

Genesis 35 — Renewal

July 3, 2016

It's great to have you, especially if you are a visitor on this holiday weekend. My name is Kurt. I am one of the pastors. As a church we are studying the book of Genesis on both our campuses. In Genesis, we are studying the life of Jacob. He is an interesting guy. Even though he is a patriarch, for most of his life, he was one of those people you wouldn't want to call a friend. The name Jacob literally means deceiver or conman. He was aptly named because deception of friends and family was his speciality. He manipulated his brother into giving him his birthright, which was worth lots of money and status. He dressed up as his brother and deceived his own father into giving him the family blessing instead of Esau. This is not good. This is not the kind of man you want as a friend or in your family. Jacob was eventually forced to run for his life because his own brother was deciding not if he should kill him but how he should kill him. When your own brother is planning your murder, you know you crossed the line in your deceptions.

Jacob ran away to a place called Paddan-Aram. There he worked for his uncle. While he started in poverty, God blessed him and gave him four wives, 12 kids and a sizable investment portfolio in the sheep and goat business. After 20 years out of the Promised Land, God tapped him on the shoulder and told him it was time to head home. At that time Jacob was on a spiritual high. God was working powerfully in his life. God blessed him. God saved him from all kinds of disasters. Jacob even wrestled with God and had his named changed by God

from Jacob — the deceiver — to Israel — the one who wrestles with God. Jacob's faith was strong when he returned to the Promised Land. He did a bold, high-risk move. He attempted to reconcile the broken relationship with his brother, Esau. It was a high-risk move because brother Esau was a hunter, a killer and a terrorist. Twenty years prior, when Jacob ran for his life, he was at the top of Esau's hit list. Trying to restore a relationship with a man that specialized in killing, like Esau, is like trying to create open channels of communication with North Korea. It is high risk. You never know what could happen. God was gracious. Jacob was extremely humble and the brothers met one another and forgave one another. The relationship between them was reconciled and restored.

Unfortunately, the back side of spiritual mountains tops can contain dark, dark spiritual valleys. That is exactly what happened to Jacob. After his great act of trust in God where he risked his life and family to restore his relationship with Esau, Jacob seemed to lose focus. Following God became a passing interest instead of a primary concern. Instead of heading to the town of Bethel, where he promised God he would go, he moseyed to the town of Succoth. What a great name for a town. Succoth. How do you feel about your town? It Succoth. You mean you don't like it? No. That is its name.

Geographically, there was plenty of open space at Succoth. Unfortunately, there weren't many people, which meant no cell service and no friends. Jacob decided to pick up stakes and move next to the city of Shechem. At least it had a Wal-Mart. Shechem wasn't a huge city but it had the comforts of civilization. The

problem is that Shechem was a Canaanite city. Those were people famous for their sexual immorality and depravity. When Moses and Joshua conquer the Promised Land they would be told to completely wipe out the Canaanites off the face of the earth for this reason. In addition, it was not the city of Bethel, the place he promised God he would go once he returned to the Promised Land. Jacob was living in partial obedience. He was back in the Promised Land but he wasn't where God told him to go. He was closer to the world than to God.

What happened is Jacob went from a spiritual high when he reconciled with Esau and he turned into a spiritual slug. He pursued pagan culture and in time, his family paid. Last week we had a tough sermon. We saw that Dinah, his daughter, was date raped by the prince of the city of Shechem. Simeon and Levi, two of Dinah's brothers, mass murdered all the men in the city. In chapter 34, Jacob took almost no leadership. He was barely mentioned. He was an impotent father that wasn't leading his family and his children were suffering the consequences of his sin. Last week we learned that when we live a life of partial obedience like Jacob, sometimes we suffer the same consequences of full-blown rebellion. That is what happened to Jacob and his family. He ended up with two sons as mass murders and a raped daughter because he drifted from God and buddied up to the world when he returned to the Promised Land.

