

Genesis 35:1-29

Jacob Returns to Bethel to Worship

Do you have any regrets in life?

- I think most of us have a few things that we wish we could do differently
 - o Avoiding a particular relationship
 - o Taking a different career path
 - o Making a few different decisions along the way
 - o Not saying particular words

But the reality is that God uses those “bad” decisions and relationships

- He displays His sovereign, all-powerful ability to glorify Himself
- He also uses those events to conform us more to the image of Christ

I am actually grateful that God doesn't give us the opportunity to go back and change past decisions

- Because we would always be caught in the trap of living in the past
- Instead, God wants us living for the future

If there was a person who wished he could go back and change the past, I think it is Jacob

- We have been exposed to his life in intimate detail over the past few chapters of Genesis

Jacob made some foolish decisions

- Jacob met some manipulative people

But as Jacob grows older, I think that we see him maturing a little bit

- This isn't to say that he is perfect
- None of us will be perfect this side of glory

There are high points in our lives

- But there are also low points

Our joy and confidence is that God is sovereign

- We can trust Him to work all things for His glory and our good

Genesis 34 was one of the low points in Jacob's life

- Dinah, his only daughter through Leah, was raped by Shechem, a leading individual of the city
- Jacob seems to be passive and unmotivated to respond to this tragedy

So Dinah's brothers, Simeon and Levi, take the initiative

- They deceive the men of the city to become circumcised
- While the men were in terrible pain, Simeon and Levi go into the city and kill every male
- Every woman, child, and possession was taken away, leaving the city in ruins

Jacob rebukes these two sons for their behavior

- Jacob was fearful that the other Canaanite nations would attack him and his household
- He was afraid for his life

But God was not silent regarding these events

- He will speak in Genesis 35
- What He has to say will cause Jacob to make some tough decisions regarding obedience

Let's read Genesis 35:1-29

Jacob must learn some hard lessons after the events of chapter 34

- These lessons are ones that you need to learn as well
 - o Carry out your spiritual commitments (35:1-8)
 - o Commemorate your spiritual blessings (35:9-15)
 - o Continue despite your spiritual losses (35:16-29)

I. Carry out your spiritual commitments (35:1-8)

Then God said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel, and live there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.”

God was not mentioned at all in Genesis 34

- At first glance, one may be tempted to think that He was not aware of what had transpired
- Or if He was aware, He chose not to respond

We know that God was totally aware of what took place

- He knows everything, even before events take place

Once again, God speaks to Jacob

- When God speaks, man had better listen and obey

God gives Jacob a series of four commands

- These are not suggestions or opinions
- These are commands from God Himself

Jacob is to

- “arise”
- “go up to Bethel”
- “live there”
- “make an altar there”

God didn't want Jacob to remain at Shechem any longer

- The influence of the Canaanites was obviously affecting him
- Perhaps Jacob was becoming a little spiritually stagnant and complacent¹

This is the first time that God commands someone to build an altar

- Until now, individuals have volunteered to do this as a sign of their appreciation and love for the LORD

God refers to the first time Jacob went by Bethel “when you fled from your brother Esau”

- We remember this well, don't we?

After tricking Isaac regarding the blessing, Jacob skipped town

- He had heard that Esau was intent on killing him
- He left quickly for Haran at the bidding of his mother

¹ Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Record*, 517.

On his way to Haran, Jacob stopped in Bethel

- Jacob had a dream wherein God issued some amazing promises and guarantees to him

Jacob responded by setting up a pillar to honor that special place

- Jacob also took a vow, “If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and will give me food to eat and garments to wear,²¹ and I return to my father's house in safety, then the LORD will be my God.²² And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God's house; and of all that Thou dost give me I will surely give a tenth to Thee” (28:20-22)

God has been faithful to Jacob

- But Jacob has not kept his part of the deal
- There is some spiritual unfinished business on the part of Jacob

God was initiating contact with Jacob

- In essence, God was reminding Jacob of his prior commitment²

² So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your garments; ³ and let us arise and go up to Bethel; and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress, and has been with me wherever I have gone.”

