

Arise go to Bethel

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[0 : 00] Will you turn for a short time this evening to words which you will find in the book of Genesis, chapter 35, and verse 1.

Genesis, chapter 35, reading from verse 1. And God said unto Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there, and make thee an altar unto God, that appeared unto thee when thou fleddest from the face of Esau thy brother.

Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there.

Amen. Jacob was a fugitive from justice, and he was having his first experience of the bitterness of sin.

You see, sin is bitter. Sin promises so much. Sin tells us that if we follow a certain path, one way or another, that all is going to be well at the end of the day.

[1 : 57] And how many have listened to that voice, and at the end of the day, they have found bitter disappointment.

Now Jacob had sinned, aided and abetted by his mother, who no doubt had ambitions for her son, as most mothers have.

He had robbed his brother Esau of his birthright. And fearing the wrath of his brother, he had left home.

And on that first day, he was trying to put as great a distance as possible between him and his home, in case his brother might pursue him.

But God, in his grace and in his love and in his mercy, was also pursuing Jacob.

[3 : 06] And when Jacob laid down his weary head on the slopes of Bethel, he fell into a sleep, a deep sleep. And he had a remarkable dream.

He saw the angels, a ladder set up between earth and heaven, and the angels of God descending and ascending upon that ladder.

And this dream had made such an impression upon his mind, that when he awaked, it was still vividly before him.

And he realized that this was a visitation from God. And he said, surely the Lord is in this place. And I knew it not.

And then you remember how God gave him a gracious promise. And Jacob made his response to that promise.

[4 : 05] And he promised God that if he would be with him, if God will be with me, and keep me in this way which I go, and will give me bread to eat and rumen to put on, so that I come again to my Father's house in peace, then shall the Lord be my God.

And this stone which I have set for a pillar shall be God's house. And of all that thou shalt give me, I will surely give the tenth unto thee.

That briefly was the story of Jacob's encounter with God. And now, as I indicated, the years have passed.

And as Jacob's thoughts revert to Bethel, he is confronted, first of all, with an unfulfilled vow.

He had made this vow to God. And God had prospered him. God had blessed him.

[5 : 24] He had become a man of substance. He was wealthy. He had his flocks and his herds. And yet, the vow was not fulfilled.

You see, sometimes there can be dangers in prosperity. We are not told that prosperity of itself is something which is wrong.

But nevertheless, it can become dangerous. Because when a man prospers, his whole mind centers around those things which are material.

And more and more time is taken up with material things. So that God is very often relegated to the background.

And there is little time left for him. Or for his worship. Or for the advancement of his kingdom.

[6 : 32] That is a danger. That is a danger. To which we must ever be alert. What shall it profit a man?

Though he gain the whole world and lose his own soul. Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul.

You may prosper and God makes his people prosper. But we have always got to see. We have always got to ensure. That we get our priorities right.

Seek ye the kingdom of God and his righteousness. And all these things shall be added thereunto. And so when Jacob prospered.

He forgot his vow. And it wasn't kept. And is it not true to say my friends. That the history of the world.

[7 : 36] Is a history of unfulfilled vows. Perhaps it's a young man like Jacob. And he said to God very much the same as Jacob said.

I'm setting out on life. If I make a success of it. If I can be sure of the help of God. Then everything will be alright. Then in a few years time.

I'm going to devote my life. To the service of my maker. And the days pass.

And the years come and go. And the vow has not yet been fulfilled. You know I wouldn't be the least little bit surprised.

If there was somebody here tonight. Who once said that. But the vow has never been fulfilled. Or perhaps it may have been.

[8 : 47] In that time of sickness. When you were conscious of weakness. And when the outlook was not very good.

And you wondered what the future held in store for you. And on that sick bed. You bowed your head in the presence of your maker.

And you said oh God. If only you will raise me to health and strength. Things are going to be different.

And my life is going to be yours. And with the blessing of God. The sickness passed.

And you are going about now. As healthy as you ever were. But has the vow. Has the vow ever been fulfilled.

[9 : 48] Or perhaps it may have been in the hour of danger. And you found yourself in a critical situation.

