

## The God Who is Faithful to the End!

Genesis 35

Just over two years ago, on February 5th, 2017, we began our journey through the book of Genesis. I said then that Genesis is all about God – that if someone wants to get to know God, what He is really like, you would see it in this book. Here you see His power, His passion, His response to sin, and His ultimate plan to save humanity. It unfolds in a story covering centuries, punctuated by Noah’s flood that destroyed the earth, finally focusing on a man named Abram, through whom God promises that He will one day bless all the families of the earth. But if we are expecting this means that, like in fairy tales, everyone lives happily ever after, the account of the lives of the patriarchs are a major disappointment. Every act of faith is followed by a fall. The promise hangs by a thread more than once. Isaac inherits the promise from his father Abraham, but his life spirals out of control after the birth of his twin sons Esau and Jacob. Jacob inherits the promised blessing, but flees for his life and lives in a foreign country for twenty years. If this is God’s idea of how to fix the problems facing the world, it sure doesn’t seem to be working out very well!

But as we step back and look at the big picture, what we discover is that despite all the foibles and failings of the descendants of Abraham, God never abandons His plan, and nothing can derail it. This morning we conclude the *tôledôt* of Isaac – that’s the Hebrew word that sums up everything that happened to Isaac and his family. At the end of Genesis 35, Isaac dies, and the baton of hope for the world passes to Jacob and his twelve sons. But there is more in this chapter – birth, death, sin...the journey of

life goes on, yet at the end one thing stands out: Our God is faithful!

Before I go any further, let me say that if you’re thinking that this talk of a faithful God sounds trite – sort of like a politician who doesn’t display any godliness saying “God bless America” – you have my sympathies. People talk of God today with about as much conviction as if they were talking about the tooth fairy. Preachers who promise you ‘health and wealth’ and ‘your best life now’ offer a God that most of us instinctively know is as phony as a three dollar bill – because if God is some cosmic ‘rabbit’s foot’ who bows to what some preacher says, He’s not worthy of our worship.

But the God who is revealed in our story today is a God who is intimately aware of our lives. His plan was never to make our lives all sweet and rosy here – the world has a sin problem, a cancer of evil...and fixing that problem was never going to be quick. But the God we meet in the story of Genesis is faithful: He doesn’t abandon us when we fall; He patiently guides us – even using our failures to help us. He wants us to have fellowship with Him in this life – to know Him intimately, and to rest in His love for us.

### To Bethel: Rededication, Worship, and Promise (1-15)

- Jacob returns to Bethel and worships Yahweh

Last week in Genesis 34, Jacob settled in the Canaanite city of Shechem. What a disaster! He and his family were sucked into the idolatry there, and sin and death followed. As chapter 35 opens, God steps in and tells Jacob to get

himself and his family ‘out of Dodge’ – to go on to the city of Bethel – where he should have gone in the first place (v1):

*Then God said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel and live there, and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.”*

More than twenty years before, when Jacob was fleeing for his life, God met him at Bethel – that was the famous ‘stairway to heaven’ vision, and Jacob promised to return there if God protected him. Jacob had settled in Shechem, and while he built an altar and worshipped the Lord there, he wasn’t keeping his promise. That may seem a small thing to you or me, but it mattered to God. Shechem was a place of wickedness; Bethel was a place to worship.

What follows is a spiritual ‘spring cleaning’: Jacob gets rid of idols, and all symbols of Canaanite society. He is going to Bethel – *the house of God* – to worship, and no sin can be hidden there.

- God appears to Jacob and reaffirms promised blessing

This is Jacob at his best – recognizing his sin and dealing with it, and God responds in verses 9-15 by reaffirming His promises to Him (10-12):

*God said to him, “Your name is Jacob; You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.” Thus He called him Israel. God also 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 forth from you. The land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I will give it to you, and I will give the land to your descendants after you.”*

If ever God’s chosen people were going to ‘live happily ever after,’ this would be the time! But tragedy follows.

#### To Bethlehem: Birth, Death, and Sin (16-22a)

- Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin, Jacob’s last son

First, as they are journey south to Bethlehem, Rachel is about to give birth. Rachel was unable to get pregnant for years, finally giving birth to Joseph some ten years earlier, but now she is having a second child. What was usually a time of joy, however, is not here. The delivery was very hard, and she died giving birth. With virtually her last breath, she named her son Ben-oni (v18), which means *son of my sorrow*, but Jacob named him Benjamin, meaning *son of the right hand/honor*. Rachel was buried near Bethlehem. The tomb bearing her name is the third most revered site in Israel today.

- Reuben commits sexual sin with Bilhah

This physical tragedy is followed by a moral tragedy. In v22, Reuben, Jacob’s oldest son, had illicit sex with his step-mother Rachel’s maid Bilhah. Nothing more is said about this here, but years later, when Jacob is dying, he mentions this event when he passes over Reuben for the family blessing.

