

GENESIS

35:1-29

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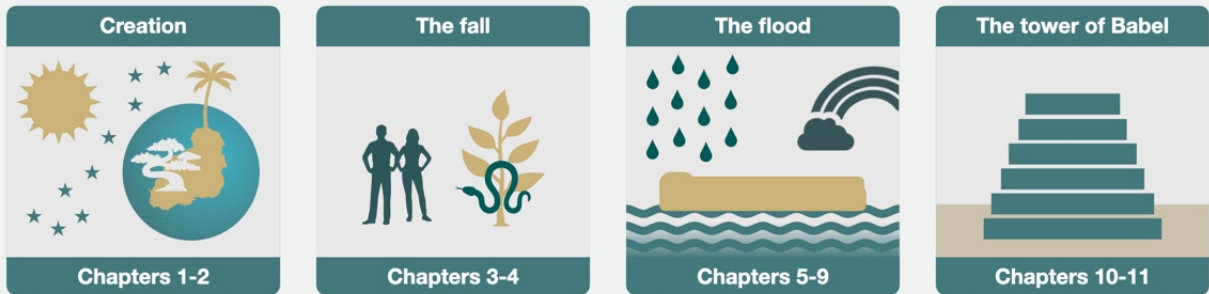
Taught by Simeon Forder on Sunday morning, 28th April 2024 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

Reading: James 4:8

Introduction

We are working our way through the book of Genesis, the first book in the Bible, and the second longest in number of words. And as a quick reminder of what I've shared before, this book covers 4 main events and 4 main characters:

The events of Genesis



And those four events are the creation of the world, the fall of man, the flood of Noah, and the tower of Babel. And they are followed by four main characters...

The patriarchs of Genesis



...starting with Abraham, then his son Isaac. Then Isaac's younger son, Jacob, followed by one of his sons, Joseph. And since we're studying chapter 35 today, that means we're approaching the end of the Bible's focus on Jacob, though his death won't take place until we reach chapter 49. But what we will see is that Isaac's death is recorded here, along with at least two others. It won't be the happiest of times for Jacob – that's for sure.

Now, importantly for context this morning, we need to remember that in chapter 34 we saw things really unravel in Jacob's family, with his only daughter, Dinah, being raped at a place called Shechem, by a young man of the same name. And then, in anger, two of her brothers (Simeon and Levi) took matters into their own hands, and slaughtered all the men of that city, following which we *read*:

Genesis 34:28-29

They took their sheep, their oxen, and their donkeys, what was in the city and what was in the field, and all their wealth. All their little ones and their wives they took captive; and they plundered even all that was in the houses.

And this greatly troubled their father, Jacob, for we then *read*:

Genesis 34:30

Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, "You have troubled me by making me obnoxious among the inhabitants of the land, among the Canaanites and the Perizzites; and since I am few in number, they will gather themselves together against me and kill me. I shall be destroyed, my household and I."

But, we know that God had promised to take care of Jacob. And as we start this chapter, we'll see God speaks to him once more, giving him instruction on where to go next.

Overview of chapter thirty five

Overview of chapter thirty five

- v1-15 — Back at Bethel
- v16-20 — Benjamin born, Rachel dies
- v21-22 — Reuben's sin
- v23-26 — Jacob's sons listed
- v27-29 — Isaac's death recorded

And that direction was to go back to a place called *Bethel*, where God had first appeared to Jacob before he reached Padan Aram, as he was fleeing from Esau. But we'll see that Jacob doesn't stay there long, and while he and his family travel on, his wife, Rachel, gives birth to Jacob's youngest child, and sadly dies in the process. But as mentioned, that won't be the only death recorded in this chapter, as we'll also see two more — one of which is the death of Jacob's father, Isaac, which is recorded at the end of this chapter, after first Moses lists each of Jacob's sons as he writes this.

Chapter thirty five

So then, let's dig into this chapter, as it has some important lessons for you and I to take note of today. We read in verse 1:

Genesis 35:1

Then God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from the face of Esau your brother."

