



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

6420 Churchill Way | Dallas, Texas | 75230 | t 972.239.5371 | believerschapeldallas.org

The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Genesis 35: 1-29

“Back to Bethel”

TRANSCRIPT

If you have your Bibles I hope you will turn with me to Genesis chapter 35. Scripture reading will be of the entire chapter, Genesis chapter 35. You remember now that Jacob has been told by the Lord that he is to return to the land. He has returned to the land but instead of going to Bethel he has made his way to Succoth and then to the City of Shechem and there he camped before the city and while he camped before the city, Dinah the daughter of Leah went out into the city of Shechem and there was seduced by Shechem, the son of Hamor the Hivite and the result of that was the slaughter of the man of Shechem by Simeon and Levi and the looting of the city by the brothers and consequently Jacob had said in the concluding words of the chapter, “You have brought trouble on me by making me odious among the inhabitants of the land.” And it is at this point that God speaks to Jacob and calls him back to Bethel.

So in verse 1 we read,

“Then God said to Jacob, ‘Arise, go up to Bethel and live there, and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.’ So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, ‘Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments; and let us arise and go up to Bethel, and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have

gone.’ So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods which they had and the rings which were in their ears, and Jacob hid them or buried them under the oak which was near Shechem. As they journeyed, there was a great terror upon the cities which were around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. (He might have expected incidentally that they would because of the slaughter that took place and they have been made hateful or odious, I think the Authorized Version says that Jacob said, ‘You have made my name to stink among the inhabitants of the land.’ And the fact that there was a great terror upon the cities as Jacob and his company passed through them was a testimony to the power of God in their behalf.) Verse 6: So Jacob came to Luz that is, Bethel, which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him. And he built an altar there, and called the place El-Bethel or the God of Bethel because there God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother (reference being to the fleeing from Esau when he made his way to the east 30 years before this). Now Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the oak; it was named Allon-bacuth or the oak of weeping. Then God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him. God said to him, ‘Your name is Jacob; You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.’ Thus He called him Israel. God also said to him, ‘I am God Almighty; be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you.’”

That incidentally is a peculiar promise given to Jacob, “A company of nations shall come from you.” That was not said to Abraham though it is in harmony with the promises to Abraham. The next line was repeated too, it was said to Abraham first and repeated here. “And kings shall come forth from you.” This is a reference to ultimately the Davidic covenant, the Davidic covenant being an expansion of that statement, “kings shall come forth from you,” and we learn in the Davidic covenant that the king who is to come will be a son of David that of course was our Lord.

“The land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I will give to you, and I will give the land to your descendants after you.’ Then God went up from him in the place where He had spoken with him and Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He had spoken with him, a pillar of stone, and he poured out a libation on it; he also poured oil on it. (That is the first reference to a drink offering in the Bible. He poured out a libation on it.) So Jacob named the place where God had spoken with him, Bethel. Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and she suffered severe labor. And it came about when she was in severe labor that the midwife said to her, ‘Don’t fear, for now you have another son.’ And it came about as her soul was departing, for she died, that she named him Benoni or son of my sorrow but in an active faith Jacob says we shall call him Benjamin, son of the right hand, (that’s the place of honor, the place of authority, a place of skill; it’s interesting that these two names Benoni son of my sorrow and son of the right hand reflect the two states of our Lord Jesus Christ -- the state of humiliation, the state of exaltation).”

When you study systematic theology, one of the things that you study is the states of Christ, the state of humiliation, the state of exaltation. These two names, Benoni and Benjamin or Benjamin reflect those two states and the fact that he was born of Rachel, the mother of Israel, reflects again the fact that the Messiah shall come from Israel but he will be a son of suffering as well as a son of exaltation. The one being the outgrowth of the other. So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath that is Jerusalem.

You know it’s interesting in the promise in Micah chapter 5, “Thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah out of these shall he come forth unto Me that shall be ruler in Israel.” There were two Bethlehems, Bethlehem Ephrathah and another Bethlehem. When God prophesized, he doesn’t prophesize like the Delphic Oracle. He doesn’t say statements that may be interpreted in two to three different ways. He might have said simply, “Thou Bethlehem.” Since there were two Bethlehems it would be possible to have a double chance of the prophecy coming to pass. But God does not even allow

that. He says, “Thou Bethlehem Ephrathah,” this particular Bethlehem not the other. That’s the difference between biblical prophecy and the prophecy of men.

