
The Mingled Experience of the Righteous

Genesis 35

Life's Difficult Tensions

Sometimes, life is difficult to understand. We are faced with baffling perplexities of natural disasters, depraved crimes, or unreasonable people. The responses of people to the COVID crisis have reflected the fear, perplexity and anger that comes when life is difficult, dangerous, and destructive. People's explanations and interpretations leave them struggling.

Sometimes, the Christian's life is even more difficult. What we are sometimes taught from the Bible shapes present expectations that clash terribly with present realities. God promises to provide all your needs including the grace to give but you can't even pay your bills. God promises long life and health to people who honor parents but your godly sister dies early. God promises to heal His people, but you have a debilitating disease. God is merciful and loving, yet life is hard and horrible.

These are very difficult tensions. We have them – the question is, how do we deal with them?

What's up here in Genesis? How are our next two chapters going to help us?

Moses is ending the *generations of Isaac* section which is primarily about Jacob and Esau. While Jacob will appear again at the end of the Genesis, here is where his story primarily ends. From here on out, instead of being a main character, he is moved to a supporting role (and not an admirable at that.) But as life winds down for these two brothers, their experience of life at that point is instructive for all. Moses is recording this history with a *for God's people* intent.

For Israel they saw Jacob with all the blessings of God still not receiving the fullness of God's promises. They also saw the greatness of Esau and the rise of Edom as a nation with the questions and tensions that created.

For us there are all the practical tensions we live with. Some are matters of sin. Some are matters of the suffering of living in a fallen world. Some are perplexities where there are tensions between what God has promised and our experiences of His present providences.

How does a text like this help us deal with life's difficult tensions? Let's give it our attention and see what God will do.

Jacob experiences obedience and the blessing of God mingled with sorrow and failure.

The Sweetness of Obedience and Blessing (v.1-15)

The weak indecisive leader of Genesis 34 stirs himself up to obey God when God speaks. The danger his sons have placed him in dislodges him from where he has settled. Now, he is to return to the place where he met with God before, the place called Bethel, the house of God.

The Blessing of Purity (v.1-4)

35 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." 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." 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." 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.

Jacob's first act of decisive obedience is to command a single minded worship of God. He ordered the gathering up of all the idols collected and carried while in his journeying. Surely this is pointedly aimed at Rachel, the darling of his heart. But there seems to have been much idolatry that had infected his household.

In the rituals of changing their clothes, purifying (washing) themselves and taking away their earrings, he is showing a reverence for God and repentance towards God. Here is a distinct putting off of the old and a putting on of the new. There is nothing essentially evil in any of these things: their clothes, their cleanliness, their earrings. But putting them away is an object lesson, a visible act demonstrating that the burial of the idols affects all of life.

Shechem - make no mistake, the name of the evil person of Genesis 34 has now become the name of a place where evil idols will be buried. Is it possible that more is intimated here? Aren't idols normally smashed and burned? Isn't it curious that here that the idolatry and its attendant immorality is placed in a grave under the tree? Maybe as a very dim shadow, but I see a cross and a tomb.

The Blessing of Protection (v.5-8)

⁵And 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. ⁶And Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him, ⁷and 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. ⁸And Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried under an oak below Bethel. So he called its name Allon-bacuth.

Jacob's continuing act of obedience is surrounded by the protecting hand of God. He had said he was fearful of imminent destruction (Genesis 34:30). But as he moves out towards Luz (Bethel) God caused the people who would have pursued and destroyed him to be afraid. Jacob arrived safely at the place where he had met God before, where God had revealed Himself before. There is so clear a sense of returning, of arriving, of a satisfying being where he is supposed to be. Kneeling in the Presence of our God is the safest and best place to be.

But even here, there can be sadness. Even here, we can lose people we love. Even when God is shielding us from enemies, death can still reach out a cold hand and scythe down Rebekah's nurse, Deborah. This is the only time in Scripture she is mentioned. But it obviously brought pain and maybe perplexity. Even in Bethel, there is Allon-bacuth; in this world, even in the house of God there are oaks of weeping.

The Blessing of Prominence (v.9-15)

⁹God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him. ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹And God 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 from your own body. ¹²The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you." ¹³Then God went up from him in the place where he had spoken with him. ¹⁴And 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. ¹⁵So Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken with him Bethel.

Jacob's walk with God was grounded in the promises that God had given and the changes God had caused. This paragraph is a rehearsal, a review, a reminder of what God had already done. The verbs here are historical – they are saying what God has done. When we remember God's person, promises and performance God is showing Himself to us. In this section, God's speaking here was pointing back to His own character, His granting of a new name and the grand promises He has made.

