

July - September 2011

# The Link

**NORTH ROAD CHAPEL**

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**BIDEFORD**

# THE TABERNACLE OF GOD

## Part 1

*“Now of the things which we have spoken this is the sum: We have such an high priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens; A minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man. For every high priest is ordained to offer gifts and sacrifices... Who serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things, as Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith He, that thou make all things according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount.” (Hebrews 8:1-5)*

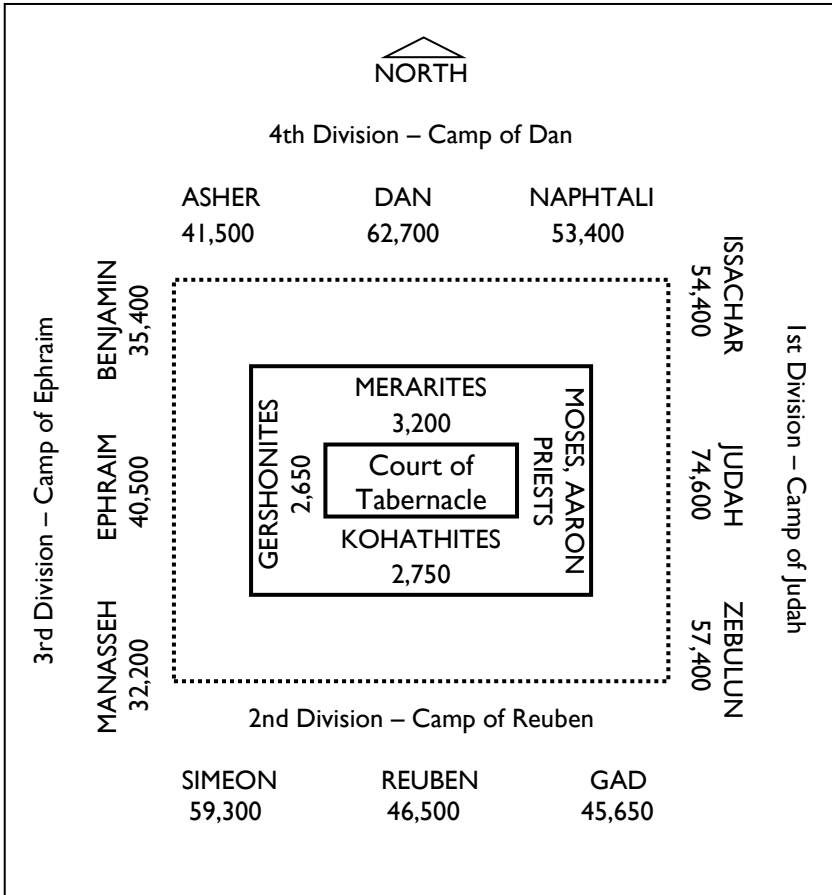
There is contained in the book of Exodus chapter 24 a very wonderful section of Holy Writ, sometimes styled as the Old Testament’s ‘Mount of Transfiguration’. The portion begins with the ratification of the Covenant by sacrifice and the application of blood, with all the ensuing blessings and privileges which came upon those who were sprinkled. Then Moses went up into Mount Sinai, and was enveloped in the cloud for six days. There, in isolation before such awesome holiness and majesty he was being prepared for that which was to follow – forty days and nights in direct communion with, and in the immediate presence of God. Thus it was, on the seventh day that Moses went into the midst of the cloud, there to remain for almost six weeks. During which time, God gave unto him the detail and plans for a remarkable and singular Tabernacle, with its furniture. It is this subject that will occupy a coming series of articles in this magazine, God willing.

In commencing the study, it is necessary to first have an idea of the Camp of Israel, for it was at Sinai that God ordered the vast multitude of people into an ordered company. The organization and arrangement of the great encampment is important as being the context of the Tabernacle itself. The God of Heaven is a God of rule and regulation: He will have every detail taken care of – a fundamental fact which will

be seen as these studies unfold. God gave authoritative directions, even in the minutiae of His people's life and worship; not a single point was to be overlooked. The words, "*And look that thou make them after their pattern, which was shewed thee in the mount*" (Exodus 25:40), resound throughout Scripture, in both Old and New Testaments.