Now in verse 20 we read,

“And Jacob set up a pillar over her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day. Rachel’s grave was a well-known place in the land. Then Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder and it came about while Israel was dwelling in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine, and Israel heard of it.

“Now there were 12 sons of Jacob. The sons of Leah: Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, then Simeon and Levi and Judah and Issachar and Zebulun; the sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin; and the sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maid: Dan and Naphtali; and the sons of Zilpah, Leah's maid: Gad and Asher. These are the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram. And Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre of Kiriath-arba that is, Hebron, where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned.

“Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. And Isaac breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people, an old man of ripe age; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.”

May the Lord bless this reading of his word.

The subject for the exposition of the word this morning is “Back to Bethel.” I have been from time to time making reference in the messages to Professor H. C. Leupold’s commentary on the Book of Genesis, sometimes without mentioning his name, other times mentioning his name. Professor Leupold was a very fine Lutheran commentator on the word of God and that two-volume book on the Book of Genesis is a very good commentary. He has a section at the end of the chapter in which he gives homiletical hints that helps for preachers in preaching a chapter and I have alluded several times to the fact that at certain points through the Book of Genesis quite a few for that matter he suggests that one should not preach on a particular chapter.

Well, obviously in Believers Chapel since we are committed to the practice of preaching through the Bible as a general practice that does not set too well with most of us here. I didn't mention that last week on chapter 34, he had said in his homiletical hints we may well wonder if any man who had proper discernment ever drew a text from this chapter which of course indicates not only that I do not have proper discernment but worse than that because I not only drew a text from it but preached on all of the passages from the chapter.

Well, when we come to chapter 35, we don't have to worry about that because this is a chapter upon which one may preach, though Professor Leupold has some questions about some parts of even that. Jacob, you remember, had come back to the land but instead of coming back to Bethel as evidently that was the divine will, he had made his way down to Succoth, and then had encamped before the city of Shechem there in contact with the pagan world about him, worldliness began to take its tow and chapter 34 and its portrayal of the seduction of Dinah and the tragedy and catastrophe that occurred as a result of it illustrates how worldliness had taken its tow but now evidently in the divine plan it is time for restoration and so back to Bethel becomes the order of the day.

Now Bethel was not much of a place physically. It was just a little community that was sitting on the top of a hill, and then down to the west and to the east were the places that meant something in the land, but it was a very sacred place for Jacob for the simple reason that it was there that God had appeared to him for the first time when he was fleeing from Esau and he had seen that wonderful vision of the mystic ladder -- the bottom of the ladder upon the earth, the top of the ladder in heaven, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon it, and then God stood by the ladder and spoke to him and said, “I am your Way, I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac, and I am going to give you the land on which you are standing Jacob. Your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth. You shall spread out to the west and the north and the east and the south and through you shall all the families of the earth be blessed.” The promises made to Abraham were then reiterated to him but further God said, “I am with you and I

am going to keep you wherever you go and I am going to bring you back into this land for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

I have said several times in the exposition that is the Old Testament equivalent of the New Testament, Philippians 1:6, “Being confident of this very thing that He which has began a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.” That is a great promise. That means that whatever God intends to do with us and he has already told us in the Bible what he intends to do with us, he is going to conform us to Jesus Christ, he will accomplish it.

Jacob is told the same thing. He said, “I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” Jacob awakened from the sleep in which he had seen this wonderful dream vision and he said, “Surely the Lord is in this place and I didn’t know it.” How awesome is this place. It is none other than the house of God, this is the gate of heaven, and he made a vow. He said if God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I have taken, will give me food to eat, and garments to wear, and I return to my father’s house in safety, then the Lord will be my God and the stone which I have set up as a pillar will be God’s house and of all that Thou dost give me I will surely give a tenth to Thee. Those were great early vows that Jacob had vowed to the Lord.

But in the meantime, things had happened. He had come back to the land that’s true. God had incidentally cared for him, had done everything that Jacob wanted him to do, and he had come back into the land and at Succoth there finally down to Shechem, he has bought a home in the land, he has barns for his cattle, he now has camped before a pagan city, and the worst thing of all, there are now idols that have been brought into the very household of Jacob and so consequently Jacob’s vows have not been paid. In addition, he is now in trouble because of the activities of the two sons, Simeon and Levi in Shechem, and the destruction of the city and the slaughter of the males of that city, Jacob’s name is not a very good name in the land. Someone has said, “A drying well often will lead the spirit to a river that flows from the throne of God.” Jacob is in trouble. He needs reassurance as a human being from his standpoint, and so God is going to give him that, but there are some other things that need transformation in Jacob’s life.

