memory, if you like, of the Bethel that was in our lives? Whatever it is today, you have to deal with it, just as I have to deal with it.

And the only way you can go back, the only appropriate way to go back to Bethel is to dispose of the foreign gods, of the things that have come between us and God.

A return to Bethel. What a privilege it was for Jacob to hear the voice of God calling him back to do something difficult, but absolutely necessary and crucial to reestablish his relationship with God.

[14 : 48] And then the renewal that took place there at Bethel. We'll read that look at verse 5, first of all there, where it says, it says, as they journeyed a terror from God, fell upon the cities that were around them, so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob.

If you go back to the previous chapter and verse 30 there, after this massacre had taken place, Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, the two sons who had carried this out, you have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites.

My numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household. That's his fear. That's his concern. The moment he steps away from Shechem, he's afraid that what the sons have done will mean that all of these inhabitants are just going to crush them out of existence.

They're going to be annihilated. But then in verse 5, a terror from God fell upon the cities. None of these people moved against them. And you know, that reminds us too that when we take the steps that God requires of us, whatever concerns we have, and you may be here today and have concerns about what's going to happen to your relationship with this or that other person, what's going to happen in terms of your place of work or other things that are very important in your life if you go back to Bethel, if you go back to God, if you renew your relationship to God, if you really get serious about your relationship to God.

Well, what's going to happen? Well, he's saying to you from this, you take the steps that you need to take and I will look after your concerns. I will look after the other things that you're concerned about.

[16 : 33] And for Jacob, his concern with what might happen with these inhabitants of the land was taken away. God took care of it. And he'll take care of whatever is of concern in your life too that maybe just now is just such a barrier in your thoughts to the action that God is calling you to take.

And he came and built an altar there as God had said to him. He came back to, in verse 9, and God said, your name is Jacob. Well, before that, he built the altar, came to, in verse 6, and he built an altar and called the place El Bethel.

Now, of course, Bethel was its name before when Jacob had called it Bethel. The place had been called Luz at first. But Jacob called it Bethel, the house of God. And what's happening in these verses right down through to verse 15 is a reestablishment of God, in fact, reinforcing the covenant promises that he made to Jacob and that now Jacob is making back to God.

So it's not just a mere repetition. It's not being called Bethel for the first time. But it's Jacob again doing what he did previously that he now needed to do to renew his relationship, to renew his relationship with God and his position with regard to God's covenant and God's promises.

So it's really a rededication of himself to God and to the covenant promises of God that he had neglected over these years. And he received in verses 9 to 13 this confirmation from God or a reconfirmation from God as to who he was.

[18 : 19] Your name will no longer be called Jacob but Israel will be your name. Now that was the case back in chapter 32 where Jacob wrestled with God and where God said to him your name will no longer be called Jacob but Israel will be your name because you have prevailed.

In other words as he wrestled there you remember he prevailed he said I will not let you go except you bless me or until you bless me. He followed through and he won through to the blessing of God. And God is reiterating that for him here. the promises that he gave to Abraham they're now yours and I'm reestablishing my promise and my covenant with you.

And in verses 14 and 15 Jacob shows that he has indeed accepted this that he has renewed his relationship with God. He builds this pillar and he pours out a drink offering on it and pours oil on it. That's what God wants you and I to do today. set up in your life spiritually a pillar to God.

Consecrate your life consecrate your heart to him and say as Jacob did with this literal pillar of stone this is my God I accept his promises I accept his covenant and I want to be from now on his wholeheartedly.

[19 : 49] We pray that God will bless these thoughts on his word to us. Now while the children are coming in we're going to sing verses from Psalm 146 verses 5 to 10 that's on page 191 Blessed is the one who truly looks for help to Jacob's God Blessed is the one who places all his hope upon the Lord and we'll sing on through to the end of the psalm the tune this time is Stuttgart Psalm 146 from verse 5 to verse 10 Blessed is the one who truly looks for help to Jacob's God Blessed is the one who truly looks for help to Jacob's God

Blessed is the one who places all his hope upon the Lord He who made the earth and heaven and the seas with all their store He who keeps his every promise who is faithful evermore He delivers He delivers from oppression and releases the hungry's plight He releases those in prison to the blind the Lord gives sight those who are bowed down

He raises God delights in righteousness He protects and cares for strangers widows and the fatherless He frustrates the wicked's purpose so the Lord through endless days reigns to every generation praise your God O Zion praise praise That's fine just give him children plenty time to settle down in their seats Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[24 : 16] Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. knows about Jesus. We can make a difference in ways that sometimes is not very good. We can make a difference because our lives always affect other people, don't they? We always have contact with other people. So our lives, when we have a contact with other people, we can either make a difference in a bad way or in a good way. We can make a difference in a bad way if you say nasty things about people, you tell lies about them, say something to them that's not very nice, or take some action that hurts them in some way, and that's making a difference in a bad way, and that's not the way that you want to be and that I want you to be today. Take an apple, you bash it around a wee bit, and then you just leave it for a couple of days. Outside, it still looks okay. Nice shiny red apple, and you just do something like that on it, all the way around, put it aside for a couple of days, and then you go to it and it looks almost the same. And then when you take the skin off, it's full of brown bruises inside, because your bashing around has bruised the inside.

[26 : 38] And it's like that with people as well. If we use words that hurt them, maybe on the outside it doesn't really show. Maybe they're not able to say how they feel, even if they're hurting inside.

But we don't want to make a difference in a bad way, because that leaves people bruised in their hearts and sore inside and really hurting. I want to make a difference in a good way.