It is the early chapters of the book of Numbers which provide the most information pertaining to the layout of the Camp of Israel. "*And the Lord spake unto Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tabernacle of the congregation, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they were come out of the land of Egypt, saying, Take ye the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel, after their families, by the house of their fathers, with the number of their names, every male by their polls*" (Numbers 1:1-2). There then follows a list of the heads of the families which gave their names to the various tribes, and each tribe was duly numbered, excepting that of Levi. They were singled out for a special office: "*But the Levites after the tribe of their fathers were not numbered among them. For the Lord had spoken unto Moses, saying, Only thou shalt not number the tribe of Levi, neither take the sum of them among the children of Israel: But thou shalt appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of testimony, and over all the vessels thereof, and over all things that belong to it: they shall bear the tabernacle, and all the vessels thereof; and they shall minister unto it, and shall encamp round about the tabernacle*" (Numbers 1:47-50). The size of the tribe of Levi is actually given later in the book: they totalled 8,600 in all.

Numbers chapter two describes the actual disposition of the camp, which is best summarised in graphical form (see Figure 1, overleaf). The primary fact to register is that the Tabernacle was in the very centre. Everything else was planned around it. The tent in the midst was supreme, as its location denoted. All Israel were gathered around that central point. The Levites were those in closest proximity to the Tabernacle itself, as illustrated, headed up in the three sons of Levi:



**Figure 1: The Camp of Israel**

“And these were the sons of Levi by their names; Gershon, and Kohath, and Merari” (Numbers 3:17). The Gershonites were on the West, the Kohathites on the South, and the Merarites on the North; but on the East, where was situated the only entrance to the Tabernacle, encamped Moses and Aaron, and Aaron’s sons who were priests under him. They were to keep the charge of the Sanctuary. “But those that

*encamp before the tabernacle toward the east, even before the tabernacle of the congregation eastward, shall be Moses, and Aaron and his sons, keeping the charge of the sanctuary for the charge of the children of Israel; and the stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death”* (Numbers 3:38). The encampment ‘round about’ was arranged as four divisions, consisting of three tribes, on each side, as described in detail in Numbers chapters 1 and 2. Each division had its flag, or standard, flying: *“And the children of Israel shall pitch their tents, every man by his own camp, and every man by his own standard, throughout their hosts”* (Numbers 1:52).

The arrangement and sizes of the tribes are shown in Figure 1. The sum total of the people at this time was 603,550 in the camp, plus the 8,600 Levites (cf Numbers 3:28) who dwelt immediately around the Tabernacle. In addition to each of the ‘divisions’ flying their respective standards, each individual tribe flew their flags also: *“Every man of the children of Israel shall pitch by his own standard, with the ensign of their father’s house: far off about the tabernacle of the congregation shall they pitch”* (Numbers 2:2), so there was perfect identification of the various families and tribes.

The whole camp must have presented a regimented and well-ordered appearance; a vast number of people in rank upon rank, pitched against the backdrop of the mountain ranges of Sinai. Such a sight as this, in the midst of a barren wilderness, would have been truly awe-inspiring. The world had seen nothing like it before. These were a people who had but recently been slaves in Egypt; and with a mighty arm, God had brought them out. Henceforth, they were not to be reckoned among the nations (cf Numbers 23:9), but as a people separate and distinct.

Let it be remembered that Old Testament Israel serves as a type of the **Church**. Every Christian should have this picture firmly established in their minds: a people called **out** of the world (typified by Egypt) and henceforth pilgrims and sojourners upon a wilderness journey, bound

for a better country, with Christ the Head of the Church (represented by the Tabernacle itself) in the midst of that great company. A people called out of earthly nationalities to form one Holy Nation, separated unto God. The picture of the Camp of Israel should serve to convey the truth of the **pilgrim nature** of the Church of Jesus Christ.

