

family planning

genesis 35.1-15

Find your way to Genesis chapter 35 this morning. We're going to take a look at an interesting episode in the life of Jacob.

Jacob as a character should be a great inspiration to us when we read about his life. Though he had some immense flaws, though he did some pretty sketchy things (he was regarded by many as a scoundrel), yet God loved him, chose a special life for him and carved out a path for him to walk so that he could be blessed and established and find rest.

In that regard, he's a great type for us of what God wants in our relationship with Him. Though we too are undeserving of God's goodness and richness, the Lord still wants to revolutionize and redefine us, giving us newness of life, and life more abundantly.

But you know, God doesn't just snap His fingers and immediately complete that transformation. The Bible says that we're on a *walk* with Him, heading toward a specific destination that He has in mind. The Bible says that our lives are a project that God is working on. He began the work when we were saved and He continues it moment by moment, to accomplish His plans. And one day, we can be assured, God will finish the good work He began in us, when we stand perfectly complete before Him in eternity.

But in the mean time, God says He wants us to move forward toward Him and toward His goals, not just drift aimlessly in the sea of life. He's trying to get us somewhere.

That's a pattern we see in the Scriptures. God telling His people to get up and go somewhere so that He can teach them things along the way and so that they can get in the right spot for His perfect will to be accomplished.

He did it with Abraham, moving from Ur of the Chaldees to a land he did not know. He did it with the Israelites, removing them from Egypt and sending them to Canaan. He did it with David, taking him from the sheepfolds and placing him in the palace to shepherd God's own people.

And He does it with Jacob, here in Genesis 35. The Lord calls out to him and says, "move your camp, move your family nearer to Me so that you can really get where you want to go."

So let's look at our text and see what we see.

Genesis 35.1-15 - Then God said to Jacob, "Get ready and move to Bethel and settle there. Build an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother, Esau."

So Jacob told everyone in his household, "Get rid of all your pagan idols, purify yourselves, and put on clean clothing. We are now going to Bethel, where I will build an altar to the God who answered my prayers when I was in distress. He has been with me wherever I have gone."

So they gave Jacob all their pagan idols and earrings, and he buried them under the great tree near Shechem. As they set out, a terror from God spread over the people in all the towns of that area, so no one attacked Jacob's family.

Eventually, Jacob and his household arrived at Luz (also called Bethel) in Canaan. Jacob built an altar there and named the place El-bethel (which means "God of Bethel"), because God had appeared to him there when he was fleeing from his brother, Esau. Soon after this, Rebekah's old nurse, Deborah, died. She was buried beneath the oak tree in the valley below Bethel. Ever since, the tree has been called Allon-bacuth (which means "oak of weeping").

Now that Jacob had returned from Paddan-aram, God appeared to him again at Bethel. God blessed him, saying, "Your name is Jacob, but you will not be called Jacob any longer. From now on your name will be Israel."* So God renamed him Israel.

Then God said, "I am El-Shaddai—'God Almighty.' Be fruitful and multiply. You will become a great nation, even many nations. Kings will be among your descendants! And I will give you the land I once gave to Abraham and Isaac. Yes, I will give it to you and your descendants after you." Then God went up from the place where he had spoken to Jacob.

Jacob set up a stone pillar to mark the place where God had spoken to him. Then he poured wine over it as an offering to God and anointed the pillar with olive oil. And Jacob named the place Bethel (which means "house of God"), because God had spoken to him there.

What's your family plan?

That's a term that has found its way into a lot of products and services these days. There's the family data plan for your phones. A lot of times you'll see software sold in stores under either 'Single User' or 'Family Plan'. Some of your families have a financial plan that has put together a trust to handle assets and disbursements. I remember as a kid having a family emergency plan in case of a fire or earthquake or some other time of danger.

