

JACOB & HIS LONG ROAD HOME

Some Light for Modern Pilgrims

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Jacob had a divinely ordained birthright, blessing and destiny. Before he was born his mother, Rebekah, on enquiring of the Lord concerning her pregnancy, had received the revelation that *“Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples, born of you, shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.”* (Genesis 25:23)

Unlike the mother of our Lord, who, after hearing from the Bethlehem shepherds the account of their awe-inspiring angelic visitation, *“kept all these things, pondering them in her heart”*, Rebekah shared God’s word about him with the younger of her twin sons, and together they sought by means of their own to bring to fulfilment the prophetic word. Had they simply trusted God, they would have seen events unfold according to the Divine plan, but they were not content to wait for that.

The story is a familiar one, how Jacob seized the opportunity to induce Esau to sell him his birthright in exchange for a plate of stew. Then, later, how Rebekah and he combined their wits to deceive Isaac into imparting the blessing of the firstborn upon Jacob. As a result of this despicable act of deceit Jacob was obliged to flee far off to Padanaram to his uncle, Laban. It was, in the scheming of mother and her favourite son, to be only for a short time, long enough to find a wife, but their separation was to last for twenty long years.

So we find Jacob in this far-off land, in exile from his true home, and in a place of servitude. Significantly, from Genesis 29:15 -31:6 the word “serve” or “service” occurs no fewer than ten times. Laban was a hard and devious taskmaster, determined to extract the maximum of labour from his crafty nephew, and to keep him in his employ for as long as ever possible.

So, here is this man of divine destiny, who should have been God’s freeman, in a situation of bondage and frustrating service, a man who was destined for the full privileges of sonship reduced to a paid servant. As I pondered these things recently, I received some insights which I believe to be of the Lord. Jacob represents the believer in the institutional church, or, if you like, the collective of believers in those organisations. Those who were redeemed for freedom and sonship are in a situation of servitude to denominational systems, programs, organisations, ministries, and many, like Jacob, are finding it frustrating, exhausting and unfulfilling. The church system can be just as ruthless an exploiter of labour as the cunning Laban!

Why was Jacob where he was? Was it not that he had sought to fulfil his divine destiny by his own schemes and plans? Believers in the Lord Jesus Christ are likewise born to a great destiny, to be living members of the organic Body of Christ. Why are so many in bondage such as we have indicated? Is it not because men have taken things into their own hands and have sought, by their own wit and wisdom, to bring into being the Church which only the Lord Jesus himself can build? So, what was born to be a living organism, a spiritual house infused with the life and power of the Holy Spirit, has been transformed into ever-multiplying religious systems, entangling their adherents with the yoke of bondage.

Deep down in Jacob’s heart, however, there was a stirring, a divinely implanted homesickness. There was something better for him. He knew it, but knew not how it could come into being. He had even spoken to Laban about his desire for home, only to be ensnared into a further period of

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servitude by the subtle persuasiveness of his uncle's arguments. Many in today's churches are like him. They have an inner conviction that New Testament Church-life is something more than what they are currently experiencing. That inner yearning can be, as it was for Jacob, the very first step on the long road home which we are going to look at in what follows.

A Divine Command

Into Jacob's hungry heart the voice of God spoke, *"Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you."* Calling his wives, Rachel and Leah, Jacob shared his heart with them, spilling out his frustrations with the way he had been manipulated by his father-in-law uncle Laban, and telling them of his visitation from the Lord who had said, *"I am the God of Bethel where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now arise, go forth from this land, and return to the land of your birth."* Having heard him out, Rachel and Leah uttered a word of infinite holy wisdom which deserves to be inscribed in the heart of every true believer; *"Whatever God has said to you, do."*

I am writing this today because, just over ten years ago, Margaret and I heard clearly from the Lord a similar command to leave the land of organised church, where we had sojourned for so long, and to turn our steps towards the land of the birth of the Church, towards Church as it is described and revealed in the New Testament, and we decided to do as God had said.