Thus was Israel in the wilderness, and that for a period of 40 years, or the span of a whole generation. Yet throughout it all they were fully catered for by God. For such a great multitude to live after this manner for so long a season was a miracle in itself. Nor should it be forgotten that they were constantly on the move. Think for a moment of all that was involved in that! Here indeed was a peculiar people; a company especially selected by God, completely set apart from all other peoples; a congregation in and through whom God could manifest His supreme power, show something of His glory, and demonstrate in a real way His sovereign favour upon a number whom He had chosen. That most elaborate of tents which was in the centre of the whole camp – the Tabernacle – was a structure designed exclusively for worship, and the honour of God. In a special compartment within that complex, Jehovah deigned to presence Himself in the form of Shekinah glory

Concerning the surrounding encampment which provided the setting for these things, there are given in the Scriptures certain other details, many of a practical and down-to-earth nature, which is nonetheless information inspired of God, and therefore not to be passed over. It must be evident to any thinking person that a community of such proportions was presented with numerous problems: of hygiene, disease, propriety, etc. None of these issues was overlooked by Jehovah. Perfect rulings were given. There was to be a state of great cleanliness, in which was a two-fold purpose: the preservation of the health of the people; and the maintenance of the purity of the camp – for God was amongst them. Whilst these verses relate to material

things, they are also typical of the deep spiritual teachings of the New Covenant.

Consider then these practical instructions given by God: *“And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Command the children of Israel, that they put out of the camp every leper, and every one that hath an issue, and whosoever is defiled by the dead: Both male and female shall ye put out, without the camp shall ye put them; that they defile not their camps, in the midst whereof I dwell. And the children of Israel did so, and put them out without the camp: as the Lord spake unto Moses, so did the children of Israel ”* (Numbers 5:1-4). Sanitary arrangements are described in Deuteronomy, and the fundamental reason stated: *“For the Lord thy God walketh in the midst of thy camp, to deliver thee, and to give up thine enemies before thee; therefore shall thy camp be holy: that He see no unclean thing in thee, and turn away from thee”* (Deuteronomy 23:14).

A leper was to live in isolation without the camp, being granted re-admittance only if and when all symptoms had vanished (cf Leviticus 13). Any other contagious disease was to be treated in a similar manner (cf Leviticus 15). Any person defiled by contact with the dead, whether in battle or otherwise, was excluded from the camp for seven days. The ashes from sacrifices were to be carried to an appointed place outside the camp; and all the waste and by-products of the sacrificial process were also to be burned there, beyond its confines (cf Leviticus 8:17). Criminals were executed in the same, distant place (cf Leviticus 24:23, Numbers 15:35).

This is sufficient to convey the very stringent rules laid down by God for the people whom He had called out for Himself, and amongst whom He would dwell for a season. Unto them He says, *“remember, and do all My commandments, and be holy unto your God. I am the Lord your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the Lord your God”* (Numbers 15:40-41).

So the scene is set, in which the Tabernacle is to be viewed and understood. In the midst of this immense company of people – hundreds of thousands – that tent was to be raised up. Thus instructions are given to Moses. From the commencement of Exodus 25, right through to the end of the book at chapter 40, there is recorded by the Holy Spirit a detailed description of the Tabernacle; its construction, its fixtures, its priesthood. This with the exception of chapters 32 – 34, which may be regarded as something of a tragic parenthesis, relating to the Golden Calf and all that ensued from it.

The Tabernacle is a structure designed by no less than God Himself, and more space is devoted to it in the Bible than to any other single object or tangible thing. To the creation of the world and all that is therein; animal, vegetable, mineral, human; are given just two chapters; compared to thirteen chapters devoted to this unusual tent with its fittings and functions. Here is surely abundant proof that God's thoughts and ways are far different from our own.

Some see in the Tabernacle and its Divinely appointed arrangements only a ritual of the past; a record of Jewish custom; a relic of the Old Covenant, long since passed away, and devoid of relevance. Others – with highly imaginative minds – have taken up the graphic details given, and forced upon them spurious and fanciful interpretations, designed to bolster man-made theories, or support insubstantial denominational traditions. May we be preserved from both of these serious pitfalls.

Again and again the New Testament makes reference to the Tabernacle, its equipment, ceremonies and offerings. Indeed, the greater part of the epistle to the Hebrews cannot be understood without a knowledge of the latter half of Exodus, and the book of Leviticus. For these portions are filled with genuine typology, setting forth in wondrous detail the New Covenant, and Christ, the Mediator



of that Covenant, and Head of the Church. Let the subject then be approached, not with idle curiosity, but with reverence and godly fear. Certainly not with biased thoughts or pre-conceived notions, but with an open mind, and expectant heart, and a spirit which humbly says: *“that which I see not, teach Thou me”* (Job 34:32). So may this series of articles be blessed to all who read.

