

BOB HALLMAN - THE EPIC LIFE

“The Return Of Jacob”

Genesis 35:1-29

2003

Introduction

Nearly thirty years have passed since Jacob vowed to return to Bethel, where God had revealed Himself to him during his flight from Esau to Paddan-aram.

20 of those years were spent serving Laban.

10 living in the ungodly city of Shechem, which almost destroyed his family.

From a physical point of view, Jacob was not that far from God. Only 30 miles separated him from God’s appointed destination; a place called Bethel.

30 miles had separated him from God’s will for 30 years!

But from a spiritual standpoint, Jacob might as well have been a million miles away. For the past 10 years, he was near Bethel but not near to the God of Bethel.

Jacob’s condition is Genesis 34 is not that different from many Christians today.

Outwardly, we may appear to be walking close to God, but inwardly we have stopped short of whole-hearted devotion to God – having lost our first love (Revelation 2:4). Just 30 miles short in the journey of a lifetime!

Since every one of us will face times when we have strayed from an intimate and obedient walk with God, Genesis 35 provides us with a pattern for finding the way back.

I The Guidance Of God

A. God **commanded** Jacob to go up to Bethel [Verse 1]

Bethel = “The House of God”

God had not spoken to Jacob since He had commanded Jacob to leave Paddan-aram and return to Bethel (31:3) some ten years earlier.

Gen 31:3 “Then the LORD said to Jacob, “Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you.”

Why the ten years of silence? Until now Jacob wasn’t ready to listen.

Why Bethel?

It was at Bethel that Jacob had his first real encounter with God.

It was at Bethel that Jacob was first told about God's plan to bless Jacob.

It was at Bethel that Jacob first built an altar of worship to the Lord.

1. Settle there and build an altar to God

a. Who appeared to you when you were fleeing Esau - Gen 27:42-45

B. Jacob obeyed the Lord

It's amazing how personal crisis can improve one's spiritual hearing. And Jacob was definitely facing a crisis:

1. His daughter, Dinah, had been raped by Shechem.
2. His sons had slaughtered the men of Shechem in their vengeance.
3. They had looted the city and taken the women and children as captives.
4. The relatives and neighbors of the people of Shechem would undoubtedly launch a vicious and deadly counterattack!

Application:

Our sin and disobedience to God grieve His heart. But he will allow us to go our own way and to reap the painful consequences of sin. And then, when we have gotten our fill of sin and there is no other way to turn, He will speak to us again, reminding us of His love and purpose for our lives.

1. He commanded his household to:

- a. Get **rid** of their foreign gods [Verse 2a]

Jacob was undoubtedly aware of the fact that his family was worshipping the false gods of the Canaanites. But for some reason, up until this point, he had done nothing to stop it. The seeds of this idolatry may have started some 10 years earlier when Rachel stole her father's household God (31:19).

Application: What is an idol?

Anything that takes our attention and devotion away from God.

Anything that competes with our worship of God.

Anything that has more influence in our life than God.

Illustration: Joshua and the people of Israel

Josh 24:15 "... choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve."

Josh 24:23 "... throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel."

- b. Purify themselves and change their clothes [Verse 2b]

Purify = Taher (taw-hare') = "To be uncontaminated or holy"

Why did they have to change their clothes?

Throughout the Bible, clothing is symbolic of a person's character.

Eph 4:22-24 gives a similar exhortation: "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."

2. He **invited** them to go up to Bethel and worship God [Verse 3]

- a. Who answered him in the day of his distress

Ps 34:17-19 “The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles ... A righteous man may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all.”

b. Who had been with him wherever he had gone

Gen 28:15 “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

C. The people **obeyed** Jacob

1. They gave Jacob their foreign gods and rings [Verse 4]

Apparently, their earrings were also connected to pagan worship.

a. Jacob **buried** them under the oak at Shechem

Application:

The story of when I led my high school friend to the Lord and then went to his house to get rid of all his cultic, idolatrous stuff.