I can well remember during the. Second world war. How young men used to come to me. And say as they prepared to go into the battle.

You know Padre of God. If God will only bring me safely through this lot. My life is going to be different. Some of them alas.

Went into the battle. And never returned. Never had an opportunity. Of fulfilling their vow. Others went into the battle. And in the good providence of God.

They were spared. And came back. Only to forget. What they had said. And the vow. Had never been fulfilled.

[10 : 49] Or perhaps it might be a businessman. And suddenly. He strikes adversity. Things had been going so well.

The business was prospering. And then perhaps through no fault of his own. Things changed. And he found that his accounts couldn't balance. And he was getting into the red.

And he said. If only. If only God will help me. Out of this time of trouble. This time of adversity. Then things are going to be different.

And I will give myself over to him. And God did help him. And things were different. But has the vow been fulfilled.

Are you any nearer God tonight. Than you were on the day that you made that vow. Are you giving more of your time to God now.

[11 : 58] Than you gave when you promised that you would. When you prayed to him. And perhaps Jacob.

Perhaps God is saying to you tonight. Even as he said to Jacob. Arise. And go to Bethel. To the place of the unfulfilled vow.

To the place where God first met with you. To the place where you could even see the ladder.
Between earth and heaven. And fulfill that vow.
Which you made in his presence. And then too. There are those vows.
Let us never forget. Vows which those of us. Who are parents. Vows. It took at the baptism of our
children. Vows that.

[13:02] By our own walk. And conversation. We were going to have set an example. To the little
ones.

Whom God had graciously given to us. Vows that we were going to instruct them. Out of his book.
In the good hope.

That God would so bless. So bless that instruction. That they might learn. To love him. And to know
him. Have those vows been fulfilled?

Will the day ever come. When perhaps those little ones. Will turn round. And point the accusing
finger. At those who made the vows. Because they had not been faithful.

To their promise. It's a solemn thought. We cannot take the sacraments of God lightly.

[14:03] They have their own specific purpose. They have their own place. In the solemn economy
of grace. And when we make them.

We must remember. That we do so. In the presence of the most high God. An unfulfilled vow.
You know. Whether you come into that category or not. But then we have here also. A divine
command. Arise.

Go up to Bethel. And dwell there. Now notice that God doesn't upbraid Jacob. To begin with. But
the very mention of that word Bethel.

Jogs his memory. It's just like a pinprick. Reminding him of what took place there. So long ago.
Reminding him of the promise.

[15:08] Which he had made. The promise which. Was never fulfilled. And when he said to Jacob.
Arise.

And go to Bethel. He added these further words. Dwell there. If you can't. He said. If you can't
remember Bethel otherwise.

Make your abode there. Stay in Bethel. Stay near the place. Where God met with you. And where
you made that vow to him.

Him. And where he promised to bless you. And you promised that you would be his faithful servant.
And do not these words speak to some of us here tonight.

Do they not remind us that we must not stray from the initial experience. Is there somebody here
tonight. Who can look back perhaps to a Bethel experience of some years ago.

[16:13] God seemed very near. And God seemed very near. And it was so wonderful to be
conscious of his presence and of his blessing. But with the passing of the years.

The enthusiasm has gone. And the fire which weren't once burned so brightly. Is now so dim. That
you can scarcely detect the glowing embers.

Because you have neglected God. Because you have strayed far from the initial experience. And so
God is saying to you tonight.

Arise and go to Bethel. And build an altar. You remember that was one of the things which Jacob
had promised to do.

If God was to bless him. If God was to prosper him. If God was going to help him. Then he said I'm
going to build an altar. Unto the Lord. And the altar had never been built.

[17:21] And it was after that. That God then reminded him. That he had made that vow. When he
fled.

From the presence of his brother Esau. And Jacob had met Esau. Since then.

And he looked forward to that meeting. When he heard that Esau was coming. He looked forward to
that meeting.

With much foreboding. And you see. Even yet. The old astute Jacob. Was coming to the surface.
The schemer. The planner. He was afraid that Esau. Might be angry with him. That Esau would
take revenge on him. And he said.

