

“...he talked with him...”

Do you remember God? Jesus Christ? Do I? Truly? In this chapter we see God reminding Jacob of something. Though Jacob had communion with God, he failed to address some problems in his midst. We are all like this!

In the Old Testament we see pillars being erected as a memorial to God. A memorial is not an excuse to place a marker and then to forget about it... a memorial has an active purpose – to remind us of something. Do we remind ourselves of God? Of His promises to us? Of what He has done for us? If not, then we are forgetting!

How can we forget God? It seems to me that many Christians think that if God is not speaking to them from a cloud of thunder (that is, very obviously), then He is not with us. This is error. God is with us always, even when we think He is not. When we ignore this very simple truth we miss out on many blessings. Or, rather, God continues to bless us, but we fail to see they are blessings, or fail completely to see God in a situation.

Let us always remember God! (It sounds like an absurdity, that Christians can ‘forget’ God, but they do! Every formal ‘service’ is a forgetting of God as He truly is!). Speak to each other of what He has done for us; bring to memory His blessings and promises, in our own heads and hearts. This is especially important when darkness grows around us and evil people appear to be winning the day. They might even be attacking us personally. No matter – God is with us still. It is His promise, and He never fails.

Verses 1-5

1.

“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.

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:

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3.

And let us arise, and go up to Bethel; 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.

4.

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.

5.

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.”

Jacob and his family left the place of slaughter quickly, for their own protection from surrounding tribes. His sons killed all males in the city of Shalem, because the ruler's son, Shechem, had defiled their sister. Some Christians think their family situations are not as they should be, and thus think their spiritual lives are frowned upon because of it – but, if we look at what happened in Jacob's life, well, perhaps our own situations are not so bad after all! Despite all that went wrong in his life, sometimes by his own hand, he remained God's elect.

Here we have Jacob – who was genuinely unaware of what his sons were going to do in the city – running (again) for his life. But, God comes to him and gives solace. God told him to move to Bethel ('house of God') to live. Jacob was familiar with Bethel; after fleeing from Esau's wrath many years before, and en-route to Laban to find a wife, he had his vision of angels and the ladder, there in Bethel. God now commanded him to go back there, to build an altar.

We then have what appears to be a very strange thing: Jacob told his family, and everyone else with him, to “put away the strange gods” in their possession. Did he allow them to worship false gods, even in his midst? Was he referring to the false gods stolen by his wife from Laban, and still in her tent? 'Strange', *nekar*, strictly speaking, means 'foreign'. Thus, Jacob was saying the idols were not his personal property, or from his own country, but from peoples they visited. Even so, it is strange that idols should be tolerated in Jacob's presence, given the way God obviously took care of him in such a direct way.

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Does this not show (assuming he knew of their existence) he was as vulnerable as we are to stray? Like him, we allow all kinds of sinful behaviours and decisions, even if we do not enact them personally. Yes, it is wrong, but it does not mean God will abandon us. He might even allow us to reap the dubious rewards of such tolerance, but His Holy Spirit is still with us! Do you think you have sinned too much? Or, that you have allowed what ought not to have been allowed? You are in good company! We have all done the same things and yet God, in His infinite mercy and grace, loves us still, and continues to give us His blessings.

We see that to have idols in our lives is to be unclean; to get rid of them is to be clean, *taher*: It means to be pure, morally, figuratively and spiritually. Jacob even told his retinue to change their clothing, as a symbol of being pure, and of repenting of their sin. This should also occur in our own lives: if we repent of a certain sin we should also make sure that we 'change our garments' by getting rid of every token of that sin. This can be books, videos, relationships, even clothing. They all remind us of former wrongs, so get rid of them! Though outer things, they represent inner sin.

Let us go to Bethel, Jacob said, and I will build an altar to God. All the people then handed over their idols and ear-rings. Ear-rings were often engraved with symbols connected with the idols. Even when not engraved they were associated with idol worship. Today, many people, especially males, wear ear-rings. Though it may not be the immediate aim to show affiliation with idols, they are nevertheless symbolic of idolatrous attitudes, for they are linked with the spirit of the age and a rejection of God's truth on piercings and tattoos, which are pagan.