So, with the backdrop of things falling apart in Jacob's family, with Jacob having on one had returned to the Land God told him, but also having stopped off at the worldly city of Shechem, God now tells him specifically to return to the place where he had first encountered God, and to make an offering to Him (as if God were saying, come back to your first love — not because you've got everything figured out, but because you haven't).

And He tells Jacob to return to *Bethel*, which means the house of God. And that immediately should be a reminder that in our difficulty, we need to get ourselves to the house of God, and dwell there too. That is, one of the most necessary steps in our moments of difficulty, in our fears, and in our trials, is to spend time in the house of God. That is, we should gather with His church, and offer *our* sacrifice — and that is our *sacrifice* of praise.

Of course, it's easy to do the opposite, and like a sulking child think "*why should I go to church today and praise God when this or that isn't going well, or my life feels like it is falling apart?*" — yet there is such blessing in doing so, for in praising God we turn our attention away from our problems, unto the One who has solved our greatest problem! And our focus changes from *our* lack of strength, unto the One who can do all things, who loves us, and gave Himself for us.

And so, just as a young child becomes overwhelmed by the difficulty they are facing, and runs into the arms of their father (knowing that those arms are a place of safety, love, care, and strength), so must we run into the arms of our heavenly Father. But in doing so, there is of course an acknowledgement that our own skill or effort, or trust in someone or something else, has come to naught (as we say "Lord, I need You!").

And furthermore, as we return to the Lord, and realise the state of our own souls, there is a necessary purification that should follow — not to earn God's love, but in response to it once more. Let's note what we read in Revelation 2:4-6

Revelation 2:4-5a

Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works,

And here in *Genesis* we read *Jacob's* response:

Genesis 35:2

And Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments.

Where had these idols come from? Well, there are only two possibilities we read of. For we know Rachel had stolen the gods of her father, Laban, as they left his house, and she's been dragging them around ever since. Perhaps secretly until now, for we know she'd be deceitful in concealing them from Laban when he came hunting for them in her tent. And then, there were the houses of the people of Shechem that Simeon and Levi had plundered, and it seems reasonable to conclude that included idols too.

Here, Jacob says — *“hey, we’re going to go up to God’s presence, we’re going to go to the house of God — let us put away everything that is not of Him”*. That is, he wants them to do away with their old life, for these gods, these trinkets had been of no help to them whatsoever — only a hinderance.

And this call should be a familiar one to us, for we read in Hebrews 12, right after we read of the *heroes* of faith, including Jacob:

Hebrews 12:1-2

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

So as we return to the Lord at any time, and as we come into His presence, as we come to gather with His church, to worship Him, let us lay aside our idols. Let us lay aside — let us put away — our worship of money, pornography, alcohol or anything that causes us to sin and thus comes between us and the Lord.

Let us purify ourselves, readying ourselves as the bride of Christ, that we might please Him! Indeed, I doubt any of you wouldn’t bath or shower for a week and then turn up to church, right? We’d probably have noticed by now. But are you washing yourself in the water of God’s Word with any regularity? Are you letting God work in your life to change even your habits?

Here, Jacob continues, saying to his family:

Genesis 35:3

Then let us arise and go up to Bethel; and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me in the way which I have gone.”

So, Jacob finally leads his family, after his inaction in the prior chapter. And he gives credit to God for saving him, for being with him, and says *“let us go up to the house of God and worship Him”*. And what example.

Let us reflect on that, parents, for how do your kids know you’re a Christian? It’s not by you going to church — anyone can do that. But by you telling them about your personal relationship with God. By you explaining what He has done for *you* — not only in saving you, but how He has worked in your life. How he has led you, and guided you.

And, here, as Jacob does that, his family respond:

Genesis 35:4

So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods which were in their hands, and the earrings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree which was by Shechem.

Now, earrings themselves are not bad. We see them permitted in various places in scripture. But here, they were connected with idolatry — as if they were charms to ward off evil, such as is still done in some places today. And Jacob acts decisively, for he doesn’t say let’s just not use them, let’s pack them away. No — he buries them. He cuts off their access to them, once and for all.

And I think we should consider how the seriousness of this act was because of the seriousness of sin. Indeed, Jesus Himself said:

Matthew 5:27-30

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.