W. H. Molland  
(transcribed by R. J. Steward)

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## THE MARSHALLING OF THE PEOPLE

*“And the Lord spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying, Every man of the children of Israel shall pitch by his own standard, with the ensign of their father’s house: far off about the tabernacle of the congregation shall they pitch.”* (Numbers 2:1-2)

In this chapter we have the order of the twelve tribes in the camp and on the march. And in these verses we have the general directions which the Lord gave unto Moses for marshalling the tribes; [in which are] four homiletic points:

### 1. ORDER

The Lord here gives directions to Moses concerning the order that was to be observed amongst them. The great importance of a clear and well-understood arrangement amongst so large a number of men will be obvious upon the slightest consideration. But notice:

**God Himself delights in order.** This is clearly manifest in His works: in the rising and setting of the sun and moon, in the sublime march of the stars, in the ebbing and flowing of the tides, in the regular

succession of the seasons. Even comets, those apparently erratic wanderers in space, are not erratic; but move with perfect precision both as regards space and time.

**The importance of order is recognised in human affairs.** In the Christian Church, in national government, in military affairs, in the family and home, and in the individual life, order is of the utmost importance, and is fraught with the greatest advantages. “Order... is the sanity of the mind, the health of the body, the peace of the city, the security of the state. As the beams to a house, as the bones to the microcosm of man, so is order to all things”. “*Let all things*”, says Paul, “*be done decently, and in order*” (1 Corinthians 14:40).

**This order was Divinely instituted as a means to peace and unity.** It is probable that if God had not determined the order which should be observed among them, there would have been strife and contention for priority and precedence. Thus the tribe of Reuben might have claimed the pre-eminence as a birth-right, and refused to fall in with the arrangement by which Judah held the post of honour and headed the march. While Judah might have refused to concede the position to Reuben, because of their own vast numerical superiority. Again, the tribe of Simeon, for the same reason, might have refused to occupy a position subordinate to that of Reuben; for the former tribe numbered 59,300, while the latter only 46,500. Other causes of dissatisfaction and dispute would also, probably, have been discovered. And the issue would have been strife, divisions, and we know not what evils. But the Lord prevents this by Himself determining the arrangement of the tribes. Order is ever conducive to peace and unity.

## **2. VARIETY**

There were different standards. Each camp had its own characteristic standard. And each tribe and each father's house had its own distinctive ensign. Their order was not monotonous. Monotony is not

a mark of divinity. Variety characterises the works of God. Countries differ in their climates, conformations, productions, etc. The features of landscapes differ. “*Star differeth from star*” (1 Corinthians 15:41). Trees, flowers, faces, minds differ. Hence it seems reasonable that we should find different ensigns in the Church of Christ. With one spirit there may be many forms. With unity in the inner life there may be great variety of outward development... there are differences of mind, temperament, degrees of education and culture, etc, in those who compose the Church. This variety is promotive of health, activity, and usefulness.

### 3. UNITY

All the tribes were gathered “*about the tabernacle of the congregation*” (Numbers 2:2) as around a common centre. They had different standards and ensigns, but constituted one nation. Their position in relation to the Tabernacle illustrates:

**The dependence of all on God.** All the tribes looked to Him for support, provision, protection and direction.

**The access of all to God.** The tabernacle was the sign of the presence of God with them. It was in their midst; not very far from any of them. All of them in the appointed way might approach Him in worship. “*Through [Christ] we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father*” (Ephesians 2:18).

