

BETHEL

THE DWELLING PLACE OF THE GOD OF JACOB

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Hugo Bouter

BETHEL

*The Dwelling Place
of the God of Jacob*

CHAPTER TWO
LONDON - ENGLAND

"Arise, go up to Bethel..."

Genesis 35:1

*"I was glad when they said to me:
Let us go into the house of the LORD"*

Psalm 122:1

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1. *Introduction*

God wants to dwell with man

It is God's desire to reveal Himself to man and to have fellowship with him. He desires to dwell with man. God is the God of Bethel. He is the God of His house, for Beth-El means *house of God*. God has a habitation on earth where He dwells and reveals Himself to those who come to Him.

But how is that possible? For God is a holy God, so how could He dwell with sinful sons of men? That is not a matter of course, indeed. God cannot tolerate sin and it is impossible for a sinner to come into His presence. For after they had sinned, Adam and Eve were driven out from God's presence, and how could their descendants - who bore the image of their sinful parents - venture to approach Him?

Man can come to God only on a righteous basis that meets both God's holy demands and man's needs as a sinner. Now this basis is laid by the death of a substitute, a sacrificial lamb, innocent itself but taking the place of the guilty sinner. On this basis Abel came to God and God respected him. On the same basis Noah came to God and God smelled the sweet aroma (or, odour of rest) of his offering and He respected Noah and his family. And the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob also built altars to offer their sacrifices to God.

He dwells with a ransomed people

But there is something more: God can dwell only with a people delivered from slavery. This is what we see in the book of Exodus. With a strong arm God led His people out of Egypt where they lived in slavery, in order to set them apart for Himself and to dwell in their midst. Only after their deliverance from the power of the enemy, were the Israelites able to serve God and could God set up His sanctuary in their midst. Then He had a house on earth to dwell in.

Yet God's sanctuary in the midst of His people Israel was only an image of the house God now has on earth. Christ has come as the Lamb of God and His sacrifice fulfilled the Old Testament shadow service. He really met all God's demands and His finished work is the basis on which God can dwell both with and in His own (cf. John 14:17). So we as Christians are members of God's household now (Eph. 2:19). By the Spirit we have access to the Father (Eph. 2:18; 3:12). We are the true worshippers who worship the Father in spirit and truth (John 4:23).

Jacob's experiences in relation to God's house

Now what does the history of Jacob mean to us in this context? A great deal, for God told Jacob, the patriarch of the people of Israel, that He wanted to have a dwelling place on earth. He made Himself known to him as the God of Bethel, the God of the *house of God*. God wanted to bless Jacob and He wanted to dwell with him...and Jacob was allowed to dwell with God!

But alas, at first Jacob did not understand much

of that. God's presence frightened him and he left the place where God dwelt. He set out upon a long journey and he wandered far away from the house of God. For a good many years he lived far away from Bethel, but eventually God intervened and brought him back again. This was no plain sailing, however. It involved a lot of painful experiences. But ultimately this discipline served for the good of Jacob and it brought him back into God's presence.

For that reason Jacob's experiences in relation to the house of God, recorded in Genesis 28 - 35, mean a great deal to us. They show us that God sometimes must take great *pains* to bring a believer to the place where He dwells. They also show us that God is very *patient* with a believer in order to make him fit for His presence in a practical way, so that he can draw near as a worshipper.

Thus, the life of Jacob contains many spiritual lessons for us in relation to our conduct in the house of God, which is the Church of the living God. And our objective is to dwell on that mainly, though we shall also look at the prophetic meaning of Jacob's experiences for Israel as a nation. Let us try to learn as Christians from these chapters of Scripture, "for whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (Rom. 15:4).

2. Christ, the living Stone

Genesis 28

The Rock of salvation

When we meet Jacob in Genesis 28, we see that he fled from the face of his brother Esau whom he had deceived. For he took away his birth-right as well as his blessing. Jacob was eager to fulfil God's promise that the older should serve the younger, but he refused to wait for God's time. And now he reaped the fruit of the seeds of jealousy which he had sown: he had to flee because Esau wanted to kill him.

On his way he found a resting place on a stone: "So he came to a certain place and stayed there all night, because the sun had set. And he took one of the stones of that place and put it at his head, and he lay down in that place to sleep" (v. 11).

At once a parallel can be drawn here between Jacob and the people of Israel. Just as Jacob found rest on this stone, the nation that would descend from him would find rest in the Lord, their Rock, their Refuge and their Shelter (Ps. 61:2,3; 62:2,6-8). But alas, they forsook the Rock of their salvation and provoked Him to jealousy with foreign gods (Deut. 32:4-18). They also rejected their Messiah, the Stone in which they should have put their faith (Isa. 28:16). They did not receive Him, but the Stone which the builders rejected has become the chief

cornerstone. This was the LORD's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes (Ps. 118:22, 23; Matt. 21:42-44; Acts 4:10-12; 1 Pet. 2:4-7).

Christ was despised and rejected by man, but honoured by His God and Father. For the rejected Stone has been exalted by God and has been given the most important place in God's spiritual temple, His present dwelling place. This habitation of God consists of all those who come to Christ in faith and thus find rest in Him, for He gives true rest to all those who come to Him (Matt. 11:28).

Thus He has become the Chief Cornerstone of the dwelling place of the living God (Eph. 2:20-22). Everyone who comes to Him in faith can say:

*On Christ salvation rests secure;
The Rock of ages must endure;
Nor can that faith be overthrown
Which rests upon the "Living Stone."*

Christ, the risen Lord, the living Stone, is the resting place for all His own. God Himself looks with delight at the Person and the work of Christ, who fully glorified Him on Calvary's cross. And it is on the basis of this finished work that God now invites man to come to Christ in order to find eternal peace.

This invitation is not only meant for the believing remnant of Israel, it is also extended to the nations. So if we draw a parallel between Jacob and his offspring in connection with Christ, the living Stone, this is not only meant for Israel. In this dispensation, in which our Lord Jesus Christ has been rejected by His earthly people, He gives true rest to all those who come to Him both from Israel and from the nations.

On this Rock I will build My Church

Now all these individuals who come to Jesus in faith, both from Israel and from the nations, are added as living stones to God's house. In the Old Testament, the tabernacle, and later on the temple, served as a type of this spiritual house. For the substance, the full reality of these things has come with Christ (Col. 2:17).

Therefore our Lord describes this true temple of God as the house that would be founded on Himself as the Son of the living God. We find this in the Gospel according to Matthew, which depicts Him as the rejected Messiah. But in spite of His rejection He remained the Christ, the Son of the living God, who was going to overcome death and the grave. When Peter confessed Him as such, Jesus answered and said to him: "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this Rock I will build My Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:16-18).

The Church is the fruit of Christ's death and resurrection. The *Church* of the living God is built on the *Son* of the living God. It consists of living stones who partake of His life, dead sinners by nature but made alive by Him and added to the temple of God. Peter was one of these living stones that owe their life to Christ the Rock. Jesus called him Peter, that is "a stone". He gave him a new life and a new name. And in his first epistle Peter copies this when he speaks about the chosen Stone and the many living stones that come to Him and are being built up a spiritual house (cf. Matt 16:18; John 1:43; 5:21; Eph. 2:5,21; 1 Pet. 2:4,5).

So the Church or the Assembly is the actual dwelling place of God. It has been built on Christ as

the Son of the living God, who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light. It could not be built until Christ had finished the work of redemption and thereby had laid an appropriate foundation for the temple of the living God. It was only after God's Son had come and had been united with us by His death and resurrection, that God could really dwell with men and even in men.

A Rock of offence

But there is the other side too: the Stone is not only a Rock of salvation to those who believe, but also a Rock of offence to those who continue in their unbelief! To those who are disobedient to the word He is a Stone of stumbling and a Rock of offence (1 Pet. 2:7). In the Gospels the Lord had already announced this. The rejected Stone has become the chief cornerstone of God's house. Whoever falls on that Stone will be broken. For the time will come that He will fall on His enemies and grind them to powder (Matt. 21:40-45; Luke 20:16-19).

This reminds us of the scene described by the prophet Daniel in his explanation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Dan. 2). The kingdoms of the world will be crushed together by a Stone, cut out without hands, which will displace all these kingdoms and fill the whole earth. Christ is now waiting at the right hand of God until all His enemies are made His footstool. When He suddenly appears, without man being involved in any way, He will judge His enemies and establish an eternal kingdom, of which He Himself will be the great and glorious Centre.

Then His authority will be recognized everywhere. All things will be gathered together in one in Christ (Eph. 1:10). Then too, the believing remnant

of Israel will find rest in Him, the Stone which is laid in Zion for a sure foundation - just as Jacob the patriarch found rest on the stone that he had put at his head at Bethel.

Summing up the teaching of Scripture concerning Christ as the living Stone, we can distinguish the following four aspects:

1. He is the resting place for everyone who comes to Him in faith.

2. And as such He is the foundation stone of the house of God, the Church of the living God, which is being built on Him.

3. To those who reject Him, however, and particularly to the unbelieving majority of Israel, He is a Stone of stumbling and a Rock of offence on which they stumble and fall.

4. And as such He falls on His enemies at the end of this age. He will crush them all, and then be the acknowledged Centre of the millennial kingdom.

This brings us to Jacob's next experience: the ladder he saw set up on the earth with its top reaching to heaven. This ladder is a prophetic reference to the times of restoration of all things, to the coming reign of our Lord Jesus Christ.

3. The ladder reaching to heaven

Genesis 28

You shall see heaven open

After falling asleep Jacob had a very special dream. "Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (v. 12). In his dream the heavens were opened and he saw that there was a connection between heaven and earth, a ladder on which the angels were ascending and descending.

This vision has a deep prophetic meaning, for our Lord Himself referred to it in John 1. When Nathanael recognized Him as the omnipresent and omniscient Son of God, the rightful King of Israel, He told him that he would see greater things than these. These glories were connected with the people of Israel. But there were more excellent things. Jesus promised him: "Hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (John 1:48-51). Christ's glory as the Son of Man exceeds His greatness as the King of Israel, for as the Son of Man He will have dominion over all the works of God's hands and wield universal power. And as such He has been crowned with glory and honour at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Nathanael called Him the Son of God, the King of Israel. These qualities He owned as Israel's Messiah, as the One who according to the divine decree had been set as King on the holy hill of Zion (Ps. 2:6ff.). Psalm 2 speaks of the immutability of God's counsels in this respect. Although Messiah was rejected by His own people and by the nations, God's decree will stand and His anointed King will eventually reign over Zion. And from Zion His reign will extend to the ends of the earth.

But Christ's glory as the Son of Man points to greater things than His Messianic rights on earth. For as the Son of Man, He is exalted by God to sit at His right hand in heaven and is appointed over all the works of God's hands. As the Son of Man He is the Heir of all things, of the whole creation, of everything God wanted to give to man. In this character we find Him in Psalm 8, which speaks to us of God's purpose with man - a purpose which, because of the first man's failure, is to be fulfilled in Christ, the second Man from heaven.

The angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man

This will only be visible for all in the coming kingdom, of which Christ will be the glorious Centre. The angels, those mighty servants of God, will then pay homage to the Son of Man and carry out His commandments. They will serve Him, the second Man, the Lord from heaven, to whom all authority has been given in heaven and on earth.

But the angels served Him in His humiliation as well, for the Lord said that "henceforth" (JND) He would be the Object of the angels' ministry (John 1:51). He was seen by angels (1 Tim. 3:16). When He

was tempted in the wilderness, angels ministered to Him (Mark 1:13). In Gethsemane an angel appeared to Him from heaven, strengthening Him (Luke 22:43). Angels ministered in the place where His body had been laid (Luke 24:4ff.).

But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, then all the holy angels will come with Him (Matt. 25:31). And He will be the visible Object of their ministry. They will ascend to carry out His orders and descend on the Son of Man to receive new orders. For all authority will then be given publicly to the Son of Man (cf. Dan. 7:13,14; John 5:27; Rev. 1:13; 14:14).

As the Son of Man Christ reigns on behalf of God the Father. He will have dominion over all the works of God's hands. The millennial kingdom will be the kingdom of our God and of His Christ (Eph. 5:5; Rev. 11:15). And God's anointed King must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, that God may be all in all (1 Cor. 15:24-28).

When Christ reigns, the Church shall reign with Him. For we are His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. And we are the bride of this glorified Man, a suitable helper for Him in His reign over all things.

And the angels are the willing ministers of the Son of Man, and they will see to it that the will of God is done on earth as it is in heaven. The Lord's prayer will be fulfilled (Matt. 6:10), and heaven and earth will be in perfect harmony. The firstborn over all creation will publicly take up the place to which He is entitled, and the angels will worship Him (Col. 1:15,16; Heb. 1:6).

So in fact the ladder Jacob saw, and the angels ascending and descending on it, points to the times of restoration of all things, when all things will be arranged according to the divine order (Acts 3:19-21). Still, the meaning of this ladder is not confined to the future, when all things will be put under the Son of Man publicly. To faith heaven is wide open now and there is a clear link between heaven and earth. With the eyes of faith we can even now look into an opened heaven and see Jesus there, crowned with glory and honour (Heb. 2:9; 3:1).

I see the heavens opened

In the present time, in which the Son of Man has been glorified at God's right hand, this is our position as believers: we gaze into heaven and by the power of the Holy Spirit we see a Man in the glory there.

The book of Acts gives us a wonderful illustration of this truth. Stephen the martyr, a faithful follower of the Christ who was rejected on this earth, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Then he said: "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" (Acts 7:56). His eyes were enlightened by the Spirit to look into heaven.

