

Come Back to Bethel



John R. Rice

Come Back to Bethel

by

John R. Rice

Contents

<u>Come Back to Bethel</u>	4
<u>I. That Earlier Meeting With God at Bethel</u>	5
<u>II. The Wandering, Backsliding, Troubled Jacob Needed Bethel Again</u>	13
<u>III. The Wonderful God Who Gives Another Chance!</u>	19
<u>IV. How Jacob and His Family Went Back to Bethel</u>	25

Come Back to Bethel

Like Jacob of Old, We Need to Return to Early Christian Joy, to Sweet Promises, to Meet God Afresh, and Be Newly Commissioned, and to Renew Holy Vows

(Written New Year's Day, 1958, at Mishawaka, Indiana)

And God said unto Jacob, Arise, go up to Beth-el, 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 Beth-el; 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. And they journeyed: and the terror of God was upon the cities that were round about them, and they did not pursue after the sons of Jacob. So Jacob came to Luz, which is in the land of Canaan, that is, Beth-el, he and all the people that were with him. And he built there an altar, and called the place El-beth-el: because there God appeared unto him, when he fled from the face of his brother.—Gen. 35:1-7.

John Wesley had an experience never to be forgotten at Aldersgate. There he felt his heart strangely warmed, and by faith he knew that he, even he, was forgiven and justified. Saul of Tarsus met the Lord Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus with a light brighter than the sun. There his proud heart surrendered to the Saviour he had before hated. He was saved, then called to carry the Gospel far hence to the Gentiles. Neither John Wesley nor Saul of Tarsus could forget his crisis experience.

Jacob had his Bethel, an experience as tremendous as that of John Wesley or Saul of Tarsus. Here we have the story of how Jacob, after many weary years, is called back to Bethel, back to a renewal of his vows and to a new experience of fellowship with

God, a new call to be the head of a nation and the ancestor of the Seed of Abraham, the Lord Jesus.

Every man who knows Christ as Saviour has had his place of blessing, his place of Christian joy and assurance, his place of holy vows. And all of us might well, like Jacob, hear the call of God to come back to Bethel to receive afresh the promises of God and to renew the holy vows we made before and the fellowship once so sweetly enjoyed.

I. That Earlier Meeting With God at Bethel

Jacob had a twin brother, Esau. In answer to the beseeching prayer of Isaac, his barren wife, Rebekah, conceived. When the twins struggled within her, she prayed and God revealed to her, *“Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger”* (Gen. 25:23). So before they were born, God had planned to make Jacob the head of the promised nation and the ancestor of the Seed which He had promised Abraham, the Saviour through whom all nations should be blessed.

1. How Jacob Got the Birthright and the Blessing

And God, who made such plans, had put some holy hunger in the heart of the boy Jacob. Jacob believed what he had heard his father, Isaac, tell—that ownership of the land of Palestine, the headship of the nation, the ancestry of the blessed Seed, was to come through Abraham and Isaac and one of these boys. Without knowing how God had planned to work it out, Jacob once traded the hungry, tired Esau (who was born first) “bread and pottage of lentiles” for the birthright which was expected to go to the first-born son.

Later when Isaac was an old, blind man, he instructed Esau, the firstborn of the twins, to bring in venison and prepare it such as the old man enjoyed. He said, *“And make me savoury meat, such as I love, and bring it to me, that I may eat; that my soul may*

bless thee before I die” (Gen. 27:4). But Rebekah overheard. She knew what God had told her—“*the elder shall serve the younger.*” So she schemed with Jacob to pretend to be Esau, dress in Esau’s garments, and serve quickly prepared meat of kids instead of the venison. So old, blind Isaac was deceived, and gave to Jacob the blessing which he thought he was giving to Esau. God had intended Jacob to have the blessing, and it was a prophetic blessing. But it need not have been sought by deceit and fraud.

Esau penitently sought now to get back the birthright which he had bargained away, and the blessing which he had missed, but on this matter he repented in vain. God had chosen Jacob to be the head of the Jewish nation and to enter into the covenant made with Abraham and Isaac.

We can imagine how angry Esau was with his crooked brother. We are told, “*And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing wherewith his father blessed him: and Esau said in his heart, The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then will I slay my brother Jacob*” (Gen. 27:41).

Dreading the wrath of Esau for her favored Jacob, Rebekah arranged to have old Isaac send the young man back to Padan-aram to get a bride from the daughters of Laban, Rebekah’s brother, lest he should marry some heathen woman among the Canaanites. So Jacob, running from the wrath of his brother, shamed before his father, left the home and headed northwest.

It must have been a sad journey for Jacob, away from the mother he loved, and from his old father whom he had deceived and from familiar scenes. He had no money, no company. When dark came upon him, he was near a place called Luz. It was time to sleep. There was no inn, no friendly home, no pleasant bed available. He gathered rocks together to prop his weary head, and went to sleep on the ground!

2. The Ladder From Heaven, the Angels of God, and God’s Covenant With a Homesick Man

As Jacob slept the sleep of weariness, a sad and lonely young

man, in his dream Heaven opened. There was a ladder set up on earth reaching to Heaven. The angels of God ascended and descended. God stood above the ladder and said:

I am the Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.—Gen. 28:13-15.

Jacob awaked, his soul shaken, partly with the fear that sinful mortals must have when they come into God's presence, partly with the glory of God's presence and promise. He said, "*How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven*" (Gen. 28:17). God was in the place where the lonely man laid his weary head and slept, and he knew it not!