Chapter 34 is a chapter that is almost godless while chapter 35 is a chapter that is full of God. In chapter 34, in the incident with Dinah we see the Shechem life of the children of Israel, but in chapter 35 we see the Bethel life of Jacob and his family. You know, restoration is very important in the Christian life of course, but restoration is not enough for maturity, and so if we are to be brought to maturity, we often must be put through trials and so some have called chapter 35, the school of sorrow. Sometimes that's what we have to go through, and if God wishes us to go through it there is no way that you and I may escape it, because He will put us through it, and so Jacob in this chapter is restored, but he is also now enrolled in the school of sorrow and we will talk about that later on. It's something that every one of us as a general rule must pass through, the school of sorrow. Sooner or later, it will be part of your discipline to prepare you for eternal life. So, we face it with confidence and with assurance that God will be with us in it.

When Well, the command came to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel, and live there, and make an altar there to God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.” I have often wondered how God spoke to the men of the Old Testament. Sometimes we know, sometimes it is clear he has spoken in audible voice. I have often felt that today when people say that God spoke to me in an audible voice that they are dwelling in spiritual kook-land or something like that, because it has been the universal testimony of the believers in the present age that God does not speak in an audible voice, and I suggest that when someone says that, that you too regard them as not altogether there spiritually.

How does God speak to us? Well, sometimes, he speaks to us in what may seem to be simply an impulse of the moment. Many Christians have testified to the fact that as they were getting ready to follow a certain path there came to them some impulse on the spur of the movement and an apparent impulse to move another way and then some tragedy took place from which they were spared by that impulse that came to them. Many a Christian had sought to board an airline and then as told of the experience, “Do not do it,” and afterwards after the plane has gone down they have learnt the reason for that. We are sometimes led that way; I would not doubt that.

We are also led more frequently by the daily experiences of our lives. We remember that the Bible says, “He works all things according to the counsel of His own Will,” and consequently everything that happens to us in our daily life is part of the divine plan and program for us and we shall look at those experiences as if they were experiences in which we see the Hand of God, and one of the things that we learn as a Christian is how to decipher the hieroglyphics, someone has said of our daily experiences. It’s not easy, and we are learning as long as we are in the flesh. That’s another way that God leads us through the daily experiences of our lives and then He also leads us as we meditate upon the word of God and seek for the conviction of the Holy Spirit regarding the path that we are to take.

Now how God spoke to Jacob here, the Scriptures do not say. When I finished saying what I have just said to you this morning, a seminary student came up to me and said, one of my professors said that evidently in a passage like this, God spoke through an angel to Jacob. That of course is possible. The text does not say that. It simply says, “God said to Jacob.” How he spoke to him we are not sure, but he did definitely speak to him and he made his will known to Jacob.

It is even more important to realize that this was an invitation to Jacob to return to the fervor of the early days, to return to the spirit of those vows that he made, the things that made Bethel; that mountain pass; the Gate of Heaven for him. So Jacob, “Get up, go back to Bethel, there make an altar to the Lord God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.” To Jacob’s credit, he follows divine directions. Bethel — that must have meant something special to him. There are certain things from our experience that mean things to us. Occasionally, when we hear a bar of a piece of music we remember certain things in our experience in the past or it is even possible that there is some fragrant odor that reminds us of some experience in the past. There are many things like that.

Bethel must have been a word that conjured up in Jacob’s mind all of the wonderful experiences that he had on that night when God spoke to him in the beginning and so it was a thing that excited his emotions and consequently he said to his household and to all who were with him,

“Turn away the foreign gods which are among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments, and let’s go to Bethel, and there I am going to make an altar to God who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.”

Bethel was 30 miles from Shechem. It is 10 years that Jacob has been back in the land now and he still has not come to Bethel. So his vows as I mentioned are meant to go unpaid. He has not done what he should have done.

Now he did build an altar in Shechem but you see it is possible to build an altar and to have it a meaningless kind of altar. Isaiah the Prophet, speak about the children of Israel and their apostasy trampling the temple courts because it is possible to do that in unbelief.

As you will know, it is possible to trample the courts of Believers Chapel in unbelief. It is possible to be here Sunday after Sunday and to hear the ministry of the word of God from the various teachers but never to have really yourself entered into an experience of salvation through Jesus Christ, and it is also possible for believers to sit here and listen to the ministry of the word of God and not be touched by it at all. It seems strange but nevertheless it is true.

Looking at you from the outward, you might say, well, he treads the courts of attendance at the meetings and all of the other things that go along with the outward identification with an orthodox church but inwardly there is really nothing there at all. So the building of an altar is not of significance unless it is an altar that is built in faith. That’s what God means when he says, “Build an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you came out of the land in the first place.”

You can see that Jacob’s response reveals that there has been declension in the midst of the family of God and think of it, after the exalted fellowship of Bethel in the beginning and the exalted fellowship of that night in Peniel when he wrestled with God and whipped and prayed and finally was blessed by the Lord God. In spite of all of that, we read that there were foreign gods in the midst of the tents of Jacob and his family. “Put away the foreign gods which are among you and purify yourselves and change your garments.” Declension after the most exalted fellowship.

Is it possible that we have that in Believers Chapel? Is it possible that in our congregation in which you listen to the word of God expounded Sunday after Sunday? Is it possible that there is declension in your own spiritual life? Is it possible that you do not really pray as you formerly prayed? Is it possible that the freshness of the teaching of the word of God is no longer there with you? Is it possible that you regard the reading of the Bible as really a labor and something you do simply because you feel you must do it, but your mind is not even there when you are reading the words?

See, I know exactly how you feel because that's the way I feel at times. I read the Bible and read the words but my mind and my heart are not there. Declension. Perhaps the Lord has that in mind when he says, “If your right eye offends you, pluck it out, throw it from you, it's better to enter into life maimed than to lose one's soul. If your right hand offends you, cut it off, throw it from you.”

In Acts chapter 19, when the word of God was preached and there was response, one of the outgrowths of the response was that they threw away their books of magic and there comes a time when it is proper in the Christian life for us to throw away the things that hinder our fellowship with the Lord God. There are more important things than things in this life, much more important things.

Now we read in verse 5, “As they journeyed there was a great terror upon the cities that were around them and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob.” There is a very striking verse in Proverbs chapter 16 in verse 7 where the writer of the Proverbs says, “When a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.” He might have expected the people of the land to attack Jacob because of the way they had treated the Shechemites but when Jacob and his company journeyed down toward Bethel there was a terror of them upon the cities that were around about them and they did not even bother with them.

Well, I will only just make a few comments about this section right here. I think some observations are in order. After the Bethels and the Peniels, Jacob is in decline. Bethel, if you could

put your finger on one place where Jacob came into touch with the Lord God in the fullest sense of reality it was at Bethel, when he saw the vision of the latter and heard God make those wonderful promises to him and responded in those vows and then at Peniel, a few years before this he had wrestled with God himself, thinking that he was probably a representative of Esau for a while, but finally that mystical unknown combatant touched him on the hip and his hip was immediately dislocated. Jacob realized that he was wrestling with a super-human being, and he began to cling to him and explained that he would not let him go until he had been blessed and God blessed him there and he called the place the face of God. He had been in Bethel, the house of God, and in Peniel the face of God, and now in spiritual decline. It's amazing isn't?

I think one of the most terrifying verses in the Bible is Hosea chapter 7 and verse 9. The prophet speaking about Ephraim says, “Gray hairs are here and there among him yet he knows it not.” It is possible for us to be in spiritual decline and as you hear a message like this or ponder a chapter like this think that has beautiful application to so and so when really we are the object of the spirit's application of the text. “Gray hairs are here and there among him, yet he knoweth it not.”

So I ask you about your spiritual life. Are there gray hairs here and there on the head of your spiritual life and is it possible that you do not even realize that you have retrogressed in spiritual living? Is it possible that you do not even recognize that you have become lethargic and indifferent in the things of the Lord that you do not read the Bible with the same fervor that you did and find the same things in it that you formerly did even though you know more about spiritual things? The idols are the evidences of decay.

