

## ***Beth-El: The House of God*** ***(Genesis 28:10-21)***

### **1) God's grace can bring blessings out of tragedy**

Through Rebekah's initiative and ingenuity, Jacob's leaving home did not look like a flight to escape the consequences of a family feud. Instead, his father sent him in honourable function to Paddan Aram to find a wife who would value the covenant promise and be a good mother for God's chosen line of which one day the Messiah would be introduced to the world. Therefore, before Jacob left, his father Isaac committed him to God's grace, provisions and care, giving him the full blessing of Abraham. This was how he equipped Jacob for spiritual leadership as well as to assure him of material blessings. The point, here, that God's grace can bring blessings out of tragedy, is: Jacob had to travel all alone and without any support, but God was with him and helped him in wonderful ways. Earlier, his grandfather Abraham had sent a servant with rich gifts to get a wife who believed in God from among his relatives in the land of Mesopotamia. Isaac let Esau go on his own way and marry a Canaanite woman, and seemingly, he would have allowed Jacob to copy the example of Esau by also marrying a Canaanite woman if Rebekah would not have intervened. Now, Isaac sent Jacob to the right place to get a wife and pray for God's blessings on him. But he did not send servants with ten camels, carrying precious gifts to bring back the bride and her maid servant like his father Abraham had done (Genesis 24:10). Instead, Isaac provided no gift, no transportation, no servants—nothing to recommend Jacob's cause as a suitor or even to provide for his own needs (Verse 10). Why didn't Isaac provide for Jacob's journey? Was it, perhaps, because Isaac still felt indignation towards Jacob because he had deceived him to receive the blessing of the first-born? Now Jacob was on his way to Aram and to a complete new start of life. Most important experiences in his life lay before him. He would find self-determination, the ability and confidence to make his own choices, to love, to marry, to become a father, to be a solver of domestic problems and in all, to have a personal knowledge about God his Creator and to enjoy His goodness in all storms of life. Jacob was on his foot and travelling alone. It was really a new experience for him. He had been with his parents all of his life. And now, he was on his way to discover himself and his destiny. Consciously, he had inward and outward fear of the uncertain future and had a troubled mind with a lot of questions like every young person who leaves the parents to live on his or her own, may have.

### **2) Jacob's dream**

God gave Jacob a dream to encourage him on the one second or third night of Jacob's journey (Verses 11ff). Why did God do this? It was probably because Jacob longed for a spoken assurance from the Lord about the covenant just like his father and grandfather had experienced. This would strengthen his faith and help him all through all the long, difficult years ahead of him, being away from the Promised Land. This dream was the beginning of a long process of God's direct dealing with Jacob. In his dream, Jacob saw a majestic stairway that reached from earth to heaven. On it, angels of God were ascending and descending. The stairway reaching into heaven was a symbol or picture to make the Lord's words clear and unforgettable. The Lord was right there, watching over Jacob. The point, here, is the first place of the angels' actions was on earth. God has commanded His angels over you, just as He did for Jacob. God found Jacob not to judge him, but to bless him. And His aim is to find you and also, to bless you. God has commissioned angels to watch carefully over the lives and interests of the ones who seek His protective care. The angels take special note of all who yield themselves into the hands of the Creator. They guide them with God's presence in all their ways. There is no limit as long as one seeks God's help. The angels are there to lift us up in our troubles and to give us support as we face our spiritual enemies. The secret to this protective

care is the heart and the intimate relationship that one has with his Maker. According to Scripture, angels are messengers who minister to those who are going to inherit eternal salvation (Hebrews 1:14). Jesus our Saviour, Himself, used this vision of Jacob in John 1:51, letting us know that He fulfilled the prophetic symbolism of the stairway. Jesus is the only true way from earth to heaven, the Mediator between God and man. Through Christ, we have heavens opening to us. The angels of the Lord encamp around them that fear the Lord, and He shall show them His covenant (Psalm 34:7). This protective care of God is not limited to church buildings or a formula prayer, but rather, it is God himself Who is willing to help anyone who seeks Him in any situation of life and with any words that come out of a God-seeking heart.