And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it. And he called the name of that place Beth-el: but the name of that city was called Luz at the first.—Gen. 28:18, 19.

The Hebrew word *beth* means house. "El" is the Hebrew word for God. So Jacob called this place "the house of God."

Then Jacob made holy vows. We are told:

And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, So that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the Lord be my God: And this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee.—Gen. 28:20-22.

Oh, how could Jacob ever forget that holy night! The awe-

inspiring scene of angels who are usually invisible to mortal eyes! The glory of God shining above the stairway to Heaven! The voice of God speaking to his heart!

And what glorious promises, that he should have a multitude of seed and “... *in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.*” That promise could only be fulfilled by the coming of the Saviour, the Seed of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob.

And the promise was not only to his descendants, but God had promised to be with him and to keep him and bring him again in peace to this land of Canaan.

Now Jacob had made three vows for a lifetime. On the basis that God would do what He had said, would care for his needs and bring him again to his father’s house in peace, Jacob had made three promises: First, he said, “*Then shall the Lord be my God*” (vs. 21). Is this the time when Jacob first knew forgiveness of sin and opened his heart to the saving grace of God? Is this the time when his heart was renewed and changed, when he became a child of God? I do not know. Perhaps it was. We know that he had believed in the God of his father, had wanted the spiritual heritage of the first-born, but now there is an outright decision: “*Then shall the Lord be my God.*”

Second, the stone that had been his pillow—he set it up and poured oil on the top of it. Henceforth this stone, this place, was to be to him the house of God! So he called it “Beth-el,” the name which has remained these thirty-seven hundred years.

Last of all, Jacob made the holy vow, “*Of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee.*”

This was the first of two or three climactic spiritual mountaintops in the life of Jacob. How could he ever forget the presence of God, the holy promises, the serious vows which involved all his loyalty, all his will, all his love, all his possessions?

3. We, Too, Have Had Our Bethels

And, dear Christian reader, did you not have a Bethel also? It

may have been when you were saved. How can I ever forget the events connected with my own turning to Christ! First, there was the time when I stepped out in the faith of a nine-year-old boy to trust the Lord Jesus and claim Him openly. A few years ago I drove through Gainesville, Texas, early on a summer Sunday morning. On a sudden impulse I drove to the First Baptist Church. The doors were open. Soon the throngs would be coming to the Sunday School. I went in and sat in the same seat where I had sat as a boy. Then I imagined good old Brother Ingram preached again on the prodigal son and told the story of his experience as a runaway boy and his return to the loving, forgiving arms of his father. I remembered again the invitation and how I slid off the pew and walked down that aisle to take Christ as Saviour.

Then I remember the time when after three years of a troubled, unsure heart, I found the blessed promise of God, "*He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life*" (John 3:36). Then, thank God, I had it! Full assurance flooded my soul, and from that time to this I have known that my sins are forgiven, that I, unworthy sinner that I am and was, am received by God's grace and pardoned and saved!

I remember when I was baptized in the old railroad "tank" or pond near the little cow town of Dundee, Texas. I remember that as we came out of the water on that cold November day and stood in a line beside the water, all sang together,

*O happy day that fixed my choice
On Thee, my Saviour and my God!*

*Well may this glowing heart rejoice
And tell its raptures all abroad.*

*Happy day, happy day,
When Jesus washed my sins away!*

Our big family could not all ride in the seats of the two-seated hack, so I prepared to stand in the back as I usually did. But my father, anxious that I not be chilled in my wet garments, wrapped me in a quilt and made me sit in a seat. I was not cold; my heart was so warm I did not feel the brisk November wind. Oh, that was

a Bethel to which my heart often goes back!

What was that time when God revealed Himself to you, when He called you, when He encouraged you, when there was repentance or holy vows or a new start?

I remember so well the day when I knelt under a thorny bush in the “brakes” near our home in West Texas. With a burning in my heart, I felt I must go to college. I must get ready for the work God might have me to do. So I made my decision, and with some \$9.35 in my pocket, I rode away on a January day toward Decatur College. With borrowed money, I started toward the long hours of toil and eventual training in Baylor University, the University of Chicago, and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Oh, that day when I told God I would preach or sing or be a missionary or anything He wanted me to do, if He would take me as I was and help me through school! It was a Bethel of blessing. That chaparral bush where I knelt and prayed was to me the house of God.

Again, my heart goes back to that holy time in 1921 when I knelt in the Pacific Garden Mission with my arms around a drunken bum and won him to Christ. He was so wonderfully changed, transformed, that my heart was enthralled. I had made my life plans to be a college teacher, had taught one year in Wayland College. Now suddenly I felt there was far more for me than being a college teacher. I offered myself to God, and in response to the blessed invitation of Romans 12:1, 2, I presented my body a living sacrifice. By faith I took the call, the place of service which I now know God had laid upon me from the day I was born and in answer to the holy prayers of my father and mother. Oh, kneeling on that floor beside the bum who found Christ was to me the house of God never to be forgotten.

