

Bethel Bible-Presbyterian Church
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DHW

LESSON 27

THE BOOK OF GENESIS

Chapter 35 & 36

INTRODUCTION

Christians are not exempt from the pressures and sorrows of life. As long as we are still living on this earth and bearing this mortal body, we can expect troubles and tribulations. Jacob had his fair share of troubles and tribulations during his stay and work under Laban. We are still subject to the emotions of hate, anger, and revenge when others mistreat us. On his return journey to Canaan, he feared Esau who had vowed to kill him for stealing his birthright. We succumb to our curiosities and desires. We mingle with others who do not share our Christian values and convictions. We have problems coping with deaths of our loved ones. In this chapter, Jacob had to cope with the death of his beloved servant maid who took care of him when he was an infant and youth. His favourite wife Rachel died, and

then his father Isaac, and moreover he never saw his mother Rebekah again. We may even start to wonder where God is and what He is doing. The answers to some of these problems may be found in these two chapters.

In this chapter, the name of God is mentioned so many times: ten times plus once as God Almighty (Heb. *El Shaddai*), and eleven times the names of Bethel (*Beth-El*) and Israel (*Isra-El*), whereas in the previous chapter 34, the name of God is hardly mentioned at all. It does suggest that Jacob was going through a spiritual turnabout. We also see the end of Isaac's life.

There are many lessons about God and Jacob which will comfort and encourage us in our relationship with God. There are lessons we will learn about our sins and their consequences although our sins might have been forgiven. There is always the need for spiritual renewals in our daily life. The following is a simple outline for the two chapters:

- 1) God commanded Jacob and family to settle in Bethel (Genesis 35:1-8);

- 2) God reiterated His Covenant Promises which He made to Abraham (Genesis 35:9-15);
- 3) Jacob left Bethel for Hebron, where Isaac was (Genesis 35:16-29);
- 4) God's faithfulness in His promises to Esau (Genesis 36:1-43).

STUDY THE WORD

God Commands Jacob to Settle in Bethel

The previous chapter ends with the shocking and brutal actions of Simeon and Levi. Jacob was shocked and greatly saddened for he remarked (Genesis 34:30a): *Ye have troubled me to make me to stink among the inhabitants of the land.* He feared for the life of his household and the people who were with him. In his moment of uncertainty and deep sorrow, God told him (Genesis 35:1): *Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there: and make there an altar unto God.* We recall that when Jacob was in Padan-aram, God had told him to return to his country and kindred (Genesis 31:3). Jacob should have heeded God's direction instead of wilfully

settling at Shechem. If he had agreed to go with Esau to Edom and from there proceeded to Hebron, where Isaac lived, the incident of Dinah's rape and the massacre of the Shechemites would not have happened. At the same time, we also recall that Jacob had vowed to the LORD that if God would protect and prosper him, he would return to Bethel, where he had made the vow, and to build an altar to the LORD (Genesis 28:20-22).

Now God took the initiative and told him to *go up* to Bethel. Bethel is geographically about one thousand feet above Shechem. Jacob saw the need to purify his people. He was preparing them to go to Bethel to worship God.

He told them to *put away the strange gods* (or foreign gods) and to clean themselves, and change their garments. His sons had become carnal and cruel. His servants and others, who were with him, were idol worshippers. These idols could have been encouraged by Rachel, who had stolen her father's *teraphim*. Some of them might have procured these idols from the plundering of the Shechemites. The people were cooperative and obedient. They gave Jacob *all the*

strange gods and all their earrings which were in their ears. These earrings were not the ordinary earrings but were probably amulets which they had plundered from the Shechemites. They might have engravings of pagan figures. Jacob hid them under the oak tree which was by Shechem.¹

Jacob and his people set off. *The terror of God was upon the cities* (Genesis 35:5). The Scripture does not describe how the terror was imposed. The phrase, *the terror of God* can be understood either as describing the “terror,” or pointing to a terror that was supernaturally inflicted by God. Jacob needed this protection from the people around and travelling southward in dangerous territories. Earlier he had remarked that his two sons, Simeon and Levi, had *made him to stink among the inhabitants of the land*. God's grace was upon Jacob and the people. He had called Jacob to go to Bethel. He would protect and lead him there. No harm could befall Jacob and his people because they were covered by God's covenant

promise. How marvellous and wonderful is the Lord our God! They came to Luz, which was Bethel (Genesis 35:6). The name, which Jacob had earlier given, was not in common usage then. Jacob built an altar and he called it *El-bethel* – “God—the House of God.” Observe that the emphasis is not on the place, Bethel but on the Person of God - God—the House of God.