It's essential that we also have a spiritual family plan. As Christians, we're supposed to live life in an intentionally Godly way. The Scriptures explain to us that that's the only way to the satisfaction and purpose that we're seeking - to live out our faith on purpose. And, though we all *want* the things that God promises to us as believers, many of us fail to discover them in our own lives. Why? Well, James would say because we're often hearers of the Word, but not doers of the Word.

At the opening of this text, that's the state Jacob was in. As a man, Jacob had a disconnect between his heart and his actions. In his heart he always appreciated the promises of God, he always wanted blessings from heaven, yet in his decisions he didn't push himself closer to God. Instead, he often made selfish choices that would gratify his human urges. And his spiritual life and the spiritual life of his family suffered because of it.

It's essential that we have a plan for our lives and for our families that is focused on the pursuit of God, with the goal of moving closer and closer to God each and every day.

As an aside, if you're single this morning, you still can have this family plan. Because, remember, you're always a part of the family of God, in the family of believers. God never leaves His people alone, but He brings you somewhere to connect to other Christians who will love you and support you.

Now, as God sends Jacob on this trip to Bethel, He gives him 4 distinct directives. He says that He wants them to 'get ready,' 'move to Bethel,' 'settle there,' and 'build an altar to the Lord.'

These are 4 things we also should apply to our own lives if we want to pursue God and get where He wants us to go. So, let's see how these play out.

Genesis 35.1 - Then God said to Jacob, "Get ready and move to Bethel and settle there. Build an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother, Esau."

Boil it down, the point of this trip was for Jacob to get back to where God had appeared to him. He had been living his life unconcerned with God for quite some time. And the Lord says, "It's time for you to stop living life facing away from Me. It's time for you to draw near to Me by going back to where I first met you."

Have you left your first love? No one of us is immune from that danger. The book of Hebrews spends a lot of time warning us that, if we're not careful and attentive to our spiritual lives, we will drift away from our pursuit of God. The good news is that if you've stopped pursuing your Savior, you can start running toward Him again right now by turning your heart and your focus to Him and His plan for your life, because God never abandons His love and affection for you.

Now, Jacob first met with the Lord when he was running for his life. That's where many of you first met God. Some of us were raised as children with the knowledge of God and had a different salvation experience. But at some point for every Christian here this morning, there was a realization that we needed God to step in and save us and we called out to the Lord and He was faithful to answer and to give us that salvation.

But that's not the end of His intention for us. It's clear when you read the Bible that our God doesn't just pull us out of the grave and then leave us alone. Our God loves and desires interaction with us.

Jacob had stopped interacting with God. He didn't meet with Him. He didn't shape his life to pursue Him. And so the Lord said, "It's time for us to connect again."

The question for each and every Christian here this morning is: Are you on the move in your walk with God? Are you running the race? Or have you taken a breather?

The first step God gave Jacob for this journey is one that we need to do every single day, and that's to get ready.

Here's how Jacob got ready to live a Godly life:

Genesis 35.2-4 - So Jacob told everyone in his household, "Get rid of all your pagan idols, purify yourselves, and put on clean clothing. We are now going to Bethel, where I will

build an altar to the God who answered my prayers when I was in distress. He has been with me wherever I have gone.” So they gave Jacob all their pagan idols and earrings, and he buried them under the great tree near Shechem.

The first step on this journey was to de-secularize and de-paganize. We’re not going to get very far in a pursuit of God if we bring idols with us. They’re incompatible with a real relationship with Jesus.

You know, I read verses like this about idolatry and I naturally and immediately think of golden calves and pagan temples, that sort of idolatry. But the truth is, human beings are created to worship. And the sinful nature is inclined toward idolatry.

While I may want to immediately dismiss the idea that I’m an idolator, I have a responsibility to look at my heart and my life and see if I’m giving my devotion and my passion to something other than Christ or that which He’s called me to do. If I am, then I’ve picked up an idol from one of the neighboring towns.