One of the saddest things I think in the Christian life and unfortunately it has often happened in Believers Chapel. I hope less than in other churches but I am not the one to ultimately judge. Well, I have observed many times through the years couples that seem to be getting along very well and then suddenly the shocking news that they are separating, getting a divorce, and that even individuals who have been attending the services of the local church, an orthodox church, now

are giving evidence in an outward way of the fact that there has been declension all along in the midst of the family.

Preachers of the word of God, teachers of the word of God who have after long periods of apparent fruitfulness then shown to be and who have confessed to be individuals who were adulterers in their relationships all the time over a lengthy period of time in which they were teaching the word of God. The idols that are in the midst of our personal lives, what are they? What is the idol of our lives?

I notice that when God called Jacob to go back to Bethel, He said, “I want you to prepare an altar there for me and Jacob in order to carry out the injunction put away those foreign gods. It almost suggests that the idols must go before he comes, because he will appear to Jacob again in a moment and reaffirm those promises but we remember that it is God who has initiated this command to go back to Bethel, but he has asked Jacob to go now and involved in that as the putting away of the foreign gods, so those idols must go. God is not going to escort a pack of idols back to Bethel evidently. He is just not going to be party to that and so consequently Jacob asks them to put away the idols.

Now perhaps some of you in the audience are thinking, “Well, Dr. Johnson, I surely would like to put away my idols, but please tell me how?” One of the commentators says what you need to do is to ransack the camel baggage of your life and take those idols out just as Rachel’s teraphim were in the camel baggage, and then bury them just as Jacob did in this chapter, bury them. And some people no doubt having the same experience that I have often had; I recognize that’s an idol, but I do not seem to be able to get rid of it.

Well, then it is good to pray, O God make me willing to give up these idols and then if you have difficulty with that then say, O God, make me willing to pray to be willing to give up these idols, but you will find that the Lord will answer your prayers even when you find yourself unable to overcome in your own strength, he will give you the strength.

When the Lord Jesus many centuries later, spoke to the church at Ephesus, a vital church that Paul commended for its faith and love, He said to that church, “You have left your first love,” and then do you remember the instructions he gave? He said, “Do the first works, repent, do the first works.” What are the first works? What did we do when we were first converted? The first place we were thrilled. We thank the Lord for the forgiveness of sins that we had, the relationship that we had, and assurance of eternal life. We didn’t know anything about justification or reconciliation or propitiation or the doctrine of the atonement in its deeper aspects but we knew we had been saved and so we thanked God for it. We got down on our knees by ourselves, by our bedsides, and we gave grateful thanks to the Lord God for what He has done. That’s one of the first works. And in the Bible we began to read the Bible.

I can still remember when I was in the insurance business that one of the first things that I wanted to do was to read through the whole of the Scriptures and Dr. Barnhouse gave me since some instructions. He said, “Begin in John, read from John through Revelation, come back and read Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and then go over to Genesis and read Genesis to Malachi. And I didn’t know enough to know that that was even a good method of reading the Bible, so I started and I did it. The Bible was like a fresh book to me. Chapter after chapter, I learnt things concerning the Lord God who had saved me and I read the Scofield notes. They are still good notes to read.

There are some Arminian arrows in the volume of course, but we are intelligent enough and perceptive enough to be able to read with some discernment are we not? That’s a good Bible and those notes are good notes to read and I read those Schofield notes and I learnt a great deal of good theology from them. And I learned to pray, I would get down by my bedside in Alabama and pray by myself, the first works. And I began to make some Christian friends, I didn’t have any. I made some Christian friends and companions and I love them. I grew to enjoy their fellowship. I grew to be unhappy in some of the other relationships. I didn’t like spending my Saturday nights at the club and the dance at the Birmingham Country Club as I had spent many a Saturday before that and my life was transformed. Those were some of the first works.

And when the Lord Jesus says, “Do the first works,” this is what He means. He means go back to praying, go back to reading the Scriptures, go back to the Christian fellowship, which is edifying and instructive.

Now we read of the return to Bethel in the verses that follow. Bethel is a kind of focal place just for Jacob as Mount Moriah was the climactic place for Abraham. They arrived in Bethel and there he built the altar and he called the place El-Bethel, the God of Bethel because God had revealed Himself to him there and there Deborah died. Deborah was Rebekah’s maid or Rebekah’s nurse and no doubt had been the nurse of Jacob himself and so she was a very dear person to Jacob and there they buried her and called the place, “The Oak of Weeping” for it was evidently like burying his own mother. This is the first incidentally of four burials in the chapter.

