

Sermon – 09/05/2004 pm

Back to Bethel

Study Text: Genesis 35:1-7

As she walked along she saw a ‘holy man’ sitting on the side of the road. He was selling holy ash and other religious stuff. Her eyes were drawn to him – she paused then stopped. She had recently turned from worshipping idols to worshipping the living God. But this day was a big religious festival and the Hindu holy men were out in force.

The man put some ash on her forehead and showed her some beads. She was surprised when he gave them to her free. The next day she came to our house greatly disturbed. She wanted to get rid of the beads but was afraid. We were having a prayer meeting so stopped to pray for her. Even some of the believers in the meeting were concerned about what to do with the holy beads. I took them, went to the bathroom and flushed them down the toilet.

Idol worship had crept into Jacob’s household. When God called upon him to go up to Bethel he told all who were with him to get rid of their idols and to purify themselves. He took the idols and buried them.

Jacob at this time was in Shechem. In the previous chapter we saw the disaster of genocide following the rape of his daughter. Lust led to rape and rape tore vengeance, violence and murder on a massive scale. We find not one mention of God in that chapter. Jacob was left living in fear – ~~far~~ of reprisal attack from locals when they heard what happened at Shechem. *I shall be destroyed, my household and I.*

Arise

Ch.35 begins with the word of God. What a relief to have God intervening once again in Jacob’s life. He was in pretty much the same position as he was all those years before when he fled from Esau. He was living in fear of being murdered. He thought it was just a matter of time till the Canaanites came to get him – to kill him in revenge.

The voice of God came to him at this time of distress. *Arise, go up to Bethel and make an altar there.* This was God who appeared to him way back in his youth there at Bethel. Jacob’s fears were relieved when he remembered how God had been with him and brought him back to the land – almost to Bethel. He had got distracted, waylaid, here at Shechem but God reminded him now of Bethel.

What happens when you are on a bike and stop moving? You are going to fall. Jacob had stopped moving ahead, stopped moving towards Bethel the house of God. He was in danger of falling – falling prey to the wicked. But God came to give him a push on towards Bethel.

I wonder if you have been slowing down in the journey. Not because of a steep hill but because of the scenery along the way. Jacob was not on a hill on his journey. He was coasting along after being delivered from Esau. Yet he was now in great danger again. God came on woke him up – **Arise**, go up to the house of God.

What a terrible slumber has come over the lives of God's people in our day. The treasures and the pleasures of the world that threatened Jacob at Shechem, that threatened Moses in the palace of the Pharaoh that threatened the disciples of Jesus, threaten us also.

Paul warned the Corinthians about this. He used examples from the past – examples of lusting after the things of the world- idolatry, sexual immorality, complaining, coveting. Beware he wrote – *let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall* (I Corinthians 10:12). Are you exempt from these things, do you not need to take heed? Pride remember – no hands – can stop us very quickly and leads to a hard fall.

Away With Idols

What was the response of Jacob when God spoke to him? It was an interesting response. He did not immediately arise and go up to Bethel. The word of God reminded him of the depth to which he and his household had sunk – the pit into which they had fallen. Not only was his heart full of fear but his house was full of idols.

Rachel probably still had the idol that she stole from her father. Did she take it out from time to time, dust it off and worship it? What else was there? See 34:28 – *they plundered even all that was in the houses at Shechem*. The most precious things were probably idols. And remember the women captured in Shechem and brought back to their camp. They would have brought their idols no doubt. The danger facing Jacob was not only from without- it was within his own household.

Put away the foreign gods that are among you he told his people. Jacob remembered that the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac was a holy God. He was the God who created all things, the God who had power to deliver him from all his enemies. He was the only true God and he was a jealous God.

The Commandments God gave to Moses make it very clear that *I the Lord your God am a jealous God. You shall have no other gods before me and you shall not make any carved image*. This is fundamental to the nature of God. He is holy, he is separate, and there is none like him. And he is not to be represented by any image man can make. Jacob took a look at his camp in the light of this truth.

The people brought their idols to Jacob. They also brought their earrings. Why was this you may ask? Are earrings idols? They may well have been charms or 'badges of superstition' (Calvin). Even today we find religious symbols being worn, do we not?

Jewellery could be fashioned into idols. That is what Aaron did – they all gave him their golden earrings and he fashioned a golden calf (Exodus 32:3-4). He removed the idols and the temptation to make more.

Jacob took these things and buried them under the terebinth tree. We might think that he should have melted them down or ground them to powder- but burying was sufficient to defile them and remove them from the camp. They were preparing to move on to Bethel.

Flee from idolatry. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of idols too...are we trying to arouse the Lord jealousy? Are we stronger than He? (I Corinthians 10:14, 21). The Lord requires total devotion. You cannot serve God and money – this is the greatest challenge to God in our society.

The shopping Mall is where many go to worship these days. The good news to them is the piece of plastic in their pocket. That plastic can satisfy their lust for things – they can get everything with it –

except peace and life. There are Christians who want to fully embrace the plastic also – they cling to it with one hand even as they try to hold the Bible in the other. But Jesus said you cannot serve two masters. This is a ‘no hands’ option heading for a fall.

Purify Yourself

Put away the idols and purify yourselves said Jacob. And change your garments. What did he mean? Putting away the idols was clear enough – but sometimes the idols, the things that we put before God, stay in our hearts. He was calling upon the people to repent before God.

Ritual washing may have been involved. Washing the body and changing clothes was part of what was required before going to the house of God. It was symbolic of repentance. The old must be put away and new put on.

Modern man may not have grotesque images in his house but he puts his own self in the place God must occupy. He rules his own life, he is his own idol. He does what he likes, pleases himself and determines his own destiny. His heart is proud. Contempt for the authority and command of God is tantamount to idolatry. The proud Pharisee worshipped God beating his chest as it were, but did God hear his prayer – No. God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble.

God looks upon the heart. As Jacob set out with his people he called upon them to put away their idols and repent before God. That is the only way that we can come before God – humbling calling upon him for grace and forgiveness. *Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hearts you sinners, purify your hearts you double minded* (James 4:8).

Protection from Enemies

Jacob was full of fear until God came and spoke to him, calling him to go to Bethel. He was bunkered down waiting for the Canaanites to come and destroy him. But now he steps out in faith. *They journeyed, and the terror of God was upon the cities that were all around them* (35:5).

What a wonderful peace came over Jacob when he heard the word of God and obeyed. He acted to purify his household and then went ahead, trusting in God to protect him from his enemies.

What a great picture of the believers’ journey. God comes in his amazing grace to one who is lost, who is desperate, even despairing of life. In our society the enemy may not be without but within. Many despair of life because of loneliness and futility – eyes that stand out with fat. Hearing the call of God the person repents. They turn from sin, from idolatry, unto God. God comes into their life to protect them from powerful enemies – again such enemies may be within.

I trust you know the joy of this journey that Jacob set out on. The journey to the house of God, the heaven dwelling place of Jesus our Lord. Beware the things of the world that threaten to bring you to a stop – and a fall. Press on, eyes on the road, hands on wheel until you take hold of that for which Jesus Christ laid hold of you.

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon