

## Happiness or Unhappiness in Marriage and Family (2)

—E. W. Bremicker

### *Husband and Wife (Eph. 5:19-29)*

It may surprise us that the theme "Marriage and Family" is dealt with in such detail in the Epistle to the Ephesians. In its doctrinal portion this Epistle occupies us as no other one with the eternal counsels of God regarding Christ and the Assembly. All emanates from God, the Father of glory. The starting point of everything is the purpose of His heart, rather than our ruined condition, as it is in the Epistle to the Romans. Chapter 1 describes the glorious position in which we stand before God. We may have insight and understanding in the counsel of God. Chapter 3 shows us which role the Assembly plays in the thoughts of God. It was entrusted to Paul to make this mystery known. Those who believe during the day of grace will be the wife of Christ for all eternity. She will share all with Him who has delivered Himself up for the Assembly.

Now God gives us this eternal heavenly view as an example for our marriage relationships. The light of the great and incomprehensible counsels of God falls on our marriages. Each of us can now ask him or herself the question: Which principles should be valid for us and our families, the principles of God's Word, or the principles devised by the men of this world? The principles of this world are, as we already saw, based on the simple precept: Everyone do according to his own will. Doing this results in a terrible number of divorces. We can hardly imagine the heartache hidden behind each of these separations.

God's principle, however, is: "He that giveth heed to the Word shall find good" (Prov. 16:20). To give heed to His Word means to do it. This involves giving up our own will that causes us so much trouble and acknowledging Christ's authority as Head. All who do so will experience God's blessing in their life. Ephesians 5:22-6:9 sets three relationships before us in which we can and must practise God's principles:

1. The relationship of husband and wife
2. The relationship of parents and children
3. The relationship of employers and employees.

Verses 19-21 are, as it were, a title over these relationships, announcing two important things. First God speaks about our heart's condition. He shows us what should be in our hearts. It says: "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and chanting with your heart to the Lord; giving thanks at all times for all things to Him who is God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." The Epistle to the Ephesians speaks of seven different conditions of heart. Here it speaks of singing and chanting, yes, we may say worshipping hearts. Doubtless, the natural relationships in marriage, family, and workplace come with problems and difficulties. Yet, these should not occupy us to such an extent that we can no longer praise and give thanks. A thankful Christian is a happy Christian. How do we begin our mornings and how do we end our evenings? To sing and chant to God in our hearts means to be thankful in prayer. When praying in the morning do we immediately begin with our problems and cares, or do we first have the work of the Lord on the cross before us? Occupation with Him and His work leads to thanksgiving and worship. That is the ideal condition for His leading, also in the natural relationships of marriage and family. Our marriages are not marked by our own, perhaps high ideals, but by Him. Secondly, we read of submission: "Submitting yourselves to one another in the fear of Christ." By nature it is difficult for us to be submissive, and we can be so only in the fear of Christ. The fear of Christ is the character and limit of our submission. God wants deep respect for His Word, fear to do something that would not please Him. In our earthly relationships we can best show what kind of Christian we are, whether we want to live according to God's thoughts or not.

We know God's principles contained in Ephesians 5 reasonably well. Yet, it is always good to stop a moment and ask ourselves very personally: What has the Lord to say to *me* through His Word? "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands, as to the Lord, for a husband is head of the wife, as also the Christ is head of the assembly. *He* is Saviour of the body. But even as the assembly is subjected to the Christ, so also wives to their own husbands in everything" (vv. 22-24). Here God addresses the women on a point that often gives them difficulties. They must be subject to their own husbands and not to other men. This subjection can only be in the Lord. He stands here before us as the One who has authority. Between husband and wife stands the authority of the Lord Jesus, and that gives this relationship its proper content. When both accept the Lord's authority, it will not be difficult for the wife to be subject, and the husband will not run the risk to rule over his wife. Not just in the world but even in Christendom, the submissive attitude of the wife is despised.

They speak of the emancipation and self-realization of the woman. God's Word says something else. Emancipation does not bring a blessing but a curse. Don't the nearly 130,000 divorces in a year in the Bundesrepublik tell a clear tale? It is remarkable how often the submissiveness of the woman is mentioned in the New Testament.

In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 we read: "Let your women be silent in the assemblies, for it is not permitted to them to speak; but to be in subjection, as the law also says. But if they wish to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home." This confirms the words of the Old Testament. However, this word is also directed at the husbands. If the wife is to ask her husband, then he must be in the picture too. Do we men, old or young, know our Bible so that we can explain things to our wives? It is not sufficient just to read something here and there, but we must study the Word intensively if we are to answer properly. Does not many a devout wife suffer under the inability of her husband to help in spiritual matters because he has but little interest in God's Word and thoughts?

A second important passage is found in 1 Timothy 2:11. "Let a woman learn in quietness in all subjection; but I do not suffer a woman to teach nor to exercise authority over man, but to be in quietness." This is an important principle of God. The woman should not rule over the man because God does not want this. It is against His express will, and yet there are many Christian marriages where the wife has the say so. They not only want equality, no, they want — consciously or subconsciously — to have the authority. The wish to dominate is for many women a special danger, this is why God's Word speaks so clearly about it.