Jacob responds with rapid obedience

- He tells his household what to do

What Jacob tells his household revolves around a series of verbs

- “put away the foreign gods”
- “purify yourselves”
- “change your garments”

The fact that Jacob has to tell his household to “put away the foreign gods” is enlightening

- Undoubtedly, there were idols in Jacob’s household that needed to be put away
- Some of the people, perhaps some of Jacob’s family, were not following Yahweh exclusively

We think back to how Rachel stole Laban’s household idols (31:19)

- Perhaps Rachel was not a devout follower of Yahweh

Also the influence of the Canaanites at Shechem may have rubbed off on Jacob and his household

- The call of God was enough to rouse Jacob into action
- He told his household to put away the idols
- God demanded single loyalty

These actions of putting away idols, purifying themselves, and changing their garments were all preparation³

- The real test was going to Bethel where Jacob would build an altar

Compare God’s statement in verse 1 with Jacob’s statement in verse 3

- God spoke of Bethel as the place where “you fled from your brother Esau”
- Jacob spoke of Bethel as a time “of my distress”

² Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing*, 580.

³ Ross, 580.

Jacob thinks back to the fear he had regarding Esau

- He was running for his life!

But Jacob's last statement in verse 3 is a remarkable affirmation of God's faithfulness

- Jacob's own confession is that God "has been with me wherever I have gone"

Every believer can affirm God's faithfulness throughout his/her life

- He has been with us as well, wherever we have gone

⁴ So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods which they had, and the rings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak which was near Shechem.

The people of Jacob's household respond with obedience as well

- They surrendered their foreign gods and the rings which were in their ears
- Everything that was not affiliated and associated with the worship of Yahweh was done away with

But what would Jacob do with these items?

- Verse 4 tells us that he "hid them under the oak which was near Shechem"
- Jacob buried them!

This was all part of the process of repentance

- They were to rid themselves of false gods and idols
- They couldn't possibly go to Bethel with idolatry in the camp

In order for us to worship God, there must be a willingness to surrender it all to Him

- We sometimes sing that hymn, "I Surrender All"

But can you *really* sing that with integrity?

- If you look at your heart, what are you still clinging to that God is clearly not pleased with?

⁵ As they journeyed, there was a great terror upon the cities which were around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob.

At the end of Genesis 34, Jacob expressed concern that neighboring Canaanite nations might attack the Israelites in response to what Simeon and Levi did to the inhabitants of Shechem

- Perhaps the other nations would return the favor
- Perhaps the other nations would attack Israel and his family

But verse 5 records an amazing action on the part of God toward Jacob and his household

- Moses writes that "there was a great terror upon the cities which were around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob"

As Jacob and his household left the area of Shechem, God put a "terror" in the hearts of the neighboring cities

- No one ventured to attack them

Somehow, these cities knew that God was with the Israelites

- Even though Simeon and Levi had committed wrong, God was still with these people

⁶ So Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him. ⁷ And he built an altar there, and called the place El-bethel, because there God had revealed Himself to him, when he fled from his brother.

Finally, Jacob came to Bethel

- It is referred to as “Luz,” the older name for Bethel

Just as God had commanded, Jacob built an altar

- This was a place to worship
- This was a special place of remembrance for Jacob

The first time Jacob came to Bethel, he was single

- No wives
- No children
- No possessions

But look at him now

- Four wives
- 12 children
- Many possessions

God had, indeed, blessed Jacob

Jacob names the place “El-bethel”

- Literally, “The God of Bethel”

While in Shechem, Jacob erected an altar and called it “Elohe-Israel” (33:20)

- God, the God of Israel

Now that Jacob is back at Bethel, what does he call the altar?

- “El-bethel”
- The God of Bethel

What is different?⁴

- Jacob doesn’t refer to himself in the title

Jacob realizes that worship is not about him

- Worship is about God alone

⁸ Now Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the oak; it was named Allon-bacuth.

But Jacob suffers a loss while at Bethel

- There is a report of a death, “Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, died”

I don’t think any of us are fully prepared for the death of a loved one

- Death still catches us off guard
- Death has a way of prioritizing life

⁴ W.H. Griffith-Thomas, *Genesis: A Devotional Commentary*, 333.

