

# Along the Road

- <sup>1</sup> 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."
- <sup>2</sup> 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."
- <sup>3</sup> 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."
- <sup>4</sup> 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.
- <sup>5</sup> 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.
- <sup>6</sup> And Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him,
- <sup>7</sup> 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.
- <sup>8</sup> And Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried under an oak below Bethel. So he called its name Allon-bacuth.
- <sup>9</sup> God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him.
- <sup>10</sup> 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.
- <sup>11</sup> 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.

12 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."

13 Then God went up from him in the place where he had spoken with him.

14 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.

15 So Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken with him Bethel.

16 Then they journeyed from Bethel. When they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel went into labor, and she had hard labor.

17 And when her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, "Do not fear, for you have another son."

18 And as her soul was departing (for she was dying), she called his name Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin.

19 So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem),

20 and Jacob set up a pillar over her tomb. It is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day.

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

22 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.

23 The sons of Leah: Reuben (Jacob's firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun.

24 The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin.

25 The sons of Bilhah, Rachel's servant: Dan and Naphtali.

26 The sons of Zilpah, Leah's servant: Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram.

27 And Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned.

<sup>28</sup> Now the days of Isaac were 180 years.

<sup>29</sup> 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.

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Genesis 35:1-29

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## Along the Road

From the **City of Destruction** to the **Celestial City**, **Christian** sets out on a long and winding road. Along the way he meets some **Shining Ones** who give him his ticket to the Celestial City. But he falls asleep and loses it, having to look around to find it again. He falls into a bog—the **Slough of Despond**. He descends into the **Valley of Humiliation**. He enters the **town of Vanity**. He climbs the treacherous **mountains Error and Caution**. He comes upon the **Doubting Castle**. He encounters many who try to steer him off his path: **Talkative**, **Flatterer**, **Ignorance**, and the **Giant Despair**. He has to fight and overcome the monster **Apollyon**. But he also meets many who help him on his journey: **Interpreter** and **Faithful** and **Hopeful**. He is sheltered in the house of **Goodwill**. Some of his companions fall by the wayside, but eventually Christians makes home to the celestial city, having a very difficult

journey, marked by times of peace and rest.

This journey has been put to rhyme and music in one of my favorite songs:

Joy at the start  
Fear in the journey  
Joy in the coming home...

Along the road  
Your path may wander  
A pilgrim's faith may fail  
Absence makes the heart grow stronger  
Darkness obscures the trail.

Cursing the quest  
Courting disaster  
Measureless nights forebode  
Moments of rest  
Glimpses of laughter  
Are treasured along the road.

Along the road  
Your steps may tumble

Your thoughts may start to stray  
But through it all a heart held humble  
Levels and lights your way.

Joy at the start  
Fear in the journey  
Joy in the coming home  
A part of the heart  
Gets lost in the learning  
Somewhere along the road<sup>1</sup>

Some people have his opinion that when you become a Christian, the road you travel to the eternal Promised Land is supposed to be **easy, luxurious**, filled with pleasures here and now. If you don't have that kind of life, if it is filled with struggle and heartache, then it is because you are sinful and lacking faith. Others believe that when you become a Christian, you and other Christians should **never struggle with sin**. Christianity is about becoming perfect in this life. If this is not you, then you are not a "victorious" Christian, you have not attained to the "higher life" (and I'm not talking about Miller Time). Pilgrim's Progress

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Fogelberg, "Along the Road," from the album *Phoenix*, 1979.

exists to counter such bad views of the Christian life. But so also does our story today.

It recounts the time when Jacob finally re-enters the Promised Land, while others in his family go to the Eternal Land. It shows us many difficulties, including forgetting his **vows**, three **deaths** (a fourth is implied), four **burials**, and an act of **usurpation**. But it also includes a **theophany** (an appearance of God), a marvelous **birth**, divine **protection**, reaffirmed **promises**, a ritual **baptism**, reuniting with **family**, and **looking back** on the one that God has given. In short, this is a story much like Christian's on his road to the Celestial City.

Literarily, it parallels the life of Abraham, from his divine **call** to journey, to his **obedience**, to the reaffirming of the **promises**, to the **journey** itself, to the **birth** of his sons, the **death** of his wife, his son's **marriage**, a list of **descendants**, and Abraham's **death and burial** by his **two sons** (see chart below). In doing this, it draws our attention through the very form of the literature back to the gracious working of God and his providence in the life of Jacob's grandfather Abraham. God reemerges in this story and becomes a central actor. Jacob is the new Abraham, but it

has taken him a lot longer to get there than it did his ancestor. But our story confirms it through this journey and the intervention of the LORD in Jacob's travels throughout it.