So then, we must cut off every opportunity to sin in our lives. Reckoning ourselves dead to it. That when sin comes knocking, we reply "sorry, no-one in!" — making that daily, even moment-by-moment choice to yield to God instead, as we are instructed in Romans:

Romans 6:12-14

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

That grace came free to us — that's the nature of grace. But we need to remember what it cost our Saviour to pay for our sin. And here in Genesis I believe there is a nod to that, for Jacob buries these idols where? At the foot of a tree. And it was upon a tree, upon the cross, that Jesus paid for our sin.

Now, having put away these idols, Jacob and his family head towards Bethel:

Genesis 35:5

And they journeyed, and the terror of God was upon the cities that were all around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob.

And just as God had promised Jacob, way back, He kept him safe. He protected him. Indeed, making Jacob's worry at the end of the last chapter rather fruitless, as indeed his worry before had been. For God does not break His promises. And we read on:

Genesis 35:6-7

So Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him. And he built an altar there and called the place El Bethel, because there God appeared to him when he fled from the face of his brother.

So, Jacob is now back where he started in his encounters with God, and he builds an altar. But what's interesting is the name he now gives the place. For he calls it El Bethel. Not merely, the *house of God*. But the *God of the house of God*. It seems clear, that Jacob recognises it is not about the place, but the person of God. And that is what God wants for us — not to come to church as a building, venue, or event. Not as a club, or a hobby. But to come to Him.

And we do need to be especially careful in this. For so many people make idols out of what God has given us. They idolise church culture. Whether the routine, or the people, or the programs. They idolise prophecy. They turn Bible study into an information gathering exercise. But what we need is God Himself.

And here, Jacob has really matured. Yet, that doesn't mean all he'll encounter will be easy, for now here, in this place, having put away these idols, having come to God Himself, we now see the first of three deaths in the family. I wonder if, perhaps, God was saying to Him, *"now that you've come to me, let me loosen your ties to this world. For I want you to continue to walk with Me"*.

And we read in verse 8:

Genesis 35:8

Now Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the terebinth tree. So the name of it was called Allon Bachuth.

Deborah, was the nurse that left Laban's home with Rebekah, when Eliezer had gone to find a bride for Isaac, and as such would have cared for Jacob and Esau when they were young. And we see here that there had been a reuniting with Jacob, but sadly, Deborah (now surely over 100 years old) had died. And so this place gets named Allon Bachuth, meaning "the oak of weeping". And no doubt Jacob was sad — for we also see no mention that he ever saw Rebekah again either, despite her hope to see him once Esau had calmed down. So was it that Deborah brought news of Rebekah's death too? We don't know. But we certainly see that Deborah's death brought Jacob to tears.

But in the midst of this sadness, we see God appears to Jacob:

Genesis 35:9-10

Then God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Padan Aram, and blessed him. And God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; your name shall not be called Jacob anymore, but Israel shall be your name." So He called his name Israel.

So, following Jacob's departure from the influence of Laban's house, and having finally put away the idols from there, and the land around him, God now appears to Jacob and reiterates this change of name that we first read of in chapter 32; changing his name from Jacob, meaning *supplanter*, to Israel, meaning *Governed by God*. And in addition to this reminder of his new name, God now re-confirms the Abrahamic covenant that he had also made to Isaac, and also to Jacob before, in chapter 28. We read:

Genesis 35:11

Also God said to him: "I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall proceed from you, and kings shall come from your body.

And this was important to underline, for not only would kings come from him, but the line through to Christ would come through Jacob's descendants. And God continued:

Genesis 35:12-13

The land which I gave Abraham and Isaac I give to you; and to your descendants after you I give this land." Then God went up from him in the place where He talked with him.

So once again, we see with absolute clarity that it was God's land to give. And to whom did He give it? To Jacob, and his descendants. Not to Ishmael's descendants, not to Esau's descendants. But to Jacob's descendants alone. To the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and — using his new name — to Israel. To the nation of Israel.

Genesis 35:14

So Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He talked with him, a pillar of stone; and he poured a drink offering on it, and he poured oil on it.