Of course idolatry means worshiping something, but it also means extreme admiration, love or reverence. While I may not have set up a shrine with a graven image in my house, it’s much easier for me to set up that shrine in my heart. Some person. Some pleasure. Some habit or obsession. There are tons of things that can slip into that place of preeminence in my heart if I don’t purposely, vigilantly reserve that spot for my true Savior and King, Jesus Christ.

And, as we see with Jacob’s family, it’s one thing to recognize idolatry in our lives and it’s something else to do something about it. It’s essential that we knock idolatry down out of our hearts.

1 Corinthians 10.14 - Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

Ideally, Jacob should’ve burned, not buried these idols. There was always a potential for them to return one day to that tree near Shechem and unearth those little statues and earrings. The takeaway from that is: Don’t leave breadcrumbs for yourself that lead you back to sin. If there’s some tasty temptation coming at you - some app on your phone, some invitation, some secret sin, whatever it may be, burn it. Don’t bury it.

To get ready the family purged themselves of idols and then Jacob put clean clothes on them all.

When you become a Christian, the Bible says that God takes away your sins, which were like filthy rags, and clothes you in a robe of righteousness. That’s the garment we need to keep on when we go through life. Where our thoughts and our actions and our decisions are determined by God’s word and His leading, rather than our emotions or our sinful desires.

Now Jacob’s ready to move.

Genesis 35.5 - As they set out, a terror from God spread over the people in all the towns of that area, so no one attacked Jacob’s family.

Here's the background on this: Despite the fact that God had appeared to Jacob and revealed His plan for his life, up until this point, Jacob wasn't living in obedience or submission to the Lord. Like Abraham's nephew Lot, when given the choice, Jacob decided not to live nearer to God, but nearer to the world. He set up camp on the outskirts of a pagan city called Shechem.

It seemed like a profitable, successful spot to raise a family. Naturally, as time went by, Jacob and his family made friends and connections with the people in Shechem. But, unlike the Lord, the people of Shechem didn't have Jacob's best intentions in mind. They wanted to assimilate Jacob's family into their city. They wanted to siphon off his wealth and possessions to keep for themselves. And, one day, as Jacob's daughter Dinah went to visit her friends in the city, she was attacked and raped by the local prince. In a rage, Jacob's sons Simeon and Levi butchered all the men of the city.

Because they weren't where they were supposed to be and they weren't pursuing the things of God in their minds and in their family, some terrible things had gone down in their lives. Now, everyone around them wanted to kill them, so the Lord sent out this terror to protect them on their trip.

How can this apply to us?

The encouragement here is not that we can sin and grace will abound, of course not. Jacob's family *had* to survive so that the Messiah could be born. For us the devotional encouragement is that God may be sending you somewhere, but He's gone before you and prepared the way. He knows what's coming up. He knows the dangers and the obstacles. And, just as He loves to work in your heart and in your life, He's working in the hearts and lives of the people around you as well. I know that's a great comfort to me when I look at people who we want to minister to and it seems like nothing is effective, but we can cling to the realization that God *IS* working. And when He sends us somewhere He doesn't send us on our way alone. As Jacob said in verse 3: "He has been with me wherever I have gone."

Genesis 35.6-7 - Eventually, Jacob and his household arrived at Luz (also called Bethel) in Canaan. Jacob built an altar there and named the place El-bethel (which means "God of Bethel"), because God had appeared to him there when he was fleeing from his brother, Esau.

If you walk with the Lord, trusting in those promises He's made, eventually you *will* get there. The Christian life is not a wild goose chase.

You know, God says in His word that He wants to give your life purpose and He wants to build for you a strong marriage and help in your parenting and grace for suffering and great opportunities for ministry. And we *can* get there. It's not always easy, but God's promises are never empty. But they're not going to happen if we don't let God really get His hands on our lives to mold and fashion and direct us. When we resist that controlling and directing, that's when our pace and our growth will slow. And that's not what the Lord wants.

Remember - God wanted Jacob to *settle* in Bethel. He wants rest for us as well. He says that His intention for us is to make us like a tree *planted* by rivers of water that brings forth fruit season after season.