As we turn the page and start Genesis 35 we see God used this tragedy in Jacob's family to snap him out of his spiritual stupor. Isn't this the way it works in our lives as well? We have a spiritual high like attending the Okoboji Bible Conference or we spent a week at Hidden Acres camp and we are totally juiced

up for following Jesus. Maybe, like Jacob, you even take some high-risk steps of obedience. Maybe you confess a long-hidden sin. Maybe you go out of your way to reconcile with a family member. God, in his grace, works things out. The problem is after those highs it is so easy to become spiritually sluggish, like Jacob. It is easy to blend right back into the world and become lukewarm or even cold Christians. How many of you have been there? How many of you are there today? Just like Jacob, God sometimes lets our lives fall apart to snap us out of our spiritual stupor and head us in the right direction. That is exactly what happened to Jacob as we start Genesis 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.” 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. 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.” 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. Genesis 35:1–4 (ESV)

Now that Jacob was listening, God got ahold of him and reminded him of the promise he made more than 30 years ago when he was running for his life. Remember when God appeared to him in a dream at Bethel and he saw what we call “Jacob’s ladder”? At that time Jacob promised to return to Bethel and worship God if God brought him safely home to the Promised Land. God kept his promise. Then it was time for Jacob to keep his and return to Bethel and worship God.

Jacob called a big family meeting. This was not just him and his four wives but it was him, his wives, his kids, the maids, the dog and the pet lizard.

Everybody came into the living room because dad was going to speak and people needed to listen. Dad said we need to get our acts together. We need to put away our foreign gods, purify ourselves and change our clothes. Let's deal with these one at a time.

Apparently Jacob's wives and kids picked up a bunch of foreign gods from their Canaanite neighbors. Maybe some were the ones Rachel brought from Laban. Maybe some came from Shechem after they killed all the men. Maybe they saved their allowance and bought them. I don't know. I do know that Jacob's family was spiritually drifting and this crisis caused Jacob to step to the plate and regain control. That is good. No more idols. "My daughter was raped. My sons are mass murderers. We need a change. We need to repent."

Then Jacob told them they needed to purify themselves. This was a catch-all term to get rid of all the other funky stuff in their lives that wasn't necessarily an idol but it was wrong and messing them up. If you are sneaking a drag on a joint, get rid of it. If you are drinking beer behind your parent's back, get rid of it. Get rid of the stuff you are seeing on the Internet. Install a filter.

He also told them to change their clothes. Some of you ladies already love this sermon. There was a new dress you saw at the Emporium, now you think you have biblical justification to purchase it. The pastor said I need to change my clothes.

Why did Jacob talk about a change of clothes? Clothes can remind you of your past. I have a white Reebok sweatshirt I was wearing when I met Cindy. She says whenever I wear it it reminds her of the time we met. Jacob's family

was heading a new direction and new people need new clothes. They were going to look different on the outside to remind them they were going to be new people on the inside. They were returning to following God.

Some of you need to get rid of a dress. Some of you need to get rid of a pair of jeans. The idea is that new people that head in a different direction sometimes need to look different because they are different. That is appropriate. It isn't appropriate to keep wearing the Black Sabbath T-shirts. You aren't heading that way anymore. You probably need to get rid of your Coors shirt and your Budweiser shirt. As a Christian, you are not a beer-drinking party animal anymore.

Everybody gave Dad their idols and their earrings and he buried them under an oak tree. He dug a grave. They had a funeral service for their pagan stuff and their old way of life. They buried it and headed in a new direction.

I like this part where they buried the earrings. These earrings probably came from pagan Shechem. They were probably associated with Canaanite worship.

Just to be clear, I don't have a problem with people wearing earrings, as long as the people wearing them are all women. I am probably old school but if you are a guy wearing an earring, my recommendation is to go biblical. Find a tree, dig a hole and bury it. Follow the Bible on this one. Old men like me can't figure out which ear is wrong and which ear is right so we don't know if you are trying to just be hip when you wear that earring or if you are trying to send us a message. It is very confusing. When men my age see guys wearing two

earrings we are completely confused. My recommendation is save the money you want to use for earrings and use it for an engagement ring for a wife. Let her wear the jewelry. If you are a guy with a bunch of earrings bury them under a tree. Leave the jewelry to the ladies. That way it doesn't confuse old men like me.

In all seriousness, what I love about this chapter is God's faithfulness. As we follow Jacob's life, his life looks much like our own. Jacob started out messed up but in a good home. Later he straightened up, then he messed up and drifted away, then God broke him to his knees, he repented and God brought him home again. His life was not perfect. It was a bunch of ups and downs with God, just like ours. What I love is God stayed faithful to him and kept working on him and kept maturing him even when Jacob consistently drifted away.