**The reverence of all towards God.** They were to pitch ‘over against the tabernacle’. Probably the tribes were 2,000 cubits distant from it (cf Joshua 3:4). They were thus to encamp around the sacred place, that no stranger might draw near to it; and the Levites were to encamp near the Tabernacle on every side, that the people themselves might not draw too near to it, but might be taught to regard it with respect and reverence. “*God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the*

*saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about Him*” (Psalm 89:7). Now, all Christians are one in their relation to the Lord Jesus Christ. All depend upon God as revealed in Him; all approach unto God through Him; all reverence God in Him... He is the centre of unity. As Christians draw nearer to Him they will draw nearer to each other; not in uniformity, but in increasing nearness to Jesus Christ will an increase of **true unity** be found. “Uniformity is the creation of man; unity is the inspiration of God. The first can be made by a mask; the latter must be created or imparted by the Spirit of God... All may be uniform, yet all may be dead; none can have real, inner, spiritual, vital unity, without having that truth which God inspires, and that life of which Christ is the Giver”.

#### 4. SECURITY

The tabernacle of God in the midst of the camp was a guarantee of their safety. We may apply to them the words of one of their poets of a subsequent age: “*God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early*” (Psalm 46:5). His presence in their midst would tend to:

**Quell their fears.** He had wrought marvellous things on their behalf in the past; He was ever doing great things for them. Then why should they quail before any danger or enemy?

**Inspire their confidence and courage.** It should have given to them the assurance of victory in conflict. This seems to have been the [faith] of Moses: “*when the ark set forward... Moses said, Rise up, Lord, and let Thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate Thee flee before Thee. And when it rested, he said, Return, O Lord, unto the many thousands of Israel*” (Numbers 10:35-36). Distance from God is weakness and peril to His Church. Nearness to Him is safety and power. Living in vital union with Him all-conquering might is ours.

William Jones (1836 – 1909)

## SURELY THE LORD IS IN THIS PLACE

*“And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not. And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”* (Genesis 28:16-17)

In these well-known words of Genesis chapter 28, Jacob supplies a striking ‘self-assessment’; a critique and indictment upon those actions which had ultimately brought him to this point in his experience. The account is well known to every reader of the Bible – how that Jacob, at the suggestion of his mother, with characteristic deceit and trickery, obtained a paternal blessing which ordinarily belonged to the eldest son, namely his twin brother Esau. The consequences were as perilous as they were predictable: *“And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing wherewith his father blessed him: and Esau said in his heart, The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then will I slay my brother Jacob. And these words of Esau her elder son were told to Rebekah: and she sent and called Jacob her younger son, and said unto him, Behold, thy brother Esau, as touching thee, doth comfort himself, purposing to kill thee. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice; and arise, flee thou to Laban my brother to Haran”* (Genesis 27:41-43).

So under the pretext of seeking a wife of his own ethnicity, and with one further parting blessing from father Isaac, Jacob fled for his very life. And thus he came to that place, which future generations would know by the venerated name of ‘Bethel’ – a location where the presence of God very especially dwelt. The Hebrew word ‘Bethel’ has passed unchanged into the English language, been adopted as a place-name, and since come to adorn many Churches and Chapels around the country. Its appropriateness lies in its meaning: **‘the House of God’**.

Here is a title to which every true place of worship must surely aspire – to be an abode of the Lord Himself. Yet as the account and testimony of Jacob clearly shows, it is sadly possible to be in **God’s place**, but remain ignorant of **God’s presence**. Such was the patriarch’s case on that evening of flight – he came to a place where God was, but **knew it not**. As perhaps he ate a hasty meal, sat awhile in pensive silence, cast around for a suitable place to sleep, and eventually made up a mean bed of stones – he was wholly oblivious to the very real presence of the living God; the proximity of Deity.

In how many earthly ‘Bethels’ is this true, still today? How many of God’s people go up to God’s house, and yet fail to experience God’s presence? They may sit in a pew, sing the hymns, add their ‘amens’ to the prayers offered, hear the Word preached, engage in a degree of fellowship – but know nothing of the nearness of God – remaining entirely insensible of Him. How many such persons never get to the stage of Jacob’s realisation and self-rebuke, but remain in their ignorance? Week by week going up to the Lord’s house, but never meeting their Lord? This is a tragic state in which to persist.

But if this condition could befall the patriarchs of Scripture, like Jacob or Moses (cf Exodus 3:1-6), it follows that any and every believer is equally susceptible. Let each reader make personal enquiry: they may meet often; meet with fellow-saints; but do they meet with God? Consider the record of Jacob, and see what may be learned thereby: the factors that rendered him unconscious of the presence of the Almighty, and how God graciously overcame them, giving to Jacob a remarkable revelation of Himself.

