



Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 6

Bethel

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 2nd February, 1986**

Text: *“And he called the name of that place Bethel” (Genesis 28. 19).*

Jacob never forgot Bethel. There were many occasions during his long pilgrimage when he looked back to this sacred occasion, and when he came to lie upon his dying bed, not long before he died he spoke of Bethel, saying that the Lord blessed him there.

Some of you can never forget the place where you first realised there was a God, where you realised you possessed a never-dying soul, where you realised that there was eternity before you. Some of you can never forget the place where Christ was first revealed to you, where Christ was made precious to you.

“Dost mind the place, the spot of ground,
Where Jesus did thee meet?”

I believe all God's people have a Bethel, the place where the Lord Himself met with them.

You see, these old patriarchs had a good religion. On another occasion Jacob said, “I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.” Now there is not much patriarchal religion about today. These old patriarchs like Abraham and Isaac and Jacob had intimate dealings with God. The great point in their religion was this: that they knew God – not just knew about Him – they knew God personally and savingly. They had not any Bible to read. They had not any chapel to attend. They had not any minister to listen to, and as yet even the ceremonial law was not given, with the priesthood and the sacrifices. But they met with God face to face and their lives were preserved. O for more of this patriarchal religion, religion with reality in it!

I wonder how much religion you and I would have left if all the outward things were taken away, if we had no Bible to read, and if we had no hymnbook from which to sing hymns, and if we never met together for worship in the house of God, no chapel to attend, and if we never heard the gospel preached, and if we had no good books to read. Would we have

any religion left? You see, these old patriarchs had as much religion as they received directly from God, no more and no less. If all the outward things and the forms and the traditions and everything else were taken away from your religion and mine, would we have any left? If our religion were to be weighed in these balances, would it be found wanting?

As we come to consider this sacred subject of Jacob at Bethel, immediately we are brought face to face with sovereign grace o'er sin abounding. Here you see a display of that truth, "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." Later, you know, the Word of God makes a comment on this, and I would say that the best way of having an infallible understanding of Scripture is where one scripture explains another. Now this is what the Word of God says later about this: "He found him" – that is, God found Jacob, not Jacob found God – "He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness." It was so literally, and also it was so spiritually. "He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness." And then this is the rest of Jacob's life from Bethel to his dying day: "He led him about, He instructed him, He kept him as the apple of His eye." It is all of grace, and it is God doing everything from first to last. And beloved friends, if your religion and mine is real, that is where it began. "He found him."

O was there a time when the Lord found you and when He found me? Where did He find us? Without hope and without God in the world, without concern, dead in trespasses and sins, liable to divine wrath, hastening to a lost eternity. But O the mercy if God has ever found us, and then the world *was* a waste howling wilderness to us.

"He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness." Now if the Lord has ever found you, He is the God of Jacob. I have often thought about it. You see, Daniel was a wonderful man, wasn't he? You hardly read of a fault in Daniel. God does not call Himself the God of Daniel. We read of Samuel, dear Samuel, the pure in heart. God does not call Himself the God of Samuel. Then there is Jacob. Well, perhaps there is not any saint in Scripture with more faults. God calls Himself the God of Jacob – that is, the God of all grace, that is, the God of poor, wretched, perishing sinners. Now if God has ever found you out, it is the God of Jacob, the God of all grace, and that means that that grace which first laid hold of you will never let you go. It will keep you and take

you safe to heaven at last. If the Lord has found you, if you have a Bethel, then all the rest of Jacob's experience will be yours.

“He led him about.” How we need that divine leading! “He instructed him.” How we need that divine teaching! “He kept him as the apple of His eye.” How we need that divine keeping, that divine preservation! And it is a good prayer. David takes the language up and makes it into a prayer. “Keep me as the apple of the eye.” You know, the apple of our eye is one of the most sensitive parts of our body. Even a surgeon or an optician cannot touch it unless first of all there is an anaesthetic on that eye. No-one would gladly, willingly, for nothing, let anybody touch the apple of his eye. Now this is the way God keeps his Jacobs, as the apple of His eye. No doubt you have noticed that invariably when we have a new baby in the house of God for the first time, it is impressed on me to pray that blessing for them, that God will hide them beneath the shadow of His wings, that God will keep them as the apple of His eye.

