

The Triumphs and Trials of Faith

Text: Gen. 35:8-29

Introduction:

1. We continue our study of this great chapter in Genesis. In our last message we followed Jacob as he and his household returned to Bethel. This was a season of spiritual revival for Jacob and his family and yet it would quickly become a season of trial also.
2. There are triumphs, trials and a tragedy in this chapter.
 - Triumphs: Spiritual revival for Jacob and his family as they go back to Bethel.
 - Trials: Three deaths take place in Jacob's family – Deborah, Rachel and Isaac die.
 - Tragedy: There was the tragedy of Reuben's affair with Bilhah, Jacob's wife.
3. In this message we will study the rest of the chapter focusing on the triumphs and trials Jacob faced.

I. THE TRIUMPHS OF FAITH (VS. 9-15)

Let's note three triumphs in Jacob's life at this time:

A. The Return to Bethel (Vs. 6-7)

1. We dealt with this extensively in our previous message but remind ourselves that this was a significant victory for Jacob at this time in his life.
2. Getting back on track for the Lord or going forward with the Lord in your walk of faith is a triumph to rejoice in and is due to the goodness and power of God working in our lives, just like He worked in Jacob's life.

B. The Revelation at Bethel (Vs. 9-13)

God works in Jacob's life afresh at Bethel. We are reminded of the truth of James 4:8 "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you..." Jacob had taken steps to draw nigh to God by returning to Bethel and God rewarded him by drawing near to him. What blessings there are in walking closely with our God! This revelation of God involved:

1. The presence of God – "And God appeared unto Jacob again" (Vs. 9a)
 - a. God met with Jacob for the second time in this special place. What comfort there is in that word 'again'. God was graciously meeting with Jacob and working in his life again. God does the same for us as His children.
 - b. It is noted that God appeared to him "when he came out of Padanaram". A clear connection is drawn between the coming out in obedience to God's call and God's intervention in Jacob's life.

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- c. Interestingly, much of what God said to Jacob He already knew but to be reassured of it afresh must have been a tremendous blessing to him.
2. The Blessing of God (Vs. 9b). How God blesses faith and obedience in our lives. Whatever you may have “given up” (Vs. 2) is more than made up by what you gain. The empty trinkets of this world are worthless and nothingness when compared with God and the rich blessings He gives.
3. The Assurance of God (Vs. 10)
 - a. God speaks to Jacob about his name and that he would no longer be called Jacob but Israel. The new name represents the new nature, the old name the old nature. “Jacob needed this reminder as he had not been living the Israel name but had been living the Jacob name.” (Butler)
 - b. What is fascinating about this is that Jacob already knew about his new name from his encounter with God at Penial (See Gen. 32:27-28). Why then would Jacob need to hear about it again?
 - c. God in His wisdom knew that Jacob needed to be reminded of his new identity. In like manner, we need to be reminded of the fact we have a new nature in Christ so that we might be encouraged to live in the power of that new life by the grace of God.
4. The Person of God (Vs. 11a).
 - a. God reveals much of His character through His names and God revealed Himself to Jacob here as “God Almighty”. It speaks of God as the all-powerful, all sufficient One. God had revealed Himself by this name to Abram (Gen. 17:1) and to Isaac (Gen. 28:3), and now to Jacob.
 - b. God then reminds Jacob to “be fruitful and multiply”. We are reminded of the principle that fellowship with God is intended to lead to fruitfulness for God. We see this connection in Colossians 1:9-10 “For this cause we also, since the day we heard *it*, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be **filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; That** ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, **being fruitful in every good work**, and increasing in the knowledge of God;”
5. The Promises of God (Vs. 11b-13)

Again, Jacob was aware of these promises but it would be beneficial for him to hear them again. The repetition of these promises emphasises that they are very important to Almighty God and that they are immutable. The promises concern:

 - a. The lineage of Israel (Vs. 11b)
 - b. The land of Israel (Vs. 12). “This fact of God giving the land to Israel is repeated in nearly 150 passages in the Old Testament.” (Butler) A lot of strife in the Middle East would be solved if everyone just accepted God’s Word and let the Jews have their land!