Now, usually God plans to plant His people physically as well. He scatters believers and moves them around, but for the most part the Bible indicates that there is a field where He wants us to work in for His Kingdom. He draws us to specific, local Churches where we can serve and be fed.

It's not that we can never move or relocate. But, when we do, it's usually for a better job or a better climate. *Maybe* that's what God wants. But let's be sure that when we move somewhere, when we pack up camp and set off for somewhere else, that it's because we're being transplanted by God rather than just allowing the winds of desire to uproot us. There's a big difference.

Genesis 35.8 - Soon after this, Rebekah's old nurse, Deborah, died. She was buried beneath the oak tree in the valley below Bethel. Ever since, the tree has been called Allon-bacuth (which means "oak of weeping").

There is sorrow in this life. Even when we're in hot pursuit of God we're going to pass by a few Oaks of Weeping. That's the nature of this world ever since it was infected by sin.

If you're at one of those Oaks right now, the Lord is with you. He is acquainted with your grief. He sees you and is beside you.

If you're not at a point of loss or suffering right now, praise the Lord! But pause to take a look around and see if there's someone near you who is. And if there is someone who is at an Oak of Weeping, comfort them. Mourn with them. Bring grace and support to their lives.

Genesis 35.9-13 - Now that Jacob had returned from Paddan-aram, God appeared to him again at Bethel. God blessed him, saying, "Your name is Jacob, but you will not be called Jacob any longer. From now on your name will be Israel."* So God renamed him Israel. Then God said, "I am El-Shaddai—'God Almighty.' Be fruitful and multiply. You will become a great nation, even many nations. Kings will be among your descendants! And I will give you the land I once gave to Abraham and Isaac. Yes, I will give it to you and your descendants after you." Then God went up from the place where he had spoken to Jacob.

It's clear that God was always with Jacob. Watching him, protecting him, but notice how verse 9 phrases it: "Now that Jacob had returned from Paddan-aram."

Now that Jacob was interested in pursuing God, the Lord was able to give him more revelation of Himself and bring their relationship to the next level.

It's important that we understand this about God: He responds to interest. The Lord appeared to Moses at the burning bush. That text points out that Moses saw it, but it was when he turned aside and came near that the Lord revealed Himself and started talking.

The parables also show this about God. Jesus specifically would tell these stories so that only those who followed up with interest would get the plain explanation.

Sometimes, I know in my own life, it's easy to think, "Well, God hasn't shown me much. If He wants to dial my number, great! Otherwise I'm just going to go about my regular life." But that's now how interaction with God works most of the time. God responds to interest. The Bible says, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." Now that Jacob had ordered his life to be about the Lord all sorts of things could fall into place according to the Lord's will for him.

It's clear the Lord is not withholding. He *wanted* all kinds of great, incredible things for Jacob and his family. But if Jacob wasn't interested, then the Lord wasn't going to smother him with it. God *allows* us to drift. He doesn't want it, but He will allow it.

I may think, "I want to be all about God and God's plan for my life." And that's great! But what am I doing about it? How am I setting up camp? Am I setting up my life on a spiritual level at Bethel or in Paddam-aram? Because it makes a big difference in our lives.

Consider Jacob or Lot. Very similar situations and examples in this regard. Jacob liked God's promises, the New Testament said that Lot was a righteous man, they had hearts that wanted to pursue the Lord, but when times of decision came they chose the worldly route, rather than the spiritual one and in both cases it brought terrible consequences to their families and a complete stall in their growth in the Lord.

But this plays out every day for us in our lives. We're presented with the same choices. It's easy to think, "We need connections. We need financial security! Our kids need lots of friends!" In reality, all we need is the Lord. Because He has our best intentions in mind and He has an insanely fantastic plan for our lives.

Now, the promise that God details in verses 9 through 13 are specific to Jacob and the physical line of Abraham, but it reminds us that God has made us promises as well since we are redeemed and co-heirs with Christ.