That hearing of the divine imperative *"Go forth from this land"* is absolutely essential. Until Jacob heard it, however dissatisfied and frustrated he had been, he had no effective motivation to get out from under his long-endured servitude. But, when he did hear, there was no procrastination, no rationalising and discussing of the pros and cons of such a move. In obedience to the word of wisdom in the mouths of his wives *"He arose.... to go to the land of Canaan to his father Isaac."* (*Genesis 31:17*)

Here, what I want to say is; if you are homesick for the true Church of the New Testament, chafing under the manipulative demands of the religious system to which you belong, stay until you hear clearly for yourself the Shepherd's voice "Come out!" But, when you have once heard, let your response be as Jacob's, instant, decisive and irrevocable. I cannot stress these things too strongly. Mere frustration with the church or something like a personality clash with the pastor, or boredom with the religious routine, these do not justify getting out, and will not provide enduring motivation for the long road home. Jacob only got out after God had so commanded and assured him "I will be with you." It is solely when our coming out is one of obedience to the heavenly call that we have the strong assurance that the Lord is with us. Any other basis of leaving may see you on your own and struggling to survive. Many have made shipwreck by leaving on insufficient grounds. On the other hand, I also know some who have heard the call, knowing that it was from God, but have not obeyed. They have said to me things like, "I can see what you are saying is true, but I cannot take that road." Sadly they remain the captives of the systems they serve. This leads to another important observation. There is a danger to be avoided, the danger of negotiating with our erstwhile religious master and its representatives, priest, pastor or elder.

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Do Not Parley With Laban.

The timing of God's call to Jacob to go out coincided with the absence of Laban from the home base. He had gone off to the shearing of his sheep. Before Laban became aware of what had happened, Jacob and his retinue of people and animals had put three days travelling between them. Jacob had once before expressed to Laban his desire to leave and return home, but the wily and tenacious uncle was not about to lose this productive source of labour and, as we have seen, he drove yet another bargain to retain him. *"I have learned by divination"*, said Laban, *"That the Lord has blessed me because of you; name your wages and I will give it."* God chose the time of His command so that Jacob would be able to make the separation decisive before Laban had any opportunity to exert his powers of persuasion to exact yet a further period of hired service. This all has significance. The religious system never lets anyone go easily. Let someone have a desire for "Home" in the sense of knowing Church as at its birth; if such a person goes to discuss it with his pastor or elders you may be sure that, Laban-like they will speak of the blessing his service in the church has been, how he is needed, and they will seek to make some bargain to retain him. Somewhere I have read that the religious system is like an octopus. It has many tentacles, and if a person breaks free from one of these clutching arms he is quickly embraced by another!

The conclusion from the above is: The call of God to Jacob was utterly clear:

- a) it coincided with the longing in his heart.
- b) there was an awesome divine encounter in which the command came and
- c) the call was confirmed by the word of wisdom from Rachel and Leah, *"Whatever God has said to you, do."*

If you have heard a like clear call of God to come out, do not stop to parley with Laban. Rise up! Shake off the bonds of servitude! Step out as God's freeman! Only by doing this will you be liberated. Laban has many strategies and specious arguments by which he will retain you if you give him the chance.

Laban did catch up with Jacob three days after his nephew had left. But now Jacob was free. The chains which held him were broken, and he no longer was susceptible to the pressures of Laban's persuasiveness. They finally parted amicably when Laban perceived that Jacob's decision was irreversibly made.

We Are Pilgrims on a Journey

So, at last Jacob was on the long road home. This brings me to another important point. On stepping out from the institutional church I am not instantly home. There is a journey to be made, a pilgrimage in which we will be under the discipline of the Holy Spirit to prepare us for the fullness of that to which we have been called. I was impressed in spirit by something I read some months ago about the difference between "wanderers" and "pilgrims". Pilgrims have a goal in their hearts. They are prepared for a hazardous and lonely trek. They will not give up until they arrive. Wanderers however lack that driving motivation. They are easily diverted and side-tracked. They try this and try that, and they arrive nowhere. It is my observation that some who no longer go to church are simply wanderers. They have no clear view of the goal. They are spiritual vagrants drifting aimlessly from place to place, trying this and that, and they may easily be inveigled back into the service of Laban. Jacob was from this point on a true pilgrim. True, God had yet much work to do to overcome the natural strength of the man, his reliance on his own schemes and

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plans, but the journey had begun.

Angelic Encouragement

“Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him; and when Jacob saw them he said, ‘This is God’s army!’” How gracious God is! It was no small thing for Jacob to move out as he did, after at least twenty years in Padanaram. He must have had fears and doubts about what might lie ahead. Right at the beginning God reassured him that, as He had promised, He was with him by revealing to his spiritual eye this host of ministering angels.

