Jacob Returns to Bethel

My plumbing woes continue. Two weeks ago I was unable to attend the Wednesday night service because I was dealing with a stopped up sink that had partially flooded our kitchen. The sink had clogged due to a backed up septic tank. We had the septic tank pumped out but that has provided only temporary relief because the drain field has to be replaced. There is something positive arising from this situation. The drain field will have to be routed through an area of our yard that has suffered from neglect. It has become a jungle and I have wanted to clear it for several years, however it has not been a priority so I have put it off. I have spent the last few days working in the yard and it is now in a condition to accommodate the new drain field. Out study of chapter 35 of Genesis shows Jacob finally dealing with some issues that he had neglected.

The chapter begins with God telling him specifically to go to Bethel and settle there. Jacob had stopped in Bethel on his journey to Paddan Aram where he had his famous vision of the ladder reaching to Heaven. It was there that I believe that he established his personal relationship with God. In response he anointed a stone pillar referring to the location as God’s house and the gate of Heaven. He stayed with Laban 20 years and had traveled around in Cannan for several years after that but he had not returned to Bethel. In addition to his experience at Bethel he had also met God face to face and received His blessing before he re-entered Canaan to meet with Esau yet he had avoided returning to Bethel. After receiving God’s command, Jacob prepared his family to go to Bethel by instructing them to get rid of their idols and purify themselves. As they left for Bethel, they met no resistance despite the massacre of the people in Shechem as they were under God’s protection. It appears that Deborah who was Rebekah’s nurse may have joined with Jacob’s family and she died near Bethel. When they arrived in Bethel, God reaffirmed his covenant with Jacob and Jacob erected a stone pillar to memorialize the event. Despite God’s command to settle in Bethel, they moved on again after their arrival toward Bethlehem and Rachel died while giving birth to her second son Benjamin. They moved again after that and Rueben slept with Bilhah who was Jacob’s concubine and the mother of 2 of Rueben’s brothers. There is no recorded reaction by Jacob other than the fact that he heard of the sinful act. The chapter ends with the death of Isaac at the age of 180.

Jacob’s troubles with his sons began with the killing of innocent men by Simeon and Levi, continued with Rueben’s sin and we will see further sins of his sons as they attack Joseph and sell him into slavery. Jacob had not properly raised his sons to revere God as evidenced by their idol worship. Jesus was descended from Jacob’s 4th son Judah because the first 3 sons had disqualified themselves by their sinful behavior. Note that only when Jacob is making preparations to return to Bethel does he require them to give up the idols and purify themselves. In the KJV Jacob thought Bethel to be a dreadful place (28:17). He seemed to have spent years trying to avoid it but also saw that going there again meant making preparations to meet God in an appropriate spiritual condition. He apparently tolerated his family’s idol worship for years but required them to cease that before going to Bethel. One of my brothers who was divorced was later in a relationship with a woman who was also divorced. She once said to my mother “Bill’s daughters run all over him but I can’t say anything about it because my children do the same to me”. Sort of a twist on taking the plank out of your eye before removing the speck from your brother’s eye (Matt. 7:5). I think Jacob was reluctant to confront his sons about their sins because they could see sin in him and it was easier to ignore their sins than cleaning up his own life.

Sometimes Christians fall away from church because they see it as a dreadful place. Sadly they sometimes think that they are no longer worthy to be among God’s people. Sadder still are unsaved people who are convinced that they need to clean up their lives before they approach God asking for grace. Martin Luther King once said that it’s always the right time to do the right thing.