This is the only time that Deborah is mentioned by name in the book of Genesis

- We know that she accompanied Rebekah when she left with Abraham's servant back in Genesis 24:59

Most likely, Deborah helped to raise Jacob

- So there was a close connection between Jacob and Deborah

But it does bring up several questions

- What was Deborah doing with Jacob?
- Why wasn't she with Rebekah?

The most likely answer is that Rebekah has already died

- At some point after Jacob's return from Haran, Deborah joined Jacob's entourage

This means that Jacob would have already known about the death of his mother

- The death of Deborah would have brought back much of the grief and loss that he felt when he learned of his mother's death

Jacob buries Deborah "below Bethel under the oak"

- She must have meant a lot to Jacob

The particular oak tree under which Deborah was buried was called "Allon-bacuth"

- This means, "the oak of weeping"⁵
- It was a way for Jacob to remember her life

God initiated contact with Jacob regarding his spiritual commitments

- Jacob had some unfinished business with God

Jacob had made a vow

- That vow involved the faithfulness of God to provide for and protect Jacob, His follower

God had more than manifested faithfulness to Jacob

- But Jacob needed to do his part of the vow as well

So he called his household to put away idolatry, to purify themselves, and to prepare themselves to go to Bethel

- This was all in preparation to worship at Bethel

Do you have spiritual commitments that you haven't yet fulfilled?

- Have you been promising God that you would do something once you have the time, or the money, or the ability?
- Have you followed through?

Church, are there elements of idolatry in your thinking?

- What false gods and false hopes are you trusting in?

As you prepare for worship, what steps do you take?

- Do you seek to purify yourself?
- Do you seek to prepare yourself?

These are real-life issues that you need to deal with as you seek to carry out your spiritual commitments

⁵ Ross, 581.

But secondly, you need to...

II. Commemorate your spiritual blessings (35:9-15)

⁹ Then God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him. ¹⁰ And God said to him, “Your name is Jacob; you shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.” Thus He called him Israel.

Once Jacob took the necessary steps of preparing for worship, God appears to him

- God has appeared to Jacob on a number of occasions in various forms
- But this verse looks back to when God appeared to Jacob at Bethel

For the second time, we have a record of Jacob’s name change to Israel

- There is no explanation of his new name
- There is no mention of the wrestling encounter

It is simply a reaffirmation of what the LORD had done prior

- The assumption is that the reader is already familiar with the reason for the name change⁶

¹¹ God also said to him, “I am God Almighty; be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come forth from you. ¹² And the land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I will give it to you, and I will give the land to your descendants after you.”

God identifies Himself as “**God Almighty**”

- You might remember that this is the same term used by God to describe Himself to Abram back in chapter 17
- God was calling Abram to be circumcised as an outward expression and symbol of his desire to follow Yahweh

Here in chapter 35, God refers to Himself again as “**Almighty**”

- God of strength
- God of ability
- God of power

Much of what God tells Jacob here is a repetition of what God told Abraham back in chapter 17

- This is intentional to show that Jacob is carrying out the lineage and the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant
 - o Promise of descendants
 - o Promise of nations
 - o Promise of kings
 - o Promise of land

⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 2, 325.*

13 Then God went up from him in the place where He had spoken with him. 14 And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He had spoken with him, a pillar of stone, and he poured out a libation on it; he also poured oil on it. 15 So Jacob named the place where God had spoken with him, Bethel.

As spectacular as the appearance of God was, “**God went up from him**”

- God no longer made His presence visible
- He ascended upwards, into heaven

How did Jacob respond?

- Several steps are recorded for us

First, “**Jacob set up a pillar**”

- This isn’t the first time we have seen Jacob set up a pillar
- This time is another act of worship and adoration to the LORD

Second, “**he poured out a libation on it**”

- He consecrates this stone pillar, thus setting it apart in recognition of the LORD

Third, “**he also poured oil on it**”

- This is the first instance of a drink offering recorded in the book of Genesis
- This was a voluntary action on the part of Jacob as part of the worship of the LORD

Fourth, “**Jacob named the place...Bethel**”

- For the second time, he renames Luz as “Bethel”
- Literally “house of God”

Jacob doesn’t treat this second appearance of God as mundane or ordinary

- He still has a tremendous amount of respect and reverence for God Almighty
- He still follows through with appropriate steps of worship and adoration
- He commemorates his spiritual blessings

What steps have you taken to remember your spiritual blessings?

