

# FUNERAL MARCH

GENESIS 35:1-29    OCTOBER 5, 2022

Genesis 34 was a debacle for Jacob and his family. Now, in chapter 35, he is back on track, walking in obedient faith and we can see the spiritual transformation that God is working in his life.

If this story was a fairytale, we'd expect to read "and they all lived happily ever after." Instead, Jacob faces some hard days. The truth is, there is no way for us to avoid sorrow, struggle, and loss in this life - not altogether. *Some* suffering is self-inflicted, as we saw in chapter 34. But even when we're walking with the Lord we can and should expect there to be trouble. As Jesus said in John 16:

**John 16:33 - <sup>33</sup>"I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. You will have suffering in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world."**

There's a key difference between Genesis 34 and 35. In 34, there's no mention of God. No word from Him. No petitions to Him. No remembrance of Him. But He saturates chapter 35. He's leading and speaking and promising and fulfilling and gathering.

Donald Grey Barnhouse said,

*"Chapter 34 does not mention God, and it's full of lust, murder, deceit, and wretchedness - but chapter 35 is filled with God. His name appears ten times, plus once as God Almighty, plus eleven times in the names Bethel and Israel. The contrast is striking, as it must be in the life of a believer living out of the will of God, and again when he returns to the will of God."<sup>1</sup>*

Jacob faces trouble in both chapters, but in *this* one God furnishes His peace. As one generation of the family of faith is gathered into eternity, the next takes up the unfolding drama of grace.

**Genesis 35:1 - God said to Jacob, "Get up! Go to Bethel and settle there. Build an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau."**

In these clear directions, God encouraged Jacob to keep the vow he made 30 years earlier. But the Lord was also calling Jacob back into a life of *pilgrimage*. "The command 'go up' later became a technical term for going on pilgrimage, especially to Jerusalem."<sup>2</sup> As shepherds, God's people would move around a lot. But the Lord always wanted them to live life with the understanding that they were sojourners with Him, being led and used to be a blessing to the lost world around them.

**Genesis 35:2 - <sup>2</sup>So Jacob said to his family and all who were with him, "Get rid of the foreign gods that are among you. Purify yourselves and change your clothes."**

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Grey Barnhouse *Genesis*

<sup>2</sup> Gordan J. Wenham *Eerdmans Commentary On The Bible: Genesis*

We're always shocked when we read about God's people slipping into idolatry, but it happened quite a lot in the Old Testament. It still does!

At the time, idols were not *only* a religious item, they were also covered in precious metals.<sup>3</sup> So, Jacob is not only asking them to de-paganize, he's also challenging them to trust God and give up a major financial resource. Though these idols would have enriched them economically, they were defiling them spiritually.

We see God transforming and strengthening Jacob. In Shechem, Jacob cowered in silence, unable to lead. Now he's at the head of his family and bringing them back into right relationship with God.

Cyril of Alexandria points out the spiritual analogy here: We, too, must change our garments in order to be purified and made right with God.<sup>4</sup> This is why the Lord gives us a robe of righteousness. As we live out our faith, we're to continue receiving His purification and washing.

**Ephesians 4:22-24** <sup>22</sup>...take off your former way of life, the old self that is corrupted by deceitful desires, <sup>23</sup> to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, <sup>24</sup> and to put on the new self, the one created according to God's likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth.

Repentance is not simply feeling guilty, but turning from sin toward God and submitting to this process of sanctification that He wants to do in us as He conforms us into the image of Christ Jesus.

This invitation given by God through Jacob to these idolatrous people is particularly amazing when we recall what they did in chapter 34. God's grace is so ready to save, so ready to forgive, so able to cleanse the detestable sin that defiles our lives if we will turn to Him. *"Come, let's settle this says the Lord. Though your sins are scarlet, they will be as white as snow. If you are willing and obedient."*

**Genesis 35:3** - <sup>3</sup>We must get up and go to Bethel. I will build an altar there to the God who answered me in my day of distress. He has been with me everywhere I have gone."

Jacob says we *must* go to Bethel. When God gives a command, it is a *must*. You *must* be born again. The Gospel *must* be preached. The Lord's servant *must* not quarrel, but *must* be gentle to everyone. We *must* worship God in spirit and in truth. John said, He *must* increase, I *must* decrease.

