

And then **Jacob Returns to Isaac (35:16-29)**

the death of Rachel and the birth of Benjamin (Rachel's pillar)
Reuben's folly (just before listing of the sons – showing that Judah is next in line)
And finally, the death of Isaac

There is an awful lot that goes on here at the end of book 8 –
but the common thread that runs through the whole of Genesis 35
is that there is grace at the end.

God is gracious –
and he demonstrates his grace and steadfast love to those who trust in him.

1. Jacob Returns to the House of God (35:1-15)

35:1 God said to Jacob,

*“Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there.
Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you
when you fled from your brother Esau.”*

In verse 1 we have God's call:

God calls Jacob – much like he called Abraham in Genesis 13:17,
when he said, “Arise, walk through the length and breadth of the land.”
Likewise, now Jacob will walk through the land of promise like his grandfather.

The way from Shechem to Bethel involves an ascent of some 1,000 feet.
Jacob is now called to “go up” to the house of God.

In Genesis 28 Jacob had promised that he would return to Bethel.
Now God commands him to fulfill his vow,
and also commands him to build an altar
(the only time in Genesis where God commands altar-building).

*2 So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him,
“Put away the foreign gods that are among you
and purify yourselves and change your garments.”*

The theme of verse two is renunciation.

God has called Jacob and his household to worship him.
Therefore those who are coming to worship the living and true God
must renounce all other gods –
must renounce all other allegiances.

For centuries the baptismal rites of the church included the renunciation of Satan and his ways.

We need to understand that there can be no divided allegiance among God's people.

If there is anything that you hold more dear than Christ,
then you must renounce it.

If there is anything that you can't say "no" to,
that is precisely the thing you need to renounce.

If you "have to" watch that game –
if you can't say no to that beer, that cup of coffee, that candy bar –
if you are obsessed with staying fit,
with what your friends think of your clothes,

whatever it is that you cannot say "no" to –
that is what you must renounce.

Put away the foreign gods.
Purify yourselves – get rid of all that contaminates you.

And change your garments.

Here at the end of book 8
we are introduced to a theme that will dominate book 10 of Genesis:
"the garment."

Changing garments is often used in scripture to refer to a change in worship.
As Israel is now going to Bethel to worship God,
Jacob commands his household to go to the house of God
with new clothing – and *without* their old gods.

Cyril of Alexandria comments on this that Jacob
"orders the foreign gods to be rejected like dung and filth
and to change the garments.
It is fitting for us to do likewise when we are called before God,
or enter the divine temple, especially in the time of the holy baptism.
We, as if we drive away the foreign gods and part from such error, must assert,
'I refuse you, Satan, and all your pomp and all your worship.'
We also must change completely our garment
by stripping off 'the old self that is corrupt through deceitful lusts'
(Ephesians 4:22)
and by clothing ourselves with the 'new self,
which is being renewed in knowledge
according to the image of its Creator.' (Colossians 3:10)"

And this is what Christ does by his Holy Spirit in our baptism,
as Ananias said to Saul of Tarsus,
"Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name." (Acts 22:16)

Because in our baptism we are clothed with Christ.
Remember that baptism includes both the outward sign (water) –
and the inward grace (the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit).
We have no forgiveness of sins except through Christ's blood –

and we only receive the Holy Spirit as we are united to Christ.

And so Jacob calls his household:

*3 Then let us arise and go up to Bethel,
so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress
and has been with me wherever I have gone.”*

And look at their response:

*4 So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears.
Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree that was near Shechem.*

Doubtless Rachel included the “household gods” that she had taken from her father.

The inclusion of the earrings reminds us that all sorts of physical objects
can be associated with idolatry.

Jesus will call the rich young ruler to sell all that he had, give to the poor,
and come follow me,
and all of Christ’s disciples are called to deny themselves, take up their cross,
and follow him.

There may be particular objects that you *must* get rid of
if you are going to follow Christ.

But Jacob takes these things and buries them by the terebinth at Shechem.

This was the tree where God first promised Abram the land.
And it was from Shechem that Abram went on to Bethel.

Jacob is now retracing the route of his grandfather,
from Paddan-Aram, to Shechem, to Bethel, to Mamre (or Hebron).

Each of these sites are important in Israel’s history,
and they would have many occasions to think about Abraham and Jacob.

Joshua will gather all Israel at Shechem in Joshua 24:1.
And he says that Israel’s fathers who lived beyond the Euphrates
served other gods,
echoing the language of the “other gods”

The bones of Joseph will be buried at Shechem in Joshua 24:32

And Israel’s first king will arise in Shechem –
the men of Shechem will make Abimelech, the son of Gideon, king
under the oak of the pillar at Shechem. (Judges 9).

