

Text: Gen. 35:8-29

Title: "Amenities in the House of God"

Time: May 3, 2009 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: When considering purchasing a home or renting a hotel room, we are interesting in understanding the amenities offered. We want to answer, as best as we can, the question: "What is life lived there going to be like?" On our way down to South Carolina, we stayed at a Country Inn and Suites in Chambersburg, PA, which was located next to a fun-park that had amenities like put-put golf, batting cages, and go-carts. Maureen had done all of the driving that day, so her recreation was some time alone in the hotel room, while Dad and the kids made our way to the fun park. The highlight of the evening was the go-cart race we had. Kara got the defensive driving award; Brandon won the race by a margin of three or four laps; and Kent with Dad as passenger made history as the victims of the third most notorious crash the park attendant had ever witnessed. Needless to say, that hotel offered some amenities that make the kids want to go back and that have given Dad second thoughts about the wisdom of staying there.

Our passage describes some of the features of life lived at Bethel, the house of God. *Bethel* means *house of God*. Jacob first named Luz *Bethel* back in chapter 28, where the Lord had appeared to him in a dream as he was fleeing his brother Esau. Some thirty years prior to the events of this chapter, Jacob was alone in Bethel. Now God appears to him again in this special place, only this time Jacob is not alone, so he publicly reaffirms for his household that this is the house of God (35:15). But the house that God was not limited to the city of Luz, nor did it involve a building. It was a people or a household (35:11). When the Bible speaks

of the house of God, it is talking about a place where certain people live and share certain experiences under the providence of God. *House of God* is as much a NT term as it is an OT term. Paul speaks of the local church in this way (1 Tim. 3:15). The house of God is people who have a relationship with God and one another, not bricks and mortar.

So what do Jacob's experiences at Bethel teach us about what life is like as members of the household of God? I want us to notice three things from our passage.

I. The passing of generations is a part of life in the house of God (vv. 8, 16-29).

Illustration: One of the great joys of vacation time for me is the golf outings our family enjoys together. These are times when precious memories are formed. Brandon always shares a cart with his grandpa, and I can remember the days when I shared a cart with my grandpa. Our grandmas and grandpas ought to be precious to us, and we should cherish the time we have with them because it is something that is fleeting.

Application: Our passage records the deaths of three precious people who belonged to the household of God: Deborah, Rachel, and Isaac. Two of these were very old, satisfied with days, and one death seems tragically before its time.

1. The first is the death of Deborah in v. 8. Deborah was Rebekah's nurse, likely older than Rebekah, who had evidently died during the days of Jacob's travels in Padanaram. She would have been a very old lady and a very dear friend of Jacob's at the time of her passing. Remember that Jacob had grown up very close to his mother, and it is likely that Deborah served Rebekah as Jacob's nanny. Deborah may

have been sent with Jacob to Rebekah's family as Jacob fled Esau in order to introduce Jacob to them, or she may have come to be a part of Jacob's household at a later time. We do not know how that happened, but we do know that her death and burial caused great weeping for Jacob. Jacob called the tree under which Deborah was buried *Allon-bacuth* meaning *great tree of weeping*. The painful loss of loved ones is a part of passing generations in the household of faith. Jacob undoubtedly lost a trusted confidant and a lifetime friend here. We need to make the most of the generations ahead of us while we are still blessed with their presence.

2. The second death is that of Rachel (vv. 16-21). Notice that the text indicates that all this happened on a journey, a journey that was evidently very difficult for this pregnant mother. We are not told that the journey contributed to the tragic and untimely death of Rachel, but Jacob must have asked himself that question. He had tried to follow the Lord's leading, and in spite of this he suffered the tragic and untimely death of his beloved wife.

Illustration: John Gibson Patton was a Scottish missionary of the 19th century whom God called to the remote islands east of Australia in the South Pacific called the New Hebrides. At the time, the islands were inhabited by fierce cannibalistic tribes, and these were the people Missionary Patton and his wife arrived to reach. Upon their arrival, the devoted couple met with tragedy. Patton describes it this way in his autobiography: "My dear young wife, Mary Ann Robson, and I were landed on Tanna on the 5th November, 1858, in excellent health and full of all tender and holy hopes. On the 12th February, 1859, she was confined of a son; for two days or so both mother and child seemed to prosper, and our island-exile thrilled with joy! But the greatest of sorrows was treading hard upon the heels of

that joy! My darling's strength showed no signs of rallying. She had an attack of ague and fever, a few days before her confinement; on the third day or so thereafter, it returned and attacked her every second day with increasing severity for a fortnight. Diarrhea ensued, and symptoms of pneumonia, with slight delirium at intervals; and then in a moment, altogether expectedly, she died on the 3rd March. To crown my sorrows, and complete my loneliness, the dear baby-boy, whom we had named after her father, Peter Robert Robson, was taken from me after one week's sickness, on the 20th March. Let those who have ever passed through any similar darkness as of midnight feel for me."