Divine call to journey	22:1–2	35:1	46:2–3
Obedience	22:3–14	35:2–8	46:5–7
Divine promise reaffirmed	22:15–18	35:9–14	48:4
Journey	22:19	35:16	48:5
Birth of sons	22:20–24	35:17–18	48:5–6
Death and burial of wife	23:1–20	35:18–20	48:7
Son's marriage	24:1–67	35:21–22	[48:8ff.] 49:3–4
List of descendants	25:1–6	35:22–26	49:3–28
Death and burial	25:7–10	35:27–29	49:29–50:14 <sup>2</sup>

Finally, I want you to see that this story of a pilgrim on the way is not merely Jacob's story, not merely also Abraham's story, but it the story of all of God's people. Let's now look at it to see the things Jacob went through in our chapter.

## Your Path May Wander, A Pilgrim's Faith May Fail:

### *Jacob's Second (The El Shaddai) Theophany (vv. 1-4)*

<sup>2</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 322. He also adds parallels at the death scene with the ages of both given, the same language used, both sons burying the father with the phrase “they buried him,” and both occurring at Mamre (p. 390).

Along the road, our path may wander, a pilgrim's faith may fail. The first thing we encounter in our story that God (Elohim) telling Jacob to "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" (Gen 35:1). Just here, it is very important to remember that Bethel is a place that Jacob has been to before.

Immediately after being sent away to find a wife, God met Jacob at Bethel. Jacob then had that famous dream where he saw angels ascending and descending on some kind of stairway or ladder, with God at the top (Gen 28:11-13). He could see God with his eyes, and God reminds him here that He "appeared" to him. Because he saw God with his eyes, and yet no one has ever seen God and lived, we know that the God he saw has to have been the Second Person of the Trinity who will later incarnate in human flesh and be named Jesus.

Well, in that dream, the Lord Jesus covenanted with Jacob with the same promises he had given to Abraham. He told Jacob that he would give him this land (13), that he would have offspring like the dust of the earth, that all the families of the earth would be blessed through a particular



one of them (14), and that he would **be with him** wherever he would go and **bring him back** to this land (15).

The spot was so memorable and important to Jacob that he gave it the name **Beth-el** (House of God), though it was previously called Luz (**Gen 28:19**). Then Jacob made a vow and said, “**If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you”** (**Gen 28:20-22**).

The fact that God does not appear at all in the previous story of gross and prolific sin, a story that ends with the question, “**Should he treat our sister like a prostitute?**” (**34:31**), makes God sudden appearance now very curious. One commentators notices, “**It may seem unusual that God has to remind Jacob to return to Bethel and fulfill his vow,**” and then asks, “**Is it possible that Jacob has been procrastinating?**”<sup>3</sup> Has his **path literally wandered?**

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<sup>3</sup> John H. Walton, *Genesis*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 630.

It is strange that God has to remind Jacob of his vow too, especially when he is so close to Bethel now, in Shechem, just a few miles north and east. After the last story, has this pilgrim's **faith failed**? What Jacob does in response to God's call is also fascinating. "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'" (**Gen 35:2**). Then he says, "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" (**3**). Let's look at these two things in reverse order.

First, going up to Bethel has to do with the geography. Right now, he is down at the level of the Jordan River. To get to Bethel, he will have to climb into the mountains north of Jerusalem. It is there, at this higher place where the house of God is located, that he will build his **altar**. This is in obedience to God's command, but also to the vow he had made at least twenty years earlier the first time he was at Bethel. If his faith waned at all, it will quickly return now.

Presumably, this altar will also be the place of a great sacrifice to the LORD.<sup>4</sup> This sacrifice would probably be considered by Jacob as the tithe that he had promised all those years earlier. “**Tithe**” means “tenth,” and it is the biblical minimal standard of giving, even prior to the Law of Moses. God’s people give a tenth in Genesis and throughout the OT, in acknowledgment that Yahweh is the King, even as Abraham gave a tithe to King Melchizedek. So the building of the altar serves the purpose of **fulfilling two of his vows**.

Second, prior to doing this, the people will have to put away the foreign gods. This is obviously in the form of **idols**, which represent those gods and through which those gods mediate their powers. At the end of Jacob’s command, it says, “**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**” (35:4).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, “You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you” (Ex 20:23-24).