C. The Renewal at Bethel (Vs. 14-15)

1. The renewal of consecration (Vs. 14)

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- a. Jacob sets up a new pillar to commemorate the Lord's meeting with him, just as he had all those years earlier when God had first met him at Bethel. The purpose of the pillar was to be a public witness to the important event to others of what had taken place plus serve as a reminder to the individual of that special event. So, the pillar speaks of:
 - i. Witness – this was a public witness of what God had done in Jacob's life. We also should not be ashamed to have the pillar of witness in our lives. Our salvation testimony is one such pillar we should stand up high.
 - ii. Remembrance/memorial – the memorials in our lives are places we can go back to in our minds and give thanks to God.
 - b. Jacob pours out a drink offering on the pillar. This included oil. "The drink offering was a supplement to the regular sacrifices and was poured out on the altar as the sacrifice was burning (Ex. 29:40-41; Num. 6:17; 15:5-10, 24; 29:22-38). It was a symbol of dedication, the worshiper's life poured out for the Lord (2 Sam. 23:16-17; Phil. 2:17)." (Wiersbe)
 - i. The drink offering symbolizes the surrendered life of the saint. Total surrender should be the response of our hearts to the goodness and grace of God. Let your life be a living sacrifice for the Lord for Him to use.
 - ii. The drink offering typifies the sacrifice of the Saviour. Ultimately the drink offering speaks to us of Christ who poured out His life's blood for us at the cross.
2. The renewal of Bethel's name (Vs. 15)
 - a. Jacob had already named this place Bethel the first time he met God here but now he reaffirms it again. Jacob is declaring for the second time "this is God's house". The name spoke of the essential character of the place.
 - b. There is a need in our day to affirm our commitment to the local church as "God's house". It is not the world's house nor is it the people's house. It is God's house and is to be run according to God's Word!

II. THE TRIALS OF FAITH (VS. 8, 16-29)

The fact Jacob experienced personal revival did not mean he would be exempt from trials and tests. In fact, the blessings and the burdens, the grapes and the giants, the triumphs and the trials, often come together. The key thing is to not wrongly interpret the trials as evidence you should never have embarked on the path of spiritual victory but rather to take the position of faith and rest in God as He deals with our lives according to His unfailing wisdom and faithfulness. Griffith Thomas writes, "The cloud of sorrow hangs heavily on these verses. There are three graves and one sin recorded." He also refers to this section as "The School of Sorrow", a fitting title.

A. The Death's in Jacob's Family (Vs. 8, 16-20, 28-29)

1. Deborah – the homegoing of a family friend (Vs. 8)

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- a. Deborah was Rebekah's nurse and is first mentioned back in Genesis 24:59 where she accompanies Rebekah on her journey from Haran back to Canaan to marry Isaac.
 - b. James Freeman in his book *Bible Manners and Customs* explains the role of a nurse in Bible times, "In an Eastern family the nurse is a very important personage. She is esteemed almost as a parent; and, accompanying the bride to her new home, there remains with her. She becomes the adviser, the assistant, and the friend of the bride. To the nurse, as to a mother, the bride will confide her greatest secrets. Thus, Rebekah took with her on her long journey to her future home the nurse who had cared for her since childhood, so that, besides the female servants she took with her, (Vs. 61), she might have one intimate familiar friend among strangers."
 - c. Deborah would have helped raise Jacob and would have been like another mother to him. She probably joined Jacob after Rebekah's death. It would be natural for her to want to minister to Rebekah's beloved son in her sunset years. For Jacob, Deborah would have been a link to the past, especially in relation to his mother Rebekah. "As time goes on, and friend after friend passes upward, we find ourselves more and more severed from the past and more and more united with the future." (Thomas)
 - d. We get a sense for how precious she was to Jacob and his family by the name they gave the oak tree where they buried her. The name "Allonbachuth" means "the oak of weeping". What a picture of the journey of faith.
 - e. Illustration: Growing up with Aunty Su (Nee Coventry, now Olmstead).
2. Rachel – the homegoing of a cherished wife (Vs. 16-20) "Now the scene moves from the voice of God to a baby's cry and a mother's last words." (Wiersbe)
- a. This was a sad season in Jacob's life. Rachel was the great love of his life. For him it had been love at first sight and he had worked willingly and waited 7 long years for her hand in marriage.
 - b. Rachel died giving birth to her second and final child. This is the first record in the Bible of death at child-birth. How many dear ladies have died bringing children into the world down through history, only God knows but it is a sad feature of life in a fallen world.
 - c. The midwife speaks a word of encouragement to Rachel in her final moments that the son was going to be born safely. What an insight into the heart of a mother. The chief concern of Rachel's heart in her dying moments was her precious baby!
 - d. Rachel lived to see the birth of her second son. In her final moments as she cradled the precious bundle, she whispered his name "Benoni" meaning "son of my sorrow". She had born him in suffering. Jacob renamed him "Benjamin" meaning "son of my right hand". From the tribe of Benjamin would come two

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significant men named Saul. Saul, Israel's first king and then many years later Saul of Tarsus who would become the Great Apostle Paul.