Now can some of you as sinners go to the God of Jacob this morning and ask for those three great blessings, that the God of Jacob will lead you about, that the God of Jacob will instruct you, and that the God of Jacob will keep you as the apple of His eye? What inestimable blessings! And beloved friends, in a word it is this:

“His skill infallible,
His providential grace,
His power and truth, that never fail,
Shall order all my ways.”

So we see grace abounding in the case of Jacob at Bethel. Here is a sinful man with guilt upon his conscience. He has just deceived his aged father. He has just deceived his twin brother. He has to flee from home in these awful circumstances, with Esau vowing his death. And there that night he lies down in sadness of heart with a stone for his pillow, in a dangerous place, with wild beasts of the desert round about him and only the sky for a canopy. And wonder of wonders, God comes and blesses him! This is sovereign grace o'er sin abounding. We read in Romans 9 the explanation of it. We read there that Jacob, before the beginning of the world, was a chosen vessel of mercy, foreordained to glory. And now the appointed moment has come, not to propose salvation to him, not to

suggest salvation, but effectually to call him and save him with an everlasting salvation. God will have all the glory in the salvation of this sinner, Jacob. O the aboundings of God's grace towards Jacob here! John Newton in his beautiful hymn speaks something like this:

“Kings are often waking kept,
Racked with care on beds of state;
Never king like Jacob slept,
For he lay at heaven's gate.”

“He called the name of that place Bethel,” Bethel, of course, meaning the house of God. There is a lesson to be learnt here. It was not a chapel, or a church, or a cathedral. It was neither the temple, nor was it the tabernacle. It was the Lord's gracious presence that made Bethel to be the house of God. When we meet together on the Sabbath in our solemn assembles, the name of this place is called Bethel. But it is not the name written outside the door that makes it Bethel, and it is not the walls and the building and the pews and the pulpit that make it Bethel. It is the Lord's gracious presence that makes it Bethel. The greatest favour that any congregation can have is to be blessed with the Lord's gracious presence. May this Bethel always be very jealous of this, be very concerned about it. “Take not Thy Holy Spirit from us.” May it be, “According to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remaineth among you: fear ye not.”

You know, beloved friends, it will not be every Sabbath that you will be able to go home and say that God has spoken to you. It will not be every Sabbath that you will be able to go home and say that God has truly blessed you. But may there be many Sabbaths when you are able to go home and say, “The name of that place is, the Lord is there. Surely this is none other than the house of God, and the gate of heaven.” And seek this as you come. Seek that the Lord might be there. May it not be Ichabod, the Lord's presence taken away. May there not be the grieving of the Spirit of God and the solemn withdrawing, but may it be as you come, you prove this, that this is none other than the house of God and the gate of heaven. And there is a promise for you to plead and the promise is this: “In all places where I record My name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee.”

“And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” “And he called the name of that place Bethel.” Now Bethel was the place where God made Himself known. Jacob realised the greatness of God. He realised who God is, and he was afraid. “Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not.” There was a solemn awe that rested on his spirit. I do feel that this is the great need that there is today, for there to be that realisation of God and that knowledge of God, God in three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, a holy God, that we might realise who God is, that there might be that revelation of God to us, and then realising who God is, we might realise who we are, and the awful gulf, the vast distance there is between a holy God and you and I as guilty sinners.

“He was afraid.” When he said, “How dreadful is this place,” he meant it in this sense, that solemn sense of awe, that solemn sense of dread. We need this in our religion. We need it in our solemn assemblies. You know, the world would not understand what Dr. Watts meant when he said,

“How sweet and awful is the place
With Christ within the doors.”

How can a place be awful *and* sweet? But living souls know what that means. Your heart is filled with solemn awe, and yet there is something very sacred, something very sweet in it.

“How sweet and awful is the place
With Christ within the doors.”

“And he called the name of that place Bethel.” But you see, Jacob realised the greatness of God, and let us be clear, Jacob was never the same man again after Bethel, and you will never be the same after God is made known unto you.

What a similarity there is between this and Isaiah in chapter 6. He went into the temple and he saw the Lord high and lifted up, His throne filling the temple. He saw the holy seraphim veiling their faces, singing, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God of hosts.” And the whole place was filled with the glory of the Lord. The posts of the door shook and smoke filled the temple. Isaiah could have said, “Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not.” “Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of

unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.” Well, to Isaiah the way of mercy was made known. The door of hope was opened. With Isaiah it was a live coal from off the altar which touched his lips, signifying the blessing of Christ and Him crucified to his guilty soul. “Thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.”