When Jesus was glorified, the Holy Spirit came down from heaven. And He directs our eyes upwards, to look on Jesus who has taken up His place there at the right hand of God. By the Spirit we behold Christ's glory. So we have a living link with our Master, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things. The Spirit glorifies Him, for He takes of what is His and declares it to us (John 16:13-15).

This creates a real link with heaven. The Holy Spirit unites us with our Head in heaven. The Holy Spirit teaches us the deep things of God and He has brought us to a place where we have free access to God.

We have access by one Spirit to the Father. We have boldness to enter the Holiest, so that we may say with Jacob: "This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!" (Gen. 28:17).

Jesus has entered the heavenly sanctuary as our *forerunner*. So we have this hope, both sure and steadfast, that soon we shall follow Him with glorious bodies (Heb. 6:18-20). But in the meantime we follow Him by faith, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus. In the divine presence we honour and serve our God as a company of sons and priests, until He actually brings us to glory (Heb. 10:19-22).

Now a few words as to the prophetic meaning of the ladder which Jacob saw set up on the earth. It shows the Son of Man as the Object of God's pleasure and of the angels' ministry *on earth*. Remember that the heavens were opened to Him in His pathway here below, when He had been baptized. The angels also ministered to Him on earth. The reason that He took His seat above and is visible there only by faith, is that He was refused by the earth. He was lifted up from the earth.

However, the time is near when the Son of Man appears in glory on this very earth that rejected Him. He is still waiting at the right hand of God, but at His return He will be honoured publicly by men and angels alike. Then the heavens shall answer the earth, which is still subjected to futility (Hos. 2:21). Then the whole creation will be de-

livered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God under the blessed rule of the Son of Man (Rom. 8:21).

4. *The first revelation in Bethel*

Genesis 28

I will bless you

God opened up heaven for Jacob in order to make Himself known to him: "And behold, the LORD stood above it and said: 'I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you' " (vv. 13-15).

It is remarkable that God did not blame Jacob in any way for his wrong actions as to his brother and his father. We hear nothing but promises of blessing here. God allowed Jacob to glance into the opened heavens in order to show him all the treasures He had laid up for him. No judgment, no wrath from heaven was revealed here. Instead, God revealed the fullness of His grace, everything He had purposed in His heart to bestow on Jacob and his descendants. For that reason the fulfilment of these blessings does not depend on the good deeds of

man, but on the unchanging faithfulness of God. However, this revelation of God's goodness towards Jacob also had the object to make him see how wrong he was and to make him judge his own ways.

We can discern four promises of blessing here: the promise of the land, the promise of blessing for Jacob's descendants, the promise of blessing for all the families of the earth and, finally, the promise of God's protection and of Israel's return to the land. All these divine promises were unconditional and irrevocable (cf. Rom. 11:29). They were the continuation of the earlier promises made to Abraham and Isaac. Their final fulfilment will be seen only under the reign of the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham.

1. The promise of the land

This promise confirmed the earlier pledges to Abraham (Gen. 12:7; 13:14-17; 15:7-21; 17:8) and to Isaac (Gen. 26:2-4). Of the four times this promise is made to Abraham, the third one is of special interest for our subject. For here the borders of the promised land are defined as "from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates" (Gen. 15:18).

We find a similar promise in Deuteronomy 11. If the Israelites would carefully keep all God's commandments, their territory would extend "from the river, the River Euphrates, even to the Western Sea" (Deut. 11:22-24). No doubt this is referred to in Deuteronomy 19 as well: "Now if the LORD your God enlarges your territory, as He swore to your fathers, and gives you the land which He promised to give to your fathers, and if you keep all these commandments and do them..." (vv. 8,9).

But because the people failed to keep God's commandments they never possessed all the land, except for the short period of Solomon's reign. For King Solomon reigned over all kingdoms from the River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt (1 Kings 4: 21, 24). Only after Christ's return as the true Solomon will this promise of the land, made unconditionally to the patriarchs, have its permanent fulfilment. Then our Lord shall have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth (Ps. 72:8; Zech. 9:10).

2. The promise of blessing for Jacob's descendants

Jacob's descendants should be "as the dust of the earth." They should "spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south" (v. 14a). No one could number the dust of the earth, and likewise nobody could number Abraham's descendants (Gen 13:16).

This promise was now confirmed to Jacob. Balaam used the same picture when God ordered him to bless Israel: "Who can count the dust of Jacob?" (Num. 23:10). And when praying for wisdom, Solomon acknowledged that God made him king "over a people like the dust of the earth in multitude" (2 Chron. 1:9). But apart from the idea of numerousness this picture of the dust of the earth also implies the thought of transiency (Gen. 3:19; 2 Sam. 22:43; 2 Kings 13:7).

This is one of the three figures used in Scripture to indicate how numerous the descendants of the patriarchs would be. The other two are: "the sand which is on the seashore" and "the stars of the heaven" (Gen. 22:17). Perhaps the expression "the sand which is on the seashore" refers to Israel's

blessed position in relation to the nations (the restless seas). This will be fully seen in the millennium. But the expression "the stars of the heaven" evidently refers to *heavenly* descendants. We should think then of Old Testament saints from Israel, and also of New Testament saints both from Israel and the nations. For the Church consists of heavenly saints gathered by the Holy Spirit from the Jews and the Gentiles alike, and united with Christ in heaven.

3. The promise of blessing for all peoples

This leads us to the third promise: the blessing for all the families of the earth (v. 14b). Israel should be the channel for it, and in particular the Messiah, the promised Seed springing from the people of Israel. The promise of blessing for all the nations of the earth was already given to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 (cf. also Gen. 18:18), and it was repeated after he had offered his only son Isaac (Gen. 22:18).

But then the blessing was expressly stated to be *in his seed*: "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice" (Gen. 22:18). And according to Galatians 3:16 this Seed is Christ. In Him, all the promises of God find their Yes, and their Amen (2 Cor. 1:20). In Him the blessing of Abraham has now come to all the families of the earth, that is, to all those who after father Abraham's own example are justified by faith (cf. Rom. 4:16ff.).

But this promise is also of great importance for the end time, when all the nations shall be blessed from Zion. They shall go up to the mountain of the LORD and walk in His paths. "For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. And in that day there shall be a Root

of Jesse, who shall stand as a banner to the peoples; for the Gentiles shall seek Him, and His resting place shall be glorious” (Isa. 11:9,10).

4. The promise of Israel’s return to the land

Of course the last promise about Israel’s return to the promised land, is closely linked with the other three promises. Particularly here, Jacob is the representative of his descendants. Just as Jacob they would be driven away from the land because of their sins, but in the last days God will restore their fortunes in accordance with His irrevocable promises made to the patriarchs.

The prophets testify to this return to the land again and again, and even Moses spoke of it long ago (Lev. 26; Deut. 30). But these promises of blessing and restoration presuppose an *inner* renewal, the circumcision of the heart of the people. The outward return goes together with an *inner* return to God and to the Messiah whom they have despised so long. It is obvious that the present return of the Jews in unbelief is not the complete fulfilment of prophecy.

Moreover, the prophecies concerning the return to the land usually refer to the *entire* people, both the two and the ten tribes (Isa. 11:11ff.; 43:5,6; Jer. 3:18; 16:15; 30-33; Ezek. 37:16ff.). So the return of the remnant of the two tribes from Babylon was only a partial fulfilment of these prophecies. Zechariah, who prophesied after the Babylonian captivity, tells us that not only the house of Judah but also that of Joseph - the kingdom of the ten tribes - will be brought back from the Dispersion (Zech. 10:6-12).

For the believing remnant of the people this return will also be a matter of prayer. It is remarkable that even in David's time, the Levitical singers ended their song of thanksgiving thus: "Save us, O God of our salvation; gather us together, and deliver us from the Gentiles, to give thanks to Your holy name, to triumph in Your praise" (1 Chron. 16:35). And at the dedication of the temple, Solomon concluded his prayer with a plea for the return from the exile (2 Chron. 6:36-39).

This prayer for the return to the land is also found in the Psalms. Psalm 106 ends with the same words with which the Levitical singers ended their song. Psalm 107 is a song of thanksgiving of the redeemed of the LORD, because He gathered them out of the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south (vv. 1-3). The well-known Songs of Ascents also speak about a future return to Zion, particularly Psalm 126. The LORD gives freedom to the prisoners, and He gathers together the outcasts of Israel (Ps. 146:7; 147:2).

As for the New Testament, we would like to refer to Matthew 24:31 and Revelation 7:1-8. Not all the people of Israel will be gathered together. At Christ's return the unbelieving majority will be judged, but the elect will be gathered together from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. They will be sealed and safeguarded from judgment.

So we look upon Jacob here as the representative of the people of Israel. This is a common practice in Scripture. When Jacob blessed his own sons he regarded them as the representatives of the tribes that would come forth from them, and he spoke about the distant future (Gen. 49:1). Indeed, this is always

the object of prophecy. It aims at the eventual blessing of the people in the promised land under the rule of their Messiah.

So the promise of the return to the land in Genesis 28 holds good for Jacob's descendants as well. Moreover, in the first three promises the descendants are explicitly mentioned, and it is very obvious that their blessings will be fully realized only in the coming kingdom of peace.

5. *The first stone pillar*

Genesis 28

Jacob's monument

Jacob was thankful for God's revelation to him and wanted to show his gratitude (although he made a vow later on and placed himself under the law as far as his relationship with God was concerned). Therefore he set up a memorial stone as a reminder of this unforgettable event: "Then Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on top of it. And he called the name of that place Bethel; but the name of that city had been Luz previously" (vv. 18,19).

Here Jacob did not erect an altar; he would not do so until he returned to Canaan (Gen. 33:20). His grandfather Abraham, on the contrary, had built an altar immediately upon his arrival in Bethel (Gen.12:8; 13:3,4). At that altar Abraham called on the Name of the LORD. Abraham was a worshipper and he took God at His word. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God (Rom. 4:20,21).

There was a huge difference between Jacob and Abraham. Jacob went his way in self-confidence. He walked in the power of the flesh and had to learn by bitter experience that the flesh profits nothing. On

the other hand, Abraham walked in the power of faith and that is why he always had an "altar," a place where he could call on the Name of the Lord and thank Him.

But Jacob did have this stone pillar here. Its meaning is clarified by other Scriptures, such as Genesis 31:44-52 (the pillar that was a witness between Jacob and Laban) and Isaiah 19:19,20 (the pillar that will be for a sign and for a witness to the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt). Jacob's pillar was a witness of something special; it was a lasting token of an important event.

In the light of the New Testament this memorial stone becomes even more important. In the first place it was the stone that Jacob had put at his head. And as such it is a type of Christ as the resting place for all true believers. Jacob's stone was not left to sink into oblivion; henceforth it was to be a special sign. And the same holds good for Christ, the elect and precious Stone. First He is the resting place for our hearts, but then too, He is the theme of our testimony.

So the Stone that is the foundation of the Church is at the same time the One to whom it testifies. There is no other sure foundation that meets with God's approval (1 Cor. 3:11). Christ is the foundation of the Church, because it is being built up in Him. But He is also the content of the confession upheld by the Church. Therefore the apostle Paul speaks of the Church of the living God as the house of God, the pillar and ground of the truth. And the truth is embodied in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is God manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, received up in glory (1 Tim. 3:15,16). It is the duty of the Church here on earth to bear wit-

ness of His incarnation, His perfect life on earth, His resurrection from the dead, and His glorification in heaven. In this way the Church is the pillar and ground of the truth, the living memorial of the truth concerning Christ.

The anointed Stone

Then Jacob took action again: he poured oil on top of his pillar (v. 18b). This was meant to be an anointing (Gen. 31:13). In Scripture, this is a very common type of the anointing with the Holy Spirit (cf. Zech. 4:6,14; Acts 10:38, 2 Cor. 1:21,22). So in the second place Jacob's pillar was an *anointed* stone.

The Holy Spirit provides the Church with spiritual strength to witness for Christ. Our testimony is not by might nor by power, but by the Spirit of God. For the Spirit has come to indwell the Church in order to testify to Christ and to glorify Him. The Holy Spirit maintains His testimony here on earth by means of the Church, by means of His anointed ones. That is the deeper meaning of this anointed pillar, of which Jacob said in verse 22 that it should be "God's house." It is a type of Christ linked with His Church, which at present is the habitation of God in the Spirit.

So, Christ is the Stone giving rest to the weary, as well as the chief cornerstone of God's house and then too, the content of our confession. God's revelation to us is in every respect connected with Christ, the living Stone. Our response to this revelation of God's grace should be that we speak of Him, that we make this Stone a shining testimony in this world.

It was a pity that Jacob did more than setting up this pillar. He also made a legalistic vow, and even

dared to state certain conditions for serving God. But has it been different in the history of the Church? Was the testimony of Christ not often mixed with legalistic principles?

Bethel

Jacob called the name of that memorable place Bethel, which means "house of God." But the former name of Bethel is mentioned too: "...the name of that city had been Luz previously" (v. 19). The word Luz means "almond tree," but another rendering is "crooked" or "corrupt." The latter would speak of our natural condition before God, but the former of the resurrection life that has changed us so radically. For in Scripture, the almond tree always speaks of resurrection power, of life from the dead (Ex. 25:33,34; Num. 17:8; Jer. 1:11,12).