In my lifetime, as near as the 1960's, only two kinds of people wore ear-rings... merchant sailors and, if worn in a particular ear, homosexuals. That was why, even then, no male I knew wore ear-rings, unless they belonged to either type of group. Sadly, rock groups started to wear them (possibly because many were also homosexual) and this began a trend amongst young people, along with equally pagan tattoos. Whatever the reason for wearing them, they are symbols of vanity and the willingness to follow the ways of the world.

Jacob probably smashed the idols (there are precedents in scripture), and then buried them under a large oak tree near Shechem.

The tribe moved on, and wherever they went, the surrounding peoples were terrified and did not

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dare to go after Jacob. We are told that the “terror of God” was upon the cities. This literally means to be terrified, too scared to do anything, shattered in pieces. We are not told if this was caused by the emerging stories of the total destruction of Hamor’s city and all its male inhabitants, or if this was a special terror, cloaking Jacob from harm.

Verses 6-12

1.

“So Jacob came to Luz, which is in the land of Canaan, that is, Bethel, he and all the people that were with him.

2.

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.

3.

But Deborah Rebekah's nurse died, and she was buried beneath Bethel under an oak: and the name of it was called Allon-bachuth.

4.

And God appeared unto Jacob again, when he came out of Padan-aram, and blessed him.

5.

And God said unto him, Thy name is Jacob: thy name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name: and he called his name Israel.

6.

And God said unto him, I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins;

7.

And the land which I gave Abraham and Isaac, to thee I will give it, and to thy seed after thee will I give the land.”

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Finally, Jacob and his people reached the land of Luz, at the place of remembrance, Bethel, also known as Elbethel. ('the God of the House of God'). He immediately built an altar, and they lived there. We are not given a time scale, but some time after arriving at Bethel, Deborah died. She was Rebeka's nurse, or maid. Jacob buried her under an oak tree at Bethel and he called that spot Allonbachuth ('oak of weeping').

Once again, God came to Jacob and spoke to him. Unlike the appearances of a fake 'God' to modern day charismatics, when the apparition speaks of obscurities or non-important things, the true God who actually met with Jacob had a specific message.

God blessed Jacob, and reminded him of something. From that time onward, Jacob would be called 'Israel' as a verbal symbol of his importance in the purposes of God. Though Jacob had done many things that we might think were dubious, he was still favoured by God, and was party to marvellous things. As Christians we, too, may also be used of God in spectacular or momentous ways. Do not think that because we have failed, or because we have a low esteem, that God thinks the same way. He will use whom He will use, if that is part of his predestined plan! Lowly we might be, but if God has a plan for us to do great things, then that is what will happen, surprising though it might be! This underlines, once again, that God works on a completely different basis: his predestination and election of souls and events.

That is why God reminds Jacob/Israel that He is the Almighty God of the coming Israeli people. He did not begin with Israel, but with Himself. This is always the proper order when God is truly involved. Though it might seem there is no link, we must apply this thinking to today. I think in particular of the Alpha course. Superficially it is the best-known and most powerful evangelistic tool in the world at this moment. What we forget is this – God never uses 'tools' to evangelise, only His Holy Spirit speaking through men ordained to be evangelists. Secondly, when God acts, He does not give the glory to mere men or to 'tools', but to Himself. This is one reason we know Alpha to be fake: it continually blesses and praises itself, instead of God. God first – all else second! That is the Holy order.

Because He is God Almighty, He will cause Jacob/Israel to be fruitful and to multiply as a nation. Not only would Israel be a nation in its own right, but it would incorporate others, to be a 'company of nations'. This 'company' or *qahal*, refers to Israel itself plus nations who would join them religiously or as an assembly. As the Christian Church came out of Israel, is this one of

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the meanings? It is a possibility. Jacob's tribe, at that time running from enemies and fairly small in number, would produce kings and a mighty kingdom. Never underestimate the power and possibilities of any Christian, including yourself! If God is with you, you can become greater than those around you. Cannot imagine it? Then you do not understand God.