[18:15] Now. I've got all my. My loved ones around about me. I've got my flocks. And my herds.
I'm going to divide them into two. One can go that way.

And the other half. Can go that way. And at least. I know that some will be safe. You see. The old
astute Jacob.

Was still there. And yet. Somehow or other. He realized. That that was not enough. He had to do something more. And you remember.

How we read. After he had done that. He went. Over the. The. The. The. The. The. The. The. The. The. The. The. The. The.

The. The. The. The. The. The. Had a wrestling match with God. And he prevailed. And God gave him a blessing.

[19 : 19] And God gave him a new name. And he said your name is not going to be Jacob. That's a name you could well be ashamed of. Because it means cheat. It means liar.

It means supplanter. You're going to be given a new name. You're going to be given the name Israel. A prince with God.

One who has prevailed. One who has wrestled with God. And has brought a blessing upon himself. And you know then we find a great mystery.

And it's something which should humble us. Because Jacob. The man with the new name. The man who had wrestled with God and prevailed.

He didn't go straight to Bethel to fulfill his vow. Oh no. He went to Succoth. And what happened there?

[20 : 26] He was living with heathen people. People who knew not his God. And who had no time for his God.

And there was intermarriage between them. And Jacob solved his conscience by saying. When the request was made from Hamor.

That this intermarriage might take place. Jacob solved his conscience by saying. Right. I'll agree to this on condition.

That you will agree to be circumcised. As if that outward right. Was going to make them. Something which was different.

You see he compromised. He compromised with evil. Now that's a very solemn thought. Isn't it?

[21 : 25] That we can go from the very presence of God. The place where God wrestled with us. The place where we appear to have the victory.

And where the blessings seem to be so near. Just ready to descend. And then we go back into sin. The flesh lusteth against the spirit.

And the spirit against the flesh. And these two are contrary the one to the other. This great tug of war.

The evil that we would not that we do. And the good that we would. That we do not. Israel.

The prince with God. Went and mingled. With the wicked. And now we have God summoning him again.

[22 : 32] And God said unto Jacob. Arise. Go up to Bethel. And dwell there. That's where you should be. Not in Succoth. Not in the edge of the world. But right in the center.

In the place where I met you. So that you can recapture your lost love. Love. So that you can feel and know. That I am near to you.

And what do we find as a result of that challenge. We find at last.

An obedient servant. Jacob didn't argue this time. He realized he had been wrong.

And he issued a command. To his family. And to those that were with him. Put away he says. The strange gods that are among you.

[23 : 32] Those strange gods to which they had become accustomed at Succoth. Put away the strange gods that are among you. And be clean. And change your garments. 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. And so he set his face toward Bethel. And the first thing which he did.

When he arrived at Bethel. Was to build an altar. His creature comforts were forgotten for the moment.

He had got his priorities right. The first thing to do was to build the altar. Which was the symbol of the worship of God.

[24 : 31] God had to come into his life. And God had to remain in his life. And he had to stay at Bethel.

The place. Where God met him. So he went back. In the good providence of God.

To the place of the unfulfilled vow. And perhaps that's what we are called upon to do tonight. Might we say that for some perhaps.

These past days. Have been a Bethel experience. When God has seemed. Very near.

When we have been conscious of his blessing. When we have enjoyed the fellowship of his people. When we have engaged in his worship.

[25 : 33] Where we have partaken of the sacrament. And renewed our vows before him. And have said in effect.

As for me and my house. We will serve the Lord. God. But let us take our warning. From the experience of Jacob.

For that after all. Is one of the reasons. Why the scriptures are given to us. In order that we might profit thereby. And let us remember.

The dreadful possibility. That we can go from Babel. Into the world. From Bethel.

Into the world. What a solemn thought. And yet how true it is. And so what we are called upon to do.

[26 : 39] Is to make. The Bethel experience permanent. And we can only do that. By waiting upon God. Not in fits and starts.

But all the time. Making ourselves conscious of his presence. And asking that his blessing. Might rest upon us.

