

## Is This Church Your Beth-el?

Recently I was speaking with a visitor who regularly attends a denomination in the metro area. We were speaking of churches in general. It was explained that he had attended a number of churches. One he attended for a while was a real big church. It was one he had to travel long distances to get to. Then he found a small one not far from his home. He felt the minister was good, and the people were very friendly. He then said he likes to call that church his Beth-el.

Immediately pictures of grandeur jumped into my mind. You will remember when Jacob left his home after cheating his brother by stealing the family blessing from him. He was on his way to his mother's home in Padan-Aram. On the way he stopped in a place and slept on the ground with his head on a rock, hardly (no pun intended) a promise for a good night's sleep. Yet Jacob had a marvelous dream about a ladder that led all the way to heaven. On it he saw angels ascending and descending. He also heard promises of God's commitment to him. When he woke up the next morning he said, "'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.' And he was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven,'" Genesis 28:16,17. Then in verse 19 he called the place "Bethel," that is "*beth*" which means "house of," and "*el*," meaning "God," literally the "house of God."

What would make any church seem like a Beth-el to someone? First, and foremost it would have to be a church where people feel that God is present. This does not happen by accident. In Jacob's dream he experienced two things. He saw and heard! He saw angels ascending and descending a ladder to heaven. And he heard promises from God. Jacob came to a grand conclusion, based on his experience that God was in that place.

When people visit a worship assembly here what they see and what they hear makes all the difference in whether they leave thinking "Surely the Lord is in this place!" First impressions make a great difference. When members interact with one another in such a way as to leave the impression that they are hard working, yet caring and loving individuals, where people are made to feel wanted, and instant friendships are made, they get the feeling that this church is a Beth-el.

Angels are messengers of God. Ascending and descending on a ladder leading to heaven illustrates that messengers are being sent on missions, fulfilling them and reporting back to the God of heaven. People can similarly do that when they participate in the call of the gospel, 2 Thessalonians 2:14; when they imitate Christ in their affections and determination to do God's will; when they love and are loved by the brethren; when every visitor who attends a worship service is seen as a personal mission to reach out to and made to feel they are at the very ladder that leads to heaven.

Jacob felt the spot where he slept was none other than the gate of heaven. You know the church Jesus built is to be the "gate" through which

people enter to go to heaven, Acts 2:47. The church is considered a "heavenly place," Ephesians 2:6. Paul wanted Timothy to, "know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth," 1 Timothy 3:15. When people visit the assembly it should be expected that when they leave they should feel they have been at the gate of heaven itself.

When the truth is taught and preached in love (Ephesians 4:15), and Biblical principles of commitment to God and one another are experienced from interaction with the members, the occurrence will force the irresistible conclusion that this church is "Beth-el."

Is this church your Beth-el?  
—Scott