Our own experience of setting out on the road “home” has had some parallels. On the day when we made the decision to do what the Lord had said, a great burden was lifted from our hearts. The inner wrestlings and heart heaviness were replaced with waves of holy joy and peace. Later, when questions and doubts were sown in our minds, Father illuminated certain Scriptures to give us strong assurance that, yes, He was with us. To give just one example: experiencing a sense of isolation some months after we had stepped out, I struggled with queries as to whether we had heard aright, and thoughts like “Should we go on, or should we go back?” were in my heart. My Scripture reading took me to Jeremiah 15:16-20. These verses leapt out at me reflecting in an amazing way, as they did, what I had been feeling. And there in v.19 was the answer to my heart-question, *“They shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them.”* It was not the angelic vision of Jacob, but it had the same effect; wonderful encouragement!

A Personal Crisis

We have seen how hitherto Jacob had been the schemer, the self-confident planner, reliant on his razor-sharp wits. Maybe he even thought that he could make this pilgrimage in his own strength, and arrive back home by the exercise of his own innate wisdom. God had to teach him otherwise!

I have just been reading Oswald Chambers’ little book on Abraham. Relevant to what we are saying is the following quotation: “If we try to do God’s will through our own effort, we produce Ishmael. Much of our modern Christian enterprise is “Ishmael”, that is, it is born not of God, but of an inordinate desire to do God’s will our own way.” Many have thought they could arrive home at New Testament type Church by deducing from the Scriptures, and applying what they see as the basic structures of that original vibrant creation of the Holy Spirit. They have brought forth Ishmaels who do not inherit the promises of God.

In the mercy and grace of God, Jacob was led by the Lord into an awesome personal crisis. To avoid disaster in his impending meeting with his brother Esau, he had still been relying on his own scheming, albeit accompanied by prayer. All his family and belongings having passed over the brook Jabbok, Jacob was left alone for the night and there in the darkness *“a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.”* It was the Lord wrestling against the self-reliance of Jacob. And Jacob was strong in that. The divine wrestler did not prevail until he had touched the hollow of Jacob’s thigh and it was put out of joint. His strength thus broken, Jacob now clung to his adversary with the memorable words, *“I will not let you go unless you bless me.”*

“What is your name?” asked the man. Shamefacedly and humbled, because he now saw in the presence of this divine being how accurately the name had portrayed his character - the schemer, the supplanter, the deceiver, he confessed in that one pregnant word, “Jacob.” *“Your name shall*

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no more be called Jacob, but Israel. "Israel" means "God commands". In his book "Gleanings from Genesis" A.W. Pink vividly brings out the contrast of the names. The self-reliant Jacob had hitherto ruled his own life and manipulated others, and, as the Divine adversary said, he had "prevailed" or succeeded. The recognition of just who his adversary of the night had been dawned upon a chastened and awed Jacob. *"I have seen God face to face"* he said. As he set out to rejoin his family we read *"The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his thigh."* Gracious crippling! No more Jacob! God had confronted and broken his reliance on the flesh with all its schemes and plans. It was indeed the dawn of a new day.

If ever we are to complete the journey "home", we each stand in need of a similar crisis. The other night I was watching a game of one-day cricket on T.V. One of the Australian players was running full tilt to prevent the ball reaching the boundary. As he made the last stride before stooping to pick it up he was arrested in pain. He had torn a hamstring. All his cricketing skills were now useless because his thigh had been crippled. No more bowling, no more fielding and no opportunity to bat; he limped painfully off to the dressing room. What happened to that player in the natural, God did to Jacob in the spiritual. To change the metaphor, God laid the axe to the root of Jacob's natural strength, his reliance on his own schemes and plans.

For each individual who responds to the Shepherd's voice and comes out, there will be, at some stage, such an encounter. We cannot engineer it ourselves, but assuredly somewhere on the pilgrim journey God will confront us, and in that never-to-be-forgotten experience all our religious strength to plan, to scheme and to organise will be for ever maimed, and we will be left clinging to the Lord as Jacob was. Like the cricket player our old religious self will limp from the field. From there on in it must be God's plans, God's ways and not ours.

