

# Truth for Today

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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**Broadcast Date:** 11 June 200

**No.** T0114

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## Lessons from the life of Jacob: Jacob - at Bethel again

Quite a few years ago, I made a visit to the school which I had left when I was fifteen years old. I had attended this place for four years and could remember every corner and corridor or so I thought. What struck me most when I entered the main hall was its smallness. It had always seemed enormous to me in my early teenage years. It was the same building but not as I had pictured it. Perhaps you have had a similar experience where your memory has lapsed from reality.

Alternatively, one can return to a place time and again without being disappointed because of events associated with the place. One of the earliest memories I have is of visiting a river bank with my father. It must have been about 1942 for I was still small enough to sit on a make-shift seat on the crossbar of my father's bicycle. I have no memories of any other traffic on the road. At that stage in the war, with petrol rationing and conscription, it was unlikely that there would have been many cars about. We certainly didn't have one, hence the bike. Whenever I visit that spot, which is virtually unchanged despite the passage of the years, I am never disappointed. Whatever the season, it still retains the freshness and tranquillity of that spring morning nearly sixty years ago.

Perhaps it's due to the companionship and friendship that I received from my father during his long life. Whatever the reason, I know that that view across the valley of the river has a special place in my affections. I am sure that on reflection many of you listening today would have similar memories of special places. Our subject for consideration today has certain similarities because it is about Jacob returning to a place that had great significance for him. Over the last few weeks, we have seen how this man travelled from his boyhood home in Canaan to his uncle Laban in Paddan-aram. We have traced his experiences at Bethel, Mahanaim and Peniel. It had all been a learning curve for Jacob that was shown by his new name of Israel. All of these places had special significance for him. Now, for a little time, we want to look at his return journey with its revisit to Bethel. Before we do so however, let us look at the whereabouts of Jacob before he moved to Bethel. From Genesis 33:18 we find he was living in Shalem, a city of Shechem, in Canaan. He seemed to have settled down here for he had bought a piece of ground and pitched his tent near to the city. We also find that he built an altar that he dedicated to God. He was enjoying a comfortable life that would just reflect the changing seasons. God had other things for him though, which, as we shall see, were for the blessing of Jacob and his family. Through the awful behaviour of his sons, Jacob feared for the safety of his family. The time had come when he must leave. But where should he go?

It is interesting to speculate that if the action of his sons had not disturbed Jacob's settled status, would he have moved away from Shechem? It often seems more difficult for us to recognise or listen to God's voice when things are going well with us. It is a pity if the blanket of material prosperity prevents us from hearing or obeying what we know is the will of God. It is, in fact, more than a pity, for it is disobedience and that is sin. I think that it was more than circumstances that moved Jacob away from Shechem. Above all, he was convinced that God was speaking to him.

We must turn again now to the story of Jacob for he is the subject of our study. Generally we shall confine our remarks to the outline of the narrative which we can read in the book of Genesis 35. Verse 1 states, "And God said unto Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there: and make there an altar unto God, that appeared unto thee when thou fleddest from the face of Esau thy brother."

The first thing to notice in this verse is that God spoke to Jacob and that Jacob recognised God's voice. We have heard in previous programmes that God had spoken directly to Jacob but it is pertinent to emphasise this yet again. The Bible consistently presents to its readers a God who communicates with people. He didn't leave Jacob to muddle along on his own. Rather He gave him directions at what proved to be key points in his life. As God acted then, so He acts now with those who, like Jacob, listen to His voice. It might seem audacious to make this claim but both Scripture and Christian experience prove this. Further to this is the point that in many ways Jacob didn't deserve the continued attention of God in his life. Surely this too must be a finger of encouragement to us, for no matter what our circumstances, God can deal with us where we are. The limiting factor is that we must recognise and obey the voice of the sovereign God.

The voice demanded of Jacob that he returned to the place where he had seen the ladder reaching into heaven which, as we noticed a few weeks ago when we studied Genesis 28, was called Bethel. I would suggest that even in

this command there is a lesson for us. Over the years since he had left Bethel, when he was fleeing from his brother whom he had wronged, he did many things that were not worthy of a man to whom God had promised so much. It was as if Jacob was not content to let God bring the many blessings to him. He continued to display the crafty and cunning nature that had been so evident when he had cheated his brother and deceived his father. Now God is directing him back to the beginning, to the place where he had made promises to God.