### **Unresolved Sin**

Firstly, Jacob had unresolved sin in his heart – fresh sin, just a few days old. He was guilty of deception, falsehood, lies in profusion, taking God’s name in vain, subtlety and craftiness worthy of that old serpent

the Devil. Whilst the sovereignty of God still prevailed through Jacob's shameful enterprise, and the Divine plan was unerringly outworked, this in no way minimised or reduced the magnitude and seriousness of his transgression. And there had been no repentance, or even remorse for those sins, it would seem. Esau was now beyond reconciliation; whilst Jacob had sought his father's blessing, he never asked forgiveness for his fraud. Worse still, there had been no appeal to Heaven; no humility before God, against whom all sin is primarily perpetrated. Had there been, matters may have turned out very differently.

Sin is a terrible obstacle to meeting with God. It is that all-obscuring, earth-born cloud which arises to hide Him from our eyes. It is that which, when harboured in the heart can render prayer inaudible (cf Psalm 66:18) "*Your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear*" (Isaiah 59:2). If believers desire to meet with God, they must first address their sins; if **communion** is the objective, then **confession** must first be made.

### **An Unprepared Heart**

A second fault to be identified here, is that of an unprepared heart. Jacob had been travelling all day, his mind was full of other thoughts, and of his arrival at Bethel it is said: "*he lighted upon a certain place...because the sun was set*" (Genesis 28:11). He had not been looking for the place, or seeking for this spot in particular; but as it grew dark, he happened upon a sheltered location and availed himself of it. Would that he had been better prepared! For his grandfather Abraham had been there, several times before: "*And he (Abraham) went on his journeys from the south even to Bethel, unto the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Hai; Unto the place of the altar, which he had made there at the first: and there Abram called on the name of the Lord*" (Genesis 13:3-4).

With a little forethought, Jacob might have sought out this place particularly; found the altar; made evening sacrifice; stood where Abraham had received the covenants and blessings; called upon the name of Lord again! But no – Jacob simply blundered in, unprepared for, and unconscious of God.

How easy it is for Christians to act similarly, and merely ‘fall in’ to the house of God on a Lord’s Day; with no thought of covenant or worship, or sacrifice, or their godly heritage; but simply ‘lighting’ upon the Church, stumbling across it in the week’s routine. Little wonder then that God is not found, or heard, or seen; if this is the way in which earthly Bethels are entered.

### **A Pre-occupied Mind**

As well as a want of heart-preparation, how often are God’s people, like Jacob, preoccupied with their ‘journey’ – the arduous pilgrimage of life? The patriarch was quite clearly suffering on account of his recent travels. Presuming this was his first night since quitting Beersheba, he had covered about 40 miles in reaching Bethel; evidently moving at great speed, ever fearing that Esau might give chase; Esau the accomplished hunter (cf Genesis 25:27) who might easily track down his fleeing brother. So Jacob ran until the sun had set and it was too dark to proceed – only then stopping to rest. The rigours and hardship of the journey, rather than driving him **to** God, had instead driven God **from** his thoughts.

All too often, the pressures and problems of life, the strains and stresses of daily existence can become an excuse for negligence in worship. But the effect of such trials should **not** be to displace God from the centre of His people’s affections – but ought rather to give them greater earnestness to find Him, and lay hold upon Him, and cast their burdens upon Him – who careth for them.



## Low Faith

Fourthly, it may be said that Jacob's faith was at a low ebb. Only a few days previously, he had been the recipient of a phenomenal blessing. Although communicated by his earthly father, he had been admitted into the Covenant of God, received the birthright of a first-born son, and been added to the lineage of Abraham and Isaac. The words of the blessing entailed the service of his brethren, spiritual and material prosperity, and the promise of multitudinous descendants to possess the land. Yet now Jacob is to be seen, running for his life. Did he not believe the promises? Had he so little faith? Following once again the misguided counsel of his mother, he went away from the Promised Land, back toward Haran and Chaldea. Instead of possessing all the benefits that were contained in the covenant, his only worldly goods consisted, at this time, of the staff he carried in his hand (cf Genesis 32:10). So it can be concluded that Jacob's faith was on the wane – evidenced by his actions; exacerbated by his circumstances – and that smallness of faith further contributed to his ignorance of God, and God's presence.