So this would remind us of our previous state and of the power of Christ's resurrection, which has changed our condition so thoroughly. The Church of the *living* God is founded on Christ, the Son of the *living* God, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light. Dead and corrupt sinners were turned into living stones by the Prince of life, and together we now make up the house of God that spreads the glad tidings concerning Christ here on earth. Previously it was the city of Luz, the city of corrupt creatures, but now it is the city of God shedding heavenly light in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.

Other memorial stones

Finally we would like to point out that setting up stone pillars was a fairly common practice in the

Old Testament. In Jacob's life we find it three more times. Once in Genesis 31, where the stones were a witness of the covenant between Laban and Jacob. Then twice in Genesis 35, where he set up a stone in Bethel again and also a pillar over the grave of his dear wife near Bethlehem.

Further we can find the following memorial stones in the history of Israel, and among them some *heaps of stones* with the same function:

1. The monument on Mount Ebal, reminding the people of the words of the law (Deut. 27:2-4; Josh. 8:32).
2. The twelve stones in the midst of Jordan, and those set up in Gilgal (Josh. 4:9,20).
3. The heap of stones in the valley of Achor, in remembrance of the judgment on Achan (Josh. 7:26).
4. The great heap of stones over the vanquished king of Ai (Josh. 8:29).
5. The large stone at Shechem (Josh. 24:26,27).
6. The stone Ebenezer (1 Sam. 7:12).
7. The large heap of stones over Absalom's grave (2 Sam. 18:17).
8. The pillar which Absalom had set up for himself (2 Sam. 18:18).

Maybe this list is not complete. We do not want to go into the meaning of these memorials here, but we should like to ask the reader: "What do these stones mean to *you*?" (cf. Josh. 4:6). For all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, on whom the ends of the ages have come (1 Cor. 10:11).

6. *Jacob's vow*

Genesis 28

If God will be with me

The last few verses of this chapter show a second reaction of the patriarch to God's revelation in Bethel. Jacob showed little appreciation of the fullness of grace which God revealed to him from heaven. He immediately wanted to do something in return, on condition that God would keep him: "Then Jacob made a vow, saying, 'If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God. And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You' " (vv. 20-22).

It would appear that the height of God's revelation was beyond Jacob's grasp. God's grace seemed too high for him, and he did not like to stand on that basis. He would rather leave the place of God's presence. To him the house of God was an awesome place where he could not feel at home (v. 17).

What a pity that this was Jacob's response to the grace of God. God did not reproach him with anything. God's free grace was such that He only gave him a fourfold promise of blessing. Why then had Jacob no sense of its value? Was it because he

looked at himself and had to acknowledge that he did not meet all the requirements of God's holy presence? Was it because his conscience was speaking louder and louder?

God's goodness should have led him to repentance (Rom.2:4). God's grace should have brought him to self-judgment. He should have confessed his wrong actions and put his trust in God's infinite grace. Alas, nothing of the kind was done. Jacob rather took action himself. He entered into a contract with God and made a vow. Leaving the groundwork of grace on which God had placed him, he chose a legalistic basis. He preferred the principle of the deeds of the law as the basis of his relationship with God.

Three examples of legalism

But let us not think that Jacob was the only one to do so. It is a very common reaction. History often repeats itself. Perhaps we can best make this clear by three other examples from Scripture:

1. The people of Israel at Mount Sinai, where they followed the example of Jacob their ancestor. Until they came to the mountain their history was a history of grace, even in spite of their sins. Their murmuring did not result in judgment, as was the case in the book of Numbers. It only opened the fountains of God's goodness. Also at Mount Sinai God first of all met them with promises of blessing. He spoke of their unique relationship with Him as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. But they were so preoccupied with their own strength that they answered: "All that the LORD has spoken we will do" (Ex. 19:8). The emphasis was promptly shifted from God's goodness to their own merits.

2. The prodigal son, who wanted to become a servant. When he came to himself in the far country, he decided to return to his father and to say to him: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants" (Luke 15:18,19). He wanted to take the position of a slave in order to repay some of his great debt. Fortunately the father did not accept this, and the lost son did not even get the chance to speak these words. The love of the father drove out all thoughts of slavery.

The same spirit of servitude can be observed in the older son. He reproached his father and said to him: "Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time" (Luke 15:29). And the word he used for *servi*ng means "to serve as a slave." He had never understood the privileges of grace, such as the presence of the father, and the joy of sonship.

3. The Christians in Galatia, who desired to be under the law. At first they accepted the gospel of God's grace, but then they turned to a Jewish yoke of bondage. Though they had received the position of sons, they behaved like slaves. This was a serious deterioration! To use Paul's words: "You have become estranged from Christ...you have fallen from grace" (Gal. 5:4). It was a deep fall indeed, from the heights of heavenly freedom into the depths of slavery under the elements of the world.

How awesome is this place

It was the same with Jacob here. In his opinion the house of God was not an agreeable place, the gate of heaven could but frighten him (v. 17). He

preferred the principle of the law to the privileges and the duties of grace, and he postponed his practical fellowship with God to the future. He would serve the LORD in His house only after He had kept and blessed him in all his ways (vv. 20-22).

Do we reason in the same way? Do we state our conditions for serving God, just as Jacob did here? This is not the language of grace, however. If we reason like this we have little understanding of God's grace and little knowledge of the God of Bethel, who wants to bestow His blessings upon us freely. For grace is unconditional, and the awareness of grace cannot but make us thankful. The principle of grace is that we serve God as His beloved children, because we long to be in His presence and desire to please Him in everything.

Then there is no reason to be afraid of His presence, for we have been made near by the blood of Christ. To be sure, it is not a matter of course to be in the light of God's presence. As sinners we were totally unworthy to be before Him. But as saints and sons God has made us accepted in the Beloved (Eph. 1:4-6). In this way we have come to know Him as our gracious God and Father, the God of the house of God, who has revealed Himself in order to give us a place near to Him.

The God of Bethel is no demanding God. No, in Christ He has revealed Himself as the great Giver. In Christ, the Head of a new generation, He looks at us in grace. But for the flesh it is a terrible thing to be in God's presence. The carnal mind is enmity against God and it cannot please God (Rom. 8:7,8). It goes its own way and leads us away from Him. At this stage of Jacob's life, however, it appears that he had not yet perceived this. He went on his jour-

ney in his own strength, trusting in his own abilities. Only when he came to Peniel would he learn to expect nothing good from the flesh and to depend solely on God's grace.

In John 6:63 we read that the flesh profits nothing. It is the Spirit who gives life and who enables us to serve God. Therefore we must learn to judge the flesh and to identify ourselves by faith with Christ as risen from the dead. This is the lesson of Peniel and the necessary condition for enjoying the blessings of Bethel. Then we shall have true knowledge of ourselves, but also of the God of all grace. We shall no longer put our trust in our own strength, but we shall thank God for all that He has done through Jesus Christ our Lord. We shall then no longer be afraid of God's presence, but be found as happy children before Him.

7. *The first call to return to Bethel*

Genesis 31

The discipline of God

For at least twenty years Jacob lived far away from Bethel. In the foreign country he was in fact only a slave of Laban (see vv. 38-42). Repeatedly he was deceived by his father-in-law, both in his family life and in business life. Indeed, Jacob had to pay very dearly for deceiving his own brother and his own father. How solemn it is to see the discipline of God in Jacob's life! Yet, He did not let him go. The very fact that He is chastening His own is a proof of His love. If He does so, He deals with us as with sons (Heb. 12:5ff.).

God wanted Jacob to come to himself and to qualify him to be as a son in His presence. God disciplined Jacob to enable him to live in Bethel, God's own house where He had revealed Himself to him. At this point it was *God* who had to take the initiative to bring him back to Bethel. Apparently he did not long for that place. Jacob had no clear desire to be in God's presence and to have fellowship with Him. But God longed to have him close to Himself. In the house of Laban he was merely a *slave*, but in the house of God he could be in God's presence as a *son*. What a difference!

In verse 3 God said to Jacob: "Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you." In this call the name of Bethel was lacking. It was a *general* summons to return to the land of Canaan. But in the same chapter Jacob told his wives about a dream in which Bethel was clearly mentioned: "Then the Angel of God spoke to me in a dream, saying,...'I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed the pillar and where you made a vow to Me. Now arise, get out of this land, and return to the land of your kindred' " (vv. 10-13).

It seems that God had appeared to him before, but Jacob had been slow to obey God's commandment. Was it because he still regarded the house of God as an awesome place, that he hesitated to return to Bethel? Would he rather live as a slave in Laban's house?

The heir is born

We do not really know, but in chapter 30 we find a third piece of information that is important for our subject: the birth of Joseph, the long-awaited heir. When Rachel had borne Joseph, Jacob said to Laban: "Send me away, that I may go to my own place and to my country. Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me go; for you know my service which I have done for you" (vv. 25,26). So this happy occasion also influenced Jacob. The birth of the heir made him decide to leave the house of bondage.

And this principle goes for us too. If Christ, the true Heir, is formed in us, we are freed from the law of sin and death. When He has the preeminence, we are no longer in bondage. Christ lives in us, and we are aware of our new position as Christians. If the

Son of God is formed in us, we shall behave as sons too. For He makes free indeed, and brings us in the presence of the Father.

A similar event occurred in the life of Abraham. In Genesis 21 we read about the departure of Hagar and Ishmael after a great feast in honour of Isaac. When the heir came into prominence and his rights were recognized, this led to the expulsion of the maidservant and her son. These things are symbolic, as Paul told the Galatians. They represent two covenants, two cities, two different orders: law and grace (Gal. 4:21ff.). The Galatians should take these things to heart. They should recognize the rights of Christ and "cast out the bondwoman and her son", that is, refrain from observing the law. *Christ* should be formed in them. The Heir of all things should become the all-important Centre of their lives.

So in the book of Genesis there is an obvious link between the *heir* coming to the fore and the taking possession of the *inheritance*. The son of the bondwoman could not be heir with the son of the free-woman, who inherited all that Abraham had (Gen. 21:10; 24:36; Gal. 4:30). And Jacob openly voiced his desire to return to the promised land after the birth of Joseph, Rachel's first son and the prince among his brothers (Gen. 49:26 NIV).

When Christ, the true Heir, comes to the fore and is formed in us, we shall become aware of our own position as sons and heirs of God. We shall long to take possession of our inheritance. Jacob's portion was the land of Canaan, ours is the heavenly land that God has prepared for us: the heavenly places with their fullness of spiritual blessings in Christ (Eph. 1:3).

Return to the land

We see here, however, that it took great pains to get Jacob to set out for the promised land. In fact God had to compel him to do so by bringing him into difficult circumstances. But are we better than the patriarch? Very often God finds it hard to detach us from earthly things and to direct our steps to a better, a heavenly country.

So when it came to returning to Canaan, God took the initiative. He did not leave Jacob to his fate in the foreign land. He wanted to bring him into His presence, and to take possession of the things which He had prepared for him. He longed for fellowship with Jacob in His house, even though he had turned away from Him and had gone his own ways.

We see the same thing in Genesis 3. God looked for Adam and Eve when they had hidden themselves from His presence. He sought them and He Himself laid a righteous basis on which He could have fellowship with them. By the death of a sacrifice that took the place of the guilty sinners, God brought them back to Himself. And in much the same way God dealt with Jacob in order to help him along to set out for the land and the house of God.

*Rise, my soul, thy God directs thee;
Stranger hands no more impede;
Pass thou on, His hand protects thee,
Strength that has the captive freed.*

*Light divine surrounds thy going,
God Himself shall mark thy way;
Secret blessings, richly flowing,
Lead to everlasting day.*

8. Mahanaim

Genesis 32

Encouragement on the way

On his way to the promised land Jacob had a special experience. Angels of God, messengers from God, met him: "So Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. When Jacob saw them, he said, 'This is God's camp.' And he called the name of that place Mahanaim" (vv. 1, 2).

Mahanaim means "Double Camp," or "Double Company." Jacob saw that he was not alone. There was not only the company going with him, later on divided by himself into two groups (v. 7ff.), but there was also the company of angels that God had sent out to protect Jacob and his people.

No doubt this was an encouragement on the part of God to show Jacob that he was not alone and that there was no need to fear his brother Esau. God would order all things in His providence, and ensure Jacob's safe arrival in Canaan. He was the invisible Commander of the army of the LORD, in full command of His warriors on earth (Josh. 5:13-15). And at the same time He was the LORD of hosts, surrounded by myriads of angels (1 Kings 22:19; Isa. 6:1-3).

All means are at His disposal and the angels are ready to carry out His commandments. They excel in strength and do His word, heeding the voice of

His word. They are His ministers, who do His pleasure (Ps. 103:20, 21). And God has sent out these mighty servants to go to the rescue of His children. They are all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation (Heb. 1:14). They are at God's command. As Jacob said, they form "God's camp."

All authority has been given to Me

When the Lord Jesus was arrested, He said to Peter that the Father would provide Him with more than twelve legions of angels if He would ask Him (Matt. 26:53, 54). What a strong force that would have been, for we know that a single angel was able to destroy almost an entire army (2 Chron. 32:21). However, Christ did not pray for the help of these heavenly armies, for the Scriptures had to be fulfilled. Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory? As Man in the glory He has now been placed at God's right hand, far above all principality and power and might and dominion (Eph. 1:21). Presently He will use these forces of angels to strike the earth and to triumph over Satan (see Rev. 12 and 20).

But Christ does not only have this heavenly army. He also has His warriors on earth, those who have been redeemed from Satan's power. And it is remarkable that this army on earth is credited with the ultimate victory over Satan (Rom. 16:20; Rev. 12:11). So both these armies are engaged in winning the victory over Satan, and we have the sure promise that the God of peace will crush Satan under our feet shortly.