For me it happened on the morning of October 28, 1986 in my study, when after over fifty years of exerting all my energies in working for God within the organised church, He said to me "If you want Church the way I first created it, then all your humanly devised ways of church have to die." That morning He touched the hollow of my thigh, and in that blessed weakness I too cried in effect, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." That was the day of final separation from the church system

Meeting Esau

Prior to the encounter we have been looking at, Jacob had made elaborate plans for the meeting with his brother, a meeting he feared. After all, had he not fled from home dreading the anger of his brother? You can read all about it in chapter 32 of Genesis verses 1-21. What happened? When he came near to Esau, *"His brother ran to meet him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept."* O Jacob, all your carefully laid plans and schemes were not needed. God had it all in hand! It is a lesson all pilgrims need. When God is leading the way we can trust Him implicitly for all that lies ahead. He doesn't need our help.

Dangerous Stop-overs

Having been thus marvellously reunited with his brother, Jacob moved on again and came to a place called Succoth. The name means "booths" i.e. temporary shelters, and that, I believe, was all it was meant to be, just a place of brief sojourn. But see what Jacob did. *"He built himself a house and made booths for his cattle."*

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I have not entitled this section “Dangerous Stopovers” without reason. On the pilgrimage from servitude with the Laban of organised church to the experience of life at home in the Church which is a living organism, there is an ever-present danger. It is the danger of stopping and “building a house.” The history of Christianity is full of examples of those who set out from Padanaram with a clear vision of “home” only to settle in some Succoth, abandoning the tent of the pilgrim in exchange for “a house”, an organisation, a denomination, a movement. For those who wish to check this out, books like “The Pilgrim Church” or “The Torch of the Testimony” will provide abundant evidence of what I am saying .

The Reformation, for example, was a great wake-up call of God, rousing His people to flee from the corruptions and errors of Rome to a Church such as the New Testament Scriptures portray. But look today at the lumbering ecclesiastical machinery of Lutheranism, Presbyterianism, Anglicanism, massive “houses” which man has built. Even some of the most excitingly radical in that great move of God, who attracted the opprobrium and persecuting hatred of both Rome and the main stream of reform, are now fossilised religious museum pieces like the Amish communities. Nearer our day, the great exodus from organised churches which was the Brethren movement has become itself divided established houses made with hands. And personally we were involved with a company of believers who fled from Laban, only to stop at Succoth and build a house. It was only the mercy and intervention of the Lord that delivered us out of that dangerous stopover to continue our pilgrimage.

Man is the inveterate organiser and builder, ever ready to take things out of the hands of God, and with the best of religious motives to begin to construct something for God. Will the time never come when believers will become simple obedient pilgrims, living in tents, moving on towards home and sternly resisting all temptation to stop and build a house? God’s desire is that He Himself build us into His house, the “spiritual house” of which the apostle Peter writes.

Individualism

We do not know how, but at some stage Jacob realised his mistake, abandoned his house at Succoth and moved on, only to make another dangerous halt, this time in Shechem, where, we read, *“He erected an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel (the God of Israel).”* Here he was acknowledging God as his own personal God. While that is good, and each individual has to know God for himself, it also speaks of the danger of individualism. That is one of the dangers of Shechem, and it is a hazard for those who have left the organised churches too. “Home” is a place of corporate relationships, and to stop at the place where one is content just with an individual relationship with the Lord is to come short of the goal to which we have been called. The Lord does not call us to leave the organised church just do “do our own thing”. “Home” is a place of inter-relationship. The organic Church is a corporate organism.

Seduction by the World

This is the other danger of lingering at Shechem. In the story as recorded in chapter 34 we see how Dinah was seduced by the son of the prince of the land, and how this ruler sought to bring Jacob and his family into alliance with himself.

“Make marriages with us; give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves. You shall dwell with us; and the land shall be open to you; dwell and trade in it and get property in it.”

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Freed from the disciplines and constraints of life in the organised church, there is a danger of succumbing to this siren call of the world instead of pressing on into all that God has called us to. The “Prince of this world”, our enemy, would love to deceive us, entice us to dwell in his territory and make compromising alliances with his people. He lies in wait to waylay any pilgrims who are not vigilant and keeping their eye on the goal. It has been grievous to observe that some who started out with enthusiasm have ended up in this way, no longer bearing the marks of the pilgrim, but virtually absorbed by the world.