Jacob then reminds his family that the Lord has been with them everywhere they've gone. They didn't *need* the gods of the land - gods who couldn't speak or help or give. *You* have to carry those gods with you. *You* have to clothe them and protect *them*. Meanwhile, the One True God walks with us even when we are unfaithful. Jacob could look back on the years of distress and it was clear the Lord was his shield even while they were playing around Canaanite idols.

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<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 7:25-26

<sup>4</sup> *Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture: Old Testament II (Genesis 12-50)*

**Genesis 35:4 - <sup>4</sup>Then they gave Jacob all their foreign gods and their earrings, and Jacob hid them under the oak near Shechem.**

These earrings probably belonged to the *idols* rather than the people. There's archaeological evidence that shows these sort of statues would be given jewelry, including earrings.<sup>5</sup> It's also possible that they were amulets or images of foreign gods that the people might wear.<sup>6</sup>

Why would Jacob choose the oak where God met Abraham as the spot to dump this devilish treasure? We're not told. But I suppose if one of his sons decided to go and dig it up one day he would have to face the fact that while he was shoveling through the dirt to retrieve these lifeless "gods," he'd be standing under the shade of the tree where God Almighty spoke face to face with their great-grandfather - a God Who really speaks and really acts and Who accomplishes the impossible on behalf of His people.

**Genesis 35:5 - <sup>5</sup>When they set out, a terror from God came over the cities around them, and they did not pursue Jacob's sons.**

The thing that Jacob had been so afraid of - the people of the land attacking him - was a nonissue thanks to the grace of God. In the last chapter Jacob let that fear drive him into some terrible choices. But when we walk with God, we don't have to be afraid. Because, as Eugene Roop wrote, *"The triumphant presence of God accompanied them on their pilgrimage."*<sup>7</sup>

**Genesis 35:6-7 - <sup>6</sup>So Jacob and all who were with him came to Luz (that is, Bethel) in the land of Canaan. <sup>7</sup>Jacob built an altar there and called the place El-bethel because it was there that God had revealed himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother.**

Thirty years earlier, Jacob left Bethel as one, lonely man. Now he returns with a host. He was just 20 miles from Shechem, but *what a difference* obedience makes! We see how Jacob's thoughts are full of God. This isn't just Bethel (the house of God), it's *El-Bethel*, (*God of the house of God*).

But now, in the wake of this beautiful moment of obedience and worship and thanksgiving, the all too frequent tragedies of life come knocking.

**Genesis 35:8 - <sup>8</sup>Deborah, the one who had nursed and raised Rebekah, died and was buried under the oak south of Bethel. So Jacob named it Allon-bacuth.**

We are left to wonder why Deborah was found with *Jacob* rather than Isaac. When did she join his camp? Way back in Genesis 27, when Jacob was first fleeing from Esau, his mom said, "I'll send for you and bring you back here."<sup>8</sup> But by now Rebekah was dead. Perhaps when that happened

<sup>5</sup> Victor A. Hurowitz "Who Lost an Earring? Genesis 35:4 Reconsidered." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 62, no. 1

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Waltke *Genesis* | Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

<sup>7</sup> Eugene Roop *Genesis: Believer's Church Bible Commentary*

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 27:45

Deborah came to be with the man who had been like a son to her.<sup>9</sup> They had a close relationship - Jacob wept at her loss, even naming this tree in memory his grief.

We can sense the Godly changes in Jacob's heart. In chapter 34, when his daughter had been violated, Jacob did not weep or act. He was numb to her suffering. Now, walking with the Lord, we see him obeying and leading and worshiping and testifying and weeping appropriately.

**Genesis 35:9-13** - <sup>9</sup> God appeared to Jacob again after he returned from Paddan-aram, and he blessed him. <sup>10</sup> God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; you will no longer be named Jacob, but your name will be Israel." So he named him Israel. <sup>11</sup> God also said to him, "I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and multiply. A nation, indeed an assembly of nations, will come from you, and kings will descend from you. <sup>12</sup> I will give to you the land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac. And I will give the land to your future descendants." <sup>13</sup> Then God withdrew from him at the place where he had spoken to him.