Thirdly, we read in Titus 2 that the older women should instruct the younger ones. Seven instructions are mentioned. One of them is that they should be subject to their own husbands. The reason for it is mentioned here as well. Paul says: "That the Word of God may not be evil spoken of (v. 5). Do our wives then want to mock God's Word and act against His will? "The wisdom of women buildeth their house; but folly plucketh it down with her hands" (Prov. 14:1). When a marriage does not rest on the firm foundation of God's Word, great danger exists for marriage and family. Let us pay attention to it that we do not disturb our own happiness and lose the blessing that God has meant for us.

Fourthly, it says in Colossians 3:18, "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord." It is not a shame to be subject, but an honour. It is fitting in the Lord.

Fifthly and finally, the apostle Peter speaks of submission as well. "Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, that, even if any are disobedient to the word, they may be gained without the word by the conversation of the wives, having witnessed your pure conversation carried out in fear; whose adorning let it not be that outward one of tressing of hair, and wearing gold, or putting on apparel; but the hidden man of the heart, in the incorruptible ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which in the sight of God is of great price. For thus also the holy women who have hoped in God heretofore adorned themselves, being subject to their own husbands" (1 Pet 3:1-5). Here we find two important points. First, the walk — which means the conduct — of the wife can be a testimony. Secondly, a meek and quiet spirit is very precious to God. By nature it may be hard, but whom would our wives rather please, other people or God? Then Peter mentions in verse 6 a woman out of the Old Testament and sets her before us as a monument. Sarah, Abraham's wife, is given us as an example. In her heart she called her husband "Lord." That is what God likes to see: not an outward submission, but an attitude of heart that is pleasing to Him. Today God does not tell any wife to blindly obey her husband; He wants submission. In her submission Sarah is an example for us as well. Yet, in the Old Testament God shows us that twice she went too far in her obedience, with serious consequences for her descendants. Not without reason there is a limit to the submission of the wife, for it says in Ephesians 5:22, "As to the Lord."

In Genesis 12 a famine comes over the land of Canaan. Abraham, the man of faith, becomes weak in faith. Instead of asking God for directions, he even goes to Egypt. Out of fear for the people of that country he reminds Sarah of the agreement they had made. She would make out to be Abraham's sister. That was a half-truth which in this situation, however, became a total lie and led to deception. Through that lie, which had its origin in Abraham's selfishness, he brought his wife into great danger at Pharaoh's court. If God had not interfered, Abraham would have lost his wife for good. Years later, this event repeated itself in a similar way with the Philistines. Both Abraham and Sarah failed. Abraham had little faith and demanded too much from his wife. Sarah went too far in her submission. Similarly, today too there are limits where the submission of the Christian wife ends. If the husband demands things that are against God's will, then she can and must not follow her husband. How beautiful, however, when wives in such situations are real helps. We men act often impulsively and thereby get onto a wrong track. How good it is then when our wives help us. That is also true when we men act unwisely in our gatherings. Do we accept the counsel of our wife when she, for instance, tells us that we pray too long?

Let us go back to Ephesians 5. Submit... as to the Lord. That is the limit and also the nobility of submissiveness. Verse 23 gives us the reason why wives ought to be submissive: "For a husband is head of the wife, as also the Christ is Head of the Assembly. He is Saviour of the body." To the degree to which we men follow Christ as our example, we can also be head to

our wives in the proper way. Christ is the Saviour of the body (i.e., the Assembly). He not only *once gave Himself* for the Assembly; no, *He still cares* for her in every need. He looks after His Assembly. In the same way the husband should be concerned about his wife, helping her in every situation. The question to us men is: Do we at all notice it when our wives have needs or sorrows? Perhaps they suffer in secret and we are not at all aware of it. We live selfishly, having our own well-being in view, and don't notice at all the concerns of our wives. In the evening we come home tired and expect understanding and concern from our wife. But the other way around? Not a trace! Do we ask how our wife is doing? Do we respond to her? Actually, we should have learned to do so from Christ. He will help us in this.

Verse 24 contains a further lesson: "But even as the assembly is subjected to the Christ, so also wives to their own husbands in everything." Let us for a moment return to the history of Abraham and his descendants. Abraham's wife considered him to be head and respected him. His son Isaac and his grandson Jacob were despised and ignored as head of their families. Through her demonstrated self-will Rebecca, Isaac's wife, disrupted her own house. She used her son Jacob to deceive her own husband. There was a time in her life in which she was an exemplary wife (Gen. 24); she could even be a most beautiful Old-Testament picture of the Assembly. Later, however, she became the deceiver of her husband. As result of this, Jacob had to leave his parental home. He never saw his mother again. Where had Rebecca learned to deceive? Did not her own husband deceive the Philistines? Isaac had said that Rebecca was his sister, which wasn't true. Where had Isaac learned to deceive? Had not his own father Abraham set a bad example? It began with an evil seed planted by Abraham. A bad example had results for his children and grandchildren. The harvest we see with Isaac and Jacob. Jacob, the deceiver, is more than once deceived. His wife, Rachel, deceives him, and he does not even notice it. His father-in-law, Laban, deceives him, and in the end ten sons stand as deceivers before him with the coat of his son Joseph lying to their father. For twenty-two long years Jacob suffered under this terrible deception. Oh, yes, it was a bitter harvest for him, which reminds us of God's principle: "Whatever a man shall sow, that also shall he reap."

What were the deeper reasons for these deceptions among the descendants? The first reason is: The independency of Abraham — shown in his going down into Egypt without asking God — while as head demanding Sarah's deceptive behaviour towards the Egyptians. The second reason is: Too much blind obedience on Sarah's part. Thirdly: Ignoring and despising of the head of the family by Rebecca. Let us ask ourselves, What kind of seed do we leave behind for our children and grandchildren? What kind of example do we give them? Is our behaviour for blessing or disaster? We have a further example in Moses' story. In Exodus 4:24-26 we are told about Moses return to Egypt. On the way God Himself came against him to kill him. Why? Besides Moses went Zipporah, his wife. Obviously she had refused to let her son be circumcised. He wanted to obey God; she didn't. Only God's direct intervention brings an end to Zipporah's resistance. Yet, we do not judge this woman, but look on ourselves and ask ourselves the question: "What has God to tell us by these Old-Testament examples?" In the things of God, in what He tells us through His Word, we cannot go our own ways.

From verse 25 on, men are addressed directly: "Husbands, love your own wives, even as the Christ also loved the Assembly, and has delivered Himself up for it... that *He* might present the Assembly to Himself glorious, having no spot, or wrinkle, or any of such things; but that it might be holy and blameless. So ought men also to love their own wives as their own bodies: he that loves his own wife loves himself" (vv. 25-28).

These verses belong to the most precious verses in the Bible. Christ has loved the Assembly and has delivered Himself up for it. He gave all, yes, Himself, to possess the one, precious pearl (Mt. 13:46). But in this alone did His love for the Assembly not exhaust itself. Today He sanctifies it through the Word, and He does this in view of the future when He will present the Assembly to Himself glorious. This relationship of Christ's love (an aspect we cannot now enter into in more detail) is the yardstick by which the behaviour of men will be measured. Indeed a high yardstick, but God has not given us another one. "Husbands love your own wives, even as the Christ also loved the Assembly."

Has anyone among us met up to this high yardstick? Hardly! We must acknowledge that we remain far behind the love of Christ. In reading the Old Testament, it draws our attention that there are only a few men of whom God can testify that they loved their wives. In 1 Samuel 1 God speaks about Elkanah and Hannah and He tells us that Elkanah loved his wife. Could God say this of you and me as well? God also gives a special testimony of a man of whom we would have hardly expected it. Three times we read of Jacob that he loved his wife Rachel. God saw the feelings of this man, and He thought it well to announce these feelings to *us*. Also of Isaac we read that he loved his wife Rebecca. When they were just

married, all his affections were towards his wife. Sad to say, later the picture changed. When he had become old, *he* loved good food and drink, and of love for his wife we no longer read anything. How is this with us? Did we love our bride? Doubtless! But then, when we were married, did the love then cool, or did it become stronger and deeper? He who sees in his wife his God-given helper, will love her more and more, and will also show her this. However, sadly it goes in many marriages the way it did with Isaac and Rebecca. What a loss! In Colossians 3:19 we are told to love our wives and not to be bitter against them. That is how far it can come with us. Men become bitter and discourteous and perhaps they hardly notice it. In the bridal days many are courteous, tactful, ready to help, a complete cavalier. And afterwards? Hardly is one married or one *lets* himself be served by his wife and allows himself all kinds of moods. True, the husband is the head of the family, having the responsibility, but nowhere are we men told to use our wives and to rule over them. Entirely to the contrary, we must love them just as Christ loves. God has given love in our hearts and it is a great privilege to practise this love. The apostle also prays for this in chapter 3:17 that the Ephesians may be rooted and grounded in love. In this feeding ground of divine love we receive all the needed strength. The love of the husband expresses itself in this that he nourishes and cherishes his wife just as Christ does. Nourishing and cherishing concern both the material and the spiritual needs of the wife and are in the first place the task of the husband. If the husband is the one who nourishes the family, the wife cannot remain in the workplace.

Although it has become unpopular today for the wife to do the housekeeping chores, God's principles have not changed. In Titus 2:5 it is said especially of young women that they should be occupied with housework. God did not give this command to harass the women. No, it serves to protect the woman. A housewife and mother has plenty of tasks she can pursue. Sarah was in the tent when Abraham got visitors. The tent speaks of the sphere of the home. There she was a true help to her husband. How meaningful is God's question in Genesis 18:9, "Where is Sarah, thy wife?" God knew the answer beforehand, and yet He asks, thereby speaking to us. Can we give the same answer as Abraham, "Behold, in the tent," or "at home"?