On Towards Home

The prince of Shechem had twice repeated his seductive invitation to “**dwell**” with him, but at this point in his pilgrimage the Lord again intervened with a reiterated call to Jacob, “*Arise, go up to Bethel and **dwell there**; and make there an altar to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.*” At this point there was another significant crisis of the pilgrimage. With the call came the conviction that the advancing company were harbouring things from the old life in Padanaram. Moved by that conviction, Jacob said to his household and all who were with him, “*Put away the foreign Gods that are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your garments; then let us arise and go up to Bethel.*”

We can get a goodly way along the road of our pilgrimage still clinging to things from our former ways of church life. I’m thinking of things like the need for organised meetings, forums for the “ministries” which we were perhaps so proud of, “praise and worship” sessions, the preoccupation with success in terms of numbers, carefully packaged theological systems. There are plenty of others. Jacob relied on each member of his party to recognise what were his or her “gods” brought from Padanaram. Before we may advance to Bethel all these have to be put away along with the ornamental trinkets from their former life, “*the rings that were in their ears.*” They had to change their garments. “*Clothe yourselves with humility*”, says the apostle Peter, and that is the only fitting garment for those who approach Bethel.

The Four Significant Places of “Home”

Here we come to the climax of Jacob’s pilgrimage, and the last stages of his journey take him first to Bethel, then to Bethlehem, on to Eder and finally back home with his father Isaac at Hebron. Each of these place-names has profound significance revealing differing aspects of the Church after God’s heart, the true Home of His people. “Bethel” means “The House of God”, “Bethlehem” “The House of Bread”, “Eder” signifies “Flock” and “Hebron” is “The place of communion or fellowship”. I am conscious that here we approach deep mysteries and truths that defy confining to words, but I am convinced that here in this earliest book of the Scriptures we have a divine revelation of the Church conceived and birthed and ruled from heaven, the Church to which God is calling us to return. Let’s look at each in turn.

Bethel, The House of God.

This place had a profound significance for Jacob. It was here, on his flight from Esau so many years before, that he had had his initial awesome encounter with the living God in the dream of the ladder set up between heaven and earth, above which stood the Lord with His angels ascending and descending on it. God spoke to him, first identifying Himself and then making this amazing promise; “*Behold, I am with you and I will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to*

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this land; for I will not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you.” When Jacob awoke his words reflected the indelible impression the experience had made on him. *“Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it.”* and *“How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”*

Now the time of fulfillment had come. After the long, frustrating years of servitude to Laban, after hearing and answering the call of God to return, after the dangers of the long pilgrimage, here he was back at Bethel, and God appeared to him again, blessing him and reconfirming the change in his name from Jacob to Israel, and reiterating the promise of fruitfulness and possession of the land promised to Abraham.

I have, in my spirit, a strong impression that in our day God is at work in thousands of hearts of those long held in the hired service of the religious and ecclesiastical Labans, bringing them back, no longer Jacob, but Israel, to Bethel, the House of God. In the words of Psalm 102:13, *“Thou wilt arise and have pity on Zion; it is time to favour her; the appointed time has come.”* As I keep meeting fellow pilgrims on this road, I find my heart shouting, “Yes, the Lord is again establishing Bethel, His house. It is the appointed time. Hallelujah!”

What is The House of God?

While Jacob was awe-struck by his experience of that first night at Bethel, I do not think he understood its significance or even feebly comprehended what he said, but in prophetic foresight, like his father Abraham, he was anticipating the day of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the revelations of the New Testament concerning the House of God.

In the first chapter of John’s Gospel (verses 45-51) is the account of Nathaniel’s introduction to Jesus, and it resonates with echoes of Jacob’s dream at Bethel. Jesus reveals to the once-sceptical but now believing Nathaniel that He is the fulfillment of that ancient dream, that He is the appointed One through whom all God’s communications with man are to be channelled. *“Truly truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”* In the Church, the true Bethel, everything comes through Christ, and in a profound sense Jesus Christ is Himself the House of God. It follows that if we are “in Him” we too are the House of God. Believers in Christ, and Christ in believers constitute the House. In a different figure of speech the same truth is expounded in Jesus’ discourse on the True Vine in John 15, about which I have previously written.

It is fascinating to note that the revelation to Jacob of the House of God should come in a place where there was no tabernacle, no temple, no synagogue, no cathedral or chapel but only the open sky above and a stone for a pillow. Between then and the coming of the Lord Jesus there was a tabernacle and temple, but these were only shadows of the reality which was to come with Christ. Of the temple in Jerusalem, so magnificent that it made the disciples gasp in wonder at its massive stones, Jesus said, *“There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”* The same is true of every ecclesiastical system erected by man. On that day Jesus, standing with his handful of followers represented the first of the true Bethel of the Spirit; no temple, no church building, just people united in Jesus Christ.