Take stock of your house: Books, movies, CDs, religious artifacts.

2. They set out for Bethel [Verse 5a]

Application:

Jacob had to leave Shechem and go to Bethel.

He couldn't remain in godless Shechem and expect to experience the blessings of Bethel.

We are either separate from the world or separate from Christ. It is impossible to live in both worlds at the same time - Eph 2:12-13.

“The only cure for worldliness is to separate from it.” (Barnhouse)

D. The result:

1. The **terror** of God fell on the surrounding towns [Verse 5b]

Terror = Chittah (khit-taw') = “To be in confusion, fear and dismay”

Deut 11:25 “No man will be able to stand against you. The LORD your God, as he promised you, will put the terror and fear of you on the whole land, wherever you go.”

2. No one pursued them [Verse 5c]

Why would the surrounding cities have wanted to pursue Jacob?

Because of the slaughter and looting of Shechem (Gen 34:30).

Application:

Ps 33:16-19 “No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength. A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save. But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine.”

3. They **arrived** in Luz (Bethel) in Canaan [Verse 6]

Bad news:

Jacob's ten years in Shechem were of virtually wasted and were marked by Jacob's independence from -- and disobedience to God.

Whenever we choose to go our own way, we must inevitably return to the point where we departed from the revealed will of God.

Good news: "Come near to God and he will come near to you." James 4:8

III The Events At Bethel

- A. Jacob built an altar there called El Bethel [Verse 7]

1. It was where God **revealed** himself to Jacob

This is the same place where Abraham pitched his tent, built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord - Gen 12:8.

It is also the place where Jacob had his vision of the stairway to heaven and where he set up a pillar and poured oil on top of it - Gen 28:18-19

- B. Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died [Verse 8]

We have no other record of Deborah's life. But apparently, she was much loved, since her burial place, **Allon Bachuth**, means "Oak of Weeping."

- C. God appeared to Jacob again and **blessed** him [Verse 9]

Blessed = Barak = "To confer benefit"

1. He **changed** Jacob's name to Israel [Verse 10]

When Jacob finally arrived at the place God had told him to go, Jacob immediately experienced God's renewed blessing.

God appears to him and reaffirmed the new name He had given him ten years earlier in Gen 32:27-28. No longer will he be called ...

Jacob = Ya` aqob (yah-ak-obe') = "Heel-catcher"

Israel = "Governed or ruled by God"

Application:

Part of the new life in Christ is that we are blessed with a new identity!!

As believers, we are no longer sinners but saints!

We are no longer enemies of God, but friends of God.

We are no longer orphans, but adopted sons and daughters of God.

We are no longer rejected, but "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God." (1 Peter 2:9)

And God isn't finished! In Rev 2:17, He promises to give a new name written on a white stone to believers who overcome.

2. He reaffirmed His covenant **promises**: [Verse 11-12]

These promises are almost identical to those given to Abraham in Gen 17:4-7.

a. I am God Almighty - Gen 17:1
God Almighty = 'Eel-Shaday

b. Be fruitful and increase in number

Application:

God's ultimate goal is not to simply fill the earth with people but to fill the new heaven and the new earth with worshippers!!

What's His strategy?

1. He wants you to bear fruit

John 15:8 "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."

2. He wants you to multiply yourself

2 Timothy 2:2 "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others."

c. A nation, nations and kings will come from you - Gen 17:6

d. I will give this land to you and your descendents - Gen 17:7-8

Descendents = Zera` (zeh'-rah) = "Seed"

3. He went up from him [Verse 13]

God visibly ascended before Jacob's eyes.

Illustration: The ascension of Jesus

Acts 1:7-11 "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

D. Jacob set up a stone pillar at that place [Verse 14]

In fulfillment of his vow he made to God in Gen 28:20-22

"If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the LORD will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth."

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

Drink offering = Necek (neh'-sek) = "A libation"

The drink offering is mentioned frequently in the Bible (Ex 29:40-41; Lev 23:13; Num 15:5-7) and is marked by pouring out wine before God as an act of sacrifice to the Lord.