In verse 28 Paul says further, "So ought men also to love their own wives." It is not at all something special when we love our wives, something that we should be proud of. It is our duty; it is the most natural thing in the world. And yet we must ask ourselves, Do we do it? Do we even have time for wives? Or are we often gone, pursuing our own interests and hobbies? For this we would take a closer look at 1 Peter 3:7. "Ye husbands likewise, dwell with them according to knowledge, as with a weaker, even the female, vessel, giving them honour." Here we learn three important things:

1. We ought to dwell with our wives according to knowledge. He who does so, will not be continuously somewhere else.
2. We must remember that our wives are weaker vessels. Women think and feel differently than men.
3. We should honour them and not treat them disparagingly.

A couple was recently married. The wife was physically somewhat hindered and did not feel well. In the evening, when the garbage had to be put out, the young man stayed with his book in his chair and allowed his wife to carry out the heavy garbage can. Is that giving honour? Hardly! Every day of our life is an opportunity to love our wives and to nourish them, to cherish them, and to give them honour. We can do it; we can also neglect doing it. Where, however, will our reward be at the judgment seat of Christ? However, nourishing and cherishing refers also to spiritual matters. Only when we have nourishment for ourselves can we in turn give to others also. That is the first requisite. But do we also do it? What do we do with our free evenings? Do we only spend time on our hobbies? Do we love coziness? Or do we also always find time to read the Bible together and to speak about it with each other?

A young husband loved his Lord very much. He had one wish, that his young wife would read a Bible commentary with him. She, however, preferred to read novels and stories and had no taste for spiritual literature. Lovingly the husband tried again and again to get her interested, and finally he succeeded with the Lord's help. Carefully he looked for material that would interest his wife, and today they read together.

There is another important reason in 1 Peter 3:7. "That your prayers be not hindered." There are, sad to say, still Christian marriages and families where they do not pray together. Often this lack is already evident during the bridal days. If your bridegroom has not yet prayed with you, you should seriously consider if such a link is "in the Lord." Personal as well as joint-prayer must be a firm part of marriage life. In the bridal days did not every bridegroom long to love his wife and to care for her? Should it then be different later? When we husbands take our place properly and love our wives, it will not be difficult for our wives to respect us as head and to take their place of submission.

*To be cont'd*

## 153. The Lord in Galilee. — Matthew 28:16-20; John 21.

### Outline

1. Jesus appears at the Sea of Tiberias      Jn. 21:1-14.
2. The restoration of Peter                      Jn. 21:15-19.
3. Jesus appears on a mountain in Galilee   Mt. 28:16-20.

### Explanation

1. The disciples went to Galilee as the Lord had told them (Mt. 28:7-10). There Peter, who was not yet restored in service, returns to his old trade from which the Lord had taken him to become a fisher of men. His example detracted others. That night they caught nothing (Prov. 10:22). Early in the morning the Lord, looking on, waited for the moment that He could serve them. "Before they call, I will answer" (Isa. 65:24). Affectionately He called them Children, though all had grieved Him so much. The Lord's question showed the disciples the futility of their labour. Upon the Lord's advice, the disciples caught a multitude of fishes. What a blessing we get when in faith we obey God's Word (Jas. 1:6,7). John recognized the Lord first; active Peter, however, swam to Him as quickly as he could out of love for the Lord. Once before the Lord had shown His power to the disciples (Lk. 5:1-11). Then the net rent and the ships almost sunk; here everything is secure and perfect because it pictures the new creation, based on the death and resurrection of the Lord. The sea is a picture of the nations, the net of the gospel and the fishermen of the apostles; the 153 fish picture the many to be saved during the time of grace and the Millennium.

When the disciples reached shore, the Lord had already fish and bread for a meal. It shows how He Himself prepares the foundation on which His own may build. The Lord feeds the disciples with that which He has prepared.

2. The Lord said "Simon, son of Jonas" rather than "Peter" to remind him of his natural weakness, a feeble man full of self-confidence. Then the Lord asks, "Lovest thou Me more than these?" Though Peter had thought that he loved the Lord more than others (Mt. 26:33), he had denied the Lord three times. The Lord asked twice if he *loved* Him. Simon answered each time that he was *attached* to the Lord. The third time, however, the Lord asks him if he is *attached* to Him. With this third question the Lord reached Peter's conscience, who becomes grieved and appeals to the Lord's omniscience. "Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I am attached to Thee." Peter's love for the Lord had not been visible; he had even said: "I know not this Man." Yet he loved the Lord. Peter had failed to pay attention to the Lord's admonition to watch and pray. Only God can keep us from the guile and power of the enemy (Ps. 16:1; 34:7). Peter, having come to know himself, the Lord can restore him in the service before the other disciples.

