

# Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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## The Value of Pilgrimage and Separation

by Dan Trygg

“So Abram went up from Egypt into the Negev... <sup>3</sup> And he journeyed from place to place from the Negev as far as Bethel. He returned to the place where he had pitched his tent at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai. <sup>4</sup> This was the place where he had first built the altar, and there Abram worshiped Yahweh.”  
Genesis 13:1,3-4

“Then God said to Jacob, ‘Go up at once to Bethel and live there. Make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.’ <sup>2</sup> So Jacob told his household and all who were with him, ‘Get rid of the foreign gods you have among you. Purify yourselves and change your clothes. <sup>3</sup> Let us go up at once to Bethel. Then I will make an altar there to God, who responded to me in my time of distress and has been with me wherever I went.’  
Genesis 35:1-3

“[Elijah] traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. <sup>9</sup> He went into a cave there and spent the night. All of a sudden Yahweh spoke to him, ‘Why are you here, Elijah?’”  
1 Kings 19:8-9

“Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, [Jesus] got up, went out, and made His way to a deserted place. And He was praying there.”  
Mark 1:35

“The apostles gathered together with Jesus; and they reported to Him all that they had done and taught. <sup>31</sup> And He said to them, ‘Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while.’ (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.) <sup>32</sup> They went away in the boat to a secluded place by themselves.”  
Mark 6:30-32

The Bible is full of accounts of people being led, or even instructed by God, to separate themselves from their current daily life, and go apart by themselves for a period of quiet. Often this was in preparation for a time of revelation from God. Sometimes it enabled people to reflect, and evaluate, in order to make a valuable “reset” in their lives. Sometimes God even directed people to go back to revisit previous places of significance in their past, in order to remember what He had done with them. This gave them perspective and encouragement in their current situation, and often helped them renew past commitments, or sharpen their focus going forward.

In Genesis 12, Abraham responded to God’s call to leave his former homeland in Ur of the Chaldees, and strike out in a new direction, ...to “go to a land I will show you.” His obedience was imperfect, but he was making an attempt to follow God. When he finally made it to the land, he went as far as Shechem, where Yahweh communicated more of the promise to him, ...even appearing to him. Yahweh told him, “To your descendants I will give this land.” He built an altar there to commemorate the spot. He moved on to a place near Bethel, where he built another altar, and called upon the name of Yahweh. Then, however, faced with the first difficulty he encountered since coming there, ...a famine..., he departed from the land of promise to go to Egypt. He obviously was not trusting in Yahweh, because he resorted to old tricks, ...a lie that could have disrupted the whole plan. But God mercifully delivered him from the danger and damage that his lie could have caused, and instructed him to go back to Bethel, to the place where he had built the altar to Yahweh. He obeyed and once again was calling upon the name of Yahweh, an activity and focus noticeably absent during his sojourn in Egypt. It appears that God brought him back to that previous place of worship to help him refocus and recover that heart attitude he had been walking in before. The familiarity of the place, the altar he had made, brought back those feelings and memories, and he was able to renew his faith.

In Genesis 28, Jacob was fleeing from his brother, Esau, after cheating him out of his blessing. Ostensibly, he was to go to his relatives to find a suitable bride, but the threat of his brother’s anger was the immediate concern. As he fled, with only what he could carry, he slept in a deserted field. During the night God revealed Himself to Jacob in a vision, and promised to be with him and bring him back safely to this land of promise. He repeated to him the promise of Abraham and Isaac, extending it to him and through his descendants. When he awoke in the morning, he was afraid, and exclaimed, “Surely Yahweh is in this place and I did not know it.” He set up a stone pillar as a memorial, and called that place Bethel, the dwelling-place of God. (While not the exact site as Abraham had observed, it must have been in the same general area.) In response to the vision, Jacob vowed that if God would do as He said, ...keep him safe, care for his needs, and bring him back into this land, then he would make Yahweh his God, and would honor Him with a tithe of his increase.

Twenty years later, Jacob came back into the land, along with his entourage of multiple wives, eleven sons and one daughter. He met his brother, and was received favorably. He saw this as the grace and favor of God. Although he promised to move on to Esau’s place, he chose instead to settle down in Shechem. He bought some land, built shelters for his animals, and lived among the unbelieving people of the land. This was a departure from God’s direction, and Jacob’s own word to Esau. Tragically, his daughter, Dinah, was raped by the son of the most powerful family in the town. Jacob’s sons contrived a scheme to kill all the men of the city, and take their wives and possessions as plunder. Jacob was afraid that the nearby communities would hear of it and take up arms against them.