Strangely enough, one of those times I met God, one of those times which became to me a veritable Bethel, a true house of God, was when, under strong temptation and serious threats of denominational men, I decided I must be true to my convictions. I must oppose modernism and evolutionary teaching in Baylor University where I had graduated and where my teacher, Dr. Dow,

had been a bone of contention because of his teaching of evolution. Facing the threats that I would be blackballed and branded and that I would never be invited to hold revivals, that I would have no chance as an evangelist, I told God that if I were serving a God who could not look after His preachers unless they kowtowed to the leaders, unless they sought to please men and played politics with the brethren, I would leave His service. But I told Him that I was willing to risk everything to prove that the God who called me could care for me. Oh, what a day of decision! The friends of a lifetime I lost overnight. I was a marked, a branded man.

But in some strange way, when I ceased to care so much for the opinions of men, the Word of God became to me new and sweet. In some strange way, now the drunkard, the harlot, the profane swearer, the convict, the infidel came to hear me. Before I had had children and young people saved. Now I began to have many, many of the hardest sinners saved. O thou Bethel, thou house of God, where I made holy vows that I would put God before all men, and God promised me that He would care for His own. And He has!

You, too, doubtless have had your Bethels, your places of blessing, those times of special divine call and intervention and those times of holy vows and new surrender. I trust that you will remember your Bethels as I remember mine.

How often I have thanked God for that time in 1926 when I felt I must give up all salary and never make any requirement about my own income. I gave up \$10,000 worth of insurance. I made God the proposition, "Lord, you look after my business, and I will look after Yours." I left the pastorate to become an evangelist. He alone knows how sadly I have failed in my part, but, bless God, He has never failed in His! Oh, that Bethel is as real to me as the time when Jacob promised God his tithe, and promised God that that stone should be to him the house of God.

And then I go back to 1941. I was in the field of full-time evangelism. The dear Lord had pressed on my heart so heavily the burden for revival. And now in the large Bethany Reformed

Church on the south side of Chicago, I conducted a conference on revival and soul winning. Among the speakers helping me were Dr. H. A. Ironside, Dr. Oswald J. Smith, and, as I remember, Dr. Hyman Appelman. And in my room in the Roseland YMCA I stayed on my face until 2:00 o'clock in the morning, and God and I made a bargain. I promised Him that at any cost in the world I would see that mass evangelism was brought back to America and that America again would see great city-wide revival campaigns. And at 2:00 o'clock in the morning God assured my heart that He would let me see that long-desired day.

I did not know then that He would use me in great city-wide revival campaigns in Buffalo, Cleveland, Seattle, Chicago, Miami, Winston-Salem, San Pedro, and elsewhere. But thanks be to God, I knew even then that He would bring again mass evangelism to the front in America. We have not seen what we ought to see and what I trust we will see, but this generation knows now that the living God has not done away with those He has called evangelists, and has not done away with His method of preaching the Gospel and calling sinners to repentance! Oh, that little cheap YMCA room was to me a Bethel, a house of God!

Some who read this stood by a mother's deathbed and promised to meet her in Heaven. One who reads this went forward when his heart was burning under the impact of a message from some prophet of God and laid his life on the altar. You promised to go wherever God would lead you. It was a time of surrender, of dedication, of consecration.

Some who read this remember the time when you promised God to tithe, when you promised Him that neither business, nor friends, nor anything else would come first, but that God Himself would be first, and the token of it would be the tithes and offerings you would give in His name where He might lead you to give them.

Do you remember the time you laid some sin on the altar and felt His healing, cleansing touch, and the Lord said, "Son (or daughter), thy sins are forgiven thee"? Do you remember the time that you felt so led of God to launch out in some new work when,

humanly speaking, there were obstacles too great to overcome, but you believed God and by faith went in to take the promised land? Do you remember the time when you vowed you would have upon you continually the breath of God, the power of the Holy Ghost? And perhaps you set apart a time for the morning watch. You kept a rendezvous with God in the secret place of prayer.

Oh, all who read this who are saved have some Bethel which you in your heart ought to go back to today.

I do not doubt that to many a heart who reads this God has said, *“Arise, go up to Beth-el, and dwell there: and make there an altar unto God, that appeared unto thee....”* And you ought to answer to all your family and those about you, *“And let us arise, and go up to Beth-el; 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”* (Gen. 35:3).

II. The Wandering, Backsliding, Troubled Jacob Needed Bethel Again

According to Ussher's chronology, it was twenty-eight years after Jacob's experience at Bethel when the Lord appeared to him in Genesis 35:1 and said, *“Arise, go up to Beth-el, and dwell there: and make there an altar unto God, that appeared unto thee when thou fleddest from the face of Esau thy brother.”* But it was likely longer even than that. After that Bethel experience Jacob had joined Laban's household and fallen in love with Rachel. Then he had worked seven years for a wife, was cheated by being given the wrong girl, Leah. Then Leah had borne six sons despite a period of barrenness. Then had come Dinah, the only girl, who had grown to young womanhood and had been led into sin and promised in marriage. Probably more than thirty years had gone by since Jacob made his vows at Bethel and promised God that that would be to him the house of God. And as far as we know, he had never been back to that holy place.

Oh, Jacob, Jacob, how could you so long neglect the house of God! How could you so long forget that place of holy vows and

promises?

Jacob needed to go back to Bethel. He needed to erect an altar there and to dwell there! He had been too long away from the place of blessing.

And think of all the reasons that indicate how badly Jacob needed Bethel and the presence of God.

1. A Broken Heart Over a Ruined Daughter Called Back to Bethel

First, there is his daughter who has gone wrong. I know how dearly a father loves a beautiful daughter. Someone has said that a man's son is his pride, but his daughter is his joy. I do not know, having never had a son, but I know that Jacob's heart was broken when he found that his daughter had been deceived and violated.

