

The God of Bethel

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"I am the God of Bethel." — Gen. 31:13.

About twenty years had elapsed in the life of Jacob between the wonderful night at Bethel and this new manifestation of the Lord mentioned in our text. The Lord, in giving this fresh disclosure of Himself to Jacob, commanded him, at the same time, to leave Laban's house in Padan-aram. By this gracious and, we believe, longed for hour of blessing, Jacob made a deeper discovery of the love and faithfulness of God. The name — "The God of Bethel" — by which the Lord made Himself known to him would have brought back endearing and solemn memories of other days. This, indeed, is one of the divine names which cannot fail to touch a tender cord in the hearts of many of the Lord's people. "The God of Bethel". Sweet beyond words is His name! What does this Name mean in the experience of those who are heirs of salvation? Might we not say at the beginning of our remarks that the God of Bethel is:—

I. A Prayer Answering God: In another chapter Jacob speaks of Him as "The God who answered me in the day of my distress, and was with me in the way which I went". We believe that by the day of his distress he meant not only his night of wrestling with God at Peniel, but also that wonderful morning at Bethel. Let us for a moment envisage that day when Jacob bade a fond, if sad, farewell to his father and mother. Then he moved on toward an unknown country. As the shades of night began to fall, and the stars began to appear in the silent sky above him, a sense of loneliness, if not of fear, would have touched his heart. Then, in weariness, he laid him down and slept. Was there a prayer on his lips as he closed his eyes? We believe there was. It might have been, in effect, the words of the Psalmist: "When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up". Whatever prayer was articulate within his spirit God heard it, for he awoke out of sleep conscious that the Lord was beside him. The awe of the Eternal was upon his soul. God's presence and love filled his heart. "The Lord is in this place". The One who is with His people in every age and in all their trials was near him.

A remarkable thing about Jacob's experience was that he knew who was beside him. It was not something that he had never known before. He did not say, "What is this, and whose Presence do I feel? This is all strange to me". No. "This", he said, "is none other

but the house of God and this is the gate of Heaven.” Whatever other views may be held by good men on this subject does not this prove that Jacob had communion with the Lord before this hour and that he was already in a state of grace? We think it does. The words which are used to describe him as a young man in his fathers’ house are, indeed, the same as are used with regard to Job of whom the Lord speaks as “a perfect man”. Long before this hour, therefore, Jacob was a “pious” or a “perfect man dwelling in tents”. But at Bethel his soul enjoyed a new blessing. The dew of Hermon descended upon his soul. He enjoyed much nearness to the Angel of the Covenant. God’s voice and Presence became more real to him than ever before. He moved deeper into the dimensions of eternity. Such seasons of unusual nearness to the Lord may be rare in the lives of many of God’s people. Their days of heaven upon earth, though few and far between, provide them with memories which are precious beyond words. This, we believe, was a morning which Jacob shall remember through everlasting ages.

From this place of bliss, and deep communion with God, Jacob came to the land of his affliction. For twenty years he endured many trials and deceptions under the cruel hand of Laban. His soul also might have pined for a new blessing and for more nearness to the Lord. Bethel became a wistful memory. Would he ever again stand in the suburbs of Heaven as he did then, and hear that much-loved voice and enjoy a similar season of communion with the Holy One? Ah, dear friends, are there not seasons in our own life when we recall the years of His right hand — the season of our first love — and when with the Psalmist we also say:

**“How long wilt Thou forget me, Lord,
Shall it for ever be?
O how long shall it be that Thou
Wilt hide Thy face from me?”**

Some of us echo the words of the godly Cowper when he penned the words:

**“Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul refreshing view
Of Jesus and His Word?”**

But those who know the way to the Throne of Grace, and who know the Lord as a prayer-answering God know also that the God of Bethel is:

