

Repentance & Restoration

Genesis 35

We been following the life of Jacob since his birth when he grabbed the heel of twin brother Esau. He left the land, running from Esau in fear for his life, and now that he has been delivered he returns to Bethel as he vowed (Gen. 25:26, 27:42ff, 28:15, 21-22). If God would be faithful, then so would he. This chapter shows us that faithfulness includes household-wide repentance, and when this happens, God unleashes His blessings. Israel is restored and assured in every way, strengthening them to deal with death and transition.

Burying gods

First, God initiates and reminds Jacob to get back to Bethel, make an altar, and remember how He appeared to him when he fled from Esau (v1). This is an interruption to the disaster Jacob is dealing with after Dinah's rape and the murder of the Shechemites by Levi and Simeon (34:31). It may have felt like one more impossible thing to Jacob, but we can see God invades Jacob's life. Jesus' earthly ministry was like this, the first word of His first sermon was "Repent", and among his last words before ascending into heaven, "that repentance and remission of sins should be preached" (Matt. 4:17; Lk. 24:47). God meets us in His Word and His people usually when we don't feel like it. At the same time He initiates He also comforts, and Jacob remembers the God "who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me in the way which I have gone" (v3). The "kindness of God leads you to repentance" (Rom. 2:4).

Second, we see Jacob takes responsibility for the spiritual state of his household. He has to go to Bethel to worship, but he can't take his household in its current condition (v2). The Bible teaches that husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, and because Job was righteous he offered sacrifices in case his children sinned (Eph. 5:23; Job 1:5). Wives and mothers use their position as well like Rebekah and Abigail (cf. 1 Cor. 7:14).

Third, we see idols are not demoted but buried. Jacob tells them to purify, put away, and change their clothes (v2). This is a deep repentance that begins with spiritual cleansing through confession. It's not simple behavior modification, but a true change of heart and mind that can be seen in the content of confession and resolve that follows. They got rid of the gods in their hands and earrings in theirs, all the superstitious junk that cluttered their hearts and minds, and left them buried in Shechem where they could never find them (v4). Our culture is recently post-Christian so you hopefully lack figurines, so this might be your Netflix account, phone, internet, authority or methodology, anything that competes for your devotion to God. The change begins deep and internal, but it works all the way out to clothing (Eph. 4:22-24).

Restoration

Leaving baubles behind is always scary, but God provides just what we need (v5). He builds an altar and names it God's House (v7). Right near there the faithful woman Deborah is buried in hope (v8). God doesn't scold Jacob for being a lousy Israel, but instead reminds him of his new name (v10). He is full of steadfast mercy and loving-kindness, so He wants the name to stick. Jacob gets everything Abraham does in Genesis 17: a new name, nations and kings descending from him, and promise of the land (vv10-12). God ascends showing He has been with Jacob, and Jacob builds a pillar just like he did before, but this time he not only pours the oil of blessing down it, but also a drink offering because he is rich now (vv13-15; 28:18-22). This is Bethel, House of God, full of goodness. A thousand years later King David takes the throne, and a thousand years after that the Lord Jesus would be born in his line. No restoration would be complete without sadness and sin to address. Rachel's desire for another son is met, but she dies in labor, naming him Ben-Oni, Son-of-My-Sorrow (vv17-18; 30:24; Gen. 3:16). Jacob is full of hope and so he renames him Benjamin, Son-of-the-right-hand, knowing God will bring good from this pain, and resurrection where her pillar stands (v20). Reuben's incestuous act is not random sexual disobedience, but a calculated attempt to claim authority over his father's inheritance by sleeping with his concubine, which disqualified himself from the inheritance (v22; 1 Chron. 5:1). Jacob remembered this grasping sin until his death (49:3-4). Jacob's repentance and restoration prepared him to look to the next generation. May ours do the same.

NOTES FOR LITTLE SAINTS

Today's Passage: Genesis 35:1-4

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." 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. 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." 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.

1. What does God tell Jacob to do, and how does Jacob respond (verses 1-2)?
2. How does Jacob describe what God has done in His life in verse three? What is he thankful for? How would you describe God in your life?
3. What did the people in Jacob's house give to him, and what did he do with it (verse 4)? What should we do with anything that causes us stray from the Lord?
4. Draw a picture of the Israelites handing over their silly idols and earrings to Jacob, happy to be free from them.

Memory Verse to Recite Next Week:

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." Genesis 35:2