Likewise, Rehoboam will go to Shechem to be made king (1 Kings 12)
and when Israel chooses Jeroboam – Jeroboam will make Shechem his capital.

5 And as they journeyed, a terror from God fell upon the cities that were around them, so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob.

Here again we see the ambiguity of Genesis toward the slaughter at Shechem in chapter 34.

Simeon and Levi will be cursed by their father in Genesis 49, but here, once again, they receive a measure of commendation.

After conducting holy war against a Canaanite city
before God commanded such holy war,
God nonetheless protects Jacob and his sons
from the vengeance that would normally have followed.
And so the fear of God falls upon the cities around Shechem.

*6 And 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 there he built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because there God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother.*

Notice that now he names it not just Bethel, but El-bethel –
God of the House of God.

The emphasis now is on the God who revealed himself to Jacob,
more than on the place itself.

But Bethel will be the place where Israel will gather to bring judgment
against the wicked tribe of Benjamin (Judges 20-21).

It would be one of the places where Samuel would judge Israel (1 Samuel 7)
Jeroboam would take advantage of these connections by making it a place of worship –
and so one of the golden calves would be placed here in 1 Kings 13.

8 And Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried under an oak below Bethel. So he called its name Allon-bacuth. [oak of weeping]

This is a curious verse.

It occurs right after the reminder of how Jacob fled from his brother
(when Rebekah told him “I’ll call for you.”)

But we never heard from Rebekah again.

When did she die?

Where was she buried?

We do not know.

Instead we are told when Deborah died.

Why is Deborah here?

Deborah is identified as Rebekah’s nurse –

who came with Rebekah from Paddan-Aram in 24:59,
when she came to marry Isaac.

But Isaac is still in Hebron.

Why is Deborah here?

No doubt Rebekah has died while Jacob was away.

It is interesting that we are told *nothing* about those 20 years.

It is as though when the Promised Seed is outside the Promised Land,
the events inside the land are utterly insignificant.

But when the Promised Seed returns,

when Jacob/Israel returns to the Land,

then the nurse of the faithful Rebekah immediately joins him.

And she dies at Bethel.

Whereas the foreign gods are buried beneath the terebinth at Shechem,

Rebekah's nurse is buried beneath an oak near Bethel.

In verses 9-12 God confirms his covenant with Jacob.

9 God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him.

10 And God said to him,

*“Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob,
but Israel shall be your name.”*

So he called his name Israel.

God had already changed Jacob's name at Peniel,

but he reaffirms this here at Bethel as God comes to him

and reaffirms that Jacob indeed is the true heir of Abraham.

11 And God said to him, “I am God Almighty:

El Shaddai – the name revealed to Abraham

be fruitful and multiply.

the Adamic blessing that had been proclaimed on Abraham.

A nation and a company of nations shall come from you,

Notice that it is not merely a nation – but a company of nations.

The promise to Jacob extends beyond his biological heirs –

although the kings that rule this company of nations...

and kings shall come from your own body.

We see this throughout the OT as foreigners are joined to the people of God

(think of all the Gittites and Hittites who follow David),

but especially in Jesus, where the Gentiles submit to the Seed of Abraham,

the Son of David. (2 Sam 7:12)

*12 The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you,
and I will give the land to your offspring after you.”*

Again, you need see here the irony of this statement!

The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac.
What land did Abraham and Isaac possess?
A burial plot.

They only possess the land by faith – not by sight!

Any Canaanite would have laughed uproariously
if Jacob had referred to “the land of Abraham”!
But that is the point:

Jacob believes God’s promises –
even when there is no outward reason why he should!

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.

He poured out a drink offering on it and poured oil on it.

15 So Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken with him Bethel.

A drink offering of wine, together with oil, was a familiar way of reconsecrating a holy place.

Jacob may have found the original stone that he had erected.

Or, since it is 20-25 years later, he may have had to erect a new stone,
but either way, he is reconsecrating the *place* where God met with him.

This is why we read 1 Peter 2.

As Jacob called his household to put away foreign gods,
Peter calls the church to “put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy
and envy and all slander.”

As Jacob had anointed a stone as the picture of the house of God,
Peter says that the church comes to Jesus, the living stone,
“rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious.”

Jesus is the anointed rock –
he is the precious cornerstone.

And those who are baptized into Christ are built up into a spiritual house,
a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

As Jacob was called by the living and abiding Word of God,
so also *you* have been “born again to a living hope
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,
to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading,
kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith
for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” (1 Peter 1:3-5)

2. Jacob Returns to Isaac (35:16-29)

But even as Abraham did not remain at Bethel, but headed southward,
so also his grandson, who follows his footsteps, even as he follows his faith,
journeyed south from Bethel.