It reminds me of this verse.

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. Philippians 1:6 (ESV)

I am so thankful we serve a God who is faithful to us even when we aren't faithful to him. I love a God who is patient when we drift away and slip into the life of a spiritual slug. I love the fact he is not content to leave us spiritually drifting but in his love he will use hard times to break us and lead us to repentance. Even when we aren't faithful to him, he doesn't let go. God is faithful to us even when we aren't faithful to him. That is why we are Christians. That is why the Bible is good news. Our faith is based on God's faithfulness, not our own.

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. And Jacob came to Luz (that

is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him, 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. And Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried under an oak below Bethel. So he called its name Allon-bacuth. Genesis 35:5–8 (ESV)

It says terror from God fell on all the cities around them so they did not pursue them or attack them. It doesn't tell us how this happened but here is my take. I think that after destroying Shechem the surrounding cities were thinking they needed to attack and get rid of Jacob and his sons. God put a great fear in the people's hearts so they left Jacob's family alone. I think they reasoned that if it only took two of the brothers to kill all the men in an entire town, these guys are nut cases. The last thing you want is to have all of them working together. In addition, Jacob and his family were moving out of town. That was good. Let Jacob and his nut-case sons move to another city and terrorize them instead of us. There was no point in risking their lives with the nut cases if they were moving. Isn't that the way it works with us? If we have pesty neighbors we try and change them until they put a For-Sale sign in their front yard. After that we just bide our time until they are gone. I think that is what happened with Jacob and his kids.

Jacob finally arrived in Luz, which is simply the former name of Bethel. Jacob was finally good on his word. He kept his promise to God. He went where God wanted him to go in the first place. He went to where Grandpa Abraham built his first altar. He went to where God appeared to him when he was running away from his brother 30 years before. He did what he should have done 10 years prior.

God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him. 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. And 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. 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.” Then God went up from him in the place where he had spoken with him. 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. So Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken with him Bethel. Genesis 35:9–15 (ESV)

Now that Jacob was doing what he was supposed to be doing in the first place, God picked up what he was doing in his life 10 years earlier. You can't help but wonder what would have happened if Jacob had gone there 10 years earlier.

God first reminded him of his name change. “You used to be called Jacob. That means conman. I renamed you Israel, which means one who wrestles with God. I am going to keep my promises to you.” God reaffirmed his covenant to Jacob, just like he had done to Isaac, his father. He promised him two things — he promised to give him the Promised Land. That is the same promise he gave to Grandpa Abraham. It was also passed on to Isaac. Now it was passed on to Jacob. He also promised him kings would come from him. We know this would unfold into the nation of Israel, King David and many other that follow, especially Jesus Christ who is king over all.

Then they journeyed from Bethel. When they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel went into labor, and she had hard labor. And when her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, “Do not fear, for you have another son.” And as her soul was departing (for she was dying), she called his name Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), and Jacob set up a pillar over her tomb. It is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day. Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder. 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. Genesis 35:16–22 (ESV)

Sometimes we are under the false impression that if we are walking right with God, life will be easy, that it will be smooth sailing. Nothing could be further from the truth. While God sometimes brings tough times into our lives to get us on our knees and return us from our spiritual drifting, walking with God doesn't insulate us from hard times. This is exactly what we find in Jacob's life.

Rachel was the love of Jacob's life. If you were around earlier in this study, you know the incredible love Jacob had for Rachel. He worked 14 years for her. Any man that works 14 years for a woman, you know he loves her. Rachel, the love of his life, died in childbirth. That was a crushing blow.

I can't imagine the hole in Jacob's heart with a new baby in the house but Rachel not there to care for him.

I am only beginning to understand Jacob's feelings for Rachel. Cindy and I celebrated our 23rd wedding anniversary in June. We are rapidly approaching the point where we will have lived together more of our lives than apart. It is harder and harder to imagine life without my wonderful wife. We are best friends. Since most of our lives consist of our collective memories together, if she was to die, I know nobody could replace her. So much of my life was lived with her. I know many of you understand those feelings better than I do because you are married even longer than we have been.

That was Rachel and Jacob. They were as close as you could possibly imagine. She died unexpectedly. I can't imagine the pain of that loss. Even when you are walking with God, it doesn't insulate us from hard times.

