

Jacob's decline and recovery
Genesis 33&35

Introduction

After Jacob's meeting and wrestling with God at Peniel, and his reconsecration to Him, Jacob had the dreaded encounter with his brother Esau – and it went off more easily than he dared to expect. There was no murder, but reconciliation. Jacob was right with God, and in His will and controlled by His power. God went before and cleared the way. Jacob drew on God's strength in a deeper way. This reminds us of heroic General Gordon, who, in his lonely camel rides often in prayer disarmed hostile chiefs, before he rode unaccompanied in their presence.

The next episode in Jacob's story, however, shows that it is one thing to enter into a deeper relationship with God, but another thing to have that relationship maintained and keep going. There is a real difficulty here. Once we have caught sight of a deeper relationship with God, we are never satisfied till it becomes ours permanently. Sometimes the abiding experience is not at once, but later. How do we deal with this problem? What steps should we take to grow deeper in our relationship with God? How can we maintain that position?

Evidence of decline in a new relationship with God

We do not know how long the glow of the Peniel experience lasted, but at some point it began to recede. A significant and revealing word is used in the narrative. Reference is made to "foreign gods", or "idols" (Genesis 35:2,4). Jacob's family possessed them, and even if Jacob did not own them himself, he was tolerating and acquiescing the situation. This is a sign that his own commitment to God had weakened and begun to fade.

What a fall for a man who had built so many altars to the Lord. The presence of idols shows that devotion was now given to a false deity in place of the living God. Maybe Jacob just wanted a quiet life at home, so he turned a blind eye. Whatever his excuse, spiritual decline was inevitable when something came between a man and his God. That complete consecration was undermined by the presence of something else.

In Jesus' words, **No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other** (Matthew 6:24). Double-mindedness, a divided heart, always undermines spiritual life. How do we know if this is us? We find ourselves defeated by besetting sin, not making the progress we would like, speaking the right things in the right company, but our heart is not in it. The reason is that something other than the Lord is in supreme position in our heart. D.L.Moody confessed, "The thing I fear most is losing my testimony for Christ." Like the church at Ephesus, **You have forsaken your first love** (Revelation 2:4).

An idol is anything which holds supreme place. It is often something to do with self – having my own way in something, and ambition which means more than anything,

money, friendship, husband, wife, child. It can be something good in itself, and quite legitimate. If it is in second or third place, this is fine, but the trouble is when this thing takes God's place. Then our priorities are wrong. Jesus was very clear about this. **Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me** (Matthew 10:37). Until our priorities are right, the obstruction and hindrance will continue to hold up our walk with God.

Steps to be taken to reverse the decline

God's word of command in this situation: **"Go up to Bethel and settle there, and build an altar there to God"** (Genesis 35:1). The place Bethel was not much in itself – boulders, rough hill country, no houses, just desert. But it was a most memorable and sacred spot to Jacob, the place where he had first met in a vital way with God, seeing the ladder between heaven and earth. It was 30 years since he had been there, and many adventures had intervened, many ups and downs of life.

Now God told him to return – even though he had been out of touch with God, God had not left him on his own. He had to return to an old familiar scene. His mind went back over the years. He remembered his earlier knowledge of God, the vows he had taken, and the promises he had made, how in that interval of 30 years God had remained faithful – guiding, protecting, and rebuking at times. Now he was to renew his vows and return to the devotion of the early years.

So certain things had to be put right. The idols, false gods, had to be put away. The thing which had come between him and God was to be cast out. There needed to be prompt and resolute dealing with the hindrances. No half measures would do. **If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell** (Matthew 5:30). At Ephesus, **a number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly** (Acts 19:19).

There has been many a bonfire since of some thing that has come between man and God, e.g. book, or things associated with a bad habit, or something poured down the sink, or resignation from a job or club. It can be costly and disturbing to get rid of idols.

*“Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord?
What peaceful hours I once enjoyed...
Aching void the world can never fill...
The dearest idol I have known
Help me to tear it from thy throne...
So shall my walk be close with God.”*

At Bethel, Jacob built an altar and renewed his consecration. So God appeared to him again and blessed him. God confirmed again his change of name to Israel, and promised to prosper him and give him the Promised Land. Again Jacob called the place Bethel, and there was no cloud between God and His servant. He had a new revelation of God Almighty, the all-sufficient God. The experience of Peniel was

renewed. He was reassured of God's power with him. There was a glorious future for himself and his descendants. This is another proof of God's unutterable love to us - God waits and watches for us, in all our back-slidings. **We have no real rest till back where we ought to be. "I will heal their waywardness and love them freely** (Hosea 14:4).

Maintaining the renewed relationship

We can identify with Jacob if we have lost contact with God, known better days spiritually. We know we are still not happy, we long to be where we ought to be, and to return to God, putting away all idols. He will soon show us what those idols are if we ask Him sincerely. He will show us the place where self is creeping in. Ask Him to take possession of your entire being. Be specific – your will, heart, faculties, mind, tongue, possessions, position in family and work. Let Him take you over absolutely, entirely, unreservedly, everywhere and at all times.

Enjoy again the freedom and joy and security of being entirely His. We exist for no one else but Him. What a relief as He takes full responsibility for our lives. What changes He begins to make in life. **I no longer live, but Christ lives in me** (Galatians 2:20). He can make all things new for the returning backslidden Christian. It is completely possible on one condition – He without reserve must sit on the throne. Every Christians ought to have written across their lives in the largest capitals of spiritual alphabet: "I am not my own. I have been bought with a price. I have been conquered by Another. I put both my hands between His outstretched hands."

But what about tomorrow? And next week? Will the action I take tonight do for next week? No, you cannot live on the experience, cannot live in the past. Instead, the act must become an attitude for the rest of life. Consecration to the Lord is not a date in one's spiritual history. It is something which must take place everyday. Manna has to be gathered every day. There needs to be growing and deepening acts of consecration which go on to life's end. **Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus** (Romans 6:11). **Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God** (Colossians 3:1).

*"High heaven that heard that solemn vow,
That vow renewed shall daily hear."*

An Irishman's definition of consecration: "An act committed once and for all, to be repeated daily and forever after." As consecration is repeated, though there are failures and slips en route, it becomes an abiding habit and abiding experience. Thoughtfully, unhurriedly and daily, let God speak through His Word. Reply to Him in prayer. Say to yourself, "I believe in the Name of the Son of God. Therefore I am in Him – having redemption through His blood and life by His Spirit. And He is in me, and all fullness is in Him. To Him I belong by purchase, conquest and self-surrender. To me He belongs for all my hourly need. There is no cloud between my Lord and me. There is no difficulty inward or outward which He is not prepared to meet in me today. The Lord is my keeper." Amen.

Here is the secret of strength, stability and satisfaction.