Making a difference in a good way, Paul, when he was writing to the Colossian church, in chapter 4, verse 6 says, let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt.

How many of the older folks here like salt on their food? Yeah. Nobody's put their hands up. I don't believe them, because many people put perhaps a bit too much salt on their food. But salt, when you put it on food, food gives it a flavor. It gives it a flavor so that it tastes a bit nicer than it would be without the salt, unless you put too much salt on it. But what Paul was saying was, let your speech be like the salt that you put on food. Let it have an influence for good. Let it give a good flavor to the lives of other people. Now, you remember in the Old Testament, before King David, before he was King David, another person was King. I wonder if anyone can tell me who was King before David? No. In the Old Testament, who was King before David became King? And he was actually trying to kill David. He didn't like David. He was jealous of David. So he set about trying to kill him, put him to death. Who was he? Anybody know any older ones know? Saul. That was Saul. Yeah. And at one time, he was chasing David, trying to kill him. So David fled, and he went out into the wilderness, into the desert, and he was there all on his own. Now, David's best friend was actually the son of Saul, who was called Jonathan. And we're told that Jonathan went out to where David was in the wilderness, and the Bible tells us that he strengthened his hand in God. And that means he gave him great encouragement. Now, that took courage. The son of the king who was trying to kill David, as David's best friend, actually went to help him. And that was going to make things difficult for Jonathan. You know, but sometimes, when we want to do good to people, it's going to be difficult. Maybe people will say bad things about us then. But if we want to really make a difference to people's lives, then sometimes it takes courage. And whatever people are going to say about that, we just have to do it because it's the right thing to do. So making a difference in a good way, by something you do, by something you say, to help people, to be friends with people, to go to people when they're really needing your support. And even the youngest folk can do that. But it's very important to make a difference in a positive way. And sometimes, it's not just what we say or what we do that's important.

[30 : 03] It's actually just being there for people, being beside them, and going to actually say to them, well, look, I'm here for you. Whatever your problems are, I want to support you. For example, there might be people who are being bullied at school. And they can't really tell people much about that. But if you know that, and you want to help them, it'll make a big, big difference to them. If you go to them and say, really, I want to be your friend. I want to support you, and I want to help you in that. Or maybe there are people who, for the older ones, don't get out.

They're in their homes. Maybe they're old or have an illness, anything like that, and are lonely. One thing they really like is to see children. And to see children, I'm not suggesting you go on your own, but ask your parents or ask an adult, can we go and see so-and-so? Because they're never getting out, and they never get out to church, and they're not even able to go to the shops. Can we go and do something for them? Or even go and sing, something you've learned to sing in Sunday school. That'll make a huge difference to them. And all of these things may really seem very small to us. It might seem a very small thing to do something like that. But it has a big effect, and it makes a big difference. You remember Jesus? There was a crowd of over 5,000 people following him at one time out in the countryside, and they were getting hungry. And Jesus said to the disciples, give these people something to eat. Now, all they had were five loaves and two fish. Loaves would be about that size, like little scones. Five of these, and two small fish for 5,000 people. And yet, Jesus made that, made that rich. Everybody in that crowd had something to eat when Jesus blessed and miraculously multiplied that food. But the point is this. What was very, very small to begin with, look at the effect of it. Look at what it did. And you might think that your life is very small, that what you can do for God and for Jesus is very small. But it might make a huge, big difference in the life of someone that you're trying to help. So that's my message to you today. Make a difference by your life.

Ask yourself today, how can I make a difference to some other people? How can I encourage them? How can I help them? How can I make sure that I'm there for them and I'm their friend? So make a difference.

The way Jonathan did for his friend David. Okay, let's just pray now before we sing once again. Lord, our God, we give thanks that as we think of helping other people, that we know our example is in the Lord Jesus Christ himself. And we thank you for the way in which you come to help us in our lives through the strength that you give us, particularly in the way that you come to forgive our sins and to accept us as your friends. We pray today for the children here and give thanks for them. We pray that you'd bless them as their life develops. We pray that you'd bless them in their homes. And we pray that together they may learn of making a difference in the world for you and for your glory and for your praise. Be with us later as we come to the price giving and grant your blessing. as we gather in the hall. Receive our thanks now, we pray, Father, and pardon our many sins for Jesus' sake. Amen. Now we're going to sing some verses in conclusion from Psalm 105. Psalm 105 and sing Psalms.

[34 : 00] Verses 1 to 11, the tune is Saint-Dinio. That's on page 138. Give thanks to the Lord God and call on his name. His wonderful deeds to the nations proclaim. Sing praises to him and his exploits record.

Let all those who seek him rejoice in the Lord. Verses 1 to 11, we stand to sing. give thanks to the Lord God and call on his name. His wonderful deeds to the nations proclaim. Sing praises to him and his his exploits record. Let all those who seek him rejoice in the Lord. You chosen ones look to the Lord and his might. Seek ever his face and his wonders recite.

his miracles too and his judgments divine. You children of Abraham, Jacob's own line.

the Lord is our God and his glory to the Lord. He rules all the earth. Remembering his covenant.

The word he set forth. He vowed for the ages to come to make good.

His promise to Abraham, to Isaac renewed. To Jacob, his sovereign decree was made sure.

[36 : 28] With Israel, his covenant would always endure. To you I will give us your portion to stand. The country of Canaan, the beautiful land.

You allow me to get to the main door, please, after the benediction. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and evermore.

Amen.