Later on the martyr Stephen roused the bitter and murderous ire of the religious authorities in

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Jerusalem by teaching things that threatened “*This holy place*” (the temple), “*the law*” and “*the customs which Moses delivered to us.*” (Acts 6:13-14). In his memorable and courageous speech, before their stones rained on his head, he declared, “*Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands.*” Those who abandon the “houses made with hands” of the churches today, and who take a stand for the true Bethel are similarly likely to meet the anger and opposition of those whose holy places, laws and customs are threatened.

The teaching concerning the house of God in the New Testament is plain and clear. Look at the following Scriptures:

1) **Ephesians 2:19-22.** “*So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God (Bethel), built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.*”

2) **1 Peter 2:4-5.** “*Come to Him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God’s sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*”

3) **Hebrews 3:1-6.** “*Therefore holy brethren, who share a heavenly call consider Jesus the apostle and high priest of our confession. He was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in God’s house. Yet Jesus has been counted worthy of as much more glory than Moses as the builder of a house has more honour than the house. (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, but Christ was faithful over God’s house as a son. And we are his house if we hold fast our confidence and pride in our hope.*” In this passage note that “We are His house”, that Christ is the owner, builder and ruler of the House.

4) **2 Corinthians 7:16b** “*We are the temple of the living God.*”

Pause for a time now to really open your spirit to what is being spoken in these Scriptures. Here a House of God is described wholly of heavenly origin and under heaven’s control. There is no talk of denominations, organisations, or physical real estate. This is in Peter’s words a “Spiritual house.” This is the House birthed and given life by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Every person incorporated into Christ by being “born from above” is by right a member of that House. It should have continued in that original flow of heavenly life, but even before the first century had run its course man had begun to seize control and Bethel, the House of God was corrupted and prostituted.

A Corrupted Bethel

In the book of the prophet Amos there is a tragic portrayal of a corrupted Bethel, the Bethel in which king Jeroboam of Israel had set up a calf of gold. There was abundance of religious activity in that Bethel. Solemn assemblies, feasts, tithes and offerings, notable first men, noisy songs, buildings of hewn stone. The Lord sent Amos, the humble herdsman of Tekoa with a powerful

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message exposing the falsity of it all and pleading for a return to simple trusting relationship with Himself. *“Do not seek Bethel.” “Seek Me and live”* was the word of the Lord. The priest of Bethel, Amaziah, reacted just as the religious leaders of Jerusalem did against Stephen. Reporting to the king, the priest said, *“Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words.”* And at the prophet himself he hurled these words of angry indignation, *“O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”* There from the mouth of the priestly leader himself is the confession that the “House of God” had been hijacked and become the “king’s sanctuary and a temple of the kingdom.” So it is with all the institutional machinery of what is commonly called “church” today and should another Amos arise he will be in for a similar unfriendly reception!

The first goal of Jacob’s returning pilgrimage was Bethel, the House of God, and it is ours too. With the tremendous revelations of the New Testament concerning the nature of this heavenly House clear before us let us, like the apostle Paul *“press on towards the goal.”*

The meanings of the three following place names unfold precious elements in the nature of the House of God.

Bethlehem (The House of Bread)

Genesis 35:19

“If we abandon the institutional church, how are Christians to be fed? How are new believers to be nurtured?” These are questions which people constantly raise with me, and they are valid queries. This aspect of the “House”, which is expressed in the name “Bethlehem” holds the answer. God has provided in His House through His Son and by the Holy Spirit everything required for supplying His children with the bread He knows they need.

In well-meaning zeal the churches provide abundance of material in the belief that it is supplying the essential bread. People who make a confession of faith in Christ are plied with “Follow-up” literature, and there is a plethora of courses and seminars designed for the nourishment of believers at all stages. Much of this is undoubtedly good and a blessing to many. On the other hand, there is an element of what I call “the sausage machine” in many of these courses. Put people in at one end, and at the other look for them to emerge all fashioned alike! It all bears the mark of man, and mostly it is made up of information for the intellect. The idea seems to be that a head stuffed with information will create mature Christians. I write this out of experience, having been involved in much of what I am describing both as a provider and a recipient.