Jacob had bought a bit of ground at Shalem and there had made his home. It was only some twenty miles from Bethel. How strange that he tarried here away from that place of blessing. And here his daughter went out to see some of the daughters of the land and Shechem, the young prince, saw her and loved her and led her into sin. How sore the heart of Jacob was when they told him!

2. His Murdering Sons Had Shown the Price of His Neglect

But the wild young sons of Jacob had gone too long without the influence of Bethel. Their busy, busy father had not found time, we suppose, to teach them about God. When they heard of their sister's ruin, they made a wicked scheme of revenge. Pretending to be friends and promising intermarriage with the young prince, Shechem, and his father and their city, they had all the men of Shechem's city circumcised. Then when the men were sore and incapacitated, they came upon the city and killed every man in it and looted and spoiled the city!

If you want to know how Jacob felt about the murdering rage of Simeon and Levi, read the word in his dying charge and blessing. Jacob said:

Simeon and Levi are brethren; instruments of cruelty are in

their habitations. O my soul, come not thou into their secret; unto their assembly, mine honour, be not thou united: for in their anger they slew a man, and in their self-will they digged down a wall. Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel: I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel.—Gen. 49:5-7.

The grief of Jacob over his daughter was now made more dreadful by the grief over his wicked sons.

Moreover, there was a real danger that the people of the land would now combine against Jacob and these deceitful and wicked sons and kill them all. Jacob was troubled about the matter.

3. His Idolatrous Wives Show How Far Jacob Had Drifted

There is another indication of how badly Jacob needed to go back to Bethel and rear an altar and dwell there. His two wives, Rachel and Leah, daughters of Laban, worshipped idols. At least, when Jacob left his work with Laban and took his family away from Padan-aram, Rachel stole her father's idols, hid them in the stuff, and took them with her. And now, when God called Jacob to return to Bethel, Jacob knew about these strange gods and told his family, "*Put away the strange gods that are among you.*" And we are told, "*And they gave unto Jacob all the strange gods which were in their hands...*" (Gen. 35:2, 4).

Oh, Jacob was a man of energy, of foresight, an ingenious, hard-working man. He was a man of leadership. But alas, all these great qualities were put to increasing his flocks and herds, increasing his wealth and prestige. He had no time to teach and guide his family in the religion of the true God whom he had vowed to serve and worship.

Some who read this today doubtless upon reflection would find you have left your wives and your children to be absorbed in all the things of the world. You have idols instead of God. It may be that to one of you the idol is pleasure. To another the idol is clothes or a house or clubs. One may put society first and one may put home first. At any rate, how sadly lacking is the home where the father has not taken time to lead his family with him to the

blessings of his Bethel! So Lot down in Sodom loved God and grieved his righteous soul over the wicked things that went on in Sodom. But he had no time, we suppose, to lead his family. He could not take with him even his wife when he left Sodom, and to his sons-in-law he was as one that mocked!

The man who has pleasure-crazy daughters and wild, uncontrolled sons and a worldly wife is not a good Christian. He may have met God at some Bethel in the past, but alas, the years have been wasted as was the case of Jacob.

Jacob had amassed wealth. When he came to that Bethel some years before he had only a walking stick and perhaps stale bread and a flask of oil. Now he has a great family and is rich in flocks and herds. But he is a disillusioned, disappointed man. His children have gone the way of sin; his wives have gone into idolatry.

4. Oh, the Backsliding Brought by Being Too Busy! We Need Bethel

Jacob himself has worn out his soul with hard work. There is something noble about labor. I have the highest regard for the man who is thrifty, the man who works and schemes and saves and prospers. But all of us who have energy and push, all of us who feel a delight in doing, in work, in accumulation, need to beware. That way is the way to leanness of soul and to the loss of all the joys which a Christian may have.

Do you remember that the dear Saviour said that some Christians, those represented by the seed which fell among thorns, *“are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection”* (Luke 8:14)? Oh, the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the weariness of long labor, and the distraction of constant pressure—these can keep a Christian from happiness, can keep one from meeting God, keep one from prayer and from Bible study and from Christian joy.

Jacob had gone too long without being back to Bethel. He had

worn himself out for the things of the world which mean so little!

I have one fear, one matter about which I warn myself continually. As Paul buffeted his body to keep it under subjection lest he should, after having preached so long to others and with such blessing, be “cast away,” that is, laid on the shelf, and lose his usefulness to God, so I feel a constant need to beware lest constant labor, long hours, many plans, the incessant pressure of work, should take away my joy in the Lord and my times of secret devotion and lose me the song in my heart. O dear Lord Jesus, forgive us, and watch over us more gently, all of us who have heavy burdens and who have much work to do, even for Thee! A man may be so busy working even for God, doing the highest and best work in the world, that he does not take enough time to meet God, does not take enough time to enjoy the Lord and have the refreshing and the blessing which are the privilege and the duty of every Christian.

What if, with all the burden of raising several hundred thousand dollars each year to keep the Lord’s work going, with the constant pressure of a deadline for copy for THE SWORD OF THE LORD every week, the pressure of many, many preaching engagements, and that much study which is a weariness of the flesh but which is inevitable for a good preacher—oh, what if with all this toil and my writing and traveling and planning—what if I should be too busy to pray enough? And what if I should lose the passion and tears in my preaching and the burden for souls? And what if I should no longer have a bubbling forth of song in my heart? And what if this blessed Book which has been to me the mine of the richest treasure all these years should become as barren as a played-out mine, as fruitless as an arid field without rain? Oh, God protect all of us who are so busy from losing our Bethel and the blessings of Bethel!