3. On the mountain in Galilee, the Lord sent the disciples to the nations (the "great commission" Mt. 28:19). Before Jesus' rejection, the commandment was different (Mt. 10:5; 15:24). The disciples only began to do so after the persecutions begun (Acts 8:1,4,14). They completely obeyed it after the destruction of Jerusalem. The real apostle amongst the nations was Paul (Gal. 1:16; 2:2,7-10). In the Lord's words: "Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them..." the word "them" refers to the new converts, as is evident from the Greek. They were not to baptize unregenerated nations. At His farewell the Lord says: "All power has been given Me in heaven and upon earth... I am with you all the days, until the completion of the age." He who possesses all power can exercise this for our good. The completion of the age means the end of the time of His rejection and absence. It is followed by the age of Christ's reign.

### Lesson

The Lord always brings man to see his condition before He reveals His power and grace (cf. the man who had been infirm for thirty-eight years, Jn. 5).

Rather than reproof Peter's denial, the Lord shows him its root: too much self-confidence. "The flesh profits nothing" (Jn. 6:63), and "He that confideth in his own heart is a fool" (Prov. 28:26).

The care of lambs and sheep involves feeding and watching them. The Word of God is food for their souls and keeps them from evil. Until the Lord Jesus returns there will be shepherds and teachers, as well as evangelists to preach the gospel (Eph. 4:11,12).

## 154. The Ascension. The Choosing Of Matthias. — Mark 16:19-20. Luke 24:50-53. Acts 1.

### Outline

1. The Lord's last words and promise Acts 1:1-5
2. The ascension Acts 1:6-12
3. The time of waiting of the disciples Lk. 24:13-26

### Explanation

1. For forty days after His resurrection the Lord manifested Himself as the Living One with many true signs. He spoke to His disciples through the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:2) as He had done before His death. When the Lord spoke of the Kingdom of God, the disciples still hoped that the Lord would soon establish the Kingdom of Israel. The Lord taught them that the time of the Kingdom's restoration was not important to them. They should be witnesses for Him in the whole country and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). For this they would soon receive the Holy Spirit; in Him and with Him they would receive power (Acts 1:4,8). Until then they were to stay in Jerusalem.

2. The Lord ascended to heaven from the mount of Olives, seen by the disciples, who had to be witnesses of His resurrection and ascension. With His hands lifted up in blessing He ascended from them into heaven, blessing He remains there, and blessing (i.e., to be a blessing) He will return. Jesus is coming again; He had often said so and now the two men in white clothing say it too. A cloud (the Old Testament sign of God's presence and dwelling place) received Him out of their sight.

3. After the Lord's ascension the disciples, among whom Mary — who is then mentioned no more — gathered for prayer (Acts 1:12-14). All are continually praising and blessing God (Lk. 24:52-53). While they waited for the Spirit Matthias was appointed to be apostle in Judas' stead as witness of the Lord and His resurrection. They cast lots because they had not yet received the Holy Spirit (cf. Josh. 7; 1 Sam. 10:20-21); they also leaned on God's Word (Acts 1:20; Ps. 69:25; 109:8).

### Lesson

Believers will also have the Holy Spirit after their resurrection for He shall be with us and in us for ever (Jn. 14:16-17). Today He is with us as Comforter, Leader, and Teacher, and makes intercession for us (Rom. 8:23-26). He also takes out of Christ and gives it to us. As long as we are in this body of sin, the Holy Spirit has much opposition, because He is opposed by the flesh (Gal. 5:17). Then, when sin no longer indwells us, He can unhinderedly reveal the glory of Christ to us.

The Lord will return on the clouds to judge the world and establish the Kingdom (Mt. 24:30). First the Lord will come to take His own away before the hour of temptation (1 Thess. 4:17). For the bride (all true Christians) He comes as the Morningstar (Jn. 14:3; Rev. 22:16), for the believing Jews as the Sun of righteousness (Mal. 4:2) when He comes to judge the world (Rev. 1:7; 19:11-16).

*To be cont'd*

## Jacob (3)

### His experiences in Relation to the House of God

—H. Bouter Jr.

### *The house in Succoth (Gen. 33)*

Jacob was on his way to Bethel, the place of fellowship with God. Last time we saw how the greatest hindrance for this fellowship with God, as far as Jacob was personally concerned, was removed. That is the true significance of Peniel. It is the place where the flesh is judged. We must learn to see our own flesh in the way God sees it, and to identify ourselves with the Christ who has died. Only then are we fit to have fellowship with God. For then we see ourselves as He sees us.

Yet, a long road to Bethel, to the house where God dwelled, remained ahead of Jacob. We see that he gets stuck along the way. He journeys to Succoth and there he builds a house for himself and shelters for his cattle. How is that possible? He is on his way to Bethel, to the house of God, and now he is going to build here a house for himself?

Jacob had been in Peniel. There he had seen God from face to face and there he had seen himself in the light of God. As a new man he had set out on his way to Bethel. He had been set free, to speak with the language of the New Testament. Yet, sad to say, we see that he uses this freedom as an occasion for the flesh. That is a great danger. We can use Christian liberty to serve ourselves. Here Jacob builds a house *for himself*. It is not God's house, but Jacob's house.