<sup>5</sup> **Going Deeper:** The reference to the **rings in the ears** is difficult to understand. Some have suggested that perhaps they had little idols for earrings, but there is no archeological evidence of this. They have discovered crescent shaped earrings, which probably indicate moon-god

This is the first time in all of Genesis that we find people who worship other gods actually explicitly being said to put them away. Remember, [Rachel had stolen her father's gods](#). Now we learn that the whole lot of them are still worshipping other gods. The Lord is just one among many for the family.

[John Walton](#) has suggested that this should be read in light of the question at the [end of the last chapter](#). Therefore, we are meant to understand that the greater prostitution here was not Shechem with Dinah, but Jacob and his family towards God. They, “[are treating God like a prostitute. They get what they want from him \(in accordance with Jacob's earlier vow: protection, provision, and return to the land\), then they pay the price \(the tithe\)](#)

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worship. Others think of the time when the golden jewelry of the children of Israel was melted down to make the golden calf ([Ex 32:2-4](#)) or Gideon's ephod ([Jdg 8:24-27](#)). Others, though, turn to something like [Numbers 31:50](#) where such objects were donated to the treasury of Israel as an offering.

Then there is the idea of burying these objects rather than destroying them. Some suggest this was a kind of black magic ritual, but that doesn't make sense of Jacob worshipping the LORD afterwards. The point seems to be getting rid of syncretism, rather than pursuing it further. Some think it is “a preparatory rite in holy war to activate the ‘terror of God’ against the enemy [[Gen 35:5](#)], and thus not a real burial, but a laying aside of religious figurines.” It may be that Jacob is laying to rest the gods of his fathers, in a symbolic act that they are now dead to him. This idea certainly fits the burial of Deborah in a few verses. See [Victor P. Hamilton](#), *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18–50*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 375.

and go their way. Like Shechem, they are willing to pay their bride price and undergo circumcision (= the tithe) to reap the benefits of this relationship.”<sup>6</sup> Their spiritual path has wandered too.

Certainly, Jacob and his family had been doing this with God. But now Jacob has had enough of the spiritual adultery, and so this marks a very clear and distinct moment in the life of Israel where the LORD will become the exclusive God of the children of Abraham. There are two markings here.

First, they are to “purify” themselves. Second, they are to “change their garments.” In Eastern Mediterranean epics, the so-called “homecoming” took place just prior to the hero bathing with water and changing his clothes.<sup>7</sup> Curiously, purification (this is the only time *taher* is used in Genesis) is often associated with water.<sup>8</sup> For example,

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<sup>6</sup> John H. Walton, *Genesis*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 635.

<sup>7</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18–50*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 376.

<sup>8</sup> The note from Hamilton has ... See G. Rendsburg, “Notes on Genesis xxxv,” *VT* 34 (1984) 361–64. For other uses of the Hithpael of *b r* (“cleanse, purify”) in ritual contexts, see [Lev 14:19, 28](#); [Num 8:7](#); [Neh 13:22](#); [Isa 66:17](#). Jacob’s directives to his entourage about purifying themselves and changing their clothes has analogies with [Ex 19:10–15](#); [Josh 3:5](#); [7:13](#); [Num 11:18](#). Assuming that the Hithpael of *q aš* in such narratives refers to a ritual bath of

“Anything on which any of them falls when they are dead shall be unclean, whether it is an article of wood or a garment or a skin or a sack, any article that is used for any purpose. It must be put into water, and it shall be unclean until the evening; then it shall be clean” (Lev 11:32).<sup>9</sup>

We find washing with water and changing garments together in various places. Two of the most significant are when the people **wash** their garments in preparation to **meet the God** of Sinai (Ex 19:10), and when the **priest** has his **ordination ceremony**: “You shall bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the tent of meeting and wash them with water. Then you shall take the garments, and put on Aaron the coat and the robe of the ephod, and the ephod, and the breastpiece, and gird him with the skillfully woven band of the ephod” (Ex 29:4-5).

Most of you are aware of my new that the latter is the OT type of baptism which Jesus is fulfilling in his own baptism, and that Christian baptism is a being united to

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purification, and thus is equivalent to the Hithpael of *bar*, what the above incidents have in common is bathing and washing/changing of clothes (at least in Gen. 35 and Exod. 19) that take place the day before one encounters the presence of God. See J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 963–66.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Lev 13:6, 34, 58; 14:4-5, 7-9; 15:13; Num 8:6-7, 21; 19:12, 19; 31:23-24; etc. Purification could also be done more ceremonially with blood (Lev 14:25) or oil (Lev 14:18).