Yes, Jacob needed to go back to Bethel and to take time for worship, time to lead his family for God. He needed time for holier things than the sheep and goats and camels and donkeys and cattle which had so driven him day and night for thirty years!

5. But There Was With Jacob the Constant Urging of God's Spirit That Made Him Seek Bethel Again

It is a precious truth that every Christian now has the blessed Holy Spirit dwelling within to represent Christ in the body of the Christian. In Old Testament days, Christians did not have the Spirit dwelling in the body as we have now, as I understand from many Scriptures. But surely God's Spirit was with Jacob and kept tenderly calling him back to his fellowship with God.

We know that even in his boyhood Jacob had longed for and had sought the birthright and had traded with his brother Esau to get it. Even though his methods were wrong and he need not have thought deceit would be necessary to get the blessing he so greatly coveted, Jacob was right in desiring the blessing. He wanted to be the head of a great nation for God. He wanted to be the ancestor of that blessed Seed of Abraham through whom all the nations of the world should be blessed.

And even in far off Padan-aram when he worked with unstable Laban, the God he had met at Bethel was with him. First, Laban said, *"I have learned by experience that the Lord hath blessed me for thy sake"* (Gen. 30:27). God was with Jacob as a herdsman. And the angel of God had appeared to him and reminded him of how whatever part of the flocks Jacob had chosen had multiplied under God's blessing. God had said, *"I am the God of Bethel, where thou anointedst the pillar, and where thou vowedst a vow unto me: now arise, get thee out from this land, and return unto the land of thy kindred"* (Gen. 31:13). That was years before our text. But even then God was calling him back to the land of Canaan, and back to worship.

Then in Genesis 32:1 we learn how *"Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him."* And we learn how Jacob tarried all night and wrestled with an angel of God until the angel blessed him and gave him a new name, Israel, which means "prince." And thus God warmed the heart of Esau and enmity was removed and they met as brothers beloved. And even at Shalem, where he had lived some years and where Dinah had gone wrong and where

Jacob's sons had killed and looted a whole city, Jacob had erected an altar to God. You see, God had chosen Jacob and would not let him go.

We are told that "*the gifts and calling of God are without repentance*" (Rom. 11:29). God had chosen Jacob and would keep him safely. And stirring in Jacob's heart was a hunger for God, prodding him always was the Spirit of God. Jacob had in his own heart the call to come back to Bethel, and when God spoke to him and gave him solemn invitation and commandment to "arise, go up to Beth-el. Jacob had a heart to go. His own heart condition called him to go back to Bethel.

And so it is with many who read this. Your own heart is hungry for the blessing of God to be renewed. Oh, then do not wait! Make your way back to Bethel.

III. The Wonderful God Who Gives Another Chance!

It seems a strange and wondrous thing that God would still want Jacob, would still plan to use him, would remember his covenant! Now after some thirty years away from the place of blessing, Jacob is called back to Bethel to rear an altar and to abide there. Oh, the grace of God! How wonderful is God's dealing with lost sinners when He seeks them so long and saves them! How wonderful is God's dealing with His own children that He bears with us so much and never lets us go!

So God is calling Jacob again after weary, wandering, money-mad years, after disappointment and disillusionment have wrecked the peace of his mind. God still wants Jacob, still calls him back.

We find this blessed attitude of God throughout the Bible. I do not wonder that David said by divine inspiration:

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy. He will not always chide: neither will he keep his anger for ever. He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven

is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us. Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust.—Ps. 103:8-14.

1. God Mercifully Spared Lot Despite His Compromise

So God remembered Lot down in Sodom and the angels of God complained that they could not do anything at all about destroying the city until Lot should come out! Poor, worldly Lot! Poor, compromising Lot who called the wicked his brethren. Poor Lot who neglected his family until his religion was a mockery to his sons-in-law. Poor Lot who took two daughters out of Sodom, but could not get Sodom out of his daughters. Lot down in Sodom was dear to God and God would not give him up. God must give His children another chance. He may punish them, but He loves them. He may chastise His own most severely, but He never gives one up.

2. God Did Not Cast Away David When He Sinned Grievously

Is it not amazing that God who had chosen David to be king had chosen David, like Jacob, to be in the ancestral line of Jesus, the Saviour, would not give up David when David sinned?

David was a man after God's own heart, a man of faith. By faith he risked all and killed the giant Goliath through the power of God on his little sling. David was inspired as the sweet singer of Israel to write the Psalms of David. The dear Lord Jesus was not ashamed to be called "the son of David" and the angel promised Mary that God would give to Jesus "*the throne of his father David*" (Luke 1:32).

We know that David led Bathsheba into sin. Then, lest his adultery should be found out, he had her husband, Uriah the Hittite, slain with the sword. And God did punish David with heartbreaking severity. His baby died. His daughter was raped by her half-brother, a son of David. Then Absalom, brother of Tamar, avenged her wrong by killing wicked Amnon, and David grieved

over the murder of a licentious son by another son. Then Absalom himself stole the throne and David ran for his life until Absalom was killed in battle.