- I doubt that any of you have set up a pillar, poured a drink offering on it, and renamed it after God

But we are in danger of forgetting our spiritual blessings

- We take them for granted
- We don’t take the time to honor the LORD who has given them to us

I would encourage you to celebrate what God has given you in Christ

- Every spiritual blessing is an occasion for you to bless the Lord
- Every spiritual promise is an opportunity for you to praise the Lord
- These are ways for you to commemorate your spiritual blessings

III. Continue despite your spiritual losses (35:16-29)

¹⁶ Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and she suffered severe labor. ¹⁷ And it came about when she was in severe labor that the midwife said to her, “Do not fear, for now you have *another* son.”

But the spiritual life is not always the easy life

- There are times of great rejoicing
- And there are times of great mourning and sadness

For Jacob, he has already learned that his mother, Rebekah, had died

- This chapter also tells of the death of Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse

Now we are told informed of some good news

- Rachel is pregnant again!

We learn about Rachel’s pregnancy as Jacob’s household leaves Bethel

- No doubt they are heading toward Hebron where Isaac was living

This isn’t disobedience on Jacob’s part

- Jacob has performed his vow
- He is free to move on

Rachel has only one child, Joseph

- Back in chapter 30, we were told about Joseph’s birth, “**And she named him Joseph, saying, ‘May the LORD give me another son’**” (30:24)
- It seemed that Rachel wanted more than one son

But there is a problem with Rachel’s pregnancy

- She has a premature delivery
- She began having severe labor pains

But the midwife encouraged Rachel, saying, “**Do not fear, for now you have *another* son**”

- Perhaps this midwife knew about Rachel’s desire to have another son
- Her prayers were being answered!

¹⁸ And it came about as her soul was departing (for she died), that she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. ¹⁹ So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).

But in a time of great rejoicing over the birth of a son, there was cause for sorrow

- Rachel died giving birth to her second son

It seems that Rachel’s last words were to name her son, “**Ben-oni**”

- This means “son of my sorrow”⁷

But Jacob would not allow his son to be named after a time of great sorrow

- So Jacob renamed the son to “**Benjamin**”
- This means, “son of my right hand”

⁷ Leon J. Wood, *A Shorter Commentary on Genesis*, 118.

Jacob wanted to remember Benjamin by joy, not sorrow

- Throughout Scripture, the “right hand” is a sign of honor, privilege, and prestige

We are told that “Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)”

- It is interesting to note that Jacob did not bury Rachel at Machpelah
- Instead, she was buried on her way to Hebron

It is providential that Rachel was desperate to have another son

- It was ultimately the gift of children that killed her⁸

²⁰ And Jacob set up a pillar over her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day. ²¹ Then Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder.

Once again, Jacob is seen to set up a pillar

- This one, however, was not in reference to the LORD
- This one was in mourning his favorite wife

This was a way for Jacob to honor his beloved wife

But life must continue for Israel

- So he journeyed on...without Rachel

²² And it came about while Israel was dwelling in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard of it.

Soon after the death of Rachel, another manifestation of sin displayed itself

- In Genesis 34, it was Dinah being raped by Shechem

Another act of sexual deviancy manifests itself here in Genesis 35

- Reuben, Jacob's firstborn son through Leah, committed a vile act of sin
- He slept with Bilhah, Jacob's concubine

This was a terrible crime

- Against God
- Against Jacob
- Against his other brothers

Why would Reuben possibly do this?

- The best guess is that Reuben thought that by cohabiting with Bilhah, he may replace Jacob as the chosen patriarch
- It was an attempt to dethrone Jacob from his privileged position⁹

We do know that in Genesis 49:3-4, Israel remembers this act of violence when he speaks about Reuben, his firstborn

- It appears that Israel doesn't take action about this
- However, it would eventually resurface¹⁰

⁸ Wenham, 326.

⁹ Ross, 583.