### **3) None than the House of God!**

When Jacob awoke, he was afraid and awed by God's presence. Perhaps he thought that he had come by chance to the very gate of heaven. But the knowledge that the Lord was there and was with him must have changed his entire outlook of life. Jacob's life was full of misfeelings and spiritual emptiness, but this encounter with God had brought hope to Jacob and filled him with divine joy of God's presence. Out of the abundance of his heart he said: "Surely, the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it! This is none other than the house of God- this is the gate of heaven!" (Verses 16.17) The question is: What constitutes the House of God? We have it, here, in the first book of the Bible. God's house is a place where sinners are welcome. It is a place where heaven is real. It is where we take our eyes out of time to eternity. It is a place where God reveals Himself as a giver. It is like a hospital where people come with all their physical and spiritual problems to be healed. It is a place where angels join hands with human beings to do the work of God. Rather than an institution, it is people-hood in the sense of belonging. Solomon's prayer of dedication for the House of God was to be a light for the nations. After Jesus had cleansed the House of God, He quoted Isaiah to show that God had always intended His house to be a place of worship for all nations (Isaiah 56:7; Mark 11:17). One of the greatest challenges that the House of God would face in the coming years was the same one that the early church did experience, later: the culture shock when the Holy Spirit brought new ethnic people to the fellowship. But a global mission is what God had in mind for His house. Jesus said: "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). Everyone who heard Jesus understood exactly what He meant. For in the temple that Solomon had built, there were three entrances. The first entrance was called "the way". This was where the gentile believers gathered. And it was the place where people were having merchandise. The second entrance was called "the truth", and that was where the Jews used to gather in times of prayers and ceremonies. Any gentile who would have gone through that door would have been put to death. The third door was called "the life". This was the door that led to the "Holy of holiest". Here, only the high-priest was allowed to enter once in a year after ceremonial washing. When Jesus died, the curtain that separated this part of the temple, was torn into two from top to bottom (Mark 15:38). Hebrews 10:19-22 calls this curtain "Jesus' flesh". Now the way was open, and everyone could come to the Holy of holiest. We, also, through our faith in Jesus can enter the throne-room of grace.

### **4) A partner of God**

It seems that Jacob, now, was more motivated. He had found a source of how to overcome all the obstacles which were ahead of him. Though he first saw lack of strength to produce results of his plans, he now saw the ability that God had produced out of his inability. And that is why the church is there, also, for you. Here, our pain can become power through God's help. Here, our fears can gain courage through Him. So whatever is ahead of you that you think is impossible, the House of God is where you can gain the strength to do what needs to be done. God has promised to help us with His out-stretching arm and also, the resources of skilled workers who will supply the competences needed for the work. The church or the House of

God is there to help one another to stay on course. For many times the devil will cause us to quit from the course that God has set us. But the truth is, quitters don't win, and winners don't quit. So when the task looks discouraging or the problems look overwhelming, the House of God is still the place where God promised He will be with you in all that you are going through. Jacob saw his inabilities and unwillingness to translate good intentions into effective activity. But God told him that He would be going to help him to do it and do it well. In Jacob's lack of faith, the decision not to acknowledge or trust or make use of God's perspective, power and presence was a choice that only Jacob could make because God stood ready to help him. But only he could respond to God's help in faith and obedience. And that same help is God offering to us, today. It is up to us to respond to God in faith and obedience. In Jacob's gratitude towards God he vowed that he would give one tenth of everything that God would bless him with. With that, he became a partner of God. Jacob took the stone on which he had laid during the dream and anointed it, setting it as a pillar and calling the place "Beth-El" which means, "House of God". Then, he said: "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking, and will give me food to eat and cloth to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then, the Lord will be my God, and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house" (Genesis 28:20-22). Let us think about what God has done for us through Christ Jesus! It is far more than what He did for Jacob. God is bringing us to a city where the streets are made out of gold. And if we really believe in heaven, it should be seen how we handle our belongings and people here on earth. We belong to God. All what we have has been entrusted to us by our Maker. Often, we forget His benefits in our heart to serve Him. Doing that, we serve our belongings. What do we have which has not been a gift from God? Giving to promote God's work according to Jacob is a sign that we know Who is our source. The Bible says, He became poor so that we through His poverty might become rich (2nd Corinthians 8:9). Sacrificial giving was an essential part of Christ's nature and character. By His becoming poor, we now partake of His eternal riches. God wants the same attitude among us Christians as evidence of His grace working within us (Proverbs 11:24,25). The New Testament teaches that we are stewards of God's gifts and must be used for the purpose and for the benefits of those who are in need. For instance, in the parable about the talents in Matthew 25, Jesus warns us that our place and service in heaven will depend on the faithfulness of our lives and services here on earth (Verse 29). A talent represents our abilities, time, resources and opportunities to serve God and our fellow-people. Paul wrote to the Corinthian churches: "Now He Who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God" (2nd Corinthians 9:10-15). May God continue to bless you in the way that you are investing in His Kingdom!