Looking at some parallels - God said He wanted Jacob to be fruitful and multiply. He wants that for us too. He wants us to bear much spiritual fruit. He wants us to be growing, maturing Christians that serve and bless others as He works through us. And God wants to multiply opportunities in our lives to minister and share the Gospel and do His work in this world.

God told Jacob He was going to make him a great nation. To us, Jesus promised that we would do great things. In fact, greater things than He had done!

There's a nagging suggestion in our sin nature that God wants to take things away from us. It's the same line the Devil used in the Garden of Eden when he was talking to Eve. The truth is, God *does* want to take some things away from us. Our chains and our stains and our guilt. He wants to take away the things that poison us.

But, having removed those things, the Lord then wants to *give* us so much. He is on record in His word about all the wonderful things He wants to do for you and through you.

But, as we see in so many examples, Jacob included, those things do not happen on their own. We've got to be in communion with God to enjoy the benefits of a relationship with God.

Psalm 84.5 - Blessed is the man whose strength is in You, whose heart is set on pilgrimage.

Isaiah 26.3 - You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, all whose thoughts are fixed on you!

If we want the benefits of the Christian life we've got to fix ourselves on the Lord and actually pursue Him with our choices and decisions. That's how we get there.

Charles Spurgeon once wrote:

"It is a rule to which I know of no exception that, to prosper in any work, you must have an enthusiasm for it."

Genesis 35.14-15 - Jacob set up a stone pillar to mark the place where God had spoken to him. Then he poured wine over it as an offering to God and anointed the pillar with olive oil. And Jacob named the place Bethel (which means "house of God"), because God had spoken to him there.

Here Jacob fulfilled the last directive that the Lord had given him - to build an altar of worship and remembrance.

They had made it to their new home. And it's not just that God wanted them on a different piece of real estate. The Lord wanted to get them nearer to Him and then to center their lives on worship and sacrifice. That's where we need to be in order to really receive what God wants for us. 1 Peter 2 verse 5 explains that our lives are to be built up as an altar, a place of spiritual sacrifice and worship to the Lord.

Jacob was finally where he needed to be. Though he had long valued the promises of God, for so many years he had failed to structure his life according to them.

In fact, looking geographically we see that Bethel was just about 15 miles from Paddan-aram. He had named Bethel himself, saying, "Ok - this is where God is!" But for all this time he hadn't made the jump to really pursue God and live life near to God. There was something that held him back. We don't know what it is. But all the while God wanted to do greater things in him and for him. All the while God wanted a deeper connection, but Jacob chose to keep his distance. But it wasn't worth it. In fact, it caused a lot of pain and loss in his life.

As you look at your own life, here's what we know: We know God wants to establish you like a tree that bears fruit season after season. We know God wants rest for you and power for living. He wants to strengthen your family and lift you up to be a testimony of His greatness and grace to the world around you. He wants the Gospel to pour out of your life.

And to accomplish those goals, He's carved out a path for you to walk. Many of you, maybe the majority of you, are walking that path right now.

As we walk there are 4 simple directives we can follow from this text.

Get ready by carving out time for the Lord and cleaning out any idols in your life. Put on the robe of righteousness and live a holy life.

Move toward the destination God has revealed to you. That destination is always closer to Him, closer to His house, closer to the fields that are ripe for harvest.

Where God has directed you, *settle* there. Find a place and set up camp. And don't unsettle yourself unless God is sending you.

And build an altar for worship and sacrifice in your life. Allow God to build testimonies in your life as He gets His hands on you and fashions you into the image of Jesus Christ.

That's how we get where we want to go!

Let me say this: If you're not walking with God, you're wasting your life. Snap out of it and get on the road with the Lord. Sometimes we get distracted or tripped up, and if that describes you this morning, don't despair! The Lord is with you. As God said to Jacob in Genesis 28:

Genesis 28.15 - ...I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you.

The question is this: What's your plan? Where are you headed? God Almighty is calling out to you today. How will you respond?