16 Then they journeyed from Bethel.

*When they were still some distance from Ephrath,
Rachel went into labor, and she had hard labor.*

*17 And when her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her,
“Do not fear, for you have another son.”*

*18 And as her soul was departing (for she was dying),
she called his name Ben-oni; [son of my sorrow]
but his father called him Benjamin. [son of my right hand]*

This is the only son that Jacob names –
and he reverses the name that Rachel had given –
or, to look at it a different way,
Rachel’s name is appropriate for her relationship to him:
Ben-oni is the son of her sorrow.
But Jacob’s name is appropriate as well:
Ben-yamin is the son of his right hand (of his strength).

It would appear that Benjamin is at least 10-15 years younger than any of his brothers.
Since Joseph is 17 when he is sold into Egypt,
it is likely that he never really knew Benjamin.

*19 So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem),
20 and Jacob set up a pillar over her tomb.*

It is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day.

21 Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder.

Rachel buried near Bethlehem

(curious – because Rachel is the fore-mother of Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin,
and while her grave will be in the territory of Benjamin,
here it is said to be near Bethlehem – which is in Judah!)

Rachel’s tomb will be mentioned again –

when Samuel anoints Saul, and tells him to go to Rachel’s tomb (1 Sam 10).

Also in Jeremiah 31:15 we hear that Rachel is weeping for her children.

Since Ephraim – Joseph’s son – was another name for the kingdom of Israel,
Rachel is portrayed as the “mother” of Israel.

Jeremiah speaks a century after the destruction of the northern kingdom
and says that Rachel is weeping for her exiled children.

*22 While Israel lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine.
And Israel heard of it.*

This is explicitly connected with the death of Rachel.
Bilhah was Rachel's maidservant.

This may have been a power-move on the part of Reuben.
To sleep with a man's concubine is to lay claim to his authority.
Reuben may well be trying to push his father out as patriarch of the clan.

Some think that Jacob did nothing about this –
and conclude that this shows that Jacob was a weak father.

But as we have seen, Genesis 35 is jam-packed with events.

We are told that Israel heard of it.

What did he do?

We don't know.

At least, we don't know what he might have done immediately.

What is clear is that Jacob never loses his grip on his rule of his clan.

And when he blesses his twelve sons,
he withholds his blessing from Reuben.
Reuben is not entirely disinherited (like Levi and Simeon were),
but while he is acknowledged as the firstborn,
Jacob says that he "shall not have preeminence."

Jacob passes over the first three sons
before declaring that the sons of Jacob will bow before Judah.

You have to remember that Genesis was not written to comment on Jacob's parenting skills.

It is written to set the stage for Moses and Joshua –

to explain who Israel is

(and in this particular case, to show why the fourth-born son
is the one to whom the brothers will bow)

And so immediately after the story of Reuben we hear the account of the twelve.

Now the sons of Jacob were twelve.

23 The sons of Leah:

Reuben (Jacob's firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun.

24 The sons of Rachel:

Joseph and Benjamin.

25 The sons of Bilhah, Rachel's servant:

Dan and Naphtali.

26 The sons of Zilpah, Leah's servant:

Gad and Asher.

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

The sons of the full wives are listed first – and in order of inheritance rights.

Joseph is not older than Judah.

And Judah cannot be displaced by the son of the loved wife (Dt 21:15-17).

Just to give you a hint at what is coming,
our sermons during Advent will be talking about how Judah is groomed for the kingship.

But finally, about 30 years after he had left for Paddan-Aram,

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

28 Now the days of Isaac were 180 years.

*29 And Isaac breathed his last, and he died and was gathered to his people,
old and full of days.*

And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

Isaac was 60 when Esau and Jacob were born.

So Esau and Jacob would be 120 when Isaac died.

Jacob goes to Egypt ten years later, when he is 130.

This means that the death of Isaac happens while Joseph is in Egypt –
in fact, Joseph is elevated to Pharaoh's right hand right about this time.

In all the deaths we have seen in Genesis,
we have seen an emphasis on *burial*.

The burial of the body is an expression of our hope in the resurrection of the body.

We do not know how much the patriarchs understood.

But we see clearly in their actions that they had a hope that included the body.

We express that hope in Christian burial today.

It is why cremation is not a Christian practice.

(Christians may be cremated – just like Christians may be lost at sea!)

But our hope is that our *bodies* will be raised from the dead.

And we demonstrate that hope today in baptism.

As Paul says in Romans 6,

*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus
were baptized into his death?*

*We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that,
just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father,
we too might walk in newness of life.*

In baptism we are united to Christ's death –

For if we have been united with him in a death like his,

we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Rom 6:3-5)

And as the outward sign marks our bodies,

so the inward grace of the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ in his death and resurrection.