So it is with us if we are His people. We must return in spirit to the place where we made our commitment to the Lord. The very mention of Bethel causes Jacob to recall the holiness and sanctity of that occasion, for we can read in Genesis 35:2 "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.'"

Before Jacob carried through the commission to journey to Bethel, he, and every person with him, had to be in a suitable condition to enter that holy place. How sad it is to read that a follower of the God of Abraham had to rid himself of strange gods! The testimony of Abraham was that he left the place of idols to follow the eternal, invisible God. Here now is his grandson travelling back from the country that Abraham had left but with strange gods amongst his possessions. It was now time for these idols to be put away. As head of the family, Jacob wanted his family to be right before God. He was doing in faith what was going to be demanded of the people of God in the time of Moses. "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." We can read these words in the book of Exodus 20:4. I am sure, however, that many of you recognise them as part of the Ten Commandments.

Again I would suggest that there are lessons for us to learn from this action of Jacob's. Just as he sought to rid himself of everything that was inappropriate to the worship of a holy God so we must remember the words of the apostle John when he wrote in 1 John 5:21 warning the disciples to keep themselves from idols. It might seem strange advice to bring before an audience in a scientific age like ours, but I am convinced it is as necessary in the opening years of the third millennium as it was in the early years of the first. The only antidote for the attraction of idols is to know something of the greatness of the Lord Jesus. For the apostle Paul the excellence of the knowledge of Christ was greater than any other experience. A nineteenth century hymn writer caught the same thought when she wrote,

*"Hast thou heard Him, seen Him, known Him,  
Is not thine a captured heart?  
Chief among ten thousand own Him,  
Joyful choose the better part.*

*What has stripped the seeming beauty  
From the idols of the earth?  
Not a sense of right or duty,  
But the sight of peerless worth."*

Notice also that it was not only Jacob himself that was included in the injunction to rid himself of strange gods. He was responsible for his family and he had to demonstrate that responsibility. This is something that is often lacking today. Even in secular matters the modern family can sometimes be found with nobody willing to provide leadership or authority.

Besides the command about strange gods there was also the instruction about changing their garments and being clean. Surely the New Testament counterpart to this is a sanctified life. If we are His people, we have been cleansed from our sin through the death of the Lord Jesus upon the cross. This is made plain by the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews in 9:14, "How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God." And verse 26 of the same chapter, "...but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." Many other passages could be quoted to reinforce the statement that the death of the Lord Jesus is the only sacrifice for our sins. To know our sins have been forgiven is something more than gold.

This in no way lessens God's demand upon us to lead sanctified lives. Just as the patriarch Jacob, and those who travelled with him, had to change their garments, so we must take notice of the scriptures that make demands upon us to alter our manner of life. Thankfully we are not left to do this by will power but rather by the power of God. Peter tells us this in 2 Peter 1:3, "According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue." Such a promise should put backbone into our spiritual stature.

In Genesis 35:3 Jacob continues to tell his family about God's commands. There is no mystery now for he tells them plainly their destination and why they are going. He is to make an altar unto God who answered him in the day of his

distress. Jacob seems able to communicate unto the people with him something of the reality and faithfulness of the God who had cared for him in the intervening years since his first visit to Bethel.

I think that this can be seen in their response to the words of Jacob. We read in Genesis 35:6-7 that, "...Jacob came to Luz, which is in the land of Canaan, that is, Bethel, he and all the people that were with him. And he built there an altar, and he called the place El-Bethel: because there God appeared unto him, when he fled from the face of his brother."

When Jacob had first visited Luz, he called it Bethel which means the House of God. This was because of the dream that he had when he saw the angels ascending and descending. Even more wonderful was that God was at the top of the ladder and made a pledge of what He was going to do for Jacob. When he awoke, he was so impressed with the revelation that had come to him that he poured oil upon the stones he had used as a pillow. Now that he has returned, after so many years of absence, it is the faithfulness of the God who travelled with him that impresses him. It is no longer the House of God that fills his heart but rather the God of the House of God which is the meaning of El-Bethel. Here, surely, is another lesson for us to learn, for whatever we know of theology or biblical concepts they are meaningless if they do not lead us into an adoration and worship of the living God as revealed in Christ. For Jacob it was God with whom he was concerned now and not the place itself. Apart from God, Bethel had no meaning.

