Sermon Highlights

Returning to Bethel: God's Sovereign Grace in the Life of Jacob

Sermon Summary:

Drawing from Genesis 35:1-15, this sermon follows Jacob's journey back to Bethel as a lens through which to examine the relationship between God's sovereignty and human free will. Pastor Bruce Gordon argues that neither extreme, absolute determinism nor absolute free will, fully captures how God works in a believer's life. Instead, God sovereignly pursues his purposes while allowing his people to make their own choices, loving them through their failures and guiding them toward his intended destination. Jacob's life illustrates that God is not performance-based or merit-based in his love; he works through flawed, stubborn, and disobedient people to accomplish his redemptive purposes. The sermon calls believers to put away the idols of self-sufficiency and worldliness, to prepare their hearts for genuine worship, and to return to the house of God, not merely as a building or routine, but as a place of authentic encounter with God Almighty.

Key Points:

- God's sovereignty and human free will are not mutually exclusive; God accomplishes his purposes without overriding human choice, as seen in his patient work in Jacob's life

- God is not a performance-based or merit-based God; he loves believers not because of how good they are, but because of how good he is

- Returning to the house of God requires preparation, putting away idols, pride, self-sufficiency, and the attitudes of the world

- Settling for less than God's specific will, as Jacob did at Sukkoth and Shechem, leads to fear, trouble, and spiritual vulnerability

- The purpose of coming to the house of God is not merely to gain knowledge, comfort, or community, but to encounter God himself

- Genuine worship becomes possible only when a believer recognizes that access to God comes through sacrifice and the presence of the Holy Spirit, not personal merit

- The church is called to live differently from the world, not consumed by material anxieties, but marked by praise, generosity, and care for one another

- Believers must bury the past, receive God's forgiveness, and move forward rather than being held back by previous failures

Scripture Reference:

- Genesis 35:1-15, which recounts God's command to Jacob to return to Bethel, the purification of Jacob's household, the renaming of Jacob as Israel, and Jacob's act of worship through a stone pillar anointed with oil and a drink offering

Stories:

- Pastor Bruce Gordon references Jacob's broader life narrative from Genesis 28 onward, including his flight from Esau, his time with Laban in Petaram, his marriages to Leah and Rachel, his return to Canaan, and the events of Genesis 34 in Shechem, all as context for Jacob's spiritual journey toward genuine worship

- A parable-style illustration is shared about a man who presents his bride-to-be with a recipe book of family favorites, telling her she has 40 years to master it or he will send her away, used to contrast a merit-based relationship with the grace-based love of God

- A reference is made to the biblical account of the rich man who planned to tear down his barns and build larger ones to store his wealth, whom God rebukes for his self-centered attitude toward abundance