

Remember and Build
Genesis 35:1-15
8/17/08

Today is the last Sunday in this series where we have remembered what God has done and in this story from Genesis 35, Jacob is doing just that. He's remembering all that God has done for him in the 20 years that he's lived in Haran with his uncle Laban. He left home with just a pack of clothes and now he's come back with 2 wives, 2 concubines, 11 sons, 1 daughter that we know of (there may have been more), and healthy flocks of livestock.

A few weeks ago we looked at Jacob's story in Genesis 28 where Jacob was leaving home and he had a dream of a ladder that reached from heaven to earth and the angels were going up and down the ladder. In this dream God spoke to Jacob and promised to be with him wherever he went and to bring him back home again. God has done all that He promised and Jacob has now, in chapter 35, been peacefully reunited with his brother, and is settling back in his homeland. But in chapter 28, Jacob made a vow. In Genesis 28:20-22 Jacob says, "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's household, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth." God has done all that Jacob requested and now, in chapter 35, He speaks to Jacob and tells him to go back to Bethel, the place where he had the dream and made this vow, and settle there, and build an altar there to God.

There's a lot of symbolism that can be unpacked in what God is telling Jacob to do. He's telling Jacob to go back to the place where he first had an encounter with God and knew that God was real. He's telling Jacob to go back to the place where he first made a commitment to God and stay there, live there, put down roots there, raise his family there. He's telling Jacob to go back to the place where God first spoke to him and worship God there. God speaks the same thing to us. Go back to that time and space when we first encountered God and entered into relationship with Him and live there. Don't leave that space. Settle there, put down roots there, raise our families there in that space where we first knew God. In other words, when we make the commitment to be disciples of Christ Jesus and live our lives the way He lived His, we cannot walk away from that. And it's

important that we remember making that commitment, that we remember our connection to God and don't drift away from that space of being close to Him. This is one reason why we are sharing stories together this summer, why we are remembering what God has done together, to strengthen our commitment to God as His people, and to strengthen our relationships with each other and encourage each other to stay faithful to our vows to live as Christians.

Jacob didn't get up and go to Bethel straight away. First he tells his family to get rid of the foreign gods they have, to purify themselves and wash their clothes. Then they will go to Bethel to worship God. You see, Jacob isn't the only one who is committing to worship God. He's calling his entire household to do the same. In the culture of the Bible, when the head of the household worshiped a certain god, the whole household worshiped that God. In Joshua 24, Joshua has led the people of Israel into the promised land and they've conquered the land and Joshua calls them to do the same thing Jacob is doing here. He tells them to throw away their foreign gods and serve the Lord. He tells them to choose whether they will serve the Lord who has been faithful to them, or not, but as for him and his household, they will serve the Lord. In the New Testament there are many instances where it mentions a person becoming a Christian and their whole household also becoming Christians.

When we remember what God has done, how He's been with us, been faithful to us in preserving our lives, in taking us through difficulties, in keeping us from greater harm, in giving us strength when we feel overwhelmed, we have the choice to rededicate ourselves to worshipping Him or not. The right choice, the wise choice, is to commit to serve the Lord. In doing this we need to get rid of the foreign idols. But for us it's not as simple as throwing away a few statues. Most Westerners don't worship idols or ancestors or anything like that. When I was in London, I remember seeing someone unloading a moving van as they were moving into a new house, and they were unloading their household gods. They had these statues they were going to set up inside the house in a shrine so they could worship and take care of these idols. We don't have stuff like that so how does it work for us to get rid of the foreign gods?

By this I mean we don't hold anything back from God. We get rid of those things in our lives that pull our loyalties away from God. Such things may include relationships, jobs, responsibilities that we just don't think we can trust God with, our time, our desires for

certain things. The American Dream is a big idol in this country. We can get so busy and caught up chasing The American Dream that we forget our commitment to God.

This story of Jacob tells us we have to get rid of those things that are in competition with God. He has to have first place in our lives. Now how this works for us is different than it was for Jacob. We have to first dedicate ourselves to God, decide that He is going to be in first place in our lives and we are not. Then we let Him set the priorities for our lives. We seek His wisdom in handling relationships – some relationships will get stronger as a result of this and some relationships may end. We seek His leading and guidance for handling our finances. I've prayed over my check book before asking God to show me how much money to allocate to different things. Some of us live so close to the edge that we don't know what discretionary income is and we pay the bills and are thankful for that. But some have more than just what it takes to pay the bills and we need wisdom to know how God wants us to use that money because that's the level of commitment He calls us to. We ask God to provide the right job for us so that we have sufficient income. We dare to trust that He will answer our prayers. I remember when I was trying to get my first job when I was in high school and was filling out applications everywhere and praying a lot that God would give me a job. Someone asked me one day at school had I found a job yet and I started to say no, but then I thought about all the praying I was doing and I said, "yes I have a job but I don't know what it is yet." A couple of weeks later I found out what that job was. God is faithful to us.

When we dedicate ourselves to God we dedicate everything in our lives to Him, including how we spend our time, how we express our emotions, what patterns we allow our thoughts to get into. It's that deep of a commitment. There was an interesting conversation going on with a couple of people the other night at the closing program for Summer Education Program. Earlier in the week, there had been a fight among the kids. The person breaking up the fight let the kids continue to fight just a bit because the one kid told him basically that he needed to fight to save face. In the culture these kids live in, that is true. But the theme of the whole summer program was learning to live in peace including learning to solve differences without fighting. So the conversation was, do you let the kids fight because that's their culture or do you demonstrate a different way and put the choice before them to live in peace? These kids are following a foreign god when they resort to violence. Our God calls us to live in peace, even when everyone around us

serves a foreign god of violence. Do you see the level of commitment I'm talking about? We have to get rid of those things that pull us away from becoming like Christ.

Paul states it this way in 2 Corinthians 7:1 "Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God." God calls us to be holy people and we can't be that if we are serving foreign gods, if we are allowing other things to have a greater pull on our loyalty than God has. Jesus said in Matthew 16:24-26, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?" Dietrich Bonhoffer said, "When Christ calls a man, he calls him to come and die." Bonhoffer was killed by the Nazis at the end of World War II as a result of his faithfulness to serving Christ. Nothing, not even our very lives, can take priority in our lives over God.

As we break into our small groups to continue working on the banner projects, let's be thinking and talking about what is it that pulls our loyalties away from God. What foreign gods do we have among us that we need to be getting rid of? And pray for one another if the opportunity comes up. I'll be here in the sanctuary if anyone wants to talk individually with me or have prayer, but we need to be encouraging each other by sharing our struggles and praying for one another. None of us have this Christianity thing down perfect. All of us are in a process of learning and growing so let's encourage one another and pray for one another and learn from one another as we continue to worship God together.