Now there were twelve sons of Jacob –

After giving an account of Reuben's foolish act, Moses discusses the twelve sons of Jacob

- Remember, he has 13 children, including Dinah

But the focus is specifically on the twelve sons of Jacob

- They are organized by each of the four mothers

These are not listed in the order of their birth¹¹

²³ the sons of Leah: Reuben, Jacob's first-born, then Simeon and Levi and Judah and Issachar and Zebulun;

There are six sons of Leah listed here

- Reuben
- Simeon
- Levi
- Judah
- Issachar
- Zebulun

Three of these should be familiar to us from last chapter and this chapter

- Genesis 34 chronicled the efforts of Simeon and Levi to seek revenge on the Shechemites for the rape of their sister, Dinah
- Genesis 35 just chronicled Reuben's immoral behavior with Bilhah

So three of these sons of Leah are already tainted with bad behavior

- Not necessarily a good start

²⁴ the sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin;

Next are the two sons of Rachel

- Rachel, of course, was the favored wife
- She was the one who had obtained the love and favoritism of Jacob

Joseph and Benjamin are also the two youngest sons of Jacob

- They will be favored by Jacob, as we will see in later chapters

²⁵ and the sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maid: Dan and Naphtali; ²⁶ and the sons of Zilpah, Leah's maid: Gad and Asher.

Two sons are listed for each of the maids

- Bilhah
 - o Dan
 - o Naphtali

¹⁰ Morris, 523.

¹¹ Griffith-Thomas, 341.

- Zilpah
 - o Gad
 - o Asher

Not much is known about these men at this point

- But they are important since they are the sons of Jacob
- They will play a huge part in the nation of Israel in later Biblical history

These are the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram.

Aside from Benjamin, the other 11 sons were born in Paddan-aram

- Benjamin, as we just saw, was born in the Promised Land

²⁷ And Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre of Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned.

At long last, Jacob is reunited with his father, Isaac

- We don't know if there were previous visits
- If so, we are not told of them

So this may have been the first visit in nearly 30 years¹²

- He didn't leave his father on such good terms during his last visit
- Remember, Jacob disguised himself as Esau in order to receive the blessing
- No commentary is given on their meeting or their time together

We are told that Isaac was living in Hebron

- This was the same area "**where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned**"
- Once again, Moses is showing how Jacob is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant which passed from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob

²⁸ Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. ²⁹ And Isaac breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people, an old man of ripe age; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

But there is one more death recorded in this chapter

- The death of Rebekah, Jacob's mother, is assumed
- The death of Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, is recorded
- The death of Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife, is recorded
- Now the death of Isaac, Jacob's father, is recorded

Genesis isn't always chronological in its order

- That's certainly the case here

Even though the death of Isaac is described here, he lives on to see events that will be recorded later in Genesis

- For example, Isaac was still alive when Joseph was sold into slavery¹³

¹² Griffith-Thomas, 329.

¹³ Morris, 205.

We are told in Genesis 49:31 that Jacob buried Isaac at the cave of Machpelah

- This was the same burial place of Abraham and Sarah

Isaac's death is spoken of as "**Isaac breathed his last**"

- What a sobering reminder!
- One day, we will breathe our last breath
- We will expire

Moses also tells us that Isaac "**was gathered to his people**"

- This reminds us that there is life after physical death
- Eternity begins after physical death

For Isaac, he joined "**his people**"

- Those who had placed personal faith in Yahweh
- Those who believed, as did Abraham

Isaac is described as "**an old man of ripe age**"

- God had blessed him with a long life

Notice who came to the funeral, "**his sons Esau and Jacob buried him**"

- Once again, Esau and Jacob are reconciled
- They are joined together at a crucial time in their lives

There doesn't appear to be any animosity or bitterness

- Remember, they had reconciled
- They had settled their differences

This is similar to what happened at Abraham's death

- Isaac and Ishmael come together to bury Abraham (25:9)

Are you ready to die?

- This is probably something that you don't think about
- But it will, in fact, take place

Do you know where you stand in relation to Jesus Christ?

- Are you trusting in Him?
- Or, are you trusting in something or someone else?

There is no other way to heaven, except by believing in and trusting in Jesus Christ

- Every other hope is a false hope
- Every other way is a lie

If you look back, you will be able to thank God for the trials in your life

- They will be some of the greatest times of growth in your life as a Christian
- And ultimately, you won't have any regrets...