Don't we see the same thing in the history of Christendom? How many houses have not been built in the Christian yard around certain persons? The Lord was not the centre. It was not the house of God, but the house of a certain leader. Not God, but man stood in the foreground.

The second point that we see here is that Jacob loses his standing as stranger that had characterized him till then. He no longer dwells in tents like Abraham and Isaac. In fact he surrenders here his confession that he is a stranger and sojourner on earth. He is no longer looking for a better, that is a heavenly country (Heb. 11:13-16). Now he has found a permanent dwelling place, a house for himself and shelters for his cattle. Therefore he calls the name of that place Succoth, which means "shelters" or "tabernacles." In reality his giving that name is not entirely honest; it is only a half truth. It appears that the name testifies of it that he is a stranger, that the nature of his stay here has only a temporary character. But that he himself has found a permanent residence here is not expressed by it. Obviously he does not want to completely surrender his position as stranger and sojourner. In it we see Jacob as a man of mixed principles. This also shows from the next lodging place.

#### *The altar at Shechem (Gen. 33:18-20)*

Still, Jacob travels on and reaches Shechem. Here, however, we see two things that confirm what we have just stated, namely that the confession of his character as stranger is only a half truth. Here Jacob does two things Abraham never did. He sets up camp in sight of the city. Did Jacob not know the warning example of Lot who put his tents up to Sodom? Did he not know how Lot had fared, and what had been his end? Lot found a permanent residence in Sodom and with difficulty escaped God's judgment over that city. Abraham, on the other hand, lived in tents on the plateau. He walked by faith and was a stranger.

The second thing Jacob does here is buy a piece of land to place his tent on. Abraham never did this either. Abraham only bought a piece of land to bury Sarah (Gen. 23). He did this in view of the resurrection and in faith that his descendants would possess the land. Nor did he possess property in the land for himself, for that would have conflicted with his pilgrim character. Jacob, however, does buy a piece of land, and that close to the city of Shechem. A tent is still mentioned here, but evidently Jacob drove his tent stakes deep into the ground. In the next chapter, Genesis 34, the results of this prove to be to the shame of Jacob and his whole household.

All appears so nice. Here Jacob even builds an altar, but not on the place God had shown him! It was contrary to God's thoughts and to Jacob's promise. God wanted an altar in Bethel, the place where He wanted to dwell. However, Jacob's self-will was active. Jacob wants to serve God in a way that suits him best. In actuality, all centres around Jacob. It is Jacob's altar and it is the God of Jacob.

That Jacob forms the centre is evident from the name he gives this altar: "El-Elohe-Israel," Israel's God is God. Though Jacob uses now the new name God had given him — Israel, Prince with God — we do not read here that God openly recognizes that name. God only does this in Genesis 35 where He anew calls Jacob's name Israel.

Now Jacob calls God, Israel's God. It was his God and of this God he says: "He is God! In other words, he recognizes in a general way that He is God. Jacob really says: "My God is God!" It is true of course, but it is a general confession. We see here a clear contrast with Genesis 35. There Jacob is finally at the place where God wants to have him and where he has a much closer connection with God. The place of the altar that he builds there he calls: "El Beth-El," the God of the house of God. Then Jacob no longer is the centre. At that place God is everything. Then, too, Jacob no longer utters a general confession. Then God is no longer far off, but very near. God dwells there. He is the God who has His house there, and who comes to Jacob there, revealing His thoughts.

#### *The second call to return to Bethel (Gen. 35)*

Now it becomes evident that God is not pleased with this altar at Shechem, with this general confession of Jacob. It also comes to light what was the real hindrance for Jacob to go to Bethel. God uses the terrible events of Genesis 34 to wake Jacob out of his spiritual sleep, and to cause a real turnabout. "And God said to Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there, and make there an altar unto the God that appeared unto thee when thou fleddest from the face of Esau thy brother" (Gen. 35:1).

Then, however, Jacob suddenly remembers that he is not able to appear before God. In the place where God dwells God is not satisfied with a mere general acknowledgement of who He is. There, all must be in agreement with Him and His thoughts, for the foundation of His house is in the mountains of holiness, and holiness becomes His house (Ps. 87:1; 93:5).

Therefore, in the light of the holiness of God's house the psalmist calls out: "Jehovah, who shall sojourn in Thy tent? Who shall dwell in the hill of Thy holiness? He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth from his heart" (Ps. 15:1-2). Jacob sees himself placed in this searching light when God commands him again to go to His house. Jacob sees that with him, in his household and in his surroundings, all conflicts with the holiness of God's house.

"And Jacob said to his household, and to all that were with him, Put away the strange gods that are among you, and cleanse yourselves, and change your garments" (v. 2).

We cannot just simply appear before God. Our practical condition must be in conformity to His holiness. The strange gods must be done away and the clothing, the total pattern of our behaviour, must be changed. In Genesis 31 Jacob was not aware that there were idols in his family. But here, so close to the house of God, he sees everything in the true light and he is firm. He does not spare anyone. Everything and everyone must answer to the holiness of Bethel.