You see Jacob is entering the school of sorrow now and it is by the school of sorrow that he will ultimately become Israel, truly our God’s fighter. And after this, God appears to him and reaffirms the promises to him, changes his name to Israel and by the way in verse 21, we read that his name is called Israel, then Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder. So, Israel as a name will begin to appear but still in Jacob’s life he is called Jacob and he is called Israel to the end of his days because there is something of Jacob in everyone of us until the end of our days and there is something of Israel in us until the end of our days as well.

They do, and if you will look at Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and see the kinds of life that they lived, you will notice progress, development, but you will notice that there is always frailty and there is always flaw as long as we are in the flesh. He reiterates that he is God Almighty, stresses by using that term the fact that the power of God is undergirding the saint of God who is frail. This word is always used when men need reassurance and encouragement, and Jacob responds by setting up the pillar in the place where he had spoken with Him, a pillar of stone, and pouring out a drink offering and oil upon it, gratitude.

Jacob does not forget the grace of God manifested to him. The latter part of the chapter contains the account of the death of his beloved wife, the one that he loved, and wished to be his

only wife. So far as we can tell, this is the second of the burials, Rachel. One thing you can say about Jacob, he was a man who had his flaws and his feelings. He is a man who is up like this and then down like this, but there is one thing that is persistent, his love for Rachel, and a man who can love as Jacob loved is a man who can love God too. And in these two states, Benoni and Benjamin, we have reflected the two states of the Lord Jesus as I mentioned in the Scripture reading. The son of Reuben is referred to in just a stanza or so. It is a laconic report leaving the shock of the breach in the family to the imagination. That too illustrates how true it is that the Bible is the word of God because it so beautifully understands man -- incest, a kind of incest in the family of Jacob.

The prevalence of incest in our society is one of the great troubles of our society in the United States today as you well know and here it is a long time ago. Well, I say the chapter concludes with reference to the family of Jacob. He has a complete family now, 12 sons and these 12 sons of the Old Testament corresponding with the 12 apostles of the New Testament marking in the ideal sense the completion of the two elections of God, the election of Israel and the election of the church of Jesus Christ and finally the death of Isaac and reunited at the bedside are Jacob and Esau. Esau evidently has matured considerably and Jacob and he are reconciled on the deathbed of their grand old father who enters into fellowship and communion with his own people in death. He was gathered to his people. That's an evidence that the Old Testament does know of the doctrine of life after death. Let me say this just in conclusion.

The school of restoration is suggested by the command to go back to Bethel and Jacob is going to back to Bethel and discarding the idols that had been obstructing fellowship with the Lord God but the school of restoration does not exempt us from the school of sorrow. One of the commentators reminds us that in the making of chinaware there is a process that illustrates with startling force and beauty, the way that God often brings us to perfection. For after the chinaware has been made and the pictures have been painted upon it, it is necessary for that ware to be put into a furnace and there extreme heat is applied to it in order that, that which has been painted on the side may be burned into the china itself. That's the way God brings us to perfection, very often through

the sorrows of life. Fruitfulness and possession of the land is only for those who pass through the school of suffering.

The Apostle Paul at Antioch, in the preaching of the ministry, and it is Barnabas who preached, and Barnabas told the believers there that it was through many tribulations that we must enter into the Kingdom of God. And see what you got yourself into when you became a Christian? That’s what you got yourself into. You got yourself into a relationship to a father who disciplines. He loves enough to discipline, and he does discipline, and he passes us through the experiences of life so that we may become what he wants us to become. And it may be tribulations, not *the* tribulation, but tribulations. If we suffer with Him, we shall also reign with Him, and we shall not reign if we do not suffer with Him, so Jacob’s path is draped in the gathering shadows of outward sorrow from now on.

There is Deborah who dies. There is Rachel who dies. There is Reuben who destroys the happy relationship of the family in his sin. There is the story of Joseph and the elder brethren, who take advantage of him, sell him into captivity, and as far as Jacob is concerned, Jacob thought he was dead. His partiality no doubt helped in that situation. We will talk about that later. Then there is Isaac’s death, the death of his beloved father. Simeon, his family separated from him. And then when that strange fellow in Egypt asks for Benjamin, he says all these things are against me. A few chapters later he says, “I have not attained to the years of the patriarchal companions,” but you know the interesting thing about it is that when Jacob said all these things are against me, actually everything was working for his good. Joseph was in Egypt, his own son, Prime Minister, Joseph, by the grace of God had all of the provisions necessary for their maintenance.