With Jacob under this revelation, what a view he had of the greatness of God, his own sin, his guilt and the awful gulf between a holy God and a guilty sinner, the enormous gulf between heaven and earth. But you see, this is the gospel. The gospel was revealed to Jacob here. As he slept, he dreamed and beheld a ladder between heaven and earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. To Jacob it meant the whole of the glorious Person and work of Christ the Mediator. That is Jacob’s ladder. It begins in heaven and comes right down to where a guilty sinner lies in his helplessness and need. There is the joining together of heaven and earth. There is a way in which a holy God can draw near to a guilty sinner and not consume him. There is a way in which a guilty sinner can ascend to God and venture to heaven itself. O that this morning you might have a little glimpse of Jacob’s ladder.

In the eighteenth century there used to be a popular ballad and it was on Jacob’s ladder. It went through the whole story of Jacob at Bethel from beginning to end, and every verse had this chorus:

“Hallelujah to Jesus who hung on the tree,
And has raised up a ladder of mercy for me.”

No hope, no heaven, no salvation for a guilty sinner apart from Jacob’s ladder. But this morning we see it all fulfilled in Christ – “one God, and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus,” He who is the eternal Son of God, yet who came right down to this earth, became incarnate, lived, suffered, bled and died and then rose again and ascended to heaven. Now this is the dear Mediator and He stands between a holy God and a guilty sinner and unites heaven and earth. This, if you will, is reconciliation, that He might reconcile us to God. It is this:

“But since my Saviour stands between,
In garments dyed in blood,

'Tis He, instead of me, is seen,
When I approach to God.”

“And behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.” There was two-way traffic. You see, the only way you and I can ever ascend from earth to heaven is by Jacob’s ladder. Whether it be in your approaches to God as a sinner seeking mercy, or whether it be in prayers, or whether it be at last when you die, the only way a guilty sinner can ever rise up from earth to heaven is by Jacob’s ladder. O have you blessed God that it comes right down, right to where you are? Like the good Samaritan, he came right where he was.

And then you see, this is the way in which the blessings of the gospel come to sinners. What a lot of divinity there is in that little word, “Every grace and every favour, come to us through Jesus’ blood.” Apart from Jacob’s ladder, no blessing could ever come down from God to sinners, but only His wrath, only divine judgment. O to see the finished work of Christ the Mediator, these blessings of the gospel, ten thousand blessings rich and rare! They flow down the ladder. They are communicated to sinners and the sinners’ chief.

“And he called the name of that place Bethel.” Just a word on this. The Lord communicated this blessing to Jacob in a dream. Of course, this was before God’s holy Word was given. We are told in Hebrews that God in times past “in divers manners” spoke to the fathers. In these last days He has spoken to us by His own Son. There were many ways in which God spoke, and one of them was dreams. Does God still speak by dreams? Well, usually His way is through His Word. But God is still a sovereign, and if He chooses to speak through a dream, He does. Now we must not despise dreams. On the other hand, we must not build our hope of heaven on dreams. The point is this: is your dream according to the analogy of Scripture? Does your dream humble you and exalt the Lord? Does your dream have a gracious, sanctifying effect? Above all, does your dream cause you to cling and cleave to Christ? I believe there are some dreams that are completely meaningless. They are just part of our natural constitution. I believe there are other dreams that have a meaning, but it is hidden from us. “Do not interpretations belong to God?” I believe there are some dreams and God may be speaking to you. Now, “God is His own Interpreter, and He” – He – “will make it plain.”

“And he called the name of that place Bethel.” Bethel was the place where exceeding great and precious promises were given, given to an unworthy sinner, given for Christ’s sake through the Mediator. One promise was natural. It concerned Jacob and it concerned the Jewish nation, that God would give them that land. That was a natural promise. And then there was the promise of Christ – “In thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.” The Lord Jesus according to the flesh was descended from Jacob. And then there was this personal promise. It must have been a beautiful word to Jacob in his state of mind. When the Lord makes a promise, you do not need to squeeze it to make it fit. It exactly fits your case. It may be a time of need, a time of trouble, and a kind friend tries to speak. The words do not exactly fit. He misses the point. Perhaps he does not exactly understand where you are. The Lord’s promise exactly fits. And let us be clear, this promise given at Bethel belongs to all the seed of Jacob. Who are they? Unworthy sinners who seek His face. That is the point concerning the seed of Jacob. They are those who feeling their unworthiness seek the Lord’s face. “I said not unto the seed of Jacob, Seek ye Me in vain.” This is the promise: “Behold, I am with thee,” the promise of His presence. What more can you seek? “Behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest” – a promise of divine keeping, a promise of divine preservation.