A sad incident occurred. Deborah, Rebekah's maid died. Deborah was first mentioned when Rebekah left Laban to go to Isaac (24:59). But there was no mention that Deborah was with Jacob when he first left home (28:10). There are four conjectures. (1) Deborah did leave with Jacob, but it was not mentioned; (2) Deborah chose to join Jacob, whom she had loved and cared for in his infancy probably after the death of Rebekah; (3) Esau brought her to Jacob when they met each other; and (4) Isaac sent her to meet Jacob after having heard of his return. But what is most interesting and significant is the fact that Deborah, a humble maid, was given a decent and dignified burial. A memorial called *Allon-bachuth* meaning “the oak of weeping” was built in her honour. It was an

¹ The word “hid” is not the word for “bury” which is in Hebrew *kabar*, meaning to bury someone, who is dead. The word is *taman* (in Hebrew), which can be translated “to dump” by hiding the contents (Bruce K. Waltke, GENESIS, p. 472).

expression of Jacob's deep bereavement. She must have been a wise and godly matron who had supervised the domestics of his household and served, counselled, comforted and advised Jacob in times of dangers and difficulties.² The Divine Author memorializes her but not Rebekah her mistress. Oh, the wisdom and kindness of God!

God Reiterates His Covenant Promises to Abraham

At Bethel God appeared to Jacob again and gave him a second blessing. God confirmed afresh the covenant promises which He had previously made with him.

He reaffirmed Jacob's new name *Israel* which He had given to him. Jacob now was renamed Israel and became the true heir of the Abrahamic Covenant through which the nation Israel would emerge and be blessed. The blessing is "national in scope and consists of the promise of fertility, nationhood, kingship, and territory" (Genesis 35:11, 12).³ Observe the similarities of this covenant with that of the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 17:1-8): God, who appeared as God Almighty (Hebrew, *El Shaddai*) blessed; the

name changed (Abram to Abraham; Jacob to Israel); the nation would multiply and become prosperous; and the giving of the land. When God *went up from him*, Jacob set up a pillar of stone in the place where God had communed with him. He then offered a *drink offering* by pouring wine onto the ground and by pouring oil on the altar (Genesis 35:14). This was an act of worship and consecration and a memorial of his faith and gratitude. God's reminder to Jacob of His promises surely strengthened and encouraged him. He was now a changed person having a deeper understanding and appreciation of God and His ways with him. He had left for Padan-aram with only a staff but now returned with two bands a different person, hence the name, *El-Bethel*.

Jacob Journeys from Bethel to Hebron

Jacob then departed from Bethel and journeyed on south toward Hebron, where his father Isaac lived. When they were nearing Ephrath, which was Bethlehem, Rachel went into labour. It was a difficult one. The midwife, who tried to comfort her, said not to be

² Leupold, 919-920.

³ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, 242.

afraid for the newborn child was a boy. But Rachel's *soul was in departing* (meaning, dying), and before she died, she named the baby boy *Ben-oni* (meaning, "son of sorrow"). She died after giving birth to a son. There is an irony in this event. In her barrenness, Rachel had called to Jacob (Genesis 30:1): *Give me children or else I die*. And this gift of another child killed her. God had answered her prayerful wish to have another son, when Joseph was born (30:24). But looking back, Rachel had used her childbearing cycle to deceive Laban, when he tried to look for his *teraphim* which was stolen by Rachel. Jacob was so sure that nobody had taken Laban's idols, and promised to put the thief to death, not realizing that his favourite wife was the thief. At that time Rachel escaped. Some people have drawn a connection between Rachel's sin and her death.

Jacob erected a tomb over the grave of his beloved. This tomb remained standing four hundred years later when Moses recorded it in Genesis 35:20. It was mentioned four hundred years afterwards in 1 Samuel 10:2. Today, there is a monument of solid masonry over her

burial site in Bethlehem. Before Rachel died, she named the child Ben-oni, ("son of my sorrow"). Jacob renamed him *Benjamin*, which means "son of the right hand" to express that he would be near and dear to him. This is interesting when we consider how much Jacob loved Rachel. He would have been uncontrollably grieved and mournful. His renaming of this latest addition to the family indicates that he had matured. In his old age when he was very sick, he mentioned this incident to Joseph (Genesis 48:7): *And as for me, when I came from Padan, Rachel died by me in the land of Canaan in the way, when yet there was but a little way to come unto Ephrath: and I buried her there in the way of Ephrath; the same is Bethlehem*. In this Jacob exemplifies a valuable lesson to us. The grieving over the loss of a loved one may be deep and unfeigned, yet "we should aim rather to surround ourselves with the mementos of our mercies than of our afflictions, and to divert our thoughts from the objects taken away, and direct them to those that are left."⁴

Jacob journeyed on and pitched his tent at the watchtower of

⁴ Bush, 206.

Edar. Jacob's suffering seemed to come in waves, one after another. His favourite servant, Deborah, died. His favourite wife, Rachel, also died. Now his eldest son, Reuben seduced Bilhah, who was Rachel's maid, and who was his father's concubine. It was done in secret but Jacob was told about it (Genesis 35:22). Surely, Jacob was deeply grieved and anguished, but he did not take any corrective or disciplinary action. He seemed to vacillate just like the time when Dinah was raped.

Reuben had given us a bad picture of him. His seduction of Bilhah, Rachel's maid, has produced some debate: is his act motivated by lust or political? One can dismiss that Reuben's incestuous relationship was committed out of lust. There was no good reason for him to do that. So far he had behaved quite well. But there was another plausible reason. By defiling Bilhah, Rachel's maid, he made certain that with Rachel's death, Bilhah might not take over his mother Leah as the chief wife of Jacob, who had all along loved Rachel and ignored Leah. His sin therefore disqualified Bilhah and ensured Leah's position.