Why is it included here? Simply to remind us that sin is still a problem with Jacob and his children. We’d like to see them all living holy lives, but that doesn’t happen.

And it makes what the narrator tells us next that much more significant.

### To Hebron: God's Covenant Faithfulness (22b-29)

- Jacob's twelve sons, the foundation of a great nation

The very next thing recorded is the list of the twelve sons of Jacob – from whom would arise the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Benjamin, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher. This is irrefutable evidence of God's blessing: Despite sin and death, God's promise is not withdrawn. Even if His people are not faithful, He is!

- The baton is passed from Isaac to Jacob

That chapter ends with the report of Isaac's death:

*Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre of Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned. Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. Isaac breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people, an old man of ripe age; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him (27-29).*

It is the end of an era, but it is not the end of the story. Isaac has died, but the promise God made to his father Abraham has been passed on to his son Jacob, and his twelve sons are God's evidence that a great nation is coming. What seems like an end to us is just a turning of the page to God, who has already written the last chapter.

And while we look at *the good, the bad, and the ugly* of the lives of Isaac and Jacob, God sees the One who will come centuries later, a descendant of Jacob named Jesus, who will deliver all mankind from their sin.

### Questions for Christians

What can we learn from this chapter? I'm convinced that every page of Scripture is recorded for a reason, that God has truth for us in every story. Genesis 35 is no different.

This morning, I'd like to highlight those truths by asking us all three questions.

➤ *Do we worship God on our terms, or His?*

This is a big topic these days; churches around the world strive to make their worship services more appealing to the masses. What kind of lighting is best? What kind of songs should we sing – contemporary or traditional? Is it best to have something upbeat, or more soothing? What about special effects? Does all of that matter?

In Genesis 35, God tells Jacob to worship Him in Bethel, not Shechem. Jacob built an altar to God in Shechem, so what's the big deal? A close look at the first seven verses of Gen 35 reveal that the problem was Jacob's heart. He had made a promise to worship God at Bethel, and while he was in Shechem, his heart had wandered from God.

Listen, I care about lighting and music and songs as much as anyone...but you know what God cares about? Your heart. Jacob worshipped at Shechem, but his house had idols in it, and his lifestyle was tangled up with the sinful society he lived in. He needed spiritual cleaning.

When Jesus was asked about where to worship (John 4), He made clear what the real issue was in worship:

*“God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (Jn 4.24)*

We want to do worship well here at NBBC...but what is most important is your heart. Are you worshipping God on His terms, or yours?

➤ *How can we maintain purity, living in a sinful world?*

There's another question we need to answer here: How can a Christian maintain purity in a world immersed in a tidal wave of sin? Down through the centuries, many Christians have decided that the only way to live a pure life is to separate from the world – to become hermits and avoid contact with anyone.

But everything in the Bible – from Israel living among the Canaanites, to Jesus living among the people of His day, to the teaching of the New Testament, tells us that God wants us to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world. But how do you do that?

God's solution for Jacob and his family was for them to make their worship active – to engage in activities that involved worship and remind them of His faithfulness to them. All through the OT, God kept providing activities to help Israel maintain their devotion to Him and avoid adapting to the pagan idolatry of other nations. He gave them feasts and holy days and the law and the tabernacle

and sacrifices and offerings. When they remained active in their worship of Yahweh, they were able to resist the lure of the world around them.

In the church, we remind ourselves of our cleansing from sin and our new birth into God's family by baptizing new believers. We remind ourselves of the price Christ paid to purchase our forgiveness by dying on the cross when we observe communion. We remind ourselves that we are a new community as the body of Christ by coming together for worship, prayer, and teaching.

The body of Christ is God's provision to help us remain strong in our faith. But it doesn't happen by osmosis! You don't get it by sitting in a pew. You get it when you intentionally become a part of a body of believers.

➤ *Have you thanked God for His faithfulness to you?*

The final question from Gen 35 – and from the story of Isaac and Jacob, is this: Have you thanked God for His faithfulness to you? We've seen more muck here than anyone would expect in the Bible, but through it all, God remains unwavering. His promises are sure. You or I might have thrown in the towel a dozen times, but God doesn't. He sees hope when we see despair. He finds a glimmer of faith when we just see flaws. And here's the really great thing: This is true in our lives as well. When we feel like we're going under, and Satan rushes in to tell us we're hopeless losers and God doesn't love us any more, we remember God's faithfulness, and find strength to go on. Horatio Spafford put it this way:

*Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,*

*Let this blest assurance control,  
That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate,  
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.*

Let me say this to anyone here who feels weak in your faith, who wants a spiritual life that soar with wings of eagles – but more often seems to walk or stumble: God is faithful. He's strong enough to carry you. Trust in Him today, and let Him lift you up. Truly, His faithfulness is great.