Christ in his baptism, as the Apostle says, “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Gal 3:27 NAS). Thus, it shouldn’t be surprising to find Church Fathers putting this all together long ago:

It is fitting for us to do likewise when we are called before God, or enter the divine temple, especially in the time of the holy baptism. We, as if we drive away the foreign gods and part from such error, must assert, “I refuse you, Satan, and all your pomp and all your worship.” We also must change completely our garment by stripping off “the old self that is corrupt through deceitful lusts” and by clothing ourselves with “the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to image of its Creator.”

(Cyril of Alexandria, *Glaphyra on Genesis*, 5.4)

Cyril’s citation of refusing Satan and all his pomp and worship has been a common renunciation when Christians are baptized since the days of the early church and right on into the Reformation. And it certainly fits here with Jacob burying the gods represented through idols and jewelry under the terebinth tree. This purification and new clothing thus represents a **sacramental newness** for this household. They are now being consecrated into a different worship, and exclusive worship, where they must become his priests and do his bidding. But why?

One more thing is worth mentioning, and it is **Jacob’s great confession of faith** here. Upon it rests all of Jacob’s religious devotion. This is the God who **answers him in his**

distress and does not leave him no matter what. Christians know personally and understand that theirs is a God who hears them from his heaven. He hears them and answers them. They can all point to things, small or large, where God has answered their distress. He gives them peace in otherwise tumultuous circumstances. He sends them just the right amount of money at the only moment it could possibly be understood as a gift from him to meet their needs. He sends them a church wherein they can worship in confidence and peace. So many things we can think of, because we, like Jacob, know that God answers us.

But not only this. **God does not leave us.** Even in our darkest moments (and perhaps Jacob is just coming out of one here), we know that God is always with us. This is confirmed by the Holy Spirit who lives inside of us. It is made certain by redemptive history, even stories such as this, that allow us to see God's actions in the lives of others. And it is known most properly because ours is a God who has raised the Lord Jesus from the dead, and now he never leaves or forsakes his people, but is with them always, even to the very end of the age. It is upon these real and certain facts that Jacob obeys God and becomes a new Abraham.



## Moments of Rest:

### *Terror from God (5-7)*

Moving on, we find that along the road, there are **moments of rest**. Thank the Lord. This journey is not always full of trouble and sorrow. There are plenty of moments of peace and rest: A quiet night sleep, holding a tiny baby in your arms, a walk in the mountains, an evening of laughter with friends, a thanksgiving dinner with family, a Bible-study full of fellowship and learning, life lived apart from the horrors and atrocities of war. In the kindness of God, it happened that this was the case for Jacob after he departed for Bethel. It tells us, “**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**” (**Gen 35:5**). Why mention this?

It is because when we last saw Jacob, he was scolding his sons for having potentially undone them all. “**You have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites. My numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household**” (**Gen 34:30**). Because his sons has dealt so

treacherously with the city of Shechem, Jacob became afraid of the cities around him finding out and taking revenge, thereby killing them all in return. So this verse tells us that indeed, **God is with Jacob** wherever he goes, so that his promise to him might not fail. God would not let the Chosen Seed come to harm, or else that would mean his entire plan for the future, including his plans for the nation of Israel and finally for his only begotten Son would not come to pass. Thus, he sent a terror upon the enemies of Jacob.

We do not know what this **terror of the LORD** was exactly. The language is similar to something we find after the Exodus, “**You are about to pass through the territory of your brothers, the people of Esau, who live in Seir; and they will be afraid of you. So be very careful**” (**Deut 2:4**). Why would Edom be afraid? “**Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed; trembling seizes the leaders of Moab; all the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away. Terror and dread fall upon them; because of the greatness of your arm, they are still as a stone, till your people, O LORD, pass by, till the people pass by whom you have purchased**” (**Ex 15:15-16**). This is found in Moses’ first song where he recounts

the mighty acts of God, especially in drowning the Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea. In this song, God’s “arm” and his “name” (15:3) refer to the “man of war” (15:3), the LORD of Hosts, the Angel of God. This is the same figure presenting himself now to Jacob. And so in a kind of precursor, perhaps the Angel himself is the Terror that goes before Jacob, causing great fear to come upon the people of Canaan so that they would not touch God’s chosen people.