Often at the very time that we think all of these things are against us, as we are under the hand of divine discipline, it is then that God is really working in our behalf. So we need to remember, we don’t judge in the things of the Lord by appearances, we know God has a purpose in sorrow, we know also that nothing can separate us from the love of God and Jesus Christ if we know

him, and we remember as the writer of the Epistle of the Hebrews says that after the time of discipline there is an afterwards in which we inherit the blessings of that experience.

So I say to you this morning, you who are Christians, you who are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, take heart, you are just a bit of heaven’s chinaware, and He is putting you in the furnace in order to make those colors permanent so that you will be of joy and a glory and a thing of beauty for the Lord God throughout eternity.

From now on, Jacob fades from the scene; it is Joseph and the others who come into the lime light. Jacob will appear from time to time but the story shifts now. Jacob is back in Bethel where he should have been and God has now prepared to go on with the program which is bigger than an Abraham, and bigger than an Isaac, and bigger than a Jacob, and bigger than one of us too.

If you are here today and you have never believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, of course you do not know have a father who will love you enough to discipline you, what you need is to recognize that the Lord God has offered His own son, the Lord Jesus Christ as an atoning sacrifice by which you may have everlasting life.

Forgiveness of sins is offered to all who recognize that they are sinners and are willing to come as beggars and receive as a gift, eternal life. And so if you are here this morning and you have never believed in the Lord Jesus, we remind you of the blood that was shed and the forgiveness of sins that is available, come to Christ, put your trust in him, lean upon him who loved sinners, and gave himself for them. By the grace of God, join the company of sinners who have been saved by grace.

If you are a Christian, remember when degeneration and declension set in, do the first works. Cast away the idols. If you find it difficult, ask God to make it willing to cast away the idols, and resume the relationship that meant so much to you in the beginning. You know, I often find that this is my particular problem, having been in the Lord’s work for many years now, the biggest problem I have is the fact that I am often so busy, doing things in the Lord’s work that I neglect the Scriptures, that I neglect the prayer life, neglect the other things that must minister to me spiritually,

and the one thing that disturbs me very much about Believers Chapel—not specially Believers Chapel, but any group to whom the ministry of the word of God has come—is that it seems so easy for us to find the ministry of God that which we accept and take for granted. Day after day, Sunday after Sunday, we hear the ministry of the word of God and it does not really affect us very much after a time.

I remember that God said through the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews that I am going to be held accountable as an elder, for the ministry given to an elder. That’s a terrifying thing. That’s as terrifying as “gray hairs are here and there among him and yet he knoweth it not” and it disturbs me. I would love for those of you who have been in the chapel for many years to do the first works that there be the freshness of the reading of the word of God, the freshness of the prayer life, and the freshness of the communication of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

May God deliver us from a humdrum kind of Christian existence, taking things for granted in the things of God. May He give us the freshness, delivering us from lethargy and indifference. May the Lord Jesus be exalted and honored in our lives. Wouldn’t it be great, really? If we just went home, every one of us, and had a little time of prayer over our own spiritual relationship, and the relationship with the chapel to the Lord God. Back to Bethel is not a bad word, it’s a good word.

Let’s stand for the benediction and bow in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are so grateful to Thee for these words of encouragement and exaltation that have come to us. We remember the patriarch and his problems and his difficulties, his weaknesses, and his faults, and flaws, but we thank Thee for the grace that was manifested in that Thou didst appear to him, encourage him, enable him to go back to Bethel, to cast away the idols, change their garments, purify themselves, and resume the kind of life that Thou wouldst have them to live.

O God, touch our lives. Make us different. Give us the freshness of those first days. Lord God, deliver us from the condemnation of the church at Ephesus that we have left our first love. O

“Back to Bethel,” by S. Lewis Johnson
Copyright © 2007 Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. All Rights Reserved.

God may that never be. We worship Thee, we desire to glorify Thy name, undertake for us, make us willing to give thee first place in our lives as an individual and as an assembly of believers.

May grace and mercy go with us to that end. For Jesus' sake. Amen.