Bruce Waltke points out how, once again, it was *God* Who took the initiative to renew the covenant. If we were scoring the performance of Jacob and his family, well, I don't think he'd get a callback. At best we would've put Jacob on probation or changed the offer, knowing he probably couldn't live up to the deal. Not the Lord. It was the same promise that He made to Abraham and to Isaac, because it was *God* Who was going to accomplish this work, not man. And so, He came down from heaven in a Theophany so He could bless Jacob and tell him (once again), "I've got a plan for you, Israel. A plan that's going to last for *thousands of years!*" There's so much grace in these stories.

The Lord says, "Be fruitful and multiply," as He had to Adam and Noah. God's grace has been the same from the beginning and it's the same for us. We're also called to be fruitful and multiply, though it has a different connotation in this Church Age. We're to multiply by making disciples and we're to be fruitful by bearing spiritual fruit and allowing the Gospel to operate.<sup>10</sup>

**Genesis 35:14-15** - <sup>14</sup> Jacob set up a marker at the place where he had spoken to him—a stone marker. He poured a drink offering on it and poured oil on it. <sup>15</sup> Jacob named the place where God had spoken with him Bethel.

There's no immature bloviating this time. Last time after God appeared to him at Bethel, Jacob said, "Well, *IF* God does this and that, I suppose He can be my God." This time around, just worship.

**Genesis 35:16** - <sup>16</sup> They set out from Bethel. When they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth, and her labor was difficult.

The question is, if God told Jacob to settle in Bethel and if Rachel was *this* pregnant, why in the world would they all set out on such a journey?<sup>11</sup> Maybe Jacob received word that his father was

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<sup>9</sup> *CSB Study Bible Notes*

<sup>10</sup> Colossians 1:5-6

<sup>11</sup> John Goldingay *Genesis: Baker Commentary On The Old Testament Pentateuch*

dying and he felt the need to fulfill the *rest* of his vow where he talked about “returning safely to his father’s house.” Even if it wasn’t about the vow, Isaac was soon to die and it was very important for the sons to be there to bury their father. We saw that also with Isaac and Ishmael.

So Rachel is very pregnant and (apparently) starts hemorrhaging during a breech birth.<sup>12</sup>

**Genesis 35:17-18 - <sup>17</sup>During her difficult labor, the midwife said to her, “Don’t be afraid, for you have another son.” <sup>18</sup>With her last breath—for she was dying—she named him Ben-oni, but his father called him Benjamin.**

Ben-oni can mean either “son of my sorrow,” or some linguists make a case that it can mean “son of my vigor.” The former seems more likely since Jacob feels the need to overrule his wife and call him Benjamin, which means “son of my right hand,” or it could mean “son of the south.”<sup>13</sup>

We’re saddened at the loss of Rachel, but then surprised by what happens next.

**Genesis 35:19-20 - <sup>19</sup>So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). <sup>20</sup>Jacob set up a marker on her grave; it is the marker at Rachel’s grave still today.**

It is a big deal that Rachel was not buried in the family tomb in Mamre. Jacob’s body will be carted more than 200 miles from Egypt so he can be put there. It was an important family ritual. Yet, as one commentator noted, Jacob commits his beloved wife’s corpse to a roadside grave.<sup>14</sup>

We’re not specifically told the reasoning, but it is interesting to note that, from antiquity, many cultures had specifically different burial customs when it came to women who died in child birth. One paper published in the *Journal Of Biblical Literature* cites examples from Assyria, the Philippines, Nigeria, Benin, and elsewhere. For one Liberian ethnic group, the tradition was to bury a woman who died in childbirth in a shallow grave. And, in England, “starting in the 15th century, the bodies of English mothers who died in childbirth were frequently interred outside the sanctified walls of their local churchyards.”<sup>15</sup> It’s possible that tradition and superstition were the deciding factors for leaving Rachel where she was. But we also see Jacob’s grief and desire that Rachel be remembered. He sets up a monument for her that is so solid it seems it was still standing at least 860 years later.<sup>16</sup> And in chapter 48 he talks about the great sorrow he felt at her loss.

