

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF GENESIS

by

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

“AND God said unto Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there.”

This confirms the principle on which we have been dwelling. When there is a failure or declension, the Lord calls the soul back to himself. **“Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen; and repent and do the first works”** (Revelation 2:5).

This is the divine principle of restoration.

The soul must be recalled to the very highest point; it must be brought back to the divine standard. The Lord does not say, “Remember where you are;” no; but “remember the lofty position from whence you have fallen.” Thus only can one learn how far he has declined, and how he is to retrace his steps.

Now, it is when thus recalled to God’s high and holy standard, that one is really led to see the sad evil of one’s fallen condition.

What a fearful amount of moral evil had gathered round Jacob’s family, unjudged by him, until his soul was roused by the call to **“go up to Bethel.”**

Shechem was not the place in which to detect all this evil. The atmosphere of that place was too much impregnated with impure elements to admit of the soul’s discerning, with any degree of clearness and precision, the true character of evil.

But the moment the call to Bethel fell on Jacob’s ear, **“Then Jacob said unto his household, and to all that were with him, 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 thee an altar unto God, who answered me in the day of my distress, and was with me in the way which I went.”**

The very mention of **“the house of God”** struck a chord in the soul of the patriarch; it carried him, in the twinkling of an eye, over the history of twenty eventful years. It was at Bethel he had learnt what God was, and not at Shechem; hence he must get back to Bethel again, and erect an altar upon a totally different base, and under a totally different name, from his altar at Shechem.

This latter was connected with a mass of uncleanness and idolatry.

Jacob could speak of “**El-elohe-Israel**,” while surrounded by a quantity of things utterly incompatible with the holiness of the house of God.

It is important to be clear in reference to this point. Nothing can keep the soul in a path of consistent, intelligent separation from evil save the sense of what “**the house of God**” is, and what becomes that house. If I merely look at God, in reference to myself, I shall not have a clear, full, divine sense of all that flows out of a due recognition of God’s relation to his house.

Some there are who deem it a matter of no importance how they are mixed up with impure materials in the worship of God, provided they themselves are true and upright in heart. In other words, they think they can worship God at Shechem; and that an altar named “**El-elohe Israel**” is just as elevated, just as much according to God, as an altar named “**El Bethel**.”

This is evidently a mistake.

The spiritually-minded reader will at once detect the vast moral difference between Jacob’s condition at Shechem and his condition at Bethel; and the same difference is observable between the two altars. Our ideas in reference to the worship of God must, of necessity, be affected by our spiritual condition; and the worship which we present will be low and contracted, or elevated and comprehensive, just in proportion as we enter into the apprehension of his character and relationship.

Now, the name of our altar and the character of our worship express the same idea.

El-Bethel worship is higher than El-elohe-Israel worship, for this simple reason, that it conveys a higher idea of God. It gives me a more elevated thought of God to speak of Him as the God of His house than as the God of a solitary individual. True, there is beautiful grace expressed in the title, “God, the God of Israel;” and the soul must ever feel happy in looking at the character of God, as graciously connecting himself with every separate stone of his house, and every separate member of the body.

Each stone in the building of God is a “**lively stone**,” as connected with the “**living stone**,” having communion with the “**living God**,” by the power of “**the Spirit at life**.”

But while all this is blessedly true, God is the God of His house; and when we are enabled, by an enlarged spiritual intelligence, to view Him as such, we enjoy a higher character of worship than that which flows from merely apprehending what He is to ourselves individually.

But there is another thing to be remarked in Jacob’s recall to Bethel.

He is told to make an altar “**unto God, that appeared unto thee when thou fleddest from the face of Esau thy brother**.”

He is thus reminded of “**the day of his distress.**”

It is often well to have our minds led in this way to the point in our history in which we found ourselves brought down to the lowest step of the ladder. Thus Saul is brought back to the time when he was “**little in his own eyes.**” This is the true starting-point with all of us.

“**When thou wast little in thine own eyes,**” is a point of which we often need to be reminded. It is then that the heart really leans on God. Afterwards we begin to fancy ourselves to be something, and the Lord is obliged to teach us afresh our own nothingness.

When first one enters upon a path of service or testimony, what a sense there is of personal weakness and incapacity! and, as a consequence, what leaning upon God! what earnest, fervent appeals to him for help and strength! Afterwards we begin to think that, from being so long at the work, we can get on by ourselves,- at least there is not the same sense of weakness or the same simple dependence upon God; and then our ministry becomes a poor, meager, flippant, wordy thing, without unction or power,- a thing flowing, not from the exhaustless tide of the Spirit, but from our own wretched minds.

From ver. 9-15, God renews his promise to Jacob, and confirms the new name of “**prince,**” instead of “*supplanter;*” and Jacob again calls the name of the place “**Bethel.**”

At verse 18 we have an interesting example of the difference between the judgment of faith and the judgment of nature.

The latter looks at things through the hazy mist with which it is surrounded; the former looks at them in the light of the presence and counsels of God.

“**And it came to pass, as her soul was in departing (for she died), that she called his name Ben-oni: but his father called him Benjamin.**”

Nature called him “**the son of my sorrow;**” but faith called him “**the son of the right hand.**” Thus is it ever.

The difference between the thoughts of nature and those of faith must ever be wide indeed; and we should earnestly desire that our souls should be governed only by the latter, and not by the former.

~ end of chapter 35 ~

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