And when the altar has been built. In the home. And in every Christian home. There should be an altar. When the altar has been built.

In the home. We have a constant reminder. Of the presence of God. The God of Jacob.

For he was the God of Jacob. Despite all Jacob's waywardness. Despite all Jacob's sinfulness. He was still the God of Jacob.

[27 : 38] He had made a covenant with him. And his covenant would not be broken. Because he is an unchanging. Because he is an unchanging and unchangeable God.

He still makes a covenant with his people. And he promises to bless them. And though from time to time.

We stray far from him. Though we are poor sinful creatures. Yet in his love and in his mercy. He welcomes us.

And he tells us to remain. In the place. Of the initial experience. But I wonder if there is somebody here tonight.

Of whom it may be true. That they have never. Had an initial experience. You have been listening to what I have been saying.

[28 : 41] You have perhaps been a little bit puzzled about it. Because you have never really come face to face with God. As Jacob did on that memorable night in Bethel.

Wouldn't it be wonderful. If somebody had an initial experience tonight. An experience of the grace of God.

If God seemed to be so near. That you could see him. You could see the end of the ladder. And you realized that God was there.

And if by his grace. You were able to bow down. And claim him as your Lord. And as your master. Then surely there would be joy.

In the presence of the angels of God. And it was angels who were descending. And ascending upon the ladder. There would be joy in the presence of the angels of God.

[29 : 51] Because of a sinner who had repented. And who had turned unto God. But you are trying to resist him.

You are trying to flee from him. Perhaps you are saying in the words of the poet of old. I fled him down the days and down the nights.

I fled him down the arches of the years. I fled him down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind.

Conscious of the fact that there was somebody pursuing you.

Somebody after you. And yet you didn't want to have any dealings with them. You were afraid it was going to change your manner of life. And yet.

The heavenly one is pursuing. Who knows but he may be pursuing someone tonight. And that someone might be you.

[30 : 48] Who knows but this might be the beginning of a new life for you. You would have a Bethel experience. When God draws near and blesses you in his love and in his mercy.

And even a soul on the Damascus road. Was confronted by the risen Christ. So you may be tonight.

And he's saying to you. It's hard. It's hard to kick against the pricks. Your conscience has been troubling you for a while.

You haven't been very happy. Because there's been this struggle going on within your heart and within your life. God grant that in his love and in his mercy.

He may enable you tonight. To bow down before him. In his presence. And to say. Lord.

[31 : 59] What wilt thou have me to do? What wilt thou have me to do? And when you ask that question.

He'll give you the answer. And may you be enabled to rise. And take up your cross. And follow him. 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. Will you substitute your name for Jacob tonight?

Arise. John. Mary. Donald. I am calling you says God. Go to Bethel.

[33 : 14] And dwell. There. May he enable us all. To go to Bethel. The place where he drew nigh.

To his child of old. The place where he still meets. With his children. Let us pray. O Lord our God. There is so much in thy word which we cannot understand. So much that is strange and mysterious and hidden from our view.

For here we see. But through a glass darkly. But we do thank thee that thou hast revealed thyself to us. Through Jesus Christ thy son.

Through him who came in the fullness of time. And who suffered and who died upon the cruel cross of shame. And we pray that we may hear his voice calling us tonight.

[34 : 25] To believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. So that we indeed shall be saved. We thank thee for these days of fellowship.

Which we have had one with the other. And we thank thee for the sense of thy presence. Which has been ours. And now when we part one from the other.

And as we go our several ways. And as we go into the days which lie ahead. We know not oh Lord. For thou hast not seen fit to reveal it to us. We know not what the future holds in store. But we do ask that thou wouldst be with us.

We do ask that thou wouldst be the companion of our pilgrim way. Until our traveling days are done. And we beseech of thee oh Lord.

[35 : 27] That when that day comes. That day when we must needs leave behind. The trappings of this world. We pray that we may through faith be found so united to Christ.

That at the end of the journey. We may hear his word of welcome. Well done good and faithful servant.

Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord. And this we ask with the pardon of our every sin. For Jesus sake. Amen.