**Genesis 35:21-22a - <sup>21</sup>Israel set out again and pitched his tent beyond the Tower of Eder. <sup>22</sup>While Israel was living in that region, Reuben went in and slept with his father’s concubine Bilhah, and Israel heard about it.**

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<sup>12</sup> Augustine Mensah *The Death Of Rachel: An Interpretation Of A Biblical Story*

<sup>13</sup> *Alter*

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin D. Cox & Susan Ackerman *Rachel’s Tomb Journal of Biblical Literature Vol. 128, No. 1 (Spring, 2009)*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> 1 Samuel 10:2

Commentators agree this wasn't about Reuben's lust, it was a power play. Think of when Absalom does the same thing to *his* father. It's also possible that Reuben, the firstborn of Leah, wanted to take revenge against Jacob because his dad had never loved his mom. *And*, his dad had sat idly by when Reuben's sister was raped and held hostage. Now, as Jacob mourns Rachel, the only wife he actually loved, perhaps Reuben wanted to push his dad out of the way, seize control of the family, while also twisting the knife. Bilah was Rachel's servant, and Reuben was disqualifying her from any sort of future family activity by defiling his father's marriage bed. Perhaps the wives were still in some sort of competition, especially after God's command to be fruitful and multiply.

Whatever the reasons, this was terrible and sordid. Reuben's power play doesn't work. He loses his position as firstborn. With Simeon and Levi also disqualified after Shechem, the lead falls to Judah. But we'll see, Jacob chooses to give the birthright to *Joseph*, citing *this* incident as the reason why.

It's sad: Reuben will later be described as a man who excelled in prominence and power. But instead of walking by faith, he walked in the flesh. He joins the list of firstborn sons who the Lord passes over. Cain, Ishmael, Esau, now Reuben, because they would not honor God and fell into sin. Frankly, even Adam fits this list. But praise God the Second Adam came from heaven to save us!

**Genesis 35:22b-26 - Jacob had twelve sons: <sup>23</sup> Leah's sons were Reuben (Jacob's firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. <sup>24</sup> Rachel's sons were Joseph and Benjamin. <sup>25</sup> The sons of Rachel's slave Bilhah were Dan and Naphtali. <sup>26</sup> The sons of Leah's slave Zilpah were Gad and Asher. These are the sons of Jacob, who were born to him in Paddan-aram.**

That closing phrase is obviously a generalization - Benjamin was born in Canaan. It's interesting that of *all* the heads of the tribes of Israel, only *one* was actually born in the Promised Land.

The list is categorized not by birth order, but by mother. All was not well, relationally, among this next generation. Their many problems are seen in the story of Reuben, their treatment of Joseph, and the sin of Judah. They remind us that humanity is not going to someday produce a perfect person or generation. We need a perfect God to step in and make right what we've done wrong.

The focus is on the sons, but it's worth noting that Jacob also had other daughters. They make an appearance in chapter 37.

**Genesis 35:27-29 - <sup>27</sup> Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre in Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had stayed. <sup>28</sup> Isaac lived 180 years. <sup>29</sup> He took his last breath and died, and was gathered to his people, old and full of days. His sons Esau and Jacob buried him.**

Jacob would've been 120 years old at this point, meaning that Isaac died around 12 years after Joseph was sold into slavery.<sup>17</sup> All of the patriarchs were familiar with sorrow and loss. But, in the

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<sup>17</sup> Kenneth A. Mathews *Genesis 11:27-50:26 The New American Commentary*

end, they were gathered to their eternal home. God's work would march on, with all the grace and help and faithfulness that each previous generation had known.

Following God did not mean the absence of difficulty or suffering. But those who walk with God are able to face the trouble of life with peace and assurance and confidence that our Lord is by our side and leading us forward in grace, forward in growth, leading us home. As we grow older, hopefully we are growing stronger in the Lord and closer to His heart.

**2 Corinthians 4:8-11 - <sup>8</sup>We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; we are perplexed but not in despair; <sup>9</sup>we are persecuted but not abandoned; we are struck down but not destroyed. <sup>10</sup>We always carry the death of Jesus in our body, so that the life of Jesus may also be displayed in our body. <sup>11</sup>For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus's sake, so that Jesus's life may also be displayed in our mortal flesh.**