The principle still applies. Those who assemble themselves together with doubting and disbelieving hearts cannot expect to meet with God in reality and truth: "*for he that cometh to God **must believe** that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that **diligently seek Him***" (Hebrews 11:6). It was Thomas, so prone to doubt and fear, who missed meeting his risen Lord on the first occasion; and Jacob, with so small a faith, who missed the presence of God at Bethel, and 'knew it not', and instead selected a stone for a pillow, and stretched himself out to sleep.

## Sleeping

The fifth, and most significant factor which militated against Jacob meeting with God was that he fell asleep; with no thought of prayer, or of sacrifice, or of grandfather Abraham, or of his God; he simply slept.

There are those who attend a Church service and, seated in the warmth and comfort of the place, fall asleep quite literally! It goes without saying that this is not the purpose of divine worship, and is dishonouring to God, and a shame to the individual concerned. Yet how many more are mentally or spiritually asleep? It is sadly possible to be found in God's house, physically awake, but with the mind 'turned off', or the heart apathetic, dull and dormant regarding the things of God. "*Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light*" (Ephesians 5:14) shouts Paul, from the New Testament epistle. Just as a heavy sleeper appears almost lifeless, so too the spiritually lethargic Christian resembles their 'dead in sins' condition once more! Let all take warning.

So Jacob was unrepentant, unprepared, unfocussed, unbelieving and finally unconscious. He had come to the house of God, but signally failed to meet with the God of the house; and there are many professing Christians who repeat the same mistakes in the present day. However, God was about to effect an amazing reversal of the situation.

*"And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the Lord stood above it, and said, I am the Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac"* (Genesis 28:12-13). **He dreamed!** For all Jacob's faults and folly, God could still break through! Even when he had gone so far as to close his natural eyes in sleep, the God whom he had ignored yet spoke – through all his faithlessness and sinfulness. Such is the power and grace of the Lord.

Perhaps in considering the case of Jacob, the catalogue of his errors and insensibility, the reader can make painful identification, and is inclined to ask "what hope is there for me, who am also often guilty of these very things?" "*If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart*" (1 John 3:20); God is greater than all our blindness and deafness and

stubborn ignorance; He can penetrate all sin's barriers and reveal Himself to His erring children. When Jacob might justly have been left to suffer the consequences of his misdeeds and go unblessed, God condescended to intervene and speak. This God is unchangeably the same: His grace and power are still as great today.

That which Jacob had failed to see with his waking sight, and had not comprehended with his natural mind was divinely communicated to him in a night-vision, namely: that the place whereon he had lighted was nothing less than the House of God – a place where the omnipresent God focussed an even greater measure of His glorious presence. Jacob was on holy ground, and what an insight into its nature he was about to receive! God by His Spirit can open His people's eyes to see their earthly 'Bethels' for what they really are. The features which the patriarch observed are the portion of every true, Biblical, local Church.

### **The Ladder**

*“And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven...”* He saw a vital link, a communicating passage between earth and eternity; a unification of terrestrial and celestial, of physical and spiritual; bridging the divide of time and space; the dwelling-place of God so very near, and rendered accessible. This is what the Church is: the place on earth where one is closest to heaven; the place from which one may view the glory-land, and feel it close at hand; the place from which the saints may ascend in prayer to the throne-room on high, and there appear in the presence of God. This is what the Church is: the bottom step of the staircase to glory; the threshold of the realms of the blessed; the outer court of the eternal Tabernacle; the way, the portal, *“the gate of heaven”*. Oh, could the people of God but grasp these verities concerning their earthly places of worship, and how might attitudes be changed! How would their souls be blest!

## **The Angels**

“...and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it...” The ladder was not unoccupied, but upon it was a solemn procession of angels, coming down from the presence of God, and alighting near where Jacob lay; or else returning from that same point on earth. Angels are not regularly considered, or preached upon; but they take a great interest in the members of the Church – those fallen, mortal, earthly creatures, so beloved and redeemed by God. “*Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister to them who shall be heirs of salvation?*” (Hebrews 1:14) asks the apostle, speaking of angels. The public gatherings of the Church for worship receive their special attention. Their attendance upon those same meetings is one of the reasons for the ruling concerning head-covering given in 1 Corinthians 11. Every local Church is a ‘Mahanaim’ – a place of **two** hosts: one earthly, one angelic.