Do we, do I have strange gods? God looks at the heart and in my heart there can be idols. No one sees them; no one suspects them. Only God knows that they are there. For instance, God calls greed, materialism idolatry (Col. 3:5). The apostle John encourages his children in faith: "Children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 Jn. 5:21). Those idols are in contrast to "the true God and eternal life" (1 Jn. 5:20). All that is contrary to Him, all what is not out of Him, is really an idol.

And what about our clothing? Have we put off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light (Rom. 13:12-14)? We confessed having done so in baptism: "For ye, as many as have been baptised unto Christ, have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27). Are we in our outward appearance characterized by Christ Himself? Are we conformed to Him?

To appear before God in Bethel our "clothes need changing." We must change our clothes. We must lay off all that is of the old man. Only that which is of the new man is pleasing to God. As far as our position is concerned we are only acceptable to God when we are in Christ. He has made us acceptable in the Beloved (Eph. 1:6). If we want to be practically in His presence we need to reveal Christ truly. If we are before God characterized by that glorious Person, the Lord Jesus Christ, would it not be our desire to also reveal Him through grace here on earth? As we said already, that is the prerequisite for true fellowship with God.

What has to happen with the strange gods? We read here in Genesis 35: "They gave to Jacob all the strange gods that were in their hand, and the rings that were in their ears, and Jacob hid them under the terebinth that is by Shechem" (v. 4). It is remarkable that not only the idols, but also the earrings had to disappear. Perhaps those ornaments were also reminders of certain idols. Anyway, they were things with which they could not appear before God. It says here that the strange gods were in their hands and the earrings in their ears. Strange gods determined their walk and the ear ornaments characterized what they heard. Their entire behaviour and walk, but also their thought life had to be cleansed from idolatrous associations.

The idols were hidden under the oak tree, speaking of the cross, where the judgment over this world and the god of this world has been completed (Jn. 12:31). We realize far too little what the cross means in this regard. At the cross it became apparent what the real character of the world and the world's leader is: total enmity against and rejection of God. At the cross, therefore, the world and the prince of this world, the god of this age, showed who they really were. Therefore it lost there its moral right of existence, and the devil lost his moral right to exercise authority over the world. The execution of this judgment God has, as far as His governmental ways are concerned, deferred until the last days described in the book of Revelation. There we find the actual deeds of casting the devil out (12:9; 20:3,10) and of cleansing heaven and earth. Since the cross, however, this judgment is a settled question. At the cross it took its effect morally.

The Christian sees things already the way God sees them. The apostle Paul did not boast in anything, as he said, "Save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world is crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal. 6:14).

To the believer the judgment of the world is therefore even now already a *fait accompli*. To him the world is the place where his Lord had but a cross and a grave. As far as he is concerned, all the idols have found their end on that cross and in that grave. Of this the oak tree at Shechem speaks. It is the personal realization of the significance of the cross regarding the world and its idols.

An idol is something that replaces God and that therefore robs him of the honour that is due to Him. He is an only God and He has the right to be recognized as such. There is nothing and no one beside Him who has a right to the honour and worship of man. "Thou shalt do homage to the Lord thy God, and Him alone shalt thou serve" (Mt. 4:10). The human being is a dependent creature and it has, therefore, either contact with idols or with the living and true God (1 Thess. 1:9).

To be able to appear before this true and living God in Bethel, and to have fellowship with Him, we need to be cleansed practically from our idols. We ought to purify ourselves from every pollution of flesh and spirit, and to perfect holiness in God's fear (2 Cor. 7:1). Then we have the promise of which we read in the last part of 2 Corinthians 6. Then Bethel becomes a reality.

The oak tree where the idols are buried is near Shechem, the place where also the total corruption of the flesh has become evident. Genesis 34 shows us who man is; that happens at Shechem. So the cross, too, shows who man is in himself. Not just the world and the prince of the world have been judged there, but also man himself. The cross has shown who man is. But not that alone, the cross also shows us the only solution that was available to man, namely death. That death, Christ in His grace has entered for His own (Rom. 8:3; 2 Cor. 5:21).

So to say, Jacob and his family left not only their idols behind, but also their entire past. All they had been was buried there. What a place is the cross! What lessons can we learn there! That is needed, too, if we are to have fellowship with God, to be able to appear before His face in Bethel.

Thus, Shechem became the place of total turnabout in the life of Jacob and his family. Here in Shechem the change took place that practically prepared them to come before God's face. For us the cross is the starting point of a renewed consecration to God.

This we see again in Joshua's history at the renewing of the covenant in Shechem (Josh. 24). Shechem is the place where it is decided: "As for me and my house, we will serve Jehovah." At that place, too, Joshua calls the people up to judge the strange gods that are among them. For us, then, Shechem speaks of it that the cross is the place where we learn to see all things as God sees them and where we again consecrate ourselves to God.