Yet God called David back to his Bethel. God sent Nathan the prophet to rebuke David for his sin and to offer him mercy. And David's heartbroken prayer in Psalm 51 tells us how David came back to Bethel pleading for cleansing, acknowledging his sin, making holy vows that he would teach transgressors God's way and that sinners would be converted. Oh, how God's dealing with David must comfort us poor, wayward Christians. Not all of us, of course, have had the same kind of sin as David had, but all of us have sinned. We may not have had the same tragedies in our family which David had, but all of us have had tragedy and failure enough, God knows. And God calls us back to confession and new vows and sweet fellowship again, as he called David and as he called Jacob back to Bethel.

When God called Jacob back to Bethel, He was calling him not only to fellowship with God, but to preparation for the headship of a nation. God is merciful to give people a new chance for joy and fellowship. He is equally merciful to give people a new chance to serve Him.

3. This Merciful God Gave Rebellious Jonah a Second Chance

You remember how the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amittai, saying, *"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me"* (Jonah 1:2). But in effect Jonah said, "Nothing doing, Lord; that bunch of fish worshippers? No, I am afraid some of them would get converted." So Jonah bought a ticket on an ocean-going vessel and ran away from the call of God. You know the story of the mighty wind that God prepared, and the great fish that God prepared, and the gourd and the worm. It is enough to say that God dealt with Jonah by the storm at sea. He was thrown overboard and swallowed by the great fish that God had prepared. And after three days in the belly of the whale (typifying Christ's three days in the grave, as we are plainly told by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 12:40),

Jonah was vomited out on dry land.

Now Jonah smelled like fish, but he certainly felt more like preaching! And now here is the wonderful, wonderful truth again: God gave Jonah a second chance! And we are told, *“And the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee”* (Jonah 3:2). It is Jonah’s call back to Bethel! “Jonah, you are called as a prophet of God. There have been holy vows. There have been divine revelations! Now God calls you again to preach the Gospel as He has called you before.”

“So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord” (Jonah 3:3). And God gave one of the most marvelous revivals of all history, and hundreds of thousands of people repented in sackcloth and ashes, and turned to God for mercy and forgiveness. God gave Jonah a second chance.

4. Peter, Cursing, Denying Christ, Was Restored to Fellowship and to Wonderful Service

Peter is another example of a man who needed another chance. You know how Peter had vowed to die for Jesus. He went in and sat by the fire with the soldiers who would crucify the Saviour before nine o’clock the next morning. And in some way, as it always happens with those who rest in bad company, Peter’s courage ebbed away. They “put no strings” on him, but he was hindered none the less. And when he was challenged, he denied that he knew the Lord Jesus and cursed and swore and said, “I know not the man.” Then, as Jesus had said it would, the cock crowed, and Peter suddenly faced the ruin of all his ministry, the breaking of all his vows, and public disgrace in the eyes of the disciples. Peter went out in the dark that cool April morning and wept bitterly.

Well, Peter would naturally say, “I’m all washed up. Who would hear me preach the Gospel now? Who wants to hear a man who has no courage and who lies and denies Jesus and curses and swears?” So Peter gave up the ministry. I can imagine that he said, “Well, I’ll have to make a living some way. I have a big family

and my mother-in-law lives with me. I'll go back to the fishing business."

So back up to the little Sea of Galilee Peter went. And he was such a leader that the other disciples went with him. Oh, when we fail God, without meaning to we may lead so many others to failure! And the disciples again had a boat and nets. They toiled all night. But they caught nothing at all. And in the morning one stood by the seaside and said, "*Children, have ye any meat?*" (His voice was like an angel's, but they knew Him not.)

No, they had caught nothing all night. But He told them to let down the net on the other side of the boat. They did, and suddenly the net was filled with 153 great fish!

John the beloved, more spiritually minded than the others, perhaps, recognized that it was Jesus. Had He not given them a great load of fishes, two boats full, once before? And when Peter knew it was Jesus, he suddenly turned the nets loose. They could bring in the fish or they could let them go. What were fish beside a chance to see Jesus and get the matter of his sin and failure straightened out!

So Peter put on his coat and jumped into the sea to swim to the shore. Boats are too slow when you've been so long away from your Bethel, so long out of fellowship, so long out of the will of God!

You remember how they ate the breakfast Jesus cooked around the fire and then the searching question put to Peter, and how Peter said, "*Lord, thou knowest that I love thee.*" So Jesus recommissioned Peter and soon we see him on the Day of Pentecost, standing before thousands and preaching the Gospel with power, and 3,000 souls were added to the church that day!

Oh, we serve the God who gives a second chance, a third chance. We serve the God who seeks us so long and pleads with us to come back to the Bethel of blessing, back to the renewing of our call, the re-signing of our commission!

5. The Prodigal Son Story Shows How Willingly God Forgives

It may be that one reads this who is not even saved. Or perhaps you have gone so far in sin that you do not feel any assurance of salvation. Then remember that blessed story of the prodigal son as told by our Saviour in Luke 15. A certain man had two sons. One of them was given the portion of goods that belonged to him, and took his journey into a far country and there wasted his substance in riotous living. As gamblers and drinkers and harlot-chasers do, he came to want, and had no friends. He got a job feeding pigs, and there in want and hunger, his proud heart broke and he came to his senses. That prodigal boy said, *“I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants”* (Luke 15:18, 19).