II. A Covenant Keeping God. “He shall perform the truth to Jacob and the mercy to Abraham”.

And true to His promise He appeared to Jacob the second time. There was indeed, a sense in which He was as near to Jacob over his long period of exile as He was on that memorable morning at Bethel. Not consciously, but in His promise and providential care. On his death bed he spoke solemnly of the Angel who fed him all his days. He

could speak of Him also as the One who led and kept him throughout his earthly pilgrimage and amid the many dangers to which, in this life, he was exposed. The life of every believer is, in retrospect, a witness to God's covenant care and love. He watches over us night and day. He never slumbers nor sleeps. All the saints are in His hand. While we may sometimes complain of His silence we know that He is ever at our right hand. "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee." At the end of his life Jacob could see how true God was to His promise. "And 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." It is interesting to note that this covenant also embraced Jacob's seed. One of the great miracles of history is seen in the way in which God has preserved in His providence "the seed of Jacob". Let us pray that the day may soon come when, by the outpouring of God's Spirit, they shall look upon Him whom they have pierced and disowned, and mourn.

There is a remarkable incident recorded in this chapter. It was in the heart of Laban to do Jacob harm. But we read how God appeared to him in a dream and warned him of the consequence of doing His prophet any harm. Truly God moves in a mysterious way. He can be terrible to those who would touch the apple of His eye. We read in the Psalm how, in the days of Abraham and Isaac, God did appear to mighty kings and warned them against touching His anointed. This, as Matthew Henry and others remind us, He did in dreams or visions. Little do the people of God know how they are kept from those, in hell and on earth, who would devour them. His covenant faithfulness is a bulwark between us and all our enemies. "This God is our God for ever and ever. He will be our Guide even unto death". But, pre-eminently, the God of Bethel is:

III. The God of Revelation. Jacob's dream was, above all, a supernatural disclosure of God's way of salvation. It was a type of Him who is the only Mediator between God and man. Christ is God's "Daysman" whose hand, in the words of Job, rest on God and on His people. He alone unites Heaven and earth. If the one end of His ladder rests on the earth, the other end reaches into the highest heaven. This lovely, mystic vision brings before us Christ, both in His Person as the God-man and in His state of humiliation and exaltation. When Nathanael stood before Him He uttered the words which prove that it was He who was so gloriously typified in this heavenly dream. "Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." When our Lord spoke these words He was here among us in our nature and in the likeness of sinful flesh. The eternal and personal Word became incarnate. He took bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. He who was, in the sinless infirmity of our nature, in the bosom of a woman — unable to walk and unable to speak — was at the same time, as God's Eternal Son, in the bosom of the Father. Great, indeed, is the mystery of Godliness. And the great end for which He became incarnate was that He might die for us. The way to Heaven, therefore, begins at the Cross of Calvary. At the place where He died we begin, by faith in His blood, by our reconciliation to God and our regeneration by His Spirit, to set out on that heavenly journey that ends within the portals of everlasting bliss. The innumerable company of angels who minister to the Church of God on Mount Zion are with us here because He also inhabited this earth. As

no angel could appear on earth apart from His mediation and apart from the satisfaction which God in His law and justice received through His finished work, no sinner, on the other hand, is accepted of God and made heir of eternal glory in Heaven but through His death. It was, therefore, Christ the Angel of the Covenant who spoke to and was with Jacob in his dream, as it was He who was also there in the type. Christ is all and in all.

This is the place where all the people of God meet. The principal witness of the Holy Spirit in the written Word has to do with the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow. They are a people who are enlightened in the knowledge of Christ by the Holy Spirit. They know that before any of the elect of God, from Abel to the last of His people, could stand on the threshold of Heaven, Christ must stand on the earth. Our Lord pronounced Simon Peter a blessed man because God the Father, by the Holy Spirit, revealed to him that He who walked among men, without visible glory, was the Eternal Son of God, the Messiah and the Redeemer of His people. It is in and by the written Word that we see the glory of the Incarnate Word.