In this rehearsal of what God has promised, we see a magnificent vista of prominence and prosperity. Twelve sons are the result of being fruitful and multiplying. Here the Adamic and Noahic commands are echoed. Since we have Galatians now, we know that the nation will be physical descendants and a company of nations will be gathered as spiritual descendants. Yes, kings will come from his body, the great king David and last King, Jesus will as well. He will inherit and inhabit the land – the bordered land of earthly Canaan and eventually, the great company of spiritual descendants the unbounded land of heaven and all that will be new in the new creation.

So, this text points us first to the Lord Jesus Christ, our Bethel. He is the indwelling of God, God with us. He is the essence of holy purity. He is our protection and the object of our worship. He is the fulfillment of a people, a king and a land. And we are in Him as the dwelling place, the Bethel of God by the Spirit. Therefore, we are to put away our idols, to live in purity. It is gathered as the corporate Bethel, the church, that we are safe and worshippers. And it is in Him and He in us that the new creation is begun, but not yet completely fulfilled.

There is the heart of the tension.

The Sorrows of Disobedience and Death (35:16-29)

In the midst of the journey, there can be such suffering and sorrows. Here is disobedience and death mingled with such sweetness in walking with God.

The Mingling of Birth and Death (v.16-21)

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; but his father called him 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.

Isn't this vivid? The sweet pleasure of a son's birth and the sorrowing pain of a wife's death joined together. This was truly hard labor. The struggle is evidenced in the names given this last of Jacob's sons. Rachel called him the "Son of my sorrow". Jacob called him the "Son of my right hand." O how Jacob's heart was entwined with Rachel and her sons, Joseph and Benjamin. Here, this man walking with God, having God's protection and promises, holds a dying wife and a newborn son. And, for the first time, the *Jacob* who buries his beloved has become the *Israel* traveling on (v.20-21).

The Mingling of Sins and Sons (v.22-26)

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

Now the sons of Jacob were twelve. ²³The sons of Leah: Reuben (Jacob's firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. ²⁴The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. ²⁵The sons of Bilhah, Rachel's servant: Dan and Naphtali. ²⁶The sons of Zilpah, Leah's servant: Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram.

Doesn't this ring true? Here was a wicked son who caused shame and here is a parade of sons who invoked pride. Moses places these side-by-side on purpose. Reuben committed fornication. He slept with Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid. He may have been wickedly attempting to subvert his father's place and assert tribal leadership. He may be attempting to pollute Rachel's side of the family. Israel (Jacob) hears of it. Reuben will hear of it later.

And then the sons listed by their mother. Here is a source of pride. Here were twelve stalwart sons. Yet among them were bloody and devious men. Among them were gentle and God-fearing souls. Even when we are walking with God, sons and daughters can bring such gladness and such grief.

The Mingling of Separation and Reconciliation (v.27-29)

²⁷And Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned. ²⁸Now the days of Isaac were 180 years. ²⁹And 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.

Isn't this sometimes the best and bitterest of life? Jacob came home to his aged father. After many long years he arrived home once again. His mother was dead. His favorite wife was dead. Isaac will only know her by stories. We can image Jacob presenting his sons, touring his wealth, the long story of travel and travail, of bane and blessing. Ah, homecoming is great.

But Isaac was home going. He breathed his last and was gathered to his people. Standing there as they mourn and as they recall were two brothers, finally reconciled and side-by-side at a grave. This is groaning and grieving. This relief is and reconciliation. This is hands on each other's shoulders and big-bear hugs and soft thumps on the back while tears track sad paths down cheeks.

This should help us. Beginning and ending are mixed in a fallen world. Aching love and loss are mixed in a fallen world. Regret and relationships are mixed in a fallen world. Because we are traveling through, sojourning. Is this just the way it is? No, this is God's design that we will be constantly reminded that God is *here* even in the midst of trouble and that *here* is not home, even in the midst of blessing.

Reflect and Respond

A fundamental truth and theme is evident here that we must learn: God's people live in an *already, but not yet* tension. Let's flesh that out a bit and then map it over life.

Jacob and Israel are promised the land and the kingdom and a King. They even at times have it all – living in Palestine, having David and Solomon rule over them in a large and powerful kingdom. But the fulfillment of those promises was still future.

God's people live in the tension between God's promises and God's providences. God promises to provide, protect, heal, sustain, rescue and so on. But we sometimes are needy, hurt, sick, faltering, and enduring what we would like to be delivered from. This often causes Christians to be perplexed. It sometimes causes them to doubt God or His Word.

God's promises are to us now and often received by us much later. In one sense, all of God's promises are "Yes, and Amen" now. But in another sense, no promise is completely fulfilled until the new heavens and new earth come. So we live in this *already and not yet* tension. This is not just true of a small group of God's people, but it actually marks out who are the true people of God. Hebrews 11 says that those with commended faith may not receive what is promised, have hope and joy in suffering and God is not ashamed to be called the God of this kind of people.