“The good is often the enemy of the best” is a saying aptly applicable here, for God’s House (Bethel) is also the House of Bread (Bethlehem), and God’s provision is perfect. Even as His Son is the House of God, along with all those incorporated into Him, so is His Son the essential bread. Jesus said, *“My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world.... I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.”* (John 6:32-35) It is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself who is the bread, and life in the House is living relationship with Him. As we look to Him, meditate on Him, converse with Him He will feed our souls and spirits with bread

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exactly fitted to each individual's needs. Psalm 132:13-15 is David's vision of the House of bread; "For the Lord has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His habitation: this is my resting place for ever; here will I dwell, for I have desired it. I will abundantly bless her provisions; I will satisfy her poor with bread." Hallelujah!

Then too there is the supreme gift which comes through the Lord Jesus, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth. Of this Spirit Jesus said, "*He will teach you all things*", and, "*When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.... He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.*" (John 14:26 & 16:13,15) Can any promise be more comprehensive than that? But, grievous to say, largely we do not believe it. We rush to provide our literature, seminars and courses, and neglect the perfect inward tutor of the spirit, who is the birthright of every Christian.

The most powerful plea I know for simple trust in God's provision in His "House of Bread" comes from Madame Jeanne Guyon in a chapter in the book "Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ" addressed to "Christian Workers". In it she urges us to lead people into "real prayer and a true inward experience of Christ." or in other words into a simple trust in the promises of Jesus concerning the Holy Spirit. She concludes thus:

"The simplest can know Him, and in the deepest way, with no help from rituals or forms or theological instruction. When it pleases Him, He turns factory workers into prophets! No, He has not turned man away from the inner temple of prayer. The reverse! He has thrown wide open those gates so that all may come in!

'Whoever is simple,
Let him turn in here.
Whoever lacks understanding,
Come.
Eat of my food

And drink the wine I have mixed.' (Proverbs 9:4,5)

The Lord Jesus thanked the Father for having "Hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and revealing them to babes."

In "The Story of Mme. Guyon's Life" by T.C. Upham is her account of a poor illiterate laundress, who had come to know the Lord in this intimate inner way. Some other more educated Christians took it upon themselves to visit her and to read to her. Mme. Guyon reports, "They were surprised to learn that she was already instructed by the Lord Himself in all they read to her. God, they found, had taught her inwardly by the Holy Ghost, before He had sent in His providence, the outward aid of books and pious friends to confirm His inward communications. So much was this the case that they were willing to receive instruction from her. Her words seemed Divine." That simple unlettered woman had discovered something much better than Alpha courses or teaching seminars. She received her teaching direct from the source, the Spirit of truth.

George MacDonald has a moving passage in his novel "The Baronet's Song" when, describing an elderly Scottish Highland crofter woman, he says this of her: "Not for years and years had Janet been to church. She had long been unable to walk so far; and having no book but the best, and no help to understand it but the highest, her faith was simple, strong, real, all pervading. Day by day

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she pored over the great gospel, until she had grown to be one of the noble ladies of the kingdom of heaven - one of those who inherit the earth and are ripening to see God. For the Master, and His mind in hers, was her teacher. She had little or no theology save what He taught her. To Janet, Jesus Christ was no object of so-called theological speculation, but a living Man who somehow or other heard when she called to Him, and sent her the help she needed." Janet, you see, was living in the House of Bread.

How little have we understood Bethlehem, The House of Bread!

Eder (The Flock)

Genesis 35:21

This name expresses yet another characteristic of the House of God, and again the Lord Jesus Christ is central and supreme. Where there is a flock there is a shepherd and this flock has over it none other than "*The good shepherd*" (John 10:11) "*The great shepherd of the sheep.*" (Hebrews 13:20) "*The shepherd and guardian (or Bishop A.V.) of your souls.*" "*The chief shepherd.*" (1 Peter 5:4) The desire and purpose of the Lord Jesus is "*One flock and one shepherd.*" (John 10:16) What a pastor! What a Bishop! "*My sheep hear my voice and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.*"

To be in this flock I need but to belong to Him. He then assumes His perfect pastoral ministry over me. At times this will be in personal dealings direct with Him, and on other occasions his care will be mediated through others in the flock with the gifting from the Holy Spirit of a shepherd-heart. And how much have I been blessed by such humble servants of the Chief Shepherd acting, not out of any official church position but in their God-given caring function.