To make matters worse, not only had Simeon and Levi, Jacob's second- and third-born sons, acted like nut cases by murdering the Shechemite men, now Reuben, his firstborn, starts acting like a fruitcake. He seduced and slept with Bilhah, Rachel's maidservant, which was one of Jacob's wives.

Why in the world would Reuben be interested in sleeping with a woman that could be his mother? What did he have going with this much older woman that was married to his father? This turns my stomach. I can't even imagine the disgust in Jacob's heart. Why did Reuben do this? Here is my guess: Last time we saw Reuben, he was a young man that found mandrakes in the field and gave them to his mother. Mandrakes were also known as love apples in the ancient world. They were a type of fertility and sexuality enhancer. Reuben gave the mandrakes to his mom, Leah, to help her become the more favored of Jacob's wives. I think Reuben was up to his old tricks. Rachel, the favorite wife of Jacob died. Bilhah, Rachel's servant, was also Jacob's wife. The closest thing Jacob had to Rachel was Bilhah, her servant. When Reuben seduced and slept with Bilhah, that meant Bilhah would be completely rejected as a wife for Jacob. In that culture, she would have been given the status of living widowhood and Jacob would have ignored her. That meant there was only one woman left in Jacob's life, Leah, Reuben's mom. This was all part of Reuben's plan to make his mother the favored wife for Jacob. Once he disqualified Bilhah, it was essentially just Jacob and Leah.

Incidentally, Reuben's plan backfired. Reuben lost the right of the firstborn because he slept with Bilhah. Simeon and Levi, the second- and third-born sons

of Jacob, also lost the right of the firstborn because they murdered the Shechemites. The next guy in line was Judah. He was the next in line to be the legitimate heir of the blessing. From this point forward the book of Genesis focuses on just two people — Judah, who is the next in line for the blessing. From Judah would ultimately come David and Christ. The other person the book focuses on is Joseph, the firstborn son of Rachel. Now we are set up for the twelve tribes of Israel.

The sons of Leah: Reuben (Jacob's firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. The sons of Bilhah, Rachel's servant: Dan and Naphtali. The sons of Zilpah, Leah's servant: Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram. And Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned. Now the days of Isaac were 180 years. 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. Genesis 35:23–29 (ESV)

Now we have the 12 tribes of Israel. After getting back on track with God at Bethel, Jacob returned home to see his aging father at Mamre. There Isaac died at the age of 180. Jacob and Esau buried him

A friend asked me a good question earlier in this series. When Jacob and Esau were young men, the birthright and the blessing were a big deal to them. One reason was because it was worth so much money. When they were older, they never talked about it, especially after their father died. Why did it become a non-issue?

Let me give you at least part of the reason. If you were here when we studied the reunion of Jacob and Esau, you will remember that Jacob sent Esau a huge gift before they met to try to pacify him. Esau eventually took it but he wasn't interested in more stuff. He said to Jacob, "I don't need this. I already

have more than enough.” Apparently Esau and Jacob were both so wealthy at this point in their lives that their father’s estate was no longer a big deal.

Applications

1. **After mountain highs, it is easy to get sluggish and drift into spiritual lows.** That is what happened with Jacob. It is what often happens with us. We need to be careful of drifting away from God after great spiritual moments in our walks with Christ.
2. **God allows hard times to snap us out of a spiritual stupor.** After Jacob ended up drifting into a mess in Shechem, God allowed the hard times to be the tool he used to call Jacob back to himself. In the same way, when we grow lukewarm toward the things of God, God may allow us to taste the consequences of our sin as part of him calling us back to himself.
3. **Even when we are walking in-step with God, that doesn’t mean life will be easy.** After returning to Bethel and following God, he experienced some of the hardest times in his life, the death of the wife he loved and his own son sleeping with Rachel’s maid, one of his wives.
4. **No matter how many times we are unfaithful to God, he is faithful and will never drift away from us.** God will not let you go even after you have let him go. If there is one message from this chapter we do not want to forget, this is it. Jacob’s life was like our lives. It was a series of ups and downs. Sometimes he was faithful and sometimes he grew spiritually cool. In all of this, God never let him go. In the same way, God will never let us go even when we drift in our faithfulness to him. This morning maybe you are

here as a spiritual drifter. Maybe you have grown cool to walking with God.

God holds his hand out. He loves you. He calls you to return to him.



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