Recognising what God had for him, and all that God had promised to do, Jacob makes another offering. And he also sets a permanent marker of this encounter with God. And oh how we should both praise God when we see Him work in our lives, but also do all we can to note what He has done — that we might not forget in the years to come. I've heard of some who have underlined God's promises in the Bible, especially marking the ones they've seen God answer in their lives.

And I've always liked the idea some friends had, who used to put little notes in a jar, of all they prayed for during the year, and then at the turn of the year, would look back over them to see all that God had answered. But however we do it, let us not forget what God has done for us as individuals, and let us bring our offering of praise to Him.

Genesis 35:15

And Jacob called the name of the place where God spoke with him, Bethel.

And so, Jacob also reconfirms the name of this place, as he had called it before. But note the language here — for the house of God is where God spoke to Jacob. So do you expect the same? Do you expect to hear from God when you come to church on a Sunday? You should! I'm not saying you should expect to hear from Him audibly, but you should personally, as you hear His Word taught, and His name magnified in the songs of praise and worship that we sing, and as we come before Him in prayer.

Now, of course, it is good to be in the habit of coming to church. But what is a terrible shame it is if we only come to church out of habit, and not because want to praise God, or hear from Him. So what do we do? Well, there are several things I urge you to do:

1. Pray for your pastor, or whoever is teaching God's Word that day
2. Pray for your own heart, that you may be ready to receive God's Word
3. Prepare your own heart, not by watching the news, but by reading the passage we're going to study that day, and by reading your Bible in whichever book you're currently reading through. Even write down your questions about the passage or topic in advance
4. And be sure to do something about the sermon after the service — why not talk about it with your church family, talk about it over Sunday lunch with your friends or family, or pray about what you've learnt as you go to bed on a Sunday evening?
5. And finally I would add — do all you can to come along to home group, where we regularly look back on our previous studies, discussing how we can apply the things we read to our lives.

Whatever you do, don't come to church merely out of habit, not investing your heart in it, and then wonder why you didn't hear anything from the Lord here. For that's like having your fingers in your ears, and complaining you didn't hear anything.

Now, as we move into the second half of this chapter, we'll see at least three sad events that would have grieved Jacob. And we read the start of the first in verse 16:

Genesis 35:16

Then they journeyed from Bethel. And when there was but a little distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel laboured in childbirth, and she had hard labor.

So, Jacob and his family journeyed on. But why? God had told him in verse 1 "*Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there...*". This doesn't sound a lot like dwelling there to me. Sure, he had buried the family idols, he had come and made an offering to God. He had heard God speak to him. Yet now, for no reason we're given, he moves — you could even say drifts — away from the house of God. Perhaps the only trigger for this we see is Deborah's death, and that because of this sadness, he concludes Bethel wasn't the place for him.

Was God still with him? Yes, we'll see that was the case. But God never left Abraham either, even when he left the area of Bethel for Egypt. And Jacob will go through heartaches here in this chapter and beyond. Was each of those heartaches down to this decision? — no, I don't believe so, but I don't think it's unreasonable to conclude that this may have had some impact on his life, as it did with Abraham. Let's at least take this as a warning that we shouldn't let anything cause us to move away from attending church, the *house of God* as we know it.

Continuing on, we read:

Genesis 35:17

Now it came to pass, when she was in hard labor, that the midwife said to her, "Do not fear; you will have this son also."

And she wasn't wrong, however...

Genesis 35:18

And so it was, as her soul was departing (for she died), that she called his name Ben-Oni; but his father called him Benjamin.

And so Rachel, having in chapter 30 exclaimed to Jacob "Give me children, or else I die!", now, somewhat ironically I guess, dies during childbirth. And no doubt aware her health was failing, she calls her second son *Ben-Oni*, meaning *the son of my sorrow*. The final words of a woman who had been bitter and competitive with her sister for years. What a sad ending.