Even as Bethel can be corrupted so can pastoral ministry be distorted. Nowhere in the New Testament can I find any support for the idea of a pastor as an omniscient chief executive officer in a religious organisation, an authoritarian leader commanding his followers. A few weeks ago I was shocked to read the following from the leader of a large Pentecostal denomination, "There is need in the Church today for gifted followers. It involves taking risks and trusting leadership. Followers have to follow the lead. Further you have to be able to change direction often quickly. As the leader turns the corner, you have to have the capacity to go with the flow, wherever it may take you. People are far too quick to turn away from those who have been their spiritual leaders. Followers shouldn't! We should honour and respect them. People who don't are insecure. Never think it was a coincidence that God gave you the leader you have." That is the spirit of Laban! And many a Jacob is still in his thrall.

Corporateness and Unity

The other thing that the word "Eder" or "Flock" underlines is the corporateness of God's people. This is an organic unity and not an organisational thing. The joining is a ministry of the Holy Spirit, or put in other terms it is a work of the Master-builder placing His "living stones" together in His "spiritual house". It is now more than ten years since Margaret and I walked out on Laban, and one of the wonderful joys of these years is to have been linked in bonds of love with others on the pilgrim way in many places near and far. This is not, as some have sneeringly said "A phantom church" but an experienced living organic reality.

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Hebron (The place of Fellowship)

Genesis 35:27

At Hebron Jacob, now Israel, and a changed man, was back in the family home with his aged father, back in the place from which he had fled, after his actions had provoked the anger of his brother Esau.

Hebron means communion or fellowship, and brings into focus yet another feature of the House of God. Again it speaks of Christ for Paul tells us, *“God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ.”* (1 Corinthians 1:9) (1 John 1:3b) And the Lord Jesus Himself makes this mind-blowing statement *“If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him”* (John 14:23) These Scriptures express the essence of the fellowship to be enjoyed in the House of God. It is not the fellowship of an hour or two in a church building on a Sunday. It is a constant fellowship in the heart. It may be experienced any time anywhere. It needs no buildings. John invites all to come and share that fellowship. He says, *“That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us, and our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.”* (1 John 1:3) John isn’t saying, “Come along to our meetings to have fellowship.” No, he is saying come to the Lord Jesus Christ and share together with us what we are sharing, intimate communion with the Father and the Son.

Even as Bethel was corrupted, so with Hebron. “Fellowship” in common church parlance means gathering for meetings, attending church services, having social times together. Human fellowship that may well provide, but it is not the fellowship of the House of God which is, as Jesus said, having the Father and Himself at home within us. To say of those who have parted from institutional church, “They do not fellowship” only reveals a sad misunderstanding of the New Testament meaning of the word.

Of course there is a knitting of heart among those who are seeking to return to Bethel, and to know the House of God in its fullness. Precious and enriching are the times when the Lord brings them together and they can encourage one another on the way, or share some fresh revelation of the love of God, and praise Him from the heart. *“Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”* (Matthew 18:20) Have you ever asked yourself, “Did Jesus mean that literally, two or three?” If He did, and I believe he did, what does it say about the insistence on attendance at meetings and services? Think about it. Ask the Lord about it.

I am only too aware that the treasures of life in the Bethel of the House of God, are only feebly illuminated by what I have written, but my own heart has been blessed as I have endeavoured to convey something of the light the Lord has given me. May it bring glory to Him who is the builder, owner and ruler of the House, who is the Bread of life, the Shepherd of the flock and the One with whom is our fellowship. May it please Him to use it to encourage and strengthen others who have set out on the long road home from Padanaram and Laban to Bethel, Bethlehem, Eder and Hebron.

Who would true valour see,
Let him come hither;

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One here will constant be,
Come wind, come weather.
There's no discouragement
Shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent
To be a pilgrim

Whoso beset him round
With dismal stories,
Do but themselves confound;
His strength the more is
No lion can him fright,
He'll with a giant fight,
But he will have a right
To be a pilgrim.

Hobgoblin nor foul fiend
Can daunt his spirit;
He knows he at the end
Shall life inherit.
Then fancies fly away,
He'll fear not what men say,
He'll labour night and day
To be a pilgrim.
(John Bunyan)

Scripture references are from the Revised Standard Version.

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