So it is quite meaningful that Jacob spoke about a double camp, about *two* companies of warriors.

There are heavenly and earthly armies and, after all, both armies are fighting Satan and his hosts, who are still residing in the heavenly places (cf. Dan.10:10ff.; Eph. 6:10ff.). Both these armies are led by the same Lord, however, without having contact with each other. For otherwise we would run the risk of worshipping angels and intruding into unseen and hidden things (Col. 2:18; 1 Tim. 1:4; 6:20).

Since we are united with Christ we shall get a place *above* the angels. We shall judge angels (1 Cor. 6:3). But now it is our bounden duty to hold fast to our Head in heaven, with whom we are so closely linked, and to allow Him to lead us in our own conflicts with the enemy. It is very helpful, however, to realize that these mighty warriors are also at His disposal, and that He uses them in His providence.

Jacob was allowed a glance into the invisible world in order to encourage him on his way. There is a similar experience in the life of the prophet Elisha. Elisha did not need it for himself, for he trusted in God and knew that the angels surrounded him. So he said to his servant: "Do not fear, for *those who are with us* are more than those who are with them." The heavenly army that was with them was larger than that of the enemy. Then Elisha prayed for his servant: "LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see." And He allowed Elisha's servant a glance into the invisible world: "Then the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha" (2 Kings 6:16,17).

The presence of these myriads of angels should encourage us, although we cannot see them. We know that they are doing God's will. But we have to wage our own wars against the enemy, in depen-

dence on Him who has control over these heavenly hosts as well. These mighty servants have to carry out the task that He assigns to them. They are now doing the will of the Man Christ Jesus, who is over all, the eternally blessed God!

This meeting with God's servants should have encouraged Jacob and made him rely on the help of God rather than on his own strength and craftiness. But this was a hard lesson for Jacob, and to this end he had to wrestle with God at Peniel.

9. Peniel

Genesis 32

Wrestling with God

After his meeting with the angels of God, Jacob had to meet *God Himself*. And because he was not yet in harmony with God's holy presence, he was unable to meet Him as the God of Bethel, as the God of the house of God. Jacob could not meet Him as a loving Father, who gave him a hearty welcome to His house. He met Him as an Adversary, as a Wrestler: "And a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day" (v. 24).

God had to meet Jacob on his own ground. He had been wrestling with him for more than twenty years, and now the decisive struggle was going to take place. Jacob was a man who went his own way and who relied on his own strength. Therefore, he had to learn the hard way. He had to learn that the flesh profits nothing, and that he was completely dependent on the grace of God.

Romans 7

We find a similar struggle in Romans 7, although this chapter describes rather an *inner* conflict. But just like Jacob's it is the struggle of someone who relies on his own strength...and that is a struggle that we are bound to lose! The I, the old self, comes into prominence here. Its experiences are not specifically

Christian: those are found in Romans 8, where Christ and the Spirit are prominent. Yet the person presented by Paul in chapter 7 is a believer, for he delights in the law of God according to the inward man (v. 22). But he has to recognize that he is carnal, sold under sin (v. 14). He is not yet delivered from the power of sin. And he is no match for the sin that dwells in him, and this eventually causes him to cry: "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (v. 24).

However, this is the turning point. The very moment that we are in danger of sinking, rescue is near. We win the victory as soon as we recognize our own complete impotence. For then we learn to give up ourselves, to renounce our own strength, and to trust only in what *God* has done through Christ. This causes a complete change, full deliverance from the power of sin, so that we cry out: "I thank God - through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (v. 25).

So the end of the struggle comes by recognizing our own impotence and accepting the salvation of the Lord. We are looking no longer inwards but upwards. We realize what *God* has accomplished, and we praise Him for it. The only way for us to win this fight is to have the worst of it. Now this really was the secret of Jacob's victory, as we hope to see later on. Jacob won at the moment when he recognized that he was a loser. The same thing is true of the man in Romans 7. He wins the victory when he learns to surrender. He goes out as a free man when he is left unconditionally to the mercies of God.

The Face of God

Peniel means "the Face of God." It is the place where we meet God in a personal way. And when-

ever we meet God face to face, we learn to see everything in the proper light, in the right perspective. Then we see our own nothingness, but also God's greatness. On the one hand we recognize that we are captives of sin, that the flesh profits nothing. But on the other we see how God has met our need. He condemned sin in the flesh in the death of His own Son and He has given us a new position in Christ as raised from the dead. There is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, and have been placed in this new position before God (Rom. 8:1-3).

So this personal encounter with God sheds light on our relationship with God. We recognize that we are unable to stand before a holy God, but at the same time that God Himself has laid a righteous foundation for us to be as His children before Him. Natural man cannot stand before Him, but for the man in Christ there is indeed a place before God. That is why Jacob exclaimed wonderingly: "I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved" (v. 30).

No man shall see Me, and live

In the Old Testament there are more examples of people who met God face to face. They always reacted in the same way. On the one hand they realized their utter unworthiness, but on the other they were aware of the glory of God. Let us just briefly dwell on the following incidents:

1. To Moses God said, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live" (Ex. 33:20). But then God showed him a place where he was safe. There was a place by God, on the rock and even in the cleft of the rock. This speaks of our position in

Christ before God, for "that Rock was Christ" (cf. Ex. 17:6; 33:21,22; 1 Cor. 10:4).

2. When Gideon perceived that he had seen the Angel of the LORD, he was filled with dismay and said, "Alas, O Lord GOD! For I have seen the Angel of the LORD face to face" (Judg. 6:22). But then He preached peace to him and proclaimed the glad tidings, "Peace be with you." Gideon's sacrifice had been accepted and so there was peace, a basis for man to be at ease in God's presence. The risen Lord preached the good news, "Peace be with you," also to His disciples (John 20:19, 21).

3. When Manoah understood that the Angel of the LORD had appeared to them, he said to his wife, "We shall surely die, because we have seen God!" (Judg. 13:22). But his wife had a clearer view of the situation. She said to him, "If the LORD had desired to kill us, He would not have accepted a burnt offering and grain offering from our hands." Nor would He have given them such wonderful promises. And that goes for us too, for Christ's finished work is the only basis on which we can stand before God and be blessed of Him.

4. When Isaiah saw the glory of the Lord, he said: "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 my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts" (Isa. 6:5). But since an offering had been burnt on the altar, cleansing and conciliation could be effected (vv. 6,7). God's judgment fell upon Christ as He suffered in our stead, and that is the basis of our salvation.

So it appears from all these examples that the Person and the finished work of the Lord Jesus are the foundation of our glorious position before God.

As Christians we have been brought to God, and He has made us accepted in the Beloved. We are as sons in the presence of Him, who is both light and love. There is not only no condemnation to us, but God is even *well pleased* in us because He sees us in His beloved Son.

Now this is the lesson of Peniel: *to reach a place of safety and of salvation before God*. It is a place that God Himself has prepared for us through Christ. As natural men we cannot stand before Him. For we belong to the race of the first Adam, who turned his back on God. But since we belong to Christ, the Head of a new generation, we have passed from death into life. God has called us out of darkness into His marvellous light. He has delivered us from the power of darkness (of hatred and enmity against God) and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love (John 5:24; Col. 1:12,13; 1 Pet. 2:9).

In contrast with the Mosaic dispensation, it is our privilege to behold the glory of the Lord *with unveiled face*. God Himself has shone in our hearts with the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, with the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. And very soon, after the redemption of our body, we shall see His face and He will give us light. In His presence there is fullness of joy, pleasures for evermore (Ps. 16:11; 17:15; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:4,6; Rev. 22:4, 5).

10. *The secret of Jacob's victory*

Genesis 32

How to overcome

Now let us consider how Jacob, in his wrestling with God, won the victory. The struggle remained undecided until He touched the socket of Jacob's hip, so that his hip was wrenched. Because of this he was incapacitated, and had to stop wrestling. All he could do was to cling to the Man who wrestled with him. When He said, "Let Me go, for the day breaks," Jacob replied, "I will not let You go unless You bless me!" (vv. 25,26).

Jacob was touched in the seat of his strength. In Scripture, the hip is regarded as the seat of virile strength (just as the loins, cf. Heb. 7:5,10). In Psalm 45 it is said to the Messianic king: "Gird Your sword upon Your thigh, O Mighty One" (v. 3). And on that very spot Jacob was touched, so that he had to recognize that he was without strength and totally powerless. He had to stop wrestling, and he implored the Man who wrestled with him to bless him then and there.

That such was really the case, is confirmed by the prophet Hosea. God was dealing with His people, just as He had dealt with Jacob, and they should use the patriarch as their model. Hosea writes: "The

LORD also brings a charge against Judah, and will punish Jacob according to his ways; according to his deeds He will recompense him. He took his brother by the heel in the womb, and in his strength he struggled with God. Yes, he struggled with the Angel and prevailed; he wept, and sought favour from Him. He found Him in Bethel, and there He spoke to us - that is, the LORD God of hosts. The LORD is His memorial. So you, by the help of your God, return; observe mercy and justice, and wait on your God continually" (Hos. 12:2-6).

He wept, and sought favour from God

Here we have the secret of Jacob's victory: he wept and sought God's favour. After his own power was broken, there was only one way left, *the plea for mercy*. And that always opens up the way to blessing and victory. Whenever we appeal to God for mercy, the way to His heart is opened up. When we recognize that we are totally dependent on His mercy, He will hear us. By the cry for mercy heaven is set in motion.

We can find beautiful examples of this in the Gospels. There we often hear the cry: "Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!" (cf. Matt. 20:30,31). And these pleas for mercy are always answered. One would almost say that the Lord cannot resist them. He feels compassion for us because of our powerlessness. But then we should have reached the point of *recognizing our own helplessness and impotence*. That is the point Jacob had reached here, indeed, for his self-confidence was broken and he had no choice but to cling to the Man who wrestled with him.

The same applies to the man in Romans 7. When he has reached the lowest point and has to give up,

we hear him crying out in utter distress: "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" But the answer follows at once: "I thank God - through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (vv. 24,25). Aware as he is of his own impotence, he understands that there is but one solution: his help must come from above. All depends on God's mercy, on what *He* has done through Christ. That is the way to become an overcomer, a victor who praises God for His salvation.

Peniel and Bethel

Another thing shown by the prophet Hosea, is that the experience of Peniel is not a separate thing. Peniel serves to prepare one for Bethel. Therefore Hosea brackets both places together: "Yes, he struggled with the Angel and prevailed; he wept, and sought favour from Him. *He found Him in Bethel.*" This is quite remarkable, for the account in Genesis shows that a great deal had to happen before Jacob really set out for Bethel. But in the book of Hosea God seems to ignore all these sad experiences in the life of Jacob. Here it is only those two highlights that matter: Peniel and Bethel.

Peniel, as the place where we learn to judge ourselves and to expect nothing good from the flesh, prepares us for Bethel, the place of God's presence. For when we learn to judge ourselves, grace enables us to dwell in God's house forever.

11. *A new beginning*

Genesis 32

A new creation

Peniel became the turning point in Jacob's life. The old Jacob had passed away; he had become a new man. This was expressed here in the change of his name: "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel" (v. 28).

Jacob literally means "one who takes by the heel." The meaning marking Jacob's character and actions, "supplanter" or "deceiver," is derived from that (Gen. 25:26; Hos.12:4). Israel means "he who strives with God" or "who prevails with God." Hence the meaning "prince with God," for he had struggled with God and with men, and had prevailed. This new name marked a new beginning in Jacob's life.

This is always the case in Scripture when someone's name is changed. I should like to give two examples: Simon Peter in the New Testament, and Abraham in the Old Testament. Simon had his name changed when he met the Lord and believed in Him. The Lord told him: "You shall be called Cephas (which is translated, A Stone)." He was transformed from a dead sinner into a living stone, fit for use in God's house (John 1:42; 1 Pet. 2:5).

The second example is that of Abram. His new name was Abraham, for he was to become a father of many nations. He found himself in a new rela-

tionship with God, who imposed the circumcision as the sign of His covenant (Gen. 17). The old things had passed away, and all things had become new. *Abram* had passed away, henceforth he was *Abraham*. The old man had been put off, the new man had been put on. This is the typical meaning of circumcision. The old man is buried with Christ (Col. 2:11,12).

The same thing happened to Jacob. To put it in New Testament language: the old man went into the grave and a new man, a new creation rose again, *Israel*. A new day broke for this prince with God, for we read here: "Just as he crossed over Penuel the sun rose on him, and he limped on his hip" (v. 31). We find a beautiful parallel to this incident in the exhortation: "Arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light (Eph. 5:14). Christ who is our life and our light, is the Sun who rules the new day.

So Jacob began a new life in the enjoyment of a new relationship with God. The old life, in the strength of his self-will, was now a thing of the past as he embarked upon his new life as a child of God. And he was constantly reminded of his own weakness and of his total dependence on God, because he was limping on his hip.

Putting on the new man

When we read the history of Jacob in the light of the New Testament we realize that new life has been brought to light now through the gospel. Only when the fullness of the time had come, and God had sacrificed His Son, could a new man appear. The expression "the new man" is mentioned merely in the epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians. It is always singular (Eph. 2:15; 4:24;

Col. 3:10). As distinct from the old man, the human race descending from Adam, there is now a new generation of which the risen Christ, the last Adam, is the Head. As Christians we *have* put off the old man, everything that marked us as descendants of the first Adam, and we *have* put on the new man.