But Jacob, evidently not happy with this name for their boy, instead calls him *Benjamin*, meaning *the son of my right hand*. And think of how he loved Rachel — how he worked for years for uncle Laban, just so that he could marry her, even after he had been given Leah as his wife first of all. And like any husband that loses a dear wife, he grieves at the loss of his right hand. Perhaps similar to how we use the term "*our other half*" (though I don't think that's a helpful term, since it is Christ that completes us). And we read:

Genesis 35:19-20

So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). And Jacob set a pillar on her grave, which is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day.

And this place name, Ephrath, means fruitfulness, so rather descriptively she died and was buried on her way to fruitfulness. And Jacob buries her at this grave which was not only still around in Moses' day as he wrote this, but in our day too — for her tomb is still there.

Surprisingly though, there is no real mention of grief here. Not to say that Jacob wasn't sad, but it doesn't seem he was somehow as sad as at losing Deborah. And it may just be detail that we're not given. But what I am mindful of is that we'll see a change in Jacob's affections through these years, as when he finally reaches his final days, he asks not to be buried with Rachel, but with Leah.

Genesis 35:21

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

The same ancient tower that would host a far greater event, as one of Jacob's descendants would later be born there — none other, of course, than Jesus Himself. Born in this place reserved for the sacrificial lambs, where he would be wrapped in swaddling cloths.

But speaking of Jesus, and specifically the line through to Him, we next read:

Genesis 35:22a

And it happened, when Israel dwelt in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard about it...

It seems like a bizarre detail to throw in here, perhaps. Yet Moses is not only given this information for the sake of chronology of events, but so we know why Jacob spoke as he did, later in chapter 49 as he gave his blessings to his sons, for we read there:

Genesis 49:3-4

"Reuben, you are my firstborn, My might and the beginning of my strength, The excellency of dignity and the excellency of power. Unstable as water, you shall not excel, Because you went up to your father's bed; Then you defiled it— He went up to my couch.

That is, because of Reuben's indiscretion, and more frankly, because of his sexual sin, the line through to Christ would not flow through him as the firstborn, just as it would not through Simeon and Levi (the second and third born) because of their mass murder in chapter 34. That's why the line came through Judah, hence we sing of the *Lion of the tribe of Judah*.

Again, so serious was Reuben's sin that he forfeited his birthright. And this is a warning to us, that we must deal seriously with sexual sin, because it is so damaging. Indeed, we are not only to deal with it individually, but also corporately as a church, where needed, noting what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians chapter 5:

1 Corinthians 5:1-8

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father’s wife! And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

There is no place whatsoever for sexual sin the life a Christian. We are to deal with it urgently as we would cancer, for sin has consequences, especially if left untreated. Let us never make the mistake of tolerating it merely because the world deems it acceptable.

Genesis 35:22a-26

Now the sons of Jacob were twelve: the sons of Leah were Reuben, Jacob’s firstborn, and Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun; the sons of Rachel were Joseph and Benjamin; the sons of Bilhah, Rachel’s maidservant, were Dan and Naphtali; and the sons of Zilpah, Leah’s maidservant, were Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Padan Aram.

So then, these were not only Jacob’s sons, but the tribes of Israel. At least, in simple terms, for we’ll get to some further detail about Joseph’s sons in the future.

With all his children now born, we see him reunited with Isaac. Was this the first time they had met since Jacob arrived back in the area? Was it that the events of these prior chapters happened in quick succession — I don’t know. But we’re given no detail of how they felt as they met for the first time in decades, and that their time together doesn’t last for long, for read:

Genesis 35:27-29

Then Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kirjath Arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had dwelt. Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. So Isaac breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people, being old and full of days. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

So, here is a man who around 40 years ago considered himself old and close to death. A reminder that we surely don’t know the day of our death! And Isaac dies at the grand old age of 180, five years longer than Abraham had lived, and 30-40 more than either of his sons would live.



And finally we read that Esau and Jacob meet once more to bury him. And that will lead us into our study of chapter 36 next week, which focusses on Esau and his descendants.

Application questions

How then, might we apply this chapter to our lives? Here are three questions to help us think about how we might do just that:

- Are you willing to make a sacrifice of praise in the midst of your trials?
- What are the idols in your life, and your home, that you need to bury forever?
- How can you better prepare your heart to hear God each Sunday?

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