

Beginnings in Genesis

Genesis 35

SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

Genesis 35 ¹ 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." ² 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." ³ 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." ⁴ So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears. Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree that was near Shechem. ⁵ And 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. ⁶ And Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him, ⁷ and there he built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because there God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother. ⁸ And Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried under an oak below Bethel. So he called its name Allon-bacuth. ⁹ God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him. ¹⁰ And God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." So he called his name Israel. ¹¹ And God said to him, "I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body." ¹² The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you." ¹³ Then God went up from him in the place where he had spoken with him. ¹⁴ And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he had spoken with him, a pillar of stone. He poured out a drink offering on it and poured oil on it. ¹⁵ So Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken with him Bethel. ¹⁶ Then they journeyed from Bethel. When they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel went into labor, and she had hard labor. ¹⁷ And when her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, "Do not fear, for you have another son." ¹⁸ And as her soul was departing (for she was dying), she called his name Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. ¹⁹ So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), ²⁰ and Jacob set up a pillar over her tomb. It is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day. ²¹ Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder. ²² While Israel lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine. And Israel heard of it. Now the sons of Jacob were twelve. ²³ The sons of Leah: Reuben (Jacob's firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. ²⁴ The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. ²⁵ The sons of Bilhah, Rachel's servant: Dan and Naphtali. ²⁶ The

sons of Zilpah, Leah's servant: Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram.²⁷ And Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned.²⁸ Now the days of Isaac were 180 years.²⁹ And Isaac breathed his last, and he died and was gathered to his people, old and full of days. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

INTRODUCTION

Bethel had a unique attraction and significance for Jacob. It was there that the Lord had appeared to him when he was running away from his irate brother. While there were many ups and downs in Jacob's life he never totally forgot the events which had transpired there. The return visit proved to be most appropriate because it afforded an opportunity for some necessary spiritual renewal.

Why is spiritual renewal necessary?

Spiritual renewal is necessary because human memory is faulty.

When Jacob first passed through Bethel the Lord had promised him: "Behold I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you" [Gen 28:15]. In the intervening years the Lord had been faithful to His servant and as he stood once again at Bethel, Jacob could not fail to recognize that he had indeed brought him back to the land of promise. In the business of his life Jacob needed a place of retreat to remember what the Lord had promised and had indeed brought to pass.

At the same time, Jacob was reminded of the things he had promised the Lord. He had said: 'If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God' [Gen 28: 20-21]. The return to Bethel provided the opportunity for Jacob to deliver on his promise.

A pastor that I respect very much told of a time when a young couple whose marital problems were apparently leading to a divorce came to see him. After a long and not particularly fruitful conversation they left his office. Some time later when he went through the sanctuary in which they were married and where for four years they had worshipped together, he found them sitting together deep in conversation. Their return to the place of commitment was having more impact on them than all of the discussion and debate.

Spiritual renewal is also necessary because human commitment is fickle.

Jacob's commitment to the Lord had worn thin at the edges. When he was told to return to Bethel he realized this to be the case so he said to his household and to all who were with him: Genesis 35:2-3 ² 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. ³ 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."

He was obviously aware of the presence of the gods but had chosen not to do anything about them until he was confronted again with his exclusive commitment to the Lord. The and only then did he deal with the issue which he had treated with benign neglect.

Renewal is also necessary because human fortunes change. When Jacob made his original commitment he was young and fancy-free. Now he was no longer young and he was responsible for a very large family whose fortunes depended to a large extent on his actions.

By this time he had two wives, two concubines, eleven sons, and one daughter, not to mention considerable assets.

Many people make profound commitment when they are young and free from responsibilities, but as the years pass by and the responsibilities increase it is not uncommon for the commitments to be overlooked and ignored. Renewal is also appropriate because human life is so fleeting.

This came home to Jacob when ‘Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel’ [v. 8]. The death of this faithful and aged lady was followed shortly by another tragic passing. “Rachel labored in childbirth, and she had hard labour ... so Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath [that is Bethlehem]’ [vv 16-19].

As if these two reminders of human finitude were not enough Jacob’s father Isaac ‘Breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people, being old and full of days. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.’ [v. 29]. The ‘daily round and common task’ can become so demanding and compelling that they lead to casualness about spiritual and eternal matters. But when death comes calling, priorities are often quickly rearranged. It is far better to be **spiritually** fresh in order to meet life’s tragedies than to meet them ill-prepared and then try to salvage something from a wasted life.

HOW IS SPIRITUAL RENEWAL EXPERIENCED?

Jacob needed to get back to basics. Like Vince Lombardy said, which I have quoted a few times recently: “Gentlemen, this is a football!”, the Lord called Jacob back to Bethel to start near the beginning. He found it necessary to remind him of His presence, so ‘God appeared to Jacob again ... and blessed him’ [v 9]. Then He reminded him, ‘Your name is Jacob; your name shall not be called Jacob anymore, but Israel shall be your name.’ [v. 10].

After that He reiterated His promise: ‘The land which I gave Abraham and Isaac, I give to you; and to your descendants after you I give this land’ [v. 12]. With all these familiar things going on around him, it was not surprising that Jacob responded by doing

similar things to those he had done in his original Bethel experience. He 'set up a pillar in the place where He talked with him, a pillar of stone; and he poured a drink offering on it, and he poured oil on it. And Jacob called the name of the place where God spoke to him, Bethel.' [vv. 14-15]

There is a tendency for God's people to seek new and exciting experiences when often what they really need is a renewal of the original basic understandings and ingredients which initiated their experience of the Lord.

Jacob also needed to get rid of barriers. As we have already seen, the foreign gods had made deep incursions into the life of Jacob's family. To be true to the Lord they had to do something about the things that were antithetical to Him.

Jacob addressed the issues, gave instructions, and the people responded by handing over to him, 'All the foreign gods which were in their hands, and the earrings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree which was by Shechem' [v. 4]. He was required to deal with the things which were a blatant contradiction to his professed allegiance. He needed to rid himself of those things which would produce conflict in his walk with the Lord, and he had to address the factors which would serve only to contaminate his soul. Without this type of action there would be no lasting renewal.

WHEN IS SPIRITUAL RENEWAL POSSIBLE?

The most sure way of maintaining spiritual freshness is by daily devotion. This is a discipline which, when adhered to, deals with matters which are relatively insignificant before they get out of hand.

Regular participation in public worship is another divinely appointed way of walking closely in fellowship with the Lord.

Consistent fellowship with God's people on a level where deep and personal care and sharing are possible also contributes greatly to ongoing renewal.

But, in addition to all these regular factors, most of God's people point to Bethel experiences where special events took place in special places. This type of experience leaves impressions which are deeply etched in the heart and mind of the participant.

It should be noted that despite the renewal, Jacob's troubles were not over!

The actions of his sons at Shechem had done nothing to enhance his image among his neighbours. He had suspected that he would be 'obnoxious among the inhabitants of the land' [Gen 34:30] and apparently the fears were well justified because, as they travelled, "Genesis 35:5 ⁵ And 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."

Now, while this saved them a lot of trouble it did nothing for their relationships, and less for their reputations.

Reuben did not help either. While his father was busy with other things Reuben took the opportunity to 'lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard about it.' [v. 22].

Conclusion

Spiritual renewal never exempted the people of God from the consequences of their own actions or the actions of those whose lives are interwoven with them.

But spiritual renewal does equip people to be strong enough to handle all that comes their way in a world where sin abounds.