The two who were on the way to Emmaus, when the Lord opened to them the Scriptures, saw in the word the mystery of godliness, God manifest in the flesh. How sweetly does His own description of Himself coincide with the view that His people enjoy of Him through the enlightenment of His Spirit. "I", He says, "am the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valleys." He who as God dwelt in the Sharon of the heavenly world was found in the valley of humiliation. He was in Heaven and on earth at the same time. His humiliation, sufferings and glory were also before the eyes of His Church when she exclaimed: "My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand." He came where we are that we might be where He is. "Father I will that they whom thou hast given me be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory." He tabernacled with us that we might, through His death and exaltation, dwell in His presence for ever.

And, beloved, are there not rare hours in our life when in our affections, desires and enjoyments we seem to be in another and better world? At such times we say, "Lord, it is good for us to be here". But here we have but the tabernacle of a wayfaring man. Clouds take Him out of our sight. The fond vision fades; for the just must live by faith. In Heaven shall our Bethel be permanent — and not till then. "And ye now therefore have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart shall rejoice and your joy no man taketh from you." Peter speaks of the time when he, and the two other apostles, were with Christ on the holy mount, where they saw the glory of Zion's King and heard the voice from the most excellent glory which said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." But this great enjoyment he subordinates to the faith of the Church in God's word of promise. "We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts." God's word of promise stayed with Jacob after the lovely vision and the blissful presence were withdrawn. And in that word he trusted to the end. There are times when the Beloved withdraws Himself, but His word stays with us both in

sunshine and cloud. This is our comfort in our affliction, for by His word are we kept and revived. Let us observe that the God of Bethel is also:

IV. The God of Holiness. We read that when Jacob awoke out of sleep he exclaimed: "How dreadful is this place." The awe of the Eternal rested on his spirit. At that moment something which has no parallel in human experience invaded his consciousness and touched his life. There he bowed his head, for he felt himself in the presence of a God infinitely holy. The nearer we come to God, or the nearer He comes to us, the more we realise our own sinfulness and insignificance. Therefore the deeper becomes our humility. This is what we see in the Scriptures. When God revealed to Job a little of His glory he bowed his head and said, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." The same was true of God's prophet when in the temple he had a glimpse of the awesome majesty of the Triune God. "Woe is me, for I am undone . . . for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." Daniel was a man greatly beloved of God, but a man whose "comeliness was turned into corruption" when a ray of the divine glory was let fall on his spirit. Similar instances are before us in the New Testament when men like Peter, Paul and the apostle John shrank before the glory of Him who is the First and the Last. This holy humility shall stay with us throughout eternity in God's loving but awesome presence. "God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him."

The dark fear which is in the heart of devils and evil men in relation to God is infinitely remote from the holy fear which lodges in the heart of God's child. The one has its roots in hatred toward Him and the other has its roots in holy love. The one would destroy God, and seeks separation and concealment from Him. The other embraces Him and is ever seeking greater nearness to Him and a greater holiness of life. The lost shall be eternally trying, in abject terror, to get away from His frown and presence. The redeemed know that the joy of Heaven has its source in the light of His countenance. The one says: "Depart from us, for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways." The other says "In thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore." The God, therefore, in whose presence Jacob was afraid was, on the other hand, the Beloved of His soul. Deep reverence and holy love to God are kindred graces.

It was this apprehension of the holiness of God that led Jacob to separate himself from every species of idolatry, and which made him plead with his household to put away their strange gods and to purify themselves from the defilements of their idols. The God of Bethel had spoken to him again, demanding a deeper consecration of his life. He knew that he was in the presence of a "jealous" God to whom sin in every shape and form was a loathsome thing and the cause of alienating the affections of His people from Himself. And especially in our worship of His name is our sin in this respect most heinous.

Today, and within the visible Church, many have made a God in their own image and on their own level. The complacent and almost blasphemous irreverence with which graceless men address, and speak of, God is the evidence that they are as ignorant of

Him as they are of themselves. This holy awe or dread has never touched their spirits. If it had they would say with others: "God be merciful to me a sinner."