And, praise God, he did arise and go to his father. And the father saw him a great way off. (How long his father had watched the road and longed for the boy's return!) The father ran to meet him and fell on his neck and kissed him. The boy confessed his sin, but the father hushed him up and called for a robe to take the place of his rags, called for servants to bring shoes for his bare and sore feet, called for a ring of sonship to go on his finger. And they killed the fatted calf long prepared for this contingency. The neighbors were called in, and they had a feast of rejoicing. The boy who was dead is alive again! The boy who was lost is now found! I do not wonder that they began to be merry!

O sinner, you are not far from God. Come home! O backslider in heart, the Father never ceases watching the road, waiting for your return! Before ever you can confess how unworthy you are and how little you merit His blessings, the Father will take you in His arms and kiss you and forgive you. God wants to take off your soiled robes and put on you the white garment of His righteousness. He wants to give you the manifest token, the ring of sonship. He wants your feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace. O backslider, God cannot give you up! As He called Jacob back to Bethel, He calls you back to forgiveness and

blessing and joy and fellowship again. God does not forsake His own. Will you, like Jacob, come back to Bethel? And that is simply another way of saying to draw near to God, for He will surely draw near to you as He has promised. Come for forgiveness, for He offers it free. He wants you, not as a hired servant, but as a son, so come boldly to that throne of grace. Come back to Bethel today!

IV. How Jacob and His Family Went Back to Bethel

Well, God called Jacob back to Bethel and, thank God, Jacob came. It was only twenty or twenty-five miles. He ought to have gone long ago. But now he went.

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 Beth-el; 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.— Gen. 35:2-4.

Will you consider how Jacob and his family came to Bethel?

1. They Put Away Their Idols

First, Jacob commanded his household and workers, “*Put away the strange gods that are among you....*”

So the idols that had been cherished these years, the idols stolen from her father by Rachel, and perhaps other idols, were brought to Jacob and solemnly surrendered, and they were disowned and put away!

Does God really have first place in your life? Remember that God said, “*For I the Lord thy God am a jealous God*” (Exod. 20:5). And when God, in fury, destroyed Israel, killing many by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar’s army, and carrying the rest away

captive, He revealed to Ezekiel that it was “this image of jealousy” which wicked people had put in the entry of the temple, which had broken God’s heart and aroused His fury against His sinning people (Ezek. 8:5)! Oh, put away your idols! You cannot properly go back to Bethel, back to the place of blessing, back to the renewal of power, back to the holy vows, unless you put away your idols.

Preacher, have you pleased the denomination more than you have pleased God? Put away your idol!

Businessman, have you put your business, your job, ahead of the house of God, ahead of the Bible, and before the time you should have taken to teach your children the Word of God and win them and bless them? In Jesus’ name, put away the idols!

Some woman loves her children more than she loves God. She thinks more of their happiness, their popularity, their prosperity, than she thinks about the Word of God and winning souls, and the secret place of prayer. Oh, if you would come back to Bethel, put away your idols!

That job, that loved one to whom you may be engaged, that denomination upon whose promotion and endorsement you depend—whatever that thing which has infringed upon the crown rights of Jesus Christ, upon the singleness of heart with which He demands that you serve Him—put that idol away! If you would go back to Bethel, then idols must be destroyed.

It may be that the idol which has come between you and God is your own will. You want your way, as did the prodigal son who went into the far country. Then if you would come back to the Bethel of blessing, your will must be given up to God’s sweet will.

Years ago when Grace, my oldest daughter, was three or four years old, she rebelled at some command. Sadly I spanked her very hard and made her do what she was told to do. Then I left, and when I left, I did not tell her good-by. She still sulked for a little bit over her spanking, but then she was penitent and she began to say to her mother, though I was already gone, “Good-by, Daddy! Good-by, Daddy!” And when she took her afternoon nap, half-

asleep, with tears running down her little face, she would say, “Good-by, Daddy!” She was tired of her own way. She was sorry for her rebellion. She wanted to make right what she had done wrong.

So your stubborn will must be given up if you would have the fullness of God’s blessing. Do not hesitate to pull that idol of self-will out by the roots and let God have His way in your life, if you want to live at the place of blessing.

2. They Washed Themselves and Put on Clean Garments

Jacob commanded, “*Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments*” (Gen. 35:2). It is a good practice we have of bathing and putting on fresh garments when we go to the house of God. It does not matter so much about the other people who will be at the church. But one ought to dignify his going to the house of God, one ought to make it an high occasion. As one puts on his best clothes to go courting or to meet important visitors, so surely it is nice sometimes to dress the best we can just to honor Jesus Christ.

But Jacob had in mind here a cleaning up before going to Bethel. I do not doubt that there was a lot of bathing going on among the large family of children and servants. And that symbolizes that we need to be clean, clean of dirty habits, clean of filthy thoughts, clean of bad associations, if we would truly go back to Bethel, back to the place of blessing.

I had a letter once from a dear woman who heard me regularly on the radio. She said she became convicted about the sin of dipping snuff. Some visitors came to her house and rang the doorbell. She had snuff in her mouth and had not time to run to the kitchen to spit it out. What would she do? Ashamed for it to be known that she dipped snuff, she swallowed the snuff, wiped her mouth, and went to the door!

But the nicotine in that mouthful of snuff made her sick. She felt greatly ashamed that she had a habit that she dared not let her neighbors know about. She was ashamed that she had a secret that

she must hide from those who would be offended by it. She had heard me preaching about how a Christian ought to keep his body as a holy temple of the Lord and she resolved she would quit the snuff.