The new man is the fruit of Christ's death and resurrection. He is God's workmanship and he is created according to God, in righteousness and true holiness. This implies that he rejects and resists evil. The new man displays the features of the divine nature (cf. Eph. 1:4; 2 Pet. 1:4).

The new man contrasts sharply with the old man, who came to an end in the death of Christ. He is a *different* type of man. He does not bear the image of the first Adam, but of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is also a *new-born* man. He does not display the time-honoured image of our first parents, but the brand-new image of the risen Lord. Our old self, our old man was crucified with Christ, as we read in Romans 6:6. We have put on Christ, and we have expressed this in baptism (Gal. 3:27).

But, of course, this has to be realized in the everyday things of life. That is why we need the exhortations: "Put off...and put on" (Col. 3:8,12). We should live up to our standing in Christ. It should be a matter of course for us not to live any longer according to the old man, but to show the features of the new man. In other words, we must put on the Lord Jesus Christ in a practical way and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfil its lusts (Rom. 13:14).

The new man is not independent; he has a divine standard. The new man is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, that is, Christ (Col. 3:10,11). So we find our rule of

life in Christ, and we are being transformed into His image. The inward man is being renewed day by day (2 Cor. 3:18; 4:16). Thus we walk in newness of life, we serve in the newness of the Spirit, and we are transformed by the renewing of our mind (Rom. 6:4; 7:6; 12:2). We live a resurrection-life in the light of the risen Lord, just as the sun rose on Jacob and he continued his pilgrimage in the light of a new day.

*The Lord is ris'n: with Him we also rose,
And in His grave see vanquish'd all our foes.
The Lord is ris'n: beyond the judgment-land,
In Him in resurrection-life we stand.*

12. *The house in Succoth*

Genesis 33

Beginning with the Spirit, but ending with the flesh?

After this turning point in Jacob's life one would expect him henceforth to lead a new life. But alas, it was not so and time and again we see much of the old Jacob coming to the fore. Although he had received a new name (Israel = Prince with God) at Peniel, his conduct was not in keeping with it. In Genesis 35 this change of name was repeated and it was, so to speak, impressed on his mind again that he was a new creation.

We, too, are in danger of beginning in the Spirit and being made perfect by the flesh (Gal. 3:3). The flesh is still in us, and it has not been improved after our conversion. When we give it any room we shall serve the law of sin (Rom. 7:25). Then we shall falter between two opinions, and use a double set of principles. And that is not the will of God for His children. If we live in the Spirit, we should also walk in the Spirit.

That Jacob was a two-faced person appears from his meeting with his brother, as described in this chapter. On the one hand he praised God for all the proofs of His grace, but on the other he took all sorts of measures and made use of flattering words and lies. So it was not surprising that he did not

make good his promise to go to Seir (v. 14), but journeyed to Succoth, built himself a house, and made booths for his livestock there. Therefore the name of the place was called Succoth, that is, *Booths* (v. 17).

Every one of you runs to his own house

Had Jacob forgotten God's command to return to Bethel, the place of the house of God? *There* he was to meet God and God would reveal Himself to him again. Jacob should have longed for it too. It should have been the desire of his own heart, for there is no greater blessing on earth than to dwell in the house of the LORD forever (Ps. 23:6; 25:14; 36:7-9).

But it seems that the thought of Bethel had been blotted out from Jacob's mind. He used his liberty as an opportunity for the flesh (Gal. 5:13). Instead of going to the house of God, he built a house *for himself*. The central issues of his mind were not God and God's house, but his own affairs and his own house. We shall also see that in the altar that he built near Shechem (vv. 18-20). He thought of himself and his own house, but not of the interests of the house of God (cf. Hag. 1:4, 9).

More broadly speaking, we can also think of the typically human disposition to build all sorts of "houses" around important people in Christendom. Often, such a "house" is called after a certain leader who leaves his mark upon it. But is this *the house of God*? Often it is a human habitation being used for a man-made religion.

In fact, by building this house Jacob denied that he was a stranger and a pilgrim on the earth. Abraham had been more faithful: "By faith he

sojourned in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in *tents*...; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God (Heb. 11:9,10). Jacob, however, built himself a *house*, a permanent dwelling place. And in doing this he gave up his position as a pilgrim.

It is remarkable that the epistle to the Hebrews does not make mention of this wrong step. In the verses quoted above it says that Abraham dwelt in tents *with Isaac and Jacob*, the heirs with him of the same promise. And somewhat further on we read that they all confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth (v. 13). They desired a better, that is, a heavenly country. Heaven was their home and therefore they were only sojourners and pilgrims here on earth (cf. 1 Pet. 1:1,17; 2:11).

Jacob was untrue to this confession here. But we get the impression that he tried to conceal this. He called his new dwelling place Succoth (that is, *Booths*), after the shelters which he made for his livestock. But in doing so he concealed the fact that he built a house, a permanent dwelling place, for himself too (v. 17). Did he not want to express that fact in the name of this place? Did he not desire to give up his position as a pilgrim entirely? We do not know, but what is obvious indeed is that he acted in halfheartedness. And alas, this became evident in the next stopping place - Shechem - as well.

*We are but strangers here;
Heaven is our fatherland,
Heaven is our home.*

13. *The altar near Shechem*

Genesis 33

Jacob comes to Canaan

When Jacob finally left Succoth and came safely in the land of Canaan, he did not move on to Bethel, but settled near Shechem. So he still did not make good his original promise of Genesis 28:22 to honour God in Bethel, in His own house.

On the contrary, we get the impression that he wanted to settle permanently on Shechem's grasslands: "Then Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Padan Aram; and he pitched his tent before the city. And he bought the parcel of land, where he had pitched his tent, from the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, for one hundred pieces of money. Then he erected an altar there and called it El Elohe Israel" (vv. 18-20).

Thus, he pitched camp before the city of Shechem. He acted like Lot, who had pitched his tent even as far as Sodom. Later on Lot gave up his position as a pilgrim altogether, and he became a citizen of Sodom. In the end he had a narrow escape from God's judgment. Apparently Jacob paid no attention to this negative example, and he pitched his tent before the city. But whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. Genesis 34 shows us the ill effects of Jacob's action. If God had not intervened, his

children would have intermingled with the inhabitants of Shechem. Israel would not have become a separate nation and God's plan to have His own special people would have been foiled.

Jacob's purchase of the parcel of land, where he had pitched his tent, confirms that he wanted to settle there. Probably this was a comparatively large piece of land that Jacob bought with the aim of plying his trade unhindered. Maybe he bought it in order to prevent the kind of quarrels his father had had (cf. Gen. 26). But anyhow, this was again a denial of his position as a stranger, and it did not correspond with the example of his father and grandfather. When Abraham bought a piece of land he did so with the purpose to have *a burial place in the promised land* (Gen. 23).

El Elohe Israel

However, Jacob did not give up serving the true God, even though in some respects his walk was contrary to God's thoughts. For he erected an altar there and called it El Elohe Israel, that is, "God, the God of Israel" (v. 20). For Abraham it was a common practice to erect an altar, and that goes for Isaac too. So in erecting this altar Jacob followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather.

This was one of the three things that characterized the patriarchs. They always had an altar, a tent and a well. The *altar* speaks of our worship, the *tent* of our pilgrim life, and the *well* of the water of God's Word. They belong together. The three of them are mentioned in one verse in Genesis 26:25.

The first altar mentioned in Scripture is Noah's altar. He built an altar to the LORD, so to speak on a

new earth, offered burnt offerings on it, and God smelled the sweet aroma (Gen. 8). Then we find Abraham as a builder of altars, near Shechem, Bethel, Hebron and on Mount Moriah (Gen. 12, 13 and 22). Then Isaac who built an altar at Beersheba (Gen. 26). And finally, the last man in the book of Genesis to build altars: Jacob the patriarch. He built two altars: one before the city of Shechem, and the other at Bethel (Gen. 33 and 35).

These altars were all altars of burnt offering, just like Noah's altar. As we know, Abraham offered up a ram *for a burnt offering* instead of his son. And the word "altar" in these chapters in the book of Genesis is also used elsewhere in the books of Moses for the altar of burnt offering in the tabernacle. The burnt sacrifice was offered wholly to God, an offering made by fire, a sweet aroma to the LORD (cf. Lev. 1).

We shall go more deeply into the meaning of the altar of burnt offering, and the sacrifices offered upon it, in our discussion of the altar at Bethel, and here only remark that the altar is the place where man meets God in the awareness of his own unworthiness. At the altar we realize that we have access to God only by virtue of a sacrifice that is pleasing to Him. The altar is the centre of gathering and of worship.

But even while serving God, man can act in self-will. We cannot but conclude here that Jacob was creating a religion of his own will (something that would be repeated later on in the history of God's people). The altar of God cannot be built wherever we want, but only in the place of God's choice. Jacob erected an altar near Shechem, but God desired to have an altar at Bethel (see Gen. 35:1). That

was the place where He had appeared to Jacob, and there he should serve Him.

The vast difference between these two altars appears from their names too. One of them was called El Elohe Israel ("God, the God of Israel"), the other El Bethel ("God of the house of God"). The meaning of the first name amounts to: *my* God is God. That is a somewhat self-centred confession of the patriarch. In the second name a much more intimate knowledge of God is expressed: God is the One whom one meets *in His own house* (cf. Gen. 33:20 with 35:7).

It is true, Jacob had every reason to be thankful to God for His protection, and for all His blessings. This first altar was erected in honour of the God who had done so much for him. But Jacob himself was still the central person. Although he used his new name, Israel, this was not recognized by God. It was not until Genesis 35 that God called him by his new name again. And He did so after Jacob had built an altar in Bethel, where his attention was no longer focussed on himself but on the glory of the God of the house of God.

*Our way is upward still,
Where life and glory are;
Our rest's above, in perfect love
The glory we shall share.*

14. *The second call to return to Bethel*

Genesis 35

Go up to Bethel

Although Jacob had returned to the land of Canaan, he had not gone to Bethel, the place where God had appeared to him and where he had made a vow. He had preferred to settle near Shechem, and he had met with the serious consequences of that choice. Yet Jacob needed another clear call from God before he actually went up to Bethel: "Then God said to Jacob, 'Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from the face of Esau your brother' " (v. 1).

It seems that God was not happy with the altar that Jacob had built near Shechem. His desire was to have an altar at Bethel, where He had appeared to Jacob. Bethel was His dwelling place. Jacob had to return to the starting point of his journey, but only after the painful experiences of Genesis 34 did he do so. God's will for him was to go up to the place of His house, to dwell *there*, and make an altar *there* (not elsewhere).

Bethel, not Shechem, was the place where Jacob should serve the LORD. But it required some pressure to get him there. For the second time God

knocked at the door of Jacob's heart. It was His desire to have him in His presence, in His own house, but up to that moment Jacob had not responded to His call. Jacob had disregarded God's friendly invitation. We can behave in a similar way. Maybe the Lord has to say to us too: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me" (Rev. 3:20).

God had disciplined Jacob, but with a view to blessing him, so that he would no longer turn away from Him. It was with the best of intentions. God wanted to give him a place in His own house to dine with him there. But up to now Jacob had made excuses, just like those who were invited to the great supper in the parable of Luke 14. But how about us? Are we really interested in His supper in His house?

And dwell there

Henceforth, Bethel was to be Jacob's dwelling place. He should go up to God's house and dwell there. He should live there, stay there, settle there. His dwelling place should be the place where God Himself dwelt, and he should not leave it again. There he had to serve God and make an altar to Him, in order to bring offerings to God and to call on His name.

It is a great privilege to dwell in God's presence. But Jacob's heart was not entirely pure before the Lord, and he could not say with the psalmist: "One thing I have desired of the LORD, that will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in His temple" (Ps. 27:4). It was not

his fervent desire to dwell in God's house forever, and to see His power and His glory in the sanctuary (Ps. 23:6; 63:2).

Neither could Jacob go up to the house of the Lord with joy. There were still serious hindrances, and certain things had to be removed. There were foreign gods among them, preventing them from having fellowship with the true and living God.

Though it is a joy to be in God's presence, it is His *holy* habitation, and holiness adorns His house. We can enter there only when we comply with His will in a practical way.

That was why Jacob had to get ready to set out for Bethel. His practical life, the spiritual condition both of himself and of his family, had to be reconciled with the holiness of God's house.

God's calling

Summarizing, we can say that this second call to return to Bethel consists of four parts:

1. Jacob had to arise and make the necessary preparations to be able to appear before God.
2. He had to go up to Bethel, the house of God, the place where God dwelt and had revealed Himself to him.
3. Henceforth, that was to be Jacob's dwelling place too. He was to be a member of the household of God (Eph. 2:19).
4. It was there that his altar was going to be as well. He had to worship in the place where God Himself had chosen to put His name for His habitation.

*Arise! return to Bethel now
Where I appeared to thee!
Recall to mind the solemn vow
Which there thou gavest me!*

*I have been with thee on the way,
But Bethel is the place,
Where thou must go, where thou shalt stay
To learn my love and grace!*

15. *Bethel, God's dwelling place*

Genesis 35

Back to Bethel

A Christian who learns the truth of Bethel, the house of God, will become aware of the privileges and the responsibilities that are attached to it. Such a person will then very consciously take his place as a building stone of God's house and as a member of God's family, and in his practical life he will behave accordingly.

Now this is exactly what is typically presented to us here in the life of Jacob. God's will for him was to go up to Bethel, to find the place of God's house, and to live there as a priest before Him. And it is to this same point that God wants to bring us. He brings us up as His children, and sometimes He uses all kinds of difficulties (as we see in Jacob's life), with a view to bringing us into His house and His presence.