Jacob came into some strange places, didn’t he? He came into some sad places. If ever a man had a thorny pathway, it was Jacob. If ever a man did not understand his way, it was Jacob. If ever a man had a broken heart, it was Jacob. Think of some of these places into which Jacob came: that time when his beloved wife Rachel died at the time of Benjamin’s birth; and that time when Esau came to meet him with four hundred armed men, and Jacob was left alone, when all seemed certain death and destruction; and then that time when he was deceived by his sons, and they brought Joseph’s coat dipped in blood. And you remember the time when poor Jacob sank beneath it all and said, “Ye shall bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave.” He said, “All these things are against me.” “Behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.” I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee, Jacob, amidst all these sorrows and difficulties and trials. If ever a man had a chequered pathway, it was

Jacob. Look at those years when Laban deceived him. Look at those years of trouble and trial and difficulty. “Behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.”

Really, you know, the only death-bed blessing we read of in Scripture is that of Jacob. The Word of God has not recorded a wonderful dying bed of the Apostle Paul or any of the other eminent saints. You go to the end of the book of Genesis and see this man dying. He has not got a single cloud in his sky. Now who ever could have thought of that? Dear Jacob thought he could never smile again, never rejoice again. He felt that his grey hairs were going down in sorrow to the grave. There was never a happier death-bed in all Scripture than Jacob’s. He had his children all round him. He had his beloved Joseph with him. His prospect of heaven was clear. His sins were all forgiven, and he had nothing to do but die, and “he gathered up his feet into the bed, and yielded up the ghost.” O the faithfulness of God to His yea and amen promises! You here this morning, the spiritual seed of Jacob, some of you have come into places where the thing you feared has come upon you. You never thought that such places would be yours. You never thought you would come into such spots as these. “Behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.”

“And he called the name of that place Bethel.” And Jacob never forgot Bethel, the house of God. It meant so much to him. Thinking of Bethel, I must speak of Jacob’s return. Twenty years after this, twenty years of confusion, twenty years of sadness, twenty years of sorrow, twenty years of perplexity, and one day the Lord said, “Arise, go up to Bethel.” O these are wonderful times, if the Lord comes to us in our sorrow and dismay and sends us right back to Bethel. It was with delight that Jacob went back, and as he went back, as he journeyed, he looked back over those twenty years, and do you know what he did? He bore witness to the faithfulness of God despite all his sin, because it was not just twenty years of sorrow. There were many sins and many faults with Jacob, but he bore witness to the faithfulness of God. He said, “Let us arise, and go up to Bethel” – that is in obedience to the Lord’s command – “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.” In other words, the God of Bethel has been faithful to everything that He promised me at Bethel. I have been unfaithful. I have failed Him. But O the faithfulness of God! Cannot some of you look back this morning and trace your own sin and your own unfaithfulness, and yet amidst all these things you can build your altar to the God of Jacob and the God of Bethel and you can bear witness: “Who answered me in the day of my distress, and was with me in the way which I went.”

Now have you noticed one thing? Here we read, “He called the name of that place Bethel.” But when he built the altar there, he gave it a different name. He called it El-bethel. Bethel, of course, is the house of God. Now Jacob calls it El-bethel – the God of the house of God. And you see, the point with Jacob was this: not so much the place, but the Person. I rather think good Matthew Henry has a good commentary on this concerning when we meet in our solemn assemblies, that it might not so much be Bethel, but that it might be El-bethel that we seek. Not just with delight to come to the house of God, but that it might be that we might meet with the God of the house of God. Well, it says *Bethel* outside on the notice board, but inside may it not just be Bethel: may it be El-bethel. He calls it Bethel here. Twenty years later there has been a growth in grace and he calls the name of the place El-bethel, the God of the house of God.

Thinking of Jacob and Bethel and the God of Bethel and the pilgrimage and what lay before him and what lies before you and me, and our pilgrimage and our perplexities, I could not help but think of Dr. Doddridge’s beautiful hymn on the God of Bethel. He comes to this, and they are sacred words, and may they be your prayer and mine as we leave the house of God this morning. This is the prayer to the God of Bethel:

“O spread Thy covering wings around,
Till all our wanderings cease,
And at our Father’s loved abode,
Our souls arrive in peace!”

“And he called the name of that place Bethel.”