Does the cross have this significance for us? Do we learn there to judge ourselves ever again? Do we learn there anew what the world is in God's eye and who is the prince of the world? The cross is a wonderful place. There we see who man is, what the world is, and how the prince of the world is. But there we see, too, who God is, in His holiness and righteousness, in His judgment over sin and over the world—but also in His infinite love, grace, and mercy.

*To be cont'd*

### **The Prophecy of Micah (3)**

—R. Been Sr.

#### *Chapter 1 — cont'd.*

*'Tell it not in Gath, weep not at all; at Beth-le-aphrah roll thyself in the dust. Pass away, inhabitress of Shaphir, in nakedness [and] shame. The inhabitress of Zaanan is not come forth for the lamentation of Beth-ezel: he will take from you its shelter. For the inhabitress of Maroth waited anxiously for good; but evil hath come down from Jehovah unto the gate of Jerusalem. Bind the chariot to the swift steed, O inhabitress of Lachish: she was the beginning of sin to the daughter of Zion; for in thee were found the transgressions of Israel. Therefore shalt thou give parting-gifts to Moresheth-Gath: the houses of Achzib shall be a lie to the kings of Israel. I will yet bring unto thee an heir, O inhabitress of Mareshah; the glory of Israel shall come even unto Adullam. Make thee bald, and poll thee for the children of thy delights; enlarge thy baldness as the eagle, for they are gone into captivity from thee" (vv. 10-16).*

Samaria should not speak at Gath about its defeat, and not even weep in that Philistine city. In those days the defeat of the Philistines by Hezekiah was just about complete. How would the Philistines rejoice at the sad news of Samaria's fall! For it was the capital city of Judah's brother nation.

The names of the other cities of Judah mentioned in these verses are applied by the prophet to their fall, to the misery of it. For instance, the inhabitants of Afra — which means dust — would roll in dust. Saphir — which means beautiful one — would be raped. And so it goes for the other cities, who are finally called to mourn.

## Chapter 2

In the first chapter Micah had told what would happen to Samaria and Jerusalem. The calamity would, as far as Jerusalem is concerned, only come to the gates of the city. The second chapter describes the moral condition of the entire nation, which shows that such a severe and far-reaching judgment was righteous and necessary.

*"Woe to them that devise iniquity and work evil upon their beds! When the morning is light they practise it, because it is in the power of their hand. And they covet fields, and take them by violence; and houses, and take them away; and they oppress a man and his house, even a man and his heritage "* (vv. 1-2).

Twice a *woe* occurs in this prophecy, just like it did in Amos (5:18; 6:1). The first time is found in Micah 2:1. There it concerns the moral condition of the nation that devised iniquity on their beds. They work it out in detail and practise it when the day had dawned. It desired the possessions of their neighbours and robbed them. They oppressed peaceful people, taking away their goods and had no regard for the weak and small among them. The second time the *woe* occurs is in chapter 7:1, it is a *woe* over the prophet himself.

These calls of *woe are* one of the many agreements between Micah and Isaiah. Except that in Isaiah they are always much more clear and extensive than in Micah. We find, for instance, in one chapter of Isaiah six times an exclamation of *woe* (5:8,11,18,20,21,22). Together these agree with the first *woe* of Micah. The seventh *woe* of Isaiah is similar to Micah's second *woe*.

In Isaiah's prophecy these *woes* concern:

1. The selfishness that was only out to enrich itself, keeping all for itself.
2. The love for wine and worldly pleasures.
3. The knowingly doing evil without any concern for God and the punishment that would follow.
4. Those who call evil good and good evil.
5. Those who had high thoughts of themselves.
6. Those who used their energy to debase themselves, to justify evil ones from whom they drew benefit, to condemn righteous ones because they could not expect any benefit from them for themselves.

But Isaiah, just as Micah, also announces a *woe* over himself. In the vision that called him, he saw himself as an unclean person who cannot stand before God. We will return to Micah's second *woe* when we consider chapter 7.

*"Therefore thus saith Jehovah: Behold, against this family do I devise an evil, from which ye shall not remove your necks; neither shall ye walk haughtily: for it is an evil time" (v. 3).*

When *they* devised iniquity and worked out evil, the Lord also devised evil, a calamity, a punishment over them that they would not be able to escape. They would not be able to remove their necks from it. How little do people who devise evil things and execute them think of it what a punishment, what a recompense a holy and righteous God is simultaneously determining over them. God knows His time for it as far as the actual execution of it is concerned. He may wait for years, but He forgets nothing. The wise Preacher said of this foolish man that because the judgment does not come immediately over the evil deed, the heart of men is filled to do evil (Eccl. 8:11).

The prophet Amos, who prophesied long before Micah, had shown what the attitude of a wise man would be in the day that the judgment of the Lord would come (Amos 5:13). In that day, the prudent would be silent, for it would be an evil time. What is the use of speaking while the judgment is being poured out? As long as the judgment is not yet executed one could give warning, but once the evil had arrived speaking was meaningless.

*To be cont'd*