At any rate, in response to the rest provided by God, Jacob made his way to Luz (Bethel) in the land of Canaan. He and all the people in his great company had prepared themselves, and there he built his altar to God (Gen 35:6-7). Now he calls the place “El-bethel” in fulfillment of his vow. “The House of God” now becomes “God The House of God” in a name change that foreshadows another change of name that we will see in a moment. What is the significance of this *new name*? It is Jacob’s proclamation that now, finally, formally, officially, El/Yahweh/El Shaddai is his God as if he is saying “The God of the House of God” or thus “My God of the House of God.” It is his public declaration of faith.

In my opinion, **the order of Jacob's salvation** in history has looked something like this. **God chose** or elected this man before the creation of the world. Prior to his birth, it was **made known** that Jacob would be chosen. During his most depraved days, God came to Jacob and **made a promise** to him thereby giving him the gospel, though he was not seeking God at all. Jacob made **a vow** that if God should keep his vow, that God would become his God. Sometime during his adventures in Syria, good changes in Jacob began to **manifest**. God had converted him and the effect of this was a slow process of **sanctification**—holiness interspersed with plenty of sin. But now, at the same time as his **baptism**, Jacob makes a **formal confession of faith** in this God. **“This God is my God. I cast other gods away.”** Jacob will still sin, of course, but this moment marks a very clear line between the man who was Jacob and the man who will be called Israel. But now, the whole world knows that Christ alone is his God.

Is this not exactly what the NT teaches us about Christians today? It is not enough for you to sit there privately thinking you are a Christian. You must make a public, formal declaration of faith in Christ, and be set

apart through the waters of baptism to be identified with God's people, being yoked together with the family of Israel/Jacob through the faith once for all entrusted to the saints. Have you done this? This is what it means to truly have rest on the journey.

### **Glimpses of Laughter:**

*God's Renewed Blessing (9-15) and Rachel is Having Another Baby (16a-b)*

Skipping **vs. 8** for the moment, God wants Jacob to have some kind of sign to strengthen his faith. And so we learn that “**God appeared to him again**” in order to **reconfirm the covenant promises**. This begins with the great name change that we saw on the night that God wrestled with Jacob (**32:28**). “**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**” (**Gen 35:10**). Jacob changes a name, God does too. This is the name of the new covenant people of God. And this God must be the same God who wrestled with Jacob, so it must be Christ.

Then comes the reaffirmation of the promise that was given to Abraham and Isaac, “**I am God Almighty (El**

Shaddai – God of the Mountain): 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 seed after you” (11-12). Here, Christ identifies himself with El Shaddai. Then at that moment, it says “God went up from him in the place where he had spoken with him” (13). The Angel of the LORD goes back up to heaven, leaving Jacob to contemplate the grace and glory of God.

Jacob does this by setting up a pillar in the place where God had spoken with him, a pillar of stone. Here, he pours out a drink offering on it as well as oil. And Jacob called the name of the place, again, Bethel (14-15). The significance of reiterating that this is the house of God, is that Jacob’s response is formal, public worship in the place where God has set his Name. Today, Christians who inherit the promises need not go to this mountain or that mountain, but they worship in Spirit and in Truth, wherever they gather today in the church to worship him. How profoundly, then, this whole sequence of Jacob’s life

touches on **the reality of what we are doing now**. Let us praise God for his goodness to us in Christ.

Our worship is regular, but still momentary in many ways on this earth. When we depart from one another, we go back to our regular lives, and continue on our journey home. This happens to Jacob now. “**Then they journeyed from Bethel. When they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel went into labor...**” (**Gen 35:16**). When I think about the parallels at this point between Abraham receiving the promises and then being told that he would have a son, I think about the laughter of Isaac’s parents. There are **glimpses of laughter** on the road. How joyful must the thought of another child from his beloved Rachel have been for them both?

### **Absence Makes the Heart Grow Stronger:**

*Rachel Dies, Rebekah Dead (16c-20, 8)*

Yet, how quickly can **our laughter turn into sorrow** and tears. It continues, “**... 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’**” (**16-17**). Even this is still pretty good news, but it is still not finished. “**And as her soul was departing (for she was dying)...**” (**18**). Now we

start to see more clearly. I can tell you that in a very small way, I can relate to what was going on here, for **all four of my wife's labors** were hard. In fact, I am convinced that were it not for modern medicine, she would have died in all four of them. Thankfully, we did not have to go through the sorrow that Jacob will soon go through. And such was the way it was much of the time for most of world history. I read a biography on Samuel Adams, who was one of 10 children. I believe all but a couple of them died in infancy. He married a woman who was also one of 10 children, all but a couple of them died in infancy. Are you thankful for the blessings of God in our modern world?