Another reason is that by seducing Bilhah, whom he believed his father might take her in place of his deceased favourite wife, Rachel, he was claiming authority over his aged father's inheritance. This was the custom at that time. An example is found in 2 Samuel 3:7. Saul's son Ish-bosheth was incensed when Abner, Saul's military general, seduced Rizpah, the deceased Saul's concubine. When he was confronted Abner had to defend his loyalty.⁵ Reuben's sin was to ensure his mother's position and at the same time to wrench power from his father. He acted as though his father was dead. Sadly Jacob once again did not deal with Reuben's sin. However, he did not forget what Reuben had done. Later in his old age before he died, he gathered his sons before him to give them his blessings. Acknowledging Reuben as his first born, he declared him as unstable despite his strength and

⁵ 2 Samuel 3:7-8 *And Saul had a concubine, whose name was Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah: and Ishbosheth said to Abner, Wherefore hast thou gone in unto my father's concubine? Then was Abner very wroth for the words of Ishbosheth, and said, Am I a dog's head, which against Judah do shew kindness this day unto the house of Saul thy father, to his brethren, and to his friends, and have not delivered thee into the hand of David, that thou chargest me to day with a fault concerning this woman?*

power because he went to his *father's bed* and to defile it, he was deprived of his primogeniture birthright and the leadership of the family (Genesis 49:1-3).

Jacob came to Hebron. It must have been a great joy for him to see his aged father Isaac. His mother Rebekah was not there. Presumably, she must have died. Jacob did not get to see her. The names of his twelve sons were given beginning with the sons of Leah: Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, followed by Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Zebulun; and then the sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin; and followed by the sons of Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid: Dan and Naphtali; and the sons of Zilpah, Leah's handmaid: Gad and Asher. We were not told how long Isaac lived after the reunion with Jacob and all his children. In the end, Isaac died at the age of 180. This incident brought the two brothers, Esau and Jacob, together to bury their father in Machpelah in Hebron, where Abraham, Sarah and Rebekah were buried. God preserved Isaac's life so that he could witness the continuity of God's promises to him, which were now transferred to Jacob. This is a significant testimony

of God's faithful dealings with His people.

God's Faithfulness in His Promises to Esau

The report on Jacob's sons is left to the last to highlight the fact that, despite sin and death, God's blessings continued. Jacob's twelve sons were the first fruits of the promise of the nation.

A detailed account of Esau's posterity is given in chapter 36 verses 6 and 7. The genealogy of Esau clearly demonstrates that God kept His promises to bless Esau although he might have wandered from God. Esau became the father of the Edomites, who lived as neighbours to Israel but outside of the Promised Land of Canaan. His blessings were temporal. His kingdom was independent and had eight kings who reigned in succession, even before Israel had her first king. However, Esau's decision to marry outside the covenant people resulted in him and his descendants being cut off from the chosen people and out of their saving history.

Practical Value

Jacob's threefold instruction to his people to purify themselves can be applied to the life of a Christian. Before one can worship God, he has to put away all his foreign gods which he previously had. As a sinner before conversion, he must put away all the strange gods. Secondly, as a believer he is cleansed, sanctified and separated unto God. Thirdly, as a truly born-again believer, who will bear fruit and exemplify the character, witness, and habit of the LORD and this is symbolized by the change of his old garments to new ones. This pattern should be heeded by every one of us. One must not have any other gods of any form before he can worship God. A daily cleansing of being kept apart unto God and separated from the worldliness is necessary to please God. And lastly, the necessity to be a productive Christian leading others to the saving knowledge of Christ.

When Jacob was obedient to God, God protected him from the attacks of his enemies, when he journeyed south with his people. Similarly, each and every Christian is protected by God's promises to him. Nothing happens to a child of God unless God sanctions it. And when we have made a vow to the

LORD, we must keep our vow to God and including man. An example of a vow which is made between two humans is the marriage vow. A husband and wife vow to love and stay together until death severs their union. Jacob's vow to God is an example of the vow of a man made to God. Jacob vowed to return to Bethel if God kept His part of the promises. God kept His part and reminded Jacob to keep his part. Therefore, we must think carefully before making a vow to God or to man.

We learn also that when we sin, we must be prepared to face its consequences. Although the sinner can be forgiven, nevertheless the consequences of sin may not be erased. Sometimes they have to take their natural course.

In life, we have the Jacobs, the Dinahs, Reubens, Simeons, and the Levis. All of us have our weaknesses and strengths. Sometimes, we fall into temptation and sin. At other times, we experience grief and sorrow. In the midst of all these troubles and turmoil, God remains faithful to His Word and promises. This is in spite of our sins. When we forget, He reminds us. When we have fulfilled our duty, He blesses us. We must strive to keep ourselves undefiled. There is a need to purge ourselves of our sins and be filled with the Spirit of God.

AMEN