When we see Jacob returning to Bethel, it is good for us to reflect for a moment on the meaning of this place in the light of the New Testament. For the truth of Bethel, the truth that God has a house here on earth, has been fully realized in the *present* dispensation, on the basis of Christ's finished work and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

His foundation is in the holy mountains

We have already seen that God's house, the Church, is founded on Christ, the living Stone. It is remarkable that in Genesis 28 the stone pillar itself was spoken of as "God's house," God's future dwelling place (v. 22). Jesus spoke about the temple of His body, for in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily (John 2:19-22; Col. 2:9). The Church that is being built on Him is also God's temple, a habitation of God in the Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:20-22). Christ and the Church are really one, and He has made it to be God's dwelling place in the present time.

The blessed fact that God dwells here on earth is based on redemption. The appearances of God to the patriarchs were always temporary. When He had talked with Jacob He left him, and went up from him again (Gen. 35:13). God came to live in the midst of the people of Israel permanently, after their deliverance from Egypt and the construction of the tabernacle. There He sat enthroned on the mercy seat, in the place where the blood of atonement was sprinkled. In other words, God dwelt in the tabernacle, and later on in the temple on the basis of the blood that spoke of Christ's redemptive work.

The fact that expiation is the true foundation of God's house is proved significantly in the building of Solomon's temple. It was built on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite, in the place where David had built an altar to the LORD (1 Chr. 22:1; 2 Chr. 3:1). There atonement was made for a sinful people. At that place God's holy and just demands were satisfied by a substitutionary sacrifice that was struck by the consuming fire of God's judgment. So the temple was built in the very place where the

wrath of God had been stayed. Therefore the psalmist says that the house of God is founded on His holy hill, in the place where His holiness was seen and has been satisfied (Ps. 15:1; 48:1; 87:1).

The substance is of Christ

Yet these things were but shadows of the good things to come, of the substance that is of Christ (Col. 2:17; Heb. 10:1). God now dwells in the midst of His redeemed people in a new way. In the Old Testament the pillar of cloud could withdraw from the sanctuary. This is no longer the case, for the Spirit abides with us forever. The Holy Spirit dwells with us and will be *in* us (John 14:16-23). Jesus and the Father have made their home with us. These blessings - particularly the presence of the Spirit *in* God's people - could not be realized under the old covenant. For God dwelt in darkness, separated from the people, and no one had free access to Him. It was the high priest's privilege to enter the Holiest once a year, with the blood of atonement.

When the fullness of the time had come and Christ had finished the work of redemption, God was able to dwell here on earth in a wholly new way. He sits no longer enthroned in a stone temple, but in a temple of *living* stones. The present dwelling place of God is made up of saved sinners, made alive by Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

As Christians we are gathered by the Holy Spirit from the Jews and the Gentiles. Together we constitute the temple of God, the house of God. But at the same time we are members of the household of God: God's family, a holy and royal priesthood. These two thoughts are in line: those who make up a habitation of God in the Spirit are also those who

have free access to Him (cf. Eph. 2:19-22; Heb. 3:1-6; 1 Pet. 2:4-10). The people who, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house also constitute a holy priesthood, to draw near to God and to offer up spiritual sacrifices.

These two features are also found in the city of God, the new Jerusalem that will come down out of heaven from God. This is a picture of the Church in glory, the Lamb's wife - in other words, all the believers of the present dispensation. But they are the same people who enter the city and have access to the throne of God and of the Lamb (Rev. 21:27; 22:3). So the house of God is at the same time the household, the family of God. God is surrounded by His children, who draw near to worship and adore. That is the truth of Bethel.

16. Putting away the foreign gods

Genesis 35

How we should conduct ourselves in the house of God

But Bethel was a holy place, and Jacob and his household had to conform to the holiness of God's house. This goes for us too, for there are certain rules for our conduct in the house of God, which is the Church of the living God (1 Tim. 3:15).

The house of God is still a holy place, the more so because it is founded on Christ's finished work that has met all God's holy demands and has brought us to God. God's holiness has been manifested to the highest degree on the cross of Calvary. Christ who knew no sin was made sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. God's holiness was so great that He could not spare His own Son when the latter took our place in judgment.

The work of Christ served to glorify God, to magnify His holiness and righteousness. As a result, Christ is now glorified by God at His right hand in heaven, and the Holy Spirit has descended here on earth. A Man was taken up in glory, and God the Holy Spirit came down on the earth to gather to-

gether the Church and to make His home with us. These are the far-reaching results of the work of Christ.

But if it is the *Holy Spirit* who indwells the Church, it should answer to God's *holiness*. Nothing unclean should enter this holy temple, for holiness adorns God's house (Ps. 93:5). If this was true of God's temple in Old Testament times, how much more it holds good for the Church which will be His dwelling place eternally!

When we become aware of the holiness of God's house, we shall purify ourselves. We shall bring everything in line with the service of this holy God and remove everything that hinders us from dwelling in His presence.

This is the step that Jacob took once he really set out for the house of God: "And Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, 'Put away the foreign gods that are among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments. Then 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 in the way which I have gone' " (vv. 2, 3).

We cannot serve both God and idols. We cannot come into God's presence with anything that is contrary to His holiness. Bethel, the house of God, is a holy place, and here Jacob began to realize that. So he subjected both himself and his household to a thorough cleanup:

1. The foreign gods were put away; they turned away from their idols to the living and true God, and they dedicated themselves to His service (cf. 1 Thess. 1:9).

2. They purified themselves, which speaks of the washing of water by the Word (cf. Eph. 5:26).

3. They changed their garments, which in type speaks of putting on the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Rom. 13:14).

The origins of idolatry

When the God of glory appeared to Abraham, he left the place of idolatry, Ur of the Chaldeans, for the land that God would show him. Isaac persevered in the worship of the true God as well, but in Jacob's household the idols received a place again. Apparently this was Rachel's doing (Gen. 31:19-35). Therefore this cleanup was necessary since Jacob was now on his way to the dwelling place of the living and true God.

Now let us look for a moment at the origins of idolatry. After man fell into sin and turned his back on God, Satan - who had deceived him - got hold of him more and more. Behind the idols there are demonic powers (Deut. 32:17; 1 Cor. 10:20). Because man did not know the true God any longer, he could easily be influenced by these evil powers, and so he began to worship all sorts of false gods: the images of creatures, the heavenly bodies and the spirits of ancestors. He worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen (Rom. 1:25).

The purpose of Abraham's calling was to set someone apart from this world in which idolatry had become a common practice, and to make him the progenitor of a people that would belong to the true God. But alas, this materialized only very partially in the history of Israel. Again and again

they turned away from the Lord to serve idols. We have noted that already in Jacob's household idols had again received a place. In the land of Egypt Israel served the idols of Egypt (Ezek. 20:4-8), in the wilderness they served the golden calf and the host of heaven (Acts 7:41,42), and in the promised land they served the gods of the Canaanites and of the surrounding nations. Because of their infidelity, the Israelites were eventually carried away into exile, first the ten and later on the two tribes. It seemed that it had come to a breach between God and His people, although He did bring about the return of a remnant from Babylon in order to fulfil His promises concerning the Messiah.

However, the promised Messiah was not accepted by His people. For this reason God is in dispute with His people. He brings a charge against them not only because of their idolatry, but also because of their rejection of the Lord Jesus Christ. True enough, the unclean spirit of idolatry was banned from the house for a time, but it will enter its old house again (Matt. 12:43-45).

This will happen when Israel accepts the anti-christ, who comes in his own name, and worships him in the temple of God (John 5:43; 2 Thess. 2:4). The relationship between God and His people will only be restored in the trials of the last days, when they are refined by God's judgments and turn in repentance to the One whom they had pierced (Zech. 12:10).

The history of Israel has proved that the natural man is unable to serve God. The Law made nothing perfect, weak as it was through the flesh. It could only prove that man was a sinner, and incapable of improvement. So a new man was needed, with a

new heart and a new nature that answers to God's will. Now that is God's gracious gift to us, when we in faith turn to Christ.

Turning to God from idols

At the present time God gathers from among the Jews and the nations a newborn people, the Church of God which He purchased with the blood of His own Son. We have been brought into a close relationship with the living and true God. Paul says of the church of the Thessalonians that it was "*in* God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1). They had turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven. They had turned their backs on these vanities and served the true God, the Creator and Upholder of the universe (cf. Acts 14 and 17).

The apostle John also speaks about our fellowship with the true God. He says: "And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life" (1 John 5:20). Our knowledge of the true God is such that we are *in* Him, in His Son Jesus Christ. So here we find the same privilege that according to Paul's words was enjoyed by the whole church of the Thessalonians.

We have been brought to God, and we enjoy a very close relationship with Him. This bond of fellowship with the true God is so real that we are even said to be *in* Him. All this we owe to the work of His Son, who is the true God and eternal life Himself, and who has made us partakers of His life. We are born of God, and therefore we belong to the

family of God and rejoice in the fellowship with the Father and the Son.

Still, our practical life can be inconsistent with this divine fellowship. Therefore John ends his first epistle with a warning: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21). The danger of bringing in foreign gods is real for us too. These gods do not need to be made of wood or stone. Covetousness, for example, is also a form of idolatry (Col. 3:5).

But alas visible and tangible gods have also acquired a place in Christendom; think of iconolatry, and the worship of relics and saints. Therefore the Lord accuses the unfaithful Church of idolatry and adultery (Rev. 2:4,14,20). Much like Israel's history, the story of the Christian testimony is one of decay and apostasy. After the rapture of the true believers the remaining professors will fall into gross idolatry, with the renegade Jews. For they will worship the antichrist and the beast from the sea, the ruler of the revived Roman Empire, and even Satan himself (Rev.13:4). The object of their worship in that day is so to speak a satanic trinity.

The second coming of Christ puts an end to this culmination of idolatry. He will destroy the antichrist, the man of sin, with the brightness of His coming (2 Thess. 2:8). This false prophet is cast alive into the lake of fire, and the beast with him (Rev. 19:20). Satan is bound for a thousand years, and he shall deceive the nations no more. This marks a new era, in which the nations cannot be enticed into idolatry any longer. The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. The peoples shall serve Him with one accord (cf. Isa.11:9,10; Zeph.3:9; Zech.14:16). The foreign gods

have been removed from Israel once and for all, the nations worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and the New Jerusalem, the seat of God and of the Lamb, illuminates the earth with its heavenly light!

*And what of me? - my soul, awake,
And an impartial survey take;
Does no strange god, no idol dear,
Set up within my heart, appear?*

17. The terebinth tree by Shechem

Genesis 35

How the foreign gods are dethroned

It is remarkable to see how the foreign gods in Jacob's household met their end. Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree which was by Shechem: "So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods which were in their hands, and all their earrings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree which was by Shechem" (v. 4). This place is a type of the cross and the grave of the Lord Jesus, who triumphed over all idolatrous powers when going into death as the seemingly powerless One.

We know that the fall of man placed the world within Satan's sphere of influence. Man, who was to rule over God's creation, listened to the voice of the serpent. In doing so he placed himself with all his possessions under the authority of the enemy. The whole world lies in the wicked one (1 John 5:19 JND). This means that it is under the control of the evil one, and that it is marked by the very characteristics that mark the ruler of this world. Scripture tells us that the world is ruled by the principles of lust and pride (1 John 2:16). This proves that the evil principles which caused Satan's fall, and by which he also deceived man, are now characteristic features of the world system that is governed by him.

So when the devil tried to bring down the second Man, he was right in saying: "All this authority (i.e. all the kingdoms of the world) I will give You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish" (Luke 4:6). The Lord did not contest this. Satan is the ruler or the prince of this world. In John's Gospel the Lord called him by this name three times (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). He has power over this world and he wields it by means of demons, fallen angels.

They are "the rulers of the darkness of this age" (Eph. 6:12). They control the world and because of that it is shrouded in spiritual darkness, and man has become the slave of his own lusts and of idolatry.

These powers exercise their control over the cosmos, that is the universe as a well-ordered system, but only as far as God permits (cf. Dan. 10). For this reason Satan is never called the god of the cosmos, for God does not give up His sovereign rights to His creation. Satan is the *ruler* of the *cosmos*, but also the *god* of the present evil age (Gal. 1:4; 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2). This means that he is the god of the world system in its present character, in this present age which is marked by corruption and idolatry.

But the present time in which he is worshipped as the god of this age, draws to a close. The "age to come" is dawning, in which every knee shall bow before the true God and His Christ. Then the cosmos also shall be delivered from the power of its present ruler, and the government will be placed publicly in the hands of our Lord and of His Christ (Rev. 11:15). Satan will be defeated and bound until his final judgment at the end of the millennium.

Now is the judgment of this world

What we want to emphasize now, is that in principle Satan and his powers have been judged *on the cross*. The Lord spoke about this fact twice, once to the crowds and once to the disciples. The lifting up of Christ on the cross meant judgment for the world itself, and for the same reason the *ruler* of this world was to be cast out (John 12:31-33). The Greek word that is used for "judgment" here, implies that a judicial investigation is set up with the aim of passing a verdict. At Calvary the world, under the guidance of its ruler, was found to rebel against its Creator. It appeared to be in overt rebellion against God, and so it sealed its own doom. The wickedness of its ruler also came fully to light, and therefore he was going to be cast out. The execution of this verdict is found in the book of Revelation. As for Satan himself it takes place in three stages: first, cast out of heaven; then into the bottomless pit (or, abyss); and finally, into the lake of fire (Rev.12:9; 20:3,10).