- e. "Life is a mosaic of lights and shadows, joys and sorrows; and the same baby that brought Rachel and her husband joy also brought tears." (Wiersbe)
 - f. Rachel is buried at Bethlehem in a place called Ephrath. Ephrath is another name for Bethlehem (See Gen. 48:7). It is also called Ephratah (Mic. 5:2). Jacob sets up a pillar to mark the spot. At the time when Moses was writing, the pillar was still standing. The location of Rachel's grave was also still known during Samuel's day (1 Sam. 10:2). Many years later in that very special town, Mary would give birth to Jesus Christ the Messiah.
 - g. Note: Don't forget that standing by Rachel's graveside that tragic day was the young lad, Joseph. To lose one's mother as a child would have been a grievous experience indeed. It was kind of symbolic of the fact that Joseph's life was destined for suffering.
3. Isaac – the homegoing of a faithful father (Vs. 28-29)
- a. The age of Isaac at his death (Vs. 28). Jacob lived the longest out of the three patriarchs to the ripe old age of 180 years.
 - b. The account of Isaac's death (Vs. 29) The phrase "gathered unto his people" teaches four facts about death:¹
 - i. There is life after death.
 - ii. We will know our loved ones after death.
 - iii. Death is not annihilation.
 - iv. Death is not followed by reincarnation.
 - c. "The phrase "he gave up the ghost" means he yielded up the spirit to God Who gave it. The phrase "gathered to his people" gives another beautiful suggestion of the life to come – that of reunion with those whom we have loved and lost awhile. And so, with the spirit at rest with God and at home with our loved ones, we learn something of what heaven is. "With Christ" and "with them, all must and will be well." (Thomas)

B. The Defilement in Jacob's Family (Vs. 21-22)

It must have been a bitter blow for Jacob that this sin came so soon after the heartache of losing Rachel. How the waves of trial and sorrow can come crashing in on our lives all of a sudden!

1. Reuben's sin is a reminder of the terrible capacity for perversion there is within the depraved nature of man. A similar sin took place in the Corinthian church (See 1 Cor. 5). Similar sins still take place today and are even being promoted in popular culture.
2. Reuben's sin is a reminder that adult children can stray from the morals and values taught to them by their parents. Of course, that is now what we are aiming for as parents but it is a sad reality at times in a fallen world.
3. Reuben's sin is a reminder that you always lose more than you gain when you say yes to temptation. There is temporary pleasure in sin but what a price tag comes with it! At the end of his life, Jacob had

¹ Points from John Butler's commentary.

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these sad words to say to his son Reuben. Genesis 49:3-4
“Reuben, thou *art* my firstborn, my might, and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power: Unstable as water, **thou shalt not excel**; because thou wentest up to thy father's bed; then defiledst thou *it*: he went up to my couch.”
Reuben did not ‘excel’. Scripture does not record any prophet or judge or outstanding leader coming from the tribe of Reuben. Reuben also forfeited the birthright because of his immorality and it was given to the sons of Joseph (1 Chr. 5:1).

C. Practical Lessons from these trials in Jacob's life:²

1. Sorrow is not always sent as punishment. Sometimes we suffer sorrow as a result of our foolishness and sin. Other times we suffer sorrow when we are in the centre of God's will. The death of Deborah came when Jacob had put himself right with God.
2. Sorrow is often used for spiritual training. There is a connection spiritually as well as etymologically between discipleship and discipline. We only become real disciples through discipline.
3. Sorrow is intended to yield the peaceful fruits of righteousness. Psalm 119:71 “It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes.” “Just as the pattern of the China vase is made permanent by being put into the fire, so the impressions of God's truth and grace become part of our character by our being passed through the furnace of affliction.”

Conclusion: Are you moving forward in spiritual victory? Don't be surprised if tests accompany the triumphs! Allow those trials in the purpose and Providence of God to conform you to Christ's image.

² By W.H. Griffith Thomas.