At that moment of fear and uncertainty, God called Jacob to go up to Bethel and live there. He was to make an altar to God who had appeared to him there. Jacob had all his household consecrate themselves, putting aside anything that was unclean or had been associated with another god. Then they went to Bethel and did as Yahweh commanded. God protected them along the way. Returning to that place helped Jacob remember the encounter he had with God twenty years before. He remembered the promise of God, and the vow he had made. There, he built an altar at the site of the pillar he had set up, and he worshiped Yahweh there. He needed to return to that place to more fully feel the weight and reality of what God had done for him, and to renew his faith commitment there. God revealed Himself to him, again, ...renewing to him the covenant promise, ...the promise of Abraham and Isaac would be extended through him.

Elijah the prophet had just experienced the best, most exuberant day of his life. God had called him to come out of hiding after a three-year period, ...a period of drought which was initiated at his announcement by the command of Yahweh. He had met with king Ahab, and arranged a contest with the prophets of Baal and the devotees to Asherah. He said, "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If Yahweh is God, serve Him; if Baal is god, serve him." They agreed to prepare a sacrifice, and the deity who answered by fire would demonstrate that he was the true God. The prophets of Baal chose an ox, built an altar, and called out to their god all day long, ...and nothing happened. When Elijah, however, prepared his ox, and called out to Yahweh, fire came down out of heaven immediately, and consumed not only the sacrifice, but the wood and even the rocks of the altar! Elijah commanded the people to execute the false prophets. Then, as he prayed, Yahweh answered by bringing the much-needed rain.

When queen Jezebel found out, however, she was furious, and threatened Elijah's life. Elijah was terrified, and fled. An angel ministered to him in his exhaustion, and strengthened him with food for two days, then he traveled for forty days and nights to come to Mount Horeb, ...or Mount Sinai..., where God had appeared to Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness (Ex. 3:1; 17:6). There, God revealed Himself to Elijah, not in powerful acts of nature, but in a small, gentle whisper. There, in that sacred place, ...that place of historical visitation and awe-inspiring revelation from God..., Yahweh quietly heard Elijah's concerns, and gave him new direction. The prophet arose from that encounter, and went on his way to fulfill the instructions of God. We hear no more of his fear or depression. He needed to get away from his circumstances enough to get perspective. God sent him on a pilgrimage to a holy place to help him refocus.

We see Jesus regularly separating Himself from the busyness of His life, by rising up early in the morning to secure some private, "alone-time" with His Father. When you look closely, you can see that He did this quite often, ...and it wasn't *just* in the early morning private times. Jesus would go off by Himself in anticipation of major decisions, and after significant events. And, He was not afraid to simply leave a busy place of ministry to get alone.

Jesus also secured time alone with His disciples, ...getting them away from the crowds. Sometimes that was difficult, because people recognized Him wherever He went. When His disciples came back from their two-by-two mission, He wanted to hear a report of how things went. He suggested that they go across the sea of Galilee to find some privacy. Unfortunately, people anticipated where He was going, and had gathered there ahead of their landfall. That led to the feeding of the 5,000. Then, He sent the disciples across the sea, again, and He came later, walking on the water. Again, people quickly gathered around Him. So, they headed southeast to the area of Gadara, where they met the demoniac with the thousands of demons in him. The people there asked Him to leave, so this time they went to the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee, and up to the northwest, near Sidon. While they found some privacy there, the Syro-Phoenician woman recognized Him. He took His disciples to Caesarea Philippi to give them perspective, and He brought some of them up Mount Hermon, where they witnessed His transfiguration. In between these events were multiple trips from Galilee to Jerusalem, and back, to go to the feasts. These journeys were camping trips, as the pilgrims stopped along the way to set up camp. This allowed for a disruption of the larger venues, where He was required to teach and heal the sick. It was easier to be more anonymous in a tent city, than in a town square, or by the sea.

I don't know if you have ever done this, ...purposely set aside time to retreat from the busyness of life to secure alone-time with God, ...either by yourself or with others. Is this a regular practice that is part of the daily rhythm of your life, ...as it was with Jesus and with so many of His disciples through the centuries? Have you ever secured a time away from the activities of your life, to take a couple of days, or several, to wait upon God, to reflect on and re-evaluate your life, ...especially the direction and content of your life right now. Has God ever sent you on a pilgrimage to revisit places in your past that were locations where God did something special in your life? Are you still growing? Are you still serving? Are you as passionate and sold out as you once were? Are there things that need to change or be challenged? Are you willing to share some of these with someone else to be a prayer-partner? If God were to call you back to revisit some part of your past life, what would it be? Why? What would God remind you of?