God also reminded Israel that the land He promised to Abraham and to Isaac was to belong to him and his descendants. It is not popular to say it in modern times, but this promise still applies to the people of Israel. It is only because they were scattered by their own spiritual deafness that Jews lost physical possession of the land until the 20th century. It is true that the blessings of such possession depend on their obedience to God, but, even so, the land of 'Palestine' belongs to the Jews. Whether this now means Jews who are saved by grace, or to Jews *per se*, is not a subject for this study, but we must bear this in mind. Do not listen to the lies of Muslim preachers and terrorists, or to extremist Christians.

Verses 13-15

1.

"And God went up from him in the place where he talked with him.

2.

And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he talked with him, even a pillar of stone: and he poured a drink offering thereon, and he poured oil thereon.

3.

And Jacob called the name of the place where God spake with him, Bethel."

God then left Israel alone, and Jacob/Israel built another pillar as a memorial, on the spot. Then, to formalise it, he poured a 'drink offering' over it, and oil. The drink offering was wine, and the oil was either fat or olive oil. Again, he called that place Bethel. Never forget what God has done for us. Always bring Him back to memory. One way we do this today is through communion – which is our 'pillar' of remembrance.

Verses 16-20

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1.

“And they journeyed from Bethel; and there was but a little way to come to Ephrath: and Rachel travailed, and she had hard labour.

2.

And it came to pass, when she was in hard labour, that the midwife said unto her, Fear not; thou shalt have this son also.

3.

And it came to pass, as her soul was in departing, (for she died) that she called his name Ben-oni: but his father called him Benjamin.

4.

And Rachel died, and was buried in the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem.

5.

And Jacob set a pillar upon her grave: that is the pillar of Rachel's grave unto this day.”

Again, we are not given a time-scale, but we now see Israel and his people journeying onward and eastward. For the first time we hear that Rachel is pregnant and ready to give birth, just outside Ephrath (‘ash heap: place of fruitfulness’), which is Bethlehem. Rachel went into ‘hard labour’ and ‘travailed’. That is, she was in trouble – the labour was difficult and dangerous. As she struggled the midwife assured her that the baby, a son, would be born safely.

It seems that Rachel died as she gave birth, but not before she named the son Ben-oni (‘son of my sorrow’). A little later Israel/Jacob renamed him Benjamin (‘son of the right hand’). Rachel was buried just outside Bethlehem, where Jacob placed a marker, pillar of remembrance, over her grave.

Verses 21-26

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1.

“And Israel journeyed, and spread his tent beyond the tower of Edar.

2.

And it came to pass, when Israel dwelt in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine: and Israel heard it. Now the sons of Jacob were twelve:

3.

The sons of Leah; Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, and Simeon, and Levi, and Judah, and Issachar, and Zebulun:

4.

The sons of Rachel; Joseph, and Benjamin:

5.

And the sons of Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid; Dan, and Naphtali:

6.

And the sons of Zilpah, Leah's handmaid; Gad, and Asher: these are the sons of Jacob, which were born to him in Padan-aram.”

Israel continued his journey and pitched his tents just past Edar ('tower of the flock', a watch-tower for shepherds near Bethlehem). He was making his way southward to Hebron. During the time the tribe stayed outside Bethlehem, one of Israel's sons, Rueben, slept with Bilbah, Israel's concubine and formerly Rachel's maid. We are told that Israel 'heard it', but not if he did anything about it. She was not blood-related to Reuben in any way, and we do not know if it was by invitation, seduction, or what. (However, as a concubine she was a second-level wife to Israel). We are then given a list of Jacob's twelve sons – all mentioned in earlier texts.

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Verses 27-29

1.

“And Jacob came unto Isaac his father unto Mamre, unto the city of Arbah, which is Hebron, where Abraham and Isaac sojourned.

2.

And the days of Isaac were an hundred and fourscore years.

3.

And Isaac gave up the ghost, and died, and was gathered unto his people, being old and full of days: and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.”

Jacob/Israel arrived at his father's home in Mamre, at the city of Arbah or Hebron. Jacob was just in time, because a short while later, Isaac died, aged 180. Once more we see Esau and Jacob together again, to bury their father. Is it not strange – many families begin very close and together, but they drift apart. Yet, at times of stress and trouble, they come together again! It is sad that families have to drift apart, but as we see, it happened even thousands of years ago.

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