She had used this form of tobacco for many years. It had a vise-like hold upon her—a habit which it seemed almost impossible to break.

When she gave up the snuff, she got sick. Lying on her bed, desperately sick, she said, “O God, if I die, I will never touch the filthy stuff again! If I die, I will die clean!” But God raised her up and she was free from the habit. She had gotten clean, and had come again to Bethel, the place of blessing.

3. They Laid Aside Ordinary Ornaments and Pleasures for Bethel

And now here is a strange thing: God did not tell Jacob all the details of preparation they should make to come to Bethel. It was Jacob who, knowing about the idol gods, commanded that they be put away. It was Jacob who said to his family, “Be clean, and change your garments.” God somehow inspired these people of Jacob’s household to do more than they were commanded. They not only brought the strange gods, but they brought *“all their earrings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak which was by Shechem”* (Gen. 35:4).

You will note that God did not say it was wrong to wear earrings. And God did not tell them to leave off their earrings, even, as they were to come up to Bethel to worship God. Earrings are not necessarily wrong. When Abraham sent his servant to get a bride for Isaac, he sent along rich golden earrings and other jewels for the dear girl who would be a bride.

Christian women are commanded that their adorning should not be *“that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel.”* No, the real adornment of a good woman is *“the hidden man of the heart,”* that *“meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price”* (1 Pet. 3:3,

4).

We do not think it is wrong to plait the hair. Certainly it is not wrong to wear garments. But a woman's beauty does not depend upon her garments or on her golden jewels or on the way she dresses her hair.

I think something of this was put in the hearts of Jacob's household by the Holy Spirit. Before they went to Bethel, they laid aside the earrings. Sometimes when we wait on God for revival and pray for the power of God, or pray for some answer in a time of distress, we put aside food. Eating is not wrong, but sometimes God's people ought to fast. Sleeping is not wrong at the appointed time to sleep, but sometimes God's people ought to watch all the night through and call on Him. Ordinary businesses of life are not necessarily wrong, but there comes a time when they must give way to a special time of seeking God. Pleasures and games are not necessarily wrong, but sometimes they should be laid aside for better things. So these laid aside their earrings, although they were not commanded to do so.

Oh, then, I beg you, do not let even the good things, even those things which are perhaps harmless, keep you from the fullness of blessing. Paul properly said, "*All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient....*" (I Cor. 6:12). And surely if we take time to seek God's face, there are many things which might ordinarily be permissible and proper, which ought to be laid aside. Oh, then, if it means giving up sleep, or giving up food, or missing time for business, or if it means giving up a sweet companionship in order to have the better companionship of God, I beg you that in this spiritual sense you will lay aside whatever those earrings represent in your life, and go up to Bethel empty, to receive the fullness that God has for you.

4. The Whole Family Went to Bethel Together!

It is blessed that Jacob had been at Bethel alone when he had no family. It is doubly blessed that now he takes the whole family. Joseph was a small boy, and now Joseph goes to Bethel. Who knows but that the older sons might have been more blessed of

God if they had been early taken to Bethel, the house of God, the place of blessing, and the altar there.

Do not try to keep the blessing for yourself alone. See that wife and children, see that husband and loved ones, enter into the blessing, too. All the family went together to Bethel. The servants went along, too. All alike gave up their idols, washed their bodies, changed their garments, and changed their ways. Oh, it was a revival time for the household of Jacob when all together went up to Bethel and there met God.

It may not be in some great revival service. That may not be possible for you just now. It may not be under the preaching of the Word of God by some Spirit-filled man. It may be that you alone at home or in your office or on your farm or in a rented room in a lonely city, will go back to Bethel and to the God of Bethel. Oh, I beg you, do it today, no matter where you are.

These words are written in a lonely motel room on New Year's Day. Today my family is gone to have happy fellowship with one of the daughters—with Jessie and Sandy and baby Carol Joy, at Moline, Illinois. If I had been there, I would have gone, too. But duty called. In a few minutes I will go to the pulpit to preach the first sermon of the new year for me. Hungry hearts are waiting. So in this motel room, with a heart that was lonely, and feeling a little the constant pressure of the work that is upon me day and night, I have sought God.

The telephone rang, and I rushed to pick up the phone, hoping, even praying it would be one of my loved ones calling me. It was not.

But in this motel room today, I have gone back to Bethel. I have gone back in my mind and heart to the old experiences. I have laid aside idols, I have taken off earrings (spiritually, of course); I have renewed my vows. And this motel room has been filled with the angels of God, and I have felt, even if I have not seen, the ladder reaching to Heaven.

And Jacob, after he had been to Bethel, called it not only Bethel, the house of God, but El-bethel, the God of the house of

God. No longer did Jacob think just of the stone upon which he had poured oil. He thought now of God who met him in person, the God who renewed all the promises He had given to Isaac and Jacob, the God who heard him in the time of distress and delivered him, Jacob met God again.

Will you today have a Bethel of blessing and renewing? Will you lay aside idols? Will you repent of sins and be clean? Will you break the ties that hinder? Will you renew your vows and accept the renewed commission from God for the work He called you to do? Oh, may God let the altar fires burn at many a renewed Bethel as you read these words.

I hope many will write to tell me you have waited upon God afresh, have renewed your vows, have gone back to Bethel.

**Copyright 1962 by
SWORD OF THE LORD PUBLISHERS
ISBN 0-87398-115-4**

35 ¢ each

Printed in U. S. A