He goes on to express some regret that they had embarked on their journey so close to the beginning of the rainy season. But then he speaks of the way God sustained him:

"Stunned by that dreadful loss, in entering upon this field of labour to which the Lord had Himself so evidently led me, my reason seemed for a time almost to give way. Ague and fever, too, laid a depressing and weakening hand upon me, continuously recurring, and reaching oftentimes the very height of its worst burning stages. But I was never altogether forsaken. The ever-merciful Lord sustained me, to lay the precious dust of my beloved Ones in the same quiet grave, dug for them close by at the end of the house; in all of which last offices my own hand, despite breaking heart, had to take the principal share! I built the grave round and round with coral blocks, and covered the top with beautiful white coral, broken small as gravel; and that spot became my sacred and much-frequented shrine, during all the following months and years when I laboured on for the salvation of these savage Islanders amidst difficulties, dangers, and deaths. Whensoever Tanna turns to the Lord, and is won for Christ, men in after-days will find the memory of

that spot still green,--where with ceaseless prayers and tears I claimed that land for God in which I had 'buried my dead' with faith and hope. But for Jesus, and the fellowship He vouchsafed me there, I must have gone mad and died beside that lonely grave."

Jacob too found the sustaining grace of God in spite of great ongoing pain over the loss of his wife. The pain never completely went away (48:7). But neither did God's sustaining grace.

3. The final death is that of Isaac (vv. 27-29). Notice that the death of Isaac is preceded by a notation about the generation that was coming in to replace him in the work of the household of God on earth (vv. 22-26). Trading Isaac for any of these sons does not seem to be a fair trade, although there were faithful ones among the young. It is clear that at 180 years old, Isaac had lived long enough to see the brothers' treachery against Joseph and their lies to their burdened father about the event.

Not even Benjamin, named to be the son of Jacob's right hand, had the guts to do right and speak up. And then there is Reuben, who broke his father's heart in such a way that it could not be made the same again, because Reuben never makes this offense right. He was the firstborn. More was expected of him, so his failure was all the more painful. Gen. 49:1-4 were the last words Reuben heard from a dying father. The passing of generations involves the need for a new faithful generation. Young person, will you be a Joseph or are you going to be a Reuben? The house of God today is losing precious Isaacs everywhere we look. We need the Josephs. May God bless our church with young people who are faithful as we see the passing of generations in the house of God.

II. The omnipotent work of God is part of life in the house of God (vv. 9-13).

Illustration: I read a book over vacation that was written by a British philosophy professor named Antony Flew. The book is entitled, *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*. Flew has not yet come to the conclusion that the God who exists has revealed Himself, but He does now know that He is there and that He is a God of omnipotence. He explains the change that came to him in a chapter he calls "Open to Omnipotence": "Science qua science cannot furnish an argument for God's existence. But the three items of evidence we have considered in this volume – the laws of nature, life with its teleological organization, and the existence of the universe – can only be explained in the light of an Intelligence that explains both its own existence and that of the world. Such a discovery of the Divine does not come through experiments and equations, but through an understanding of the structures they unveil and map." After discussing his new-found openness to the possibility of divine revelation, Flew concludes the book with these thoughts: "Is it possible that there has been or can be divine revelation? As I said, you cannot limit the possibilities of omnipotence except to produce the logically impossible. Everything else is open to omnipotence."

Flew has come to understand for the first time, after a long life teaching philosophy, that God exists, that He is omnipotent, and that nothing that is not inherently contradictory is beyond His capability. Some of us have been blessed to know these things by faith since our childhood. The omnipotent work of God is an everyday part of life in the house of God. We know personally El Shaddai, the Almighty. He has revealed Himself to us as he did to Jacob, and He has changed us as he changed Jacob.

Application: I want us to see especially this morning that our passage indicates that the work of the church is the work of the Almighty. We are today's version of the household of God, and a part of a plan that Omnipotence had in mind back in Genesis 35.

Jacob, as the fellow patriarch of his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac, is commanded to be fruitful and to multiply. This multiplication would take two forms: a nation, and an assembly from the nations. This is a repetition of the promise God made in chapter 28, although the form of the promise there was far more general (28:14). Now we understand not only that people from all over the earth are going to be blessed in the descendant of Jacob, but also we find that they are going to form a nation and they are going to form an assembly from the nations.

The first of these programs is Israel, and the second of these is the church of the living, omnipotent God, the pillar and ground of the truth, the household of God in our day. What we are as we gather here today is the result of the sovereign plan and work of the Almighty. We are not alone, and our success hangs not on the weakness of our human hands, but on the power of His omnipotent plan.

III. The Spirit-filled devotion of people is part of life in the house of God (vv. 14-15).

Application: How does one respond when he realizes that he is the object of the blessing of the Almighty? Jacob told his family, "we in this place are the house of God. We are Bethel." He also set up a pillar, poured out a libation of wine on it, and then anointed it with oil. I've summed up this response with the phrase, "Spirit-filled devotion of people." We see in the oil a symbol of the Holy Spirit, and any response of devotion must be done through His power, not

ours. A libation was typically the emptying of an entire vessel of wine, and the significance of the symbol is not so much that something is receiving the wine, but rather that something is losing it, something is pouring it out. Paul uses this symbol in much the same way Jacob does, I believe, as he reflects on his life in Nero's prison in 2 Tim. 4:6-7. Paul's was a life that had been emptied out for the cause of Christ. Nothing was kept back for the use of that vessel. This is the response of Spirit-filled devotion.

Conclusion: Have we responded to the blessings of life in the house of God in this way? We need to hold nothing back; we need to pour out our lives for our Savior and for His church. What in your life still remains hoarded selfishly in the vessel? If the Lord has brought something to mind that needs to be poured out for Him, ask Him to help you with that as we close.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*