## **The Lord**

“*And, behold, the Lord stood above it, and said, I am the Lord God*” Presiding over this whole scene is the Lord – the God of the fathers, the God of His Church throughout all ages, the great I AM. He whose power controls all things, from the involuntary breath of the sleeper, to the ceaseless cycle of seraphim and cherubim passing between earth and heaven; He whose wisdom and grace alone impart spiritual revelation to His servants. And this awesome God speaks! He declares His name, pronounces blessings, establishes His covenant, and makes great promises. He speaks powerfully and personally. And He speaks still today. There is no need any longer of direct messages from heaven, for ‘we have a more sure word of prophecy, whereunto we do well to take heed’ – the Word Incarnate, which is Jesus Christ; and the Word written, which is the Holy Bible. By these means, the voice of God remains as audible in the Church in the present time, as ever it was in Canaan of old.

Observe then the effects of this revelation of truth upon Jacob. His example is one that should be followed. He awoke, and rebuked and repented of his ignorance of the previous evening: “*Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not*”. But he knew it now, and so he **fears**, and adds: “*How dreadful is this place!*”. He is filled with a godly fear. This is a spiritual emotion which every believer ought to cultivate in greater measure; a right regard for God; reverential fear not only at His wrath or judgments or holiness, but at **all** His wonderful attributes: “*But as for me, I will come into thy house in the multitude of thy mercy: and in thy fear will I worship toward thy holy temple*” (Psalm 5:7). “Fear Him, ye saints, and you will then have nothing else to fear”.

Having recognised God, Jacob also grasped the significance of the place where he had spent the night: “*this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven*”. Here is an appreciation of the nature of the Church, the house of the Lord, where infinite God condescends and confines Himself to dwell: “*But will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth? behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain Thee; how much less this house...*” (2 Chronicles 6:18). Yet such He does, assembling where but two or three of His people are found, making their gatherings the very doorway of heaven for spiritual blessedness.

This experience and knowledge inspired Jacob’s worship, prompted his vows and acts of consecration, and altered his pilgrimage. Having arrived in heaviness, he departed in great joy; having found God at Bethel, he went forth in the consciousness of God’s perpetual presence with him: “*And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee...*” (Genesis 28:15). This was a unforgettable occasion, all on account of the Lord’s presence: “*he found Him in Bethel, and there He spake with us; Even the Lord God of hosts; the Lord is his memorial*” (Hosea 12:4-5). Might every meeting of the saints be similarly memorable!

R. J. Steward

## EDITORIAL

The subject of proper order and organization in the local Church is a matter much maligned and neglected. Some would argue that the enforcement of structure or discipline is draconian and unnecessary; others that the Church should be allowed to find its own way, in the hope that a form of self-regulation might spontaneously arise. Yet the typology of the Tabernacle, and countless similar examples from Scripture, prove beyond doubt the vital importance of good governance and rule within the Church.

It is essential for the benefit of the saints. The Adversary can gain a great advantage where there is disorder, use it as a source of strife and conflict between brethren, and thereby deprive them of all the blessings which they ought to have as members within the Church. But the right administration of companies of God's people is a source of joy and security for all concerned, as Paul observed: "*I am with you in the spirit, joying and beholding your **order**, and the stedfastness of your faith in Christ*" (Colossians 2:5). The latter was consequent upon the former.

It is essential for the Church's witness to the world. Wicked Balaam was so impressed, simply by the **arrangement** of the camp of Israel that his curse turned to a blessing upon his lips (cf Numbers 24:1-9). Only with godly co-ordination can the local Church ever hope to be effectual in the world, and appear "*clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners*" (Song of Songs 6:10).

It is essential on account of God's presence. None who have come to realise the awesome fact of the Lord's attendance in His Church will fail to uphold a structured sanctity. His holiness demands it. His proximity inspires it. His Word instructs it. "*For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints*" (1 Corinthians 14:33). It behoves them to actively maintain it, to the honour of God.