But back to the story. As Rachel was dying, she named her son Ben-oni. This means “Son of my Sorrow.”<sup>10</sup> How terrible for Jacob to remember this event every time he saw his son. He thought so to, and so he said, “**No, but his name will be Benjamin**” (18). This name either means “**Son of My Right Hand**” or “**Son of the South**” (he is heading southward throughout this chapter: from Shechem to Luz

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<sup>10</sup> Some consider the name Rachel's belief that God was now punishing her for stealing the teraphim of her father, but there is no textual justification for this.



[Bethel], to Ephrata [Bethlehem], to Midgal-Eder, then to Hebron). It is probably the former that is in mind, as Jacob is telling Rachel that Benjamin will become dear and precious to him out of all his children. Perhaps, as the youngest son himself who received the inheritance, he would plan to give everything he had to Benjamin. Certainly, we will learn how precious Benjamin will become to Jacob later on in Genesis.

Then come the terrible words, “**So Rachel died**” (19). These words are a dagger through the heart. This is the great horror of the entire book of Genesis reasserting itself. From Adam to Joseph, all die. Rachel’s death is made all the more painful not only because Rachel is Jacob’s true love, but because this is the **second death** he has faced in just a few verses.

I skipped over **vs. 8** where we learn that **Deborah**, Rebekah’s nurse, died. It says that she was buried under an oak below Bethel. This parallels Jacob burying the gods of his family under a tree as well. Another new name occurs at the burial: **Allon-bacuth** (“Oak of Weeping”). But the more curious thing here is that we know nothing of this Deborah, and we hear nothing about Rebekah. In fact,

Rebekah's death is not mentioned in Genesis, and this story serves to tell us that in fact, she has already died. Jacob never got to see his mother again. For some reason, her nurse caught up with Jacob's family and stayed with him. Now, even she is dead.

In the poem/song, “absence makes the heart grow stronger.” Death is surely the greatest absence a human can experience, for this side of heaven, it is permanent. The heart grows stronger of necessity, otherwise a person will die of a broken one. Have you ever known an old couple, married for 60 or 70 years, where very soon after one spouse dies, the other does too? They were not able to deal with the loss of their other half. But **Jacob is not like this**. Instead, he has hope for the future, and the name of his son becomes a symbol of that hope. He will carry on.

## **Measureless Nights Forebode: Reuben and Bilhah (21-22)**

Now called **Israel** for the first time, Israel (that is Jacob and his whole family) continued on their journey (**Gen 35:21**). It tells us they pitched their tent beyond the **tower of Eder**. It is possible that this fortress was somewhere near

Jerusalem. Israel is traveling along a well known highway between Bethel in the north and Hebron in the south.

Suddenly, reminding us of a **foreboding night** not too long ago, when Jacob found himself sleepless fretting over the wrath of Esau, a terrible thing occurs on a new night. “While Israel lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father’s concubine” (22). This is not what you are thinking, nor is it just some random sin put into the story.

Reuben is the oldest born of Jacob. Bilhah is Rachel’s maidservant. Jacob has just declared to the world that his youngest, not his oldest, would be the son of his right hand. When you remember the context, suddenly, what I’m about to tell you makes perfect sense. “Slaves, servants, and concubines were considered part of the inheritance passed on from father to son. The oldest son (Reuben) would have the birthright (the additional share) and would inherit the human members of the household, including the concubines. When inheritance is laid hold of prior to a father’s death, it constitutes usurpation of the father’s role (cf. Absalom’s public taking of David’s concubines in **2 Sam 16:21–22**). This single isolated sentence, therefore, stands

as the first indication that the jeopardy in the next generation will again concern birthright, inheritance, and favoritism. For Reuben, the attempt to bolster his position of authority in the family ends up compromising it.”<sup>11</sup>

Based on Reuben’s later character in the Joseph stories, it really does seem like Reuben is trying to keep what he believed rightly belonged to him. Nevertheless, this is a sin committed on a very dark night.<sup>12</sup> Such is the journey that parents must often walk, as their children do things that grieve a parent’s heart. But