The second time that the Lord spoke about the judgment of this world and its ruler, was in connection with the coming of the Spirit (John 16:8-11). The Holy Spirit would convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment. The presence of the Comforter would be the conclusive evidence of these three things: of sin, of righteousness and of judgment. This is a final judgment. The Christ, whom the world has rejected, has been exalted at God's right hand in heaven. There He waits for the day of reckoning, when His enemies will be made a footstool for His feet. The indisputable evidence of these realities is the Holy Spirit's presence on earth, consequent upon Christ's glorification in heaven. The world must not think that it will escape judgment, for its ruler has been judged already.

When Christ was crucified He won in fact the victory over Satan and his powers. "Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it" (i.e. the cross, Col. 2:15). When it seemed that these principalities had won the victory over Him, actually the opposite took place: *He* triumphed over them, and took His place at God's right hand, "far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come" (Eph.1:21).

By the cross the world has been crucified to me

For that reason the cross is the turning point in the history of the world. The world and its ruler have been judged there. So the believer knows that, because of the cross, he has finished with the world. By the cross the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world (Gal. 6:14). The cross separates us from the world that is under condemnation. It makes us citizens of a new world, a kingdom in heaven, a kingdom that is not of this world (John 18:36). Although we are still *in* the world, we are not *of* the world, for we are united with Him who departed from this world to the Father. Our true place and our future are there where He is, in the Father's presence (John 17:11-24).

We are but strangers here, and are looking forward to the age to come (Titus 2:12,13). We have been delivered from this present evil age (Gal. 1:4). Christ, the crucified One, has drawn us to Himself (John 12:32). And the Father has drawn us and has given us to the Son (John 6:37, 44; 17:2, 6, 9, 24). He has delivered us from the power of darkness and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His

love (Col. 1:12,13). So we belong to a new world, the Ruler of which is the risen and glorified Lord.

Obviously the question arises how we can experience this in a practical way. To what extent do we really take our place at the cross and the tomb of Christ? Do we realize that we are united with Him? Look at Mary Magdalene. The Lord had delivered her from the power of Satan: seven demons had come out of her. Therefore she did not leave the place where her Saviour had been buried. She felt united with Him, and so she was the first to come to know Him as the risen One and the Head of a heavenly family (John. 20:11ff.).

It is this place where Satan's power was annihilated, of which the terebinth tree by Shechem speaks. It is the place of *death*, where one finishes with a life in sin and in the world. Shechem was the turning point in the life of Jacob's household, as Peniel had been in Jacob's personal life. Here they left the idols behind! One could say that they buried the past here, and purified themselves in order to be fit for the holiness of God's house, His holy presence at Bethel.

*Lord, with reverence we would linger
In the shadow of Thy cross,
Which has closed our hearts forever
To the world and all its dross.*

18. *The altar at Bethel*

Genesis 35

The place El Bethel

Jacob and his sons were now in the right condition to appear before God in Bethel. They had purified themselves and the idols had been disposed of, so that they could really dedicate themselves to the living and true God, who desires to be served in His house.

Thanks to God's protection they could go up to Bethel unhindered, and upon their arrival Jacob built an altar there: "And they journeyed, and the terror of God was upon the cities that were all around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. 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, because there God appeared to him when he fled from the face of his brother" (vv. 5-7).

When Jacob had returned to the starting point of his journey, the first thing he did was to build an altar. At the outset of his journey he had promised God to honour Him at this place (Gen. 28:22). Now, at least thirty years later, the time had finally come for him to fulfil that promise. Much had happened in that time span, and God had taken great pains to bring Jacob back to Bethel. But now he was there to

erect an altar - in keeping with God's instructions - in the place where God had appeared to him when he fled from his brother. It was an altar to the God who had answered him in the day of his distress and had been with him in the way which he had gone (v. 3).

We have an altar

So it was here that Jacob showed his due gratitude to God, in the place of God's choice. It was not at a random place or one of Jacob's own choice, as in the case of his altar near Shechem. It was the place that God had chosen. Later on the same principle applied to the people of Israel, as appears from the book of Deuteronomy. They should not serve God in every place that they saw, but in the place where He chose to make His name abide (Deut. 12-16). The Israelites had to seek that place, in one of their tribes, and there they should go and rejoice before the LORD their God.

The same principle holds good for us. We worship our God in the place of *His* choice, where He desires to dwell among His own, where we are gathered together in the name of the Lord Jesus (Matt. 18:20). We do not have a visible altar as Israel of old, but we have a *spiritual* one. As a matter of fact, our altar is Christ Himself. He is the Centre of our worship. To Him we come, and by Him we continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God.

This "altar" is of an altogether different nature than the altar of burnt offering in the tabernacle (cf. Heb. 13:10-15). It is an altar outside the Jewish camp. It is associated with a new order of things, which only became reality after Christ's exaltation and the descent of the Holy Spirit. Judaism was but

a shadow of things to come, for the substance is of Christ (Col. 2:17). The altar of burnt offering, for example, spoke both of His human nature (the acacia wood) and of His Divine power that could withstand the consuming fire of judgment (the bronze). The present system of worship, however, has to do with worshipping the Father in spirit and truth (John 4:23). It has no earthly places of pilgrimage. We worship God in the Spirit (Phil. 3:3).

The epistle to the Hebrews shows the many contrasts between Judaism and Christianity. Among other things we have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat (Heb. 13:10). It has nothing to do with the old system of worship. Those who are still linked with Judaism have no right to eat from our altar. They have no fellowship with Christ, whom they put out of Jerusalem, their central place of worship. But we, who follow Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach, are identified with Him. We recognize Him as the Centre of a new order of divine service, which is founded on His presence amongst His own and the leadership of the Spirit. We are gathered together in the name of Jesus, who was dead but is alive for evermore, and we remember Him.

Thus we can speak of the *Christian* altar, as distinct from the *Jewish* altar. By Christ we continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. Our offerings are sanctified by Christ, the true Centre of our worship. By Him they are acceptable in the sight of God. By Him we have access to God and go into the sanctuary. Therefore Peter tells us that we are a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God *through Jesus Christ* (1 Pet. 2:5).

We are partakers of the altar

The fact that we are sharers in this altar is highlighted especially in the breaking of bread, when we partake of that which speaks of the blood of Christ, and the body of Christ which was given for us. It is the communion of His blood and of His body. We have fellowship with the Christ who died for us - just as the Israelites were partakers of the altar when they ate of the offerings which were sacrificed on it (1 Cor. 10:14-18). To us, Christ is both the Offering and the Altar that sanctifies the offering (cf. Matt. 23:19). We have fellowship with Him when we feed on His Person and His work, His sacrifice that took all its value from the preciousness of His Person in God's eyes.

This leads us to the meaning of the sacrificial meals in Israel, in particular of the peace offerings and the sacrifices of thanksgiving (Lev. 3 and 7). The mutual bond of fellowship at those meals typifies our Christian fellowship at the Lord's table. The best portion of these offerings was for God, and it was offered to Him on the altar of burnt offering. Another part belonged to the priest, and the rest was for the one who presented the offering. All who were clean could eat of it (Lev. 7:19-21). So they all shared in the same offering. There was a common bond of fellowship between them, based on sharing in the offering and in the altar.

The same thing applies to us when we partake of the Lord's table, and are gathered together in His name. We recall that the best portion of the peace offering (all of the fat) was for God. This would speak of the fragrance of Christ's work before God, for He glorified God and offered Himself without spot to God. Since we are priests to our God, we

also partake of Christ's sacrifice. To this we testify by the breaking of bread, when we think of His love and have the full value of His death before us. We contemplate the love and the strength with which Christ offered Himself to God (typified by the breast and the right thigh of the peace offering).

So the Lord's supper reminds us of Christ's perfect sacrifice. Our appreciation of this unique offering is expressed by the *spiritual* sacrifices which we offer to God. Christ, the living One, invites us to remember Him as the Lamb who was slain, and to bring our offerings of praise and worship. In this respect we resemble the Israelites who came with their peace offerings, but also with their voluntary burnt offerings and grain offerings to the tent of meeting and the altar of the Lord.

The altar is the place where God and man meet. Man draws near to God to present Him his offerings, and God meets man in order to have fellowship with him and to bless him there. Both God and man feed on the offerings; they share in (the appreciation of) the same sacrifices. So the altar is the place of worship, but also the place of fellowship. God dwells close by the altar, and it is there that He is known as the God of His house.

Jacob called the place of his altar El Bethel, that is, "God of the house of God." When he drew near to honour Him there, he met God as the God of His house. God revealed Himself to him as the One who had a dwelling place on earth, a place where Jacob could dwell in His presence. So we see Him here as the One who invites His own to enter the holy place and dwell in His presence. God invites us as His *sons*, for He likes to have fellowship with us. He desires to reveal Himself to us as a loving Father. The

place of God's altar is the place where He dwells in the midst of His people. It is the place that answers to His will, where He gathers His own around His beloved Son.

19. *The terebinth of weeping*

Genesis 35

We have been delivered from the Law

Suddenly the narrative about Jacob's experiences in relation to the house of God is interrupted by the announcement of the death and burial of Rebekah's nurse: "Now Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the terebinth tree. So the name of it was called Allon Bachuth (that is, Terebinth of Weeping)" (v. 8).

This fact is mentioned as a detail in connection with Bethel. Because of the great age that people reached in those days this event may have taken place *after* Jacob's return to Bethel. Some translations (NEB) read that he, Jacob, gave the terebinth tree this name. But apart from the matter of the date of this occurrence, this insertion is very important for our subject. This verse cannot have been recorded here by chance.

It is remarkable that *twice* in these verses a terebinth tree is mentioned. The tree near Shechem marked the point where the idols were done away with (v. 4). This first tree is a type of the cross as the place where Satan and his powers have been judged. The second terebinth tree shows another aspect of the cross, namely that not only the *idolatrous* world and its powers, but also the *religious* world and its tutors have met their end there (v. 8).

This aspect of the cross is seen mainly in the epistle to the Galatians. The death of Christ broke off the bond with the nurse (that is, the Law) and put an end to the period of tutelage in which the Jews lived in bondage under the elements of the world. Paul says that they were kept under guard by the Law. The Law was their tutor (Gal. 3:23-25). He uses the word "pedagogue" here, someone who was responsible for a child and accompanied it, not an educator in the modern sense of the word.

The position of the Jews before the coming of Christ was as follows: as little children they had been left in the care of the Law. The Law was their tutor to Christ. It prepared them in a sense for the coming of Christ and the establishment of a new basis for their relationship with God, that of *faith*. For the Law made it very clear that man was a sinner, and that he could not be justified before God by works. The Law was our tutor, the apostle says, up to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. Henceforth not the Law but faith, the revealed truth concerning Christ and His finished work, was to be the basis of the believer's relationship with God. "But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:25-26).

The liberty of the sons of God

At this point the apostle changes his form of address: it is no longer "we" but "you." For *you* are all sons of God. This is because the believers from the Gentiles shared in the same privileges as the converted Jews. They were all sons of God through faith in *the* Son of God. Before that, the believing Jews had been in bondage under the Law, and the

Gentiles served the idols. But God sent forth His Son for all these slaves, to free them from their chains and give them the liberty of the sons of God. All of them are now in a new and equal position before God, of which Christ is the Standard and Model.

Two important events were necessary to give all these poor slaves the adoption as sons: the coming of the Son and the coming of the Holy Spirit who, very pointedly, is called *the Spirit of God's Son* (Gal. 4:6). When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son to redeem those who were under the Law, that they might receive the adoption as sons, the full rights of sons (Gal. 4:5; cf. Rom. 8:15; Eph. 1:5). As sons and heirs of God they rejoiced in their new position according to grace. It was in this very position that also the Gentiles stood before God through faith. So this new company included Gentile believers. And because they were all sons of God, God sent forth the Spirit of His Son into their hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!"

This position of sonship is spoken of in contrast to our former position as children and slaves, either under the Law or under the bondage of idols (Gal. 4:3, 8). In this passage serving the Law is classed with serving idols: it all belongs to the elements of the world, from which the death of Christ has separated us (v. 9). We belong to another world, since we have been translated into the kingdom of God's beloved Son. Therefore we should behave as sons, and we should feed no longer on the elements of a world that lies in the power of the evil one.

The death of Christ has separated us from the Law as our foster mother. Not only the idolatrous powers were overcome and disarmed by the cross

of Christ, but also the handwriting of requirements that was against us, the Law, was wiped out, taken out of the way and nailed to the cross. Therefore our conduct is determined neither by the pagan world with its idols, nor by the religious world with its laws (Col. 2:14-17). Our rule of life is the risen Christ, the heavenly Man. With Christ we died from the basic principles of the world, the elements of which it is made up, and therefore also from religious philosophies and traditions of men (Col. 2:8, 20). We have been released from the Law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter (Rom. 7:6). We now stand in Christian freedom. We are no longer slaves but sons, and as such we serve God in the power of the Spirit.

A place of weeping

In practice, however, it is difficult to do away with principles that one has learned since early childhood. We recall that the terebinth tree under which the nurse was buried was a place of weeping. Yet we need to part company with her, as is illustrated in Jacob's life, if at least we want to dwell in the presence of God as His sons and as members of His household. The separation is required, in order to be able to realize the truth relating to the house of God, the truth of Bethel.

Already in the early history of the Church the cross proved to be a place of grief in this respect. How difficult it was to give up the old Jewish principles and to leave the camp, the system of worship under the Law! Peter found it difficult to abandon the old legal rules of conduct (cf. Acts 10:14; Gal.