## **5) Jacob and us**

In Genesis 32, Jacob had obeyed God's instructions by leaving Laban, his uncle and his territory and returning to the land of Canaan (Genesis 31:13), the region where his hostile brother lived. So in the midst of Jacob's fears, God sent an angel to encourage him, again, of His continuing presence and protections. As human experience, Jacob was still fearful and distressed as he approached Esau's territory. Would he and his family suffer violence at Esau's hand because of Jacob's deception more than twenty years ago? Obviously, Jacob had never told his uncle nor his wives, servants or children about the sins of his youth, so they now had no idea what was troubling or worrying him. Jacob prayed to God for help. Jacob reminded God of His promise and protection for those who would trust in His grace. He stated the ultimate reason for his requesting of God's protection that was to fulfil God's covenant and purpose in his life. He prayed: "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness You have shown Your servant. I had only my stuff when I crossed this Jordan. But now, I have become two

groups” (Verse 11). What Jacob was doing, here, many of us, today have forgotten that it is God Who gives us the power to get wealth (Deuteronomy 8:18). Jacob presented himself, here, as an inferior reporting to his superior and hoping for his approval. But God’s reply did not come immediately. Therefore, Jacob did probably finally tell his family about the story between him and his brother Esau. And when the family heard this, they understood what Jacob meant, and that answers the question in verse 24 why Jacob was left alone, and then the answer came through that strange man who was struggling with him at Peniel. When the natural part of the fight had been dealt with, the supernatural part of it came in. The angel of the Lord asked Jacob: “What is your name?” He answered: “I am Jacob”. That means, he confessed that he was what others called him- a deceiver. When God answered him saying that from now on his name would be “Israel” which means that he had struggled with God, it was like God encouraging Jacob, saying: “You may have done what others say you did, but that is not what you really are. I have come to show you who you are. You are Israel”. This applies to us as Christians, today. God has found us from different cultures and different social backgrounds through His Son Jesus Christ and has changed us to become “Christians”, which means that we become Christ-like. This is now our true personality in Christ. God has given us the grace of his power to become His children. In addition, us Christians are also sometimes called “Israel” of God (Galatians 6:16). We are God’s strugglers. Jacob’s night of wrestling with God resulted in God’s blessing on his life. From then on, he knew that his life and well-being were dependant not on his own deceives, but on God’s help, guidance and blessings. His own scheming, selfishness and deceit had made it necessary for Jacob to leave Canaan. Now he had to humble himself and think of the welfare of others. He had to be generous with his possessions and to establish a good relationship with his brother before he returned into the Promised Land. Therefore, he selected a most generous present of goats, sheep, camels, donkeys and cattle. All were in proportions for breeding, 580 animals in all. We can say that if one’s ways please God, He will make his enemies live peaceful with him (Proverbs 16:7).

#### **6) Attraction of wealth (Genesis 33.34)**

Now Jacob was back in the land of promise. He now was there with his own family and with all his possessions. But he quickly found that problems still faced him and his family. Anyway, God was with him and met his very needs. Even though Jacob had crossed the river Jordan and was now back in Canaan he didn’t go back to Beth-El where he had promised God to build a house for Him. Instead, Jacob bought a land and settled down in Shechem which was a rich place with a lot of commerce. This sounds like the life of many Christians in our days. We often invest a lot of time, strength and money for the things that attract us for our joy instead of doing what God wants us to do. Jacob’s purchasing of the land shows faith in God’s promise that Canaan would some day be given to him and his descendants. But he was, actually, not doing it in God’s way for him “Israel” but still in his own “Jacob’s” way. This is like us doing things not in Christ’s but in worldly ways. Jacob had disciplined himself, a lot, by realizing that there was little basis for partnership between a man like him who was consecrated to the purpose of God and a man like Esau who was completely lacking of any spirituality. Jacob, now, had a good relationship with his brother, but it was best for each one of them to go on their own ways. Jacob did well of not returning to Seir where his parents had lived and where, now, Esau lived. But still, he was not where God wanted him to be, though he used his God’s-given name Israel to communicate his experience at Peniel. The title “God, the God of Israel” was a permanent witness to his household and the Canaanites. However, we have no record that God communicated with him, there, or guided him to settle down at Shechem. Like Lot, he had to find out that the attractions of the city and the influence of its people did have tragic results. The whole shameful episode of unrestrained passion, treachery and massacre at Shechem shows how close Jacob came to failure in maintaining the separa-

tion in the covenant line. Apparently, he was willing to accept Hamor's proposal and to become one people with the Canaanites (Genesis 34:8-10). Also, it took the tragedy at Shechem to save him from drifting into an unholy partnership and to open his ears to the divine call to return to Beth-El. God told Jacob to return to Beth-El where he should keep God first and have heaven in his mind.