But, perhaps, the sweetest thought that we can derive from these words is that the God of Bethel is:

V. An Intimately Personal God. "The God of Bethel" is also "The God of Jacob". How wonderfully do these words dovetail into one another. This is His name, and this is His memorial for ever. The Lord loves all His people equally, but each one makes a personal discovery of His love and care as if — in the words of Augustine — He loved no one but ourselves. The words, "My Lord and my God" have often, in moments of unusual nearness to the Christ, dropped like honey from the lips of Christ's spouse. "My beloved is mine, and I am His." This personal sense of possession and enjoyment shall remain with each and all of His people for ever and ever.

Is it not also true that each of us has his or her own personal and deeply valued spiritual experiences? We remember, like Jacob, places and seasons where and when the Lord refreshed our souls with a deep sense of His Presence. Sometimes in the secret place He becomes "a little sanctuary" to us. He draws us with the cords of His love. He embraces our soul, warms it with His love and seals His word upon our heart. We get glimpses of His glory, so that all doubt as to who is beside us is taken away. "Surely the Lord is in this place." We knew a man who, night after night, and under the light of the stars, enjoyed much communion with Christ. Sometimes, as he knelt on the heather beside a stone which jutted out of the ground, he watered it with his tears. Years afterwards when he came in view of that spot of sweet and hallowed memories he broke down and wept. Our Bethel hours, on the other hand, may be in the public means of grace. We remember an evening long ago walking out of a meeting house behind an elderly woman. When someone apologised to her for the length of the service she said: "Oh, I could have stayed there for ever." The Lord gave her a drink from the river of His pleasure. Such hours are precious beyond words. We remember them with a touch of holy nostalgia, and sometimes long for the day when our Bethel shall never come to an end. It is good to know that the God who is in Heaven is also down in this lower vale in daily communion with His people. "Whom have I in heaven but Thee; and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee." He is here as well as there. "The God of Bethel" is also:

V. A God to be confessed. It may be that you who read, have often poured out your soul before the Lord in the secret place, yet you have never confessed Him as your God before man. The Lord values our secret exercises and confessions, but let me remind you that He has also commanded us to confess Him before men. Let us not be ashamed to own Him as our Lord. Whatever timidity and fears may lodge in our hearts we should never conceal the worth of our inheritance or whose we are and whom we serve. He is not ashamed to call us brethren. He confessed us before men. "These", He said, "are my mother, my sister and my brother." The voice in which God expresses His

love to His people reverberates, as it were, throughout all creation. “And I heard a great voice out of Heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God himself shall be with them and be their God.” Both your past sins and your present infirmities may discourage you from paying your vows before the Lord in His people’s company and in the presence of the world. But remember His promise:

“My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” Mary confessed Him in the presence of Judas and before His apostles. “She hath done what she could . . . and wheresoever this Gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her.” To confess the Lord is one of our greatest privileges here. The Church, in The Song, though confessing herself to be “black”, would, on the other hand, describe Him to Jerusalem’s daughters and say: “This is my Beloved, and this is my friend, O ye daughters of Jerusalem.”

Let me end our brief meditation by saying that however sweet and precious our Bethel hours may be here, we must not tarry on this mount. This is not our rest. The Lord’s people are strangers and pilgrims in this world — seeking that city which hath foundations. They shall all at last be gathered to Shiloh, their glorious Redeemer. There, their sun shall no more go down. Till then let us, like Jacob, wait for His salvation till the day break and the shadows flee away.

Are there those in my hearing to whom the God of Bethel is a stranger? Do not despise Him who is speaking to you from Heaven. Make Christ your own, and then you shall be of those who say, “The Lord is the portion of my soul.” “For God is the portion of Jacob.” Without Him, whatever else we may have, we shall remain in a state of eternal misery. Why not make Him your own this day? Happy are the people whose God is the Lord. Amen.

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