2:12), and at the end of his ministry even Paul could not completely get away from the influence of his former "nurse" (Acts 18:18; 21:20-26).

But the system of the Law is incompatible with that of the Spirit. One is marked by the bondage of the letter, the other by the freedom of the Spirit. But if the Son makes us free, we shall be free indeed. Then we walk as sons in the freedom of the Spirit, having abandoned the system that held us in bondage. Then we are no longer ruled by the principles of the world, but by those of the house of God. Then we are in the place where God reveals Himself to us as His sons and heirs.

*When I survey the wondrous Cross,
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

20. *The second revelation in Bethel*

Genesis 35

Jacob finds God in Bethel

After putting away everything that could remind him of his old life in the world, Jacob was now in the right position to meet God. God could reveal Himself to him again. The idols as well as the nurse, all the elements of this world exerting their influence on man in the flesh, had disappeared in the grave. And in Bethel Jacob was in the place that God had in mind for him, the house where God dwelt and had put His name for His habitation. Therefore another divine appearance was afforded him, elaborating on the earlier revelations of Genesis 28 and 32.

The prophet Hosea says that at Peniel he struggled with God, but at Bethel he found Him and there He spoke to him (Hos. 12:4). God did not appear to Jacob now to *wrestle* with him, but to *speak* with him and to have fellowship with him. That had been the desire of God's heart during all those years in which He had had so much trouble in bringing Jacob back from his own ways. God wanted him to be in His presence, so that He could reveal Himself to him and show him all the blessings that He had prepared for him.

In Bethel God revealed Himself as follows: "Then God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Padan Aram, and blessed him. And God said to him, 'Your name is Jacob; your name shall not be called Jacob anymore, but Israel shall be your name.' So He called his name Israel. Also God said to him: 'I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall proceed from you, and kings shall come from your body. The land which I gave Abraham and Isaac I give to you; and to your descendants after you I give this land' " (vv. 9-12).

Here God could reveal Himself to Jacob as He had done to Abraham, who was called the friend of God. Jacob was no longer a slave; he had been set free. He was in the house of God as a son of God, and he felt at home there. This place no longer terrified him (cf. Gen. 28:17). He was in God's presence in the consciousness of his exalted position, in the dignity of sonship, receiving insight into God's thoughts.

God makes known to us the mystery of His will

Perhaps we can draw a parallel between this passage and the introduction to the epistle to the Ephesians. As soon as our glorious position before God has been mentioned there - God has predestined us to adoption as sons, and He has made us accepted in the Beloved -, it follows that the wisdom of God and the mystery of His will have been made known to us (Eph. 1:3-9).

God desires nothing so much as making Himself known to His children. He desires to reveal His thoughts to us, and to open up the mysteries of His heart. We are not in the position of servants who do

not know what their master is doing (cf. John 15:15), but we have received the adoption as sons. This means that we can have a heart-to-heart talk with God about the deep things of His mind.

What is the subject of God's talk with His sons? It centres on His beloved Son, the Heir, with whom we have become joint heirs as well. That is what fills the Father's heart: the glory of His Son and everything He is going to bring about through Him. For it is His plan to gather together in one all things in Christ, and we are co-heirs with Him, the One in whom God is well pleased. As proof of this we have been sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession (Eph. 1:10-14).

A triple promise of blessing

To Jacob God also spoke about the inheritance that He had prepared for him. In Genesis 35:9-12 we find a triple promise of blessing.

1. *As regards Jacob himself.* God blessed him, and repeated what He had already said in Genesis 32 about the new name he should have from now on (Israel = Prince with God). In the same way we find in Ephesians 1 that we are the objects of God's blessings. God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. We are also seen as new men here. God has made us accepted in the Beloved. He does not look upon us any longer as in Adam, but in Christ. We are clothed with all the favour of His Person.

2. *As regards his descendants.* God revealed Himself now to Jacob as God Almighty, for at Peniel He could not yet tell him His name! As such He had also made Himself known to Abraham and to Isaac

(Gen. 17:1; 28:3). This name characterizes Him as the One who takes care of weak pilgrims, and who is able to guarantee the fulfilment of His own promises. He can surely fulfil whatever He promises. As Christians we know God in the much more intimate relationship of *Father*, the name which was revealed by the *Son*.

3. *As regards the land, the inheritance.* God renewed the earlier promises made to Abraham and to Isaac in this respect. But the subject is more limited here, as the character of the blessing is exclusively *earthly*. No blessing in the Seed, no offspring in connection with heaven, and no blessing for all the nations of the earth are mentioned here. We do find these things in Genesis 22, in fact consequent upon the sacrifice of the Son.

But in Genesis 35 all emphasis is laid on the land which Jacob and his descendants were to inherit forever. Seeing that Jacob had finally returned to the land, this is all the more understandable. This promise concerning the land of Canaan will be entirely fulfilled in the millennial kingdom, when the Redeemer comes to redeem the inheritance and to restore the relationship between God and His earthly people.

For us who belong to the heavenly people of God, the inheritance has a *spiritual, eternal* and *heavenly* character (Eph. 1:3). That is the specific portion of the Church. True, in the dispensation of the fullness of the times the Church will reign over the earth with Christ, but our proper dwelling place is heaven, even the Father's house, where the Son has prepared a place for us.

Obviously Jacob reached a high point in his life here:

- He had cleansed himself from the uncleanness that clung to him, and had been set free from his bondage.

- He had abandoned the idols and the elemental things of the religious world.

- He was back in the Promised Land, and he was back in Bethel, the dwelling place of God.

- He had an altar there and he approached God as a worshipper.

- He was in God's holy presence as a son of God, getting insight into His thoughts and plans.

- He stood as a new man before God. His relationship with God was all right now and nothing could hinder his fellowship with Him anymore.

- He received a fresh revelation from God, who revealed Himself to him and blessed him abundantly with promises both for himself and his descendants. Being a son of God, he was also an heir of the blessing that God had laid up for him (cf. Rom. 8:17 and Gal. 4:7).

After God went up from Jacob in the place where He talked with him (for He could not dwell on earth permanently until redemption had been accomplished), Jacob preserved the remembrance of this precious revelation by setting up a pillar in the place where He talked with him.

Before discussing the meaning of this second memorial stone at Bethel, we should like to draw the reader's attention to the striking similarity of this passage with what is taught in 2 Corinthians 6. *Separation from evil* is necessary in order to have fellowship with God. This held true for Jacob, it held true for the Corinthians, and it goes for us too. God cannot reveal Himself to us until we answer to His holiness, and cleanse ourselves from everything which is contrary to that. His temple has no agree-

ment whatsoever with idols. His house is a holy place. Only after we have cleansed ourselves from all defilement can He bless us and say:

*"And I will receive you.
I will be a Father to you,
And you shall be My sons and daughters,
Says the LORD Almighty"*

(2 Cor. 6:14-18).

21. The second stone pillar

Genesis 35

The place where God spoke with him

After God's second revelation to Jacob in Bethel, the patriarch erected a second memorial stone: "Then God went up from him in the place where He talked with him. So Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He talked with him, a pillar of stone; and he poured a drink offering on it, and he poured oil on it. And Jacob called the name of the place where God spoke with him, Bethel" (vv. 13-15).

Bethel appears to be an important place, for three times it is repeated that this was the place where God talked or spoke with Jacob. Bethel is God's dwelling place, the place where He speaks with His own and reveals Himself to them. It is the house of God, where His own draw near to Him and dwell in His presence, where with grateful hearts they worship Him.

Such a place cannot but present a clear testimony. Its importance is not just a fleeting thing, but the banner of the truth is always held up there. That is the meaning of the stone pillar which Jacob set up here. It was to be a lasting sign of the importance of Bethel, the place where God dwells in the midst of His own, where they rejoice in all the good things that He has prepared for them.

When studying Genesis 28 earlier on, we already saw that this pillar of stone speaks of Christ and of the Church which has been built on Him. Scripture also compares the Church of the living God with a pillar. It is called "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). The Church is the living memorial of the truth about the Person of Christ. By means of the Church the testimony of Christ is spread and maintained in the world.

A day of revival

But as time went by the testimony of the Church declined and the house of God became a place where things came in that were a disgrace to God. Already at the time of the apostles the testimony concerning Christ was mixed with false doctrine. The light of the truth was obscured and the bright testimony of the early Church faded, so that its lampstand was removed from its place (Rev. 2:5). For many years Jacob had no pillar ... and for many centuries, the Church did not have a clear testimony. But then God gave a revival, and the banner of the truth was held up again. The second stone pillar testifies to this. It is typical of a restoration of the original testimony, brought about by God Himself.

In the same way the prophetic history of the Church in Revelation 2 and 3 shows a point of restoration, a revival of the truth that had been entrusted to it right from the beginning. For we read that the church in Philadelphia had kept the word of Christ and had been faithful in confessing His name (Rev. 3:8). Although it showed weakness, as it had but "a little strength," it placed the light on the lampstand again. It was a faithful remnant amidst the overall decline. It kept Christ's word, and did not deny His

name. It clung to the authority of the inspired Word, and to that of the name of Christ.

Apart from the truth about Christ Himself, the truth concerning the Church as founded on Him was restored as well. The eyes of many believers were opened again for the truth of the Church as the house of God. One could say that the truth of *Bethel* came to light again. Once more the precious blessing that is linked with this place was experienced. While on the one hand these Christians looked back upon all the failures of the Church in times past, on the other hand they looked forward to its glorious future, its union with Christ in glory and its appearing from heaven as the dwelling place of God (Rev. 3:12; 21:2,10).

But surely this *spiritual* application to the Church goes together with a *prophetic* application to Israel. There is also a promise of blessing for Israel in the last days. There will also be a time of revival for the earthly people of God. They will have their Bethel again - just as it had been in the beginning of their history as a nation, when God's house had had a central place amongst them. For in the latter days it shall come to pass that the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established on the top of the mountains (Isa. 2:2; Mic. 4:1).

The latter, or future, glory of this house will be greater than the former (Hag. 2:9 JND, NASB). It will be rebuilt according to the plan described by the prophet Ezekiel, and then God's glory will fill the temple again. He will return to His people after they have returned to Him! The greatest blessing of restored Zion will be the divine presence, for the name of the city shall be: "The LORD is there" (Ezek. 48:35).

And he poured a drink offering on it

Finally we should like to draw the reader's attention to an important detail in relation to this second stone pillar, which Jacob set up in Bethel. He did not only pour oil on it, as he had done in Genesis 28, but he also poured a drink offering on it, a certain amount of wine. This is the first place in Scripture where this kind of offering is mentioned. Later on we find it in relation to the daily burnt offerings, and in relation to the feasts of the LORD (Ex. 29; Lev. 23; Num. 28 and 29). A drink offering completed a grain offering and a burnt offering.

This drink offering of wine speaks of the *joy* that goes with the worship of the Lord, and particularly so if this worship has been restored - as it was here in Jacob's life. It is the offering of a grateful heart, which by God's grace has been restored to His fellowship and rejoices in His presence. It is the response of a person who has experienced God's discipline, but now again rejoices in His presence, thanking Him for all His goodness. Such a restoration is *always* accompanied by joy and gratitude to God, who wrought it. In this connection we should like to point to the restoration of the temple worship under Hezekiah (2 Chron. 29:35-36), the restoration in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 7:17) and the future restoration of Israel (Ezek. 45:17).

While the oil speaks of the power of the Holy Spirit to spread the testimony of the truth, the wine is a picture of the *joy* that marks a revived testimony. The drink offering is also mentioned in the New Testament (cf. Phil. 2:17 and 2 Tim. 4:6). There we see the apostle's joy in dedicating himself to the service of his Lord, in pouring out himself to the point of death as a humble follower of Christ Himself.

It is with this joy that Israel will dedicate themselves to the service of the house of God after their return to and their repossession of the Promised Land. They shall return to the house of the LORD with gladness (Ps. 122:1). Their mouths shall be filled with laughter, and their tongues with singing (Ps. 126:2). There shall be everlasting joy on their heads, they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away (Isa. 35:10). Zion shall break forth into singing and crying (Isa. 54:1). The fasts of their captivity shall become joy and gladness and cheerful feasts (Zech. 8:19). The Feast of Tabernacles, the feast of joy and the grateful memorial of God's salvation, shall be kept even by the nations (Zech. 14:16).

All this applies also to us as believers who have been blessed with *heavenly* blessings. For us too, the house of God shall be a place of everlasting joy. It is the place where we rejoice in God's presence, as His own sons, and where everything centres around the Lamb who was slain. It is the place where we begin to be merry and where there is no end to our joy (cf. Luke 15:24).

Because of God's grace Jacob found his way back to Bethel, the house of God. Because of God's grace the prodigal son returned to the house of the father. And because of God's grace alone we also have a place in God's house. This privilege is realized in weakness now, but it will soon be enjoyed in perfect glory above. Divine grace grants us a place in the Father's house, where fellowship with the Father and with the Son are our eternal joy. We shall be brought there as sons rather than as slaves, for "a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever" (John 8:35).

*Father, Thy sovereign love has sought
Captives to sin, gone far from Thee;
The work that Thine own Son hath wrought
Has brought us back in peace and free.*

*Thou gav'st us, in eternal love,
To Him to bring us home to Thee,
Suited to Thine own thoughts above,
As sons, like Him, with Him to be*

*In Thine own house. There love divine
Fills the bright courts with cloudless joy;
But 'tis the love that made us Thine
Fills all that house without alloy.*

CHAPTER TWO

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