### **7) Get rid of all the foreign gods! (Genesis 35:1-14)**

Jacob and his family did experience God's presence, protections, revelations and blessings. But he and his family had to consecrate themselves before reaching Beth-El where Jacob first had fallen in love with God. Where are the modern day gods? Perhaps you think of gods as objects of wood, stone, or metal worshipped by ancient civilizations or primitive peoples. That perception is accurate, but from the Bible's point of view, God's fundamental involves that idol-worship means that we should not allow anything or anyone to take the first place in our life instead of God (1st John 5:21). The values of our societies have loaded on all of us what we think God is and what we think He is not. Our imaginations have become the strongholds of personal gods within us. If we want to go back to Beth-El where we first fell in love with Jesus, then we must get rid of our self-made idols. The Ephesian church that Jesus asked to return back to their first love had a lot of praised qualities: They were praised by Jesus for their labour, patience, not bearing those who are evil, testing false Apostles, perseverance, and hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans. By the time John wrote to the churches in minor Asia, Christians were probably facing intensive persecutions under the Emperor Domitian (AD 81-96). He extended the practise of empire worship to demand that all citizens in the empire should refer to him as lord and god. He also used political, economic and social measures to suppress what he perceived to be resistance, including the Christian movement. It was probably during this period of history, that believers began to seek refuge in the catacombs which were normally intended to be burial places. Many of the churches at this time struggled with poverty and the reproach of heresy and dissent. That was the situation in which they were told to return to their first love. That means, knowing correct doctrine, obeying some of the commands, or worshipping in the House of God is not enough. Often we quote Jesus Who said: "I am standing at the door knocking. If anyone will open the door, I will come in and have fellowship with him" (Revelation 3:20). That was the church in Laodicea. Unfortunately, they had no compliments for what they had done right. The Owner of all things Who had made them stewards of His household warned them of being lukewarm and of pretending to be well off spiritually when they were impoverished. Also, he advised them that they had a need for repentance and overcoming. Jesus to Whom all hearts are opening and all desires known, is knocking at our door just as He knocked at the door of Jacob and asked him to return to Beth-El. Jesus is knocking at our door to get rid of everything that we put as a first priority in our lives instead of Him. Only then can we have the real Beth-El, a place where heaven is open and angels ascending from earth to heaven, bringing our prayers and petitions to the throne-room of grace and then descending down from heaven to earth to bring us answers to our prayers. What is Beth-El, just a House of God? No, it is a place to touch heaven and change the earth. At Beth-El, Jacob built an altar to renew the dedication that he had made there, thirty years before. He called the place now El-Beth-El. It seems that he was saying that he had returned to his God of Beth-El as a sign of his first love.

### **8) Sacred space**

Perhaps, for most people "Beth-El" sounds like a quaint spot on the faded map of Biblical history. Yet, the site is connected with a man and his Maker and offers us, also, important lessons for today's believers and unbelievers. It teaches us about something called "sacred space": Whenever God touches the world, that place becomes a sacred space. This was the experience of Jacob. Beth-El was sacred because God had revealed Himself, there. Likewise,

Abraham had previously built an altar near Beth-El to remember that God was also very present to him, there (Genesis 12:8; 13:3.4). This Old Testament concept of sacred spaces takes on even greater meaning in the New Testament. There we read that God, Himself, became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). In other words, God did not only touch the earth, now, but came to live on it, for a while, in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is Beth-El-like in flesh. He spoke with Nathaniel and said: "You will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (John 1:51). In other words, the same Beth-El, the House of God, had now become Jesus, the Son of God. He was the sacred person. Jesus' words to Nathaniel had been fulfilled at His baptism, when the Spirit of God descended upon Him (Matthew 3:16). Therefore, wherever Jesus went, God went. Whatever place He visited became a Beth-El or a sacred place. But the idea of sacred places does not end, there. Jesus told His disciples, including believers, today, that He would send His Spirit not only to be with us but to live in us (John 14:16.17). In other words, believers have become the House of God, the place where God lives (1st Corinthians 6:19.20). Like Jesus, wherever we go, God goes, as Christ lives in us and we live in the world. My personal question to you is: Has your life already become the House of God, a sacred place which has been touched by the Spirit of God? If not, then I recommend Jesus to you. Receive Him as your personal Saviour and have a Beth-El in your life which is heaven on earth to the glory of God!

Yours in His service, F.P. Arthur (a Ghanaian missionary)  
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