Application:

Paul likened the pouring out of his life in service to God to the drink offering at God's altar (Phil 2:17; 2 Tim 4:6).

- b. Jacob called the place Bethel [Verse 15]

Bethel = "House of God"

Luz = "Separation"

Application: We were all once living in a state of separation from God.

Col 1:21-22 "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. **But now** he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation."

III The Family Summary

- A. Rachel **died** in childbirth on the way to Ephrath [Verse 16-20]

Ephrath = 'Ephraath (ef-rawth)' = "Fruitfulness" Also known as ...

Bethlehem = "House of bread"

Mic 5:2 "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

1. She named her son, Ben-Oni

Ben-Oni = "Son of my sorrow"

- a. But Jacob renamed him Benjamin

Benjamin = "Son of (the) right hand"

The right side was associated with strength and honor (Ex 15:6; Ps 16:8).

Application:

Col 3:1-2 "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God."

2. She was buried on the way to Ephrath

Rachel's death is a reminder that we live in a fallen and temporal world.

- B. Israel moved on beyond Migdal Eder [Verse 21-22]

Here another painful incident occurred:

1. Reuben slept with his father's concubine, Bilhah

What would have motivated Reuben to sleep with Bilhah?

1. Pure physical attraction
2. To assert his position as the rightful heir to Jacob

Whatever his motivation, this sinful act would come back to haunt Rueben. In the end he forfeited his rights as the firstborn son of Jacob and the privilege of being in the direct line of the promised Messiah.

1 Chron 5:1-2 "... so [Rueben] could not be listed in the genealogical record in accordance with his birthright ..."

2. Israel heard of it

Jacob was told of Rueben's sinful actions but did nothing about it.

My guess is that Jacob's own sin and guilt over stealing Esau's birthright and blessing as the first-born son of Isaac, prevented him from taking disciplinary action against his own son. Much in the same way that King David's sin with Bathsheba prevented him from taking action against his son Absalom who slept with his father's concubines (2 Sam 16:21-22).

C. Jacob had 12 sons [Verse 23-26]

Amazingly, in spite of the dysfunction of Jacob's family, God's plan would be worked out in human history through Jacob's 12 sons.

And it goes without saying, "These guys were not exactly first-round draft picks." But then, neither were the 12 disciples of Jesus! And neither are we!

1 Cor 1:26-29 "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things -- and the things that are not -- to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him."

D. Jacob finally returned home to his father, Isaac [in Hebron] [Verse 27]

More than 30 years earlier, Jacob had left his father's home. I don't think he ever intended to return. But in order for him to be reconciled with God and experience a renewal of God's covenant at Bethel, he had no choice but to return to his father's house.

Application:

Sometimes, in order to move forward -- you have to first go back!

Prov 28:13 "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy."

E. Isaac lived 180 years and then died [Verse 28-29]

The text is so abbreviated here, that we might get the impression that Isaac died shortly after Jacob's return. Not so! But he lived an additional 12-13 years (Leupold, *Genesis*, II, p. 929).

Application:

This is the third death in this chapter of Jacob's life!

Eccl 12:6-7 "Remember him -- before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it."

1. He was gathered to his people

What does that mean?

It is a reference to those who had preceded him in death and had exercised faith in God.

2. Esau and Jacob buried him - Gen 49:30-32

The burial of Isaac was a cooperative effort of both Jacob and Esau. There is no evidence that Esau still intended to carry out his threat from years past that he would get even with Jacob once his father died (cf. 27:41).

Conclusion:

Are like Jacob -- Having spent the last 30 years only 30 miles short of God's will?

Jacob's reconciliation with God at Bethel required several actions on Jacob's part:

1. First, he had to come to the point where he stopped going his own sinful way and once again obeyed that which he knew to be the will of God.
2. Second, he had to get rid of his foreign gods which he had tolerated and which were so offensive to God.
3. Finally, he had to be reconciled with his family members whom he had injured and offended by his sins (Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15-17).

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