There is yet another thought in verse 7 that has a lesson for us. There it mentions the time when Jacob fled from his brother. When things are wrong in our lives and we seem surrounded by troubles we often then turn to God in prayer asking for a way out. Jacob returned to Bethel when generally the better times have arrived. It is good for us to have faith in good times as well as bad.

We also need to remember the times when we were nothing and had nothing. In point of fact, we only possess the blessings and knowledge of God because He has revealed them to us. A modern hymn writer has captured this thought with a refrain reminiscent of Luther's famous phrase,

*"I am a new creation,  
No more in condemnation,  
Here in the grace of God I stand."*

There is no better place for a person to rest than in the grace of God.

Verse 9 tells us the effects of Jacob's obedience. He had been commanded to return to Bethel and build an altar. This, as we have seen, is what he did. Now God appears to him again to confirm the new name that he had received at Peniel. He also renews the promise that had first been given to Abraham. Jacob now demonstrates his thanks and appreciation of God's faithfulness by pouring out a drink offering upon the altar in Bethel. He had come full circle. Now he was at home with his family, comparatively wealthy, and his relationship restored with his brother. You might say, No wonder he gave thanks to God, he had everything he wanted. The rest of his life shows that this was not so.

We must not think that a man or woman of faith who has the presence of God in their life is immune from all the trials and sorrows of this life. When, along with his mother, Jacob schemed to deceive his father and cheat his brother, he had to leave his home in a hurry to avoid Esau's anger. He was, therefore, reaping what he had sown. Now he was back on good terms with his brother, back in the Promised Land and worshipping at the altar in Bethel, we could expect the rest of Jacob's life to be one of undisturbed ease. We could, if the Bible was a series of novels! It is, however, amongst other things, the record of people's relationship with the living God. It presents the real state of things and, as many Christians experience today, having faith does not remove you from the tribulations that are the common lot of all humanity. Unemployment, sickness, sorrow, accidents and many other trials affect us, just as they affect our neighbours. One might ask then what is the point of believing? As Jacob had the presence of God in his life to uphold, strengthen and comfort, so it is with the Christian to an even greater degree. As we trace the story of the life of Jacob through the rest of the chapters of Genesis, and he lived for many years after he had returned to Bethel, we notice the many times that sorrow ripped through his heart. Even in chapter 35 we can read that three times death robbed Jacob of a person close to him. First it was Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, an old companion of the family. Next it was Rachel, his wife whom he loved so deeply, who died in childbirth and finally it was his father Isaac.

Chapter 35 also records the action of his son Reuben. The despicable behaviour of this man, so close to Jacob, must have caused him much sorrow. Another commentator on biblical matters described this very forcefully when he wrote, "We suffer keenly through the sins of those we love; and when the father saw his Reuben stained with the soil of nameless impurity, he drank perhaps the bitterest cup of his life." Even during the short time covered by the events of chapter 35, Jacob certainly drank deeply at the well of sorrow.

Perhaps the best indicator of Jacob's spiritual condition during his latter years is the comment provided by the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews. In Hebrews 11:21 it is written that, By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed both the

sons of Joseph; and worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff.” Here we see a man whose confidence is in God, who rests in His presence. No longer plotting and scheming but waiting and worshipping in faith. Jacob in Canaan is a trophy of the discipline of God. How many times had God had to correct him. Jacob was blessed with the knowledge and presence of God despite his own tendencies. In Jacob God displayed His gracious patience so that at the end of his life Jacob was a more spiritual person than at the beginning. His name would now be joined with those of Abraham and Isaac to be linked forever with the name of God. When Peter was preaching about the glorified Christ, as recorded in Acts 3:13, he brings all the names together in one triumphant sentence, “The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, hath glorified his Son Jesus.”

Jacob’s earthly life did not finish in Canaan. Driven by hunger, his sons went to buy corn from the granaries of Egypt. Here they were recognised by Joseph, their long lost brother, who invited the whole family to dwell there. Surrounded by opulence and riches beyond his dreams, Jacob’s heart remained in Canaan. When he died, his body was taken back to the Promised Land where his father and grandfather were buried.

May we take note of the lessons learned by Jacob as God revealed Himself to him, especially at the crisis moments at Bethel on his way out of Canaan, at Peniel, at Mahanaim and at El-Bethel. Let us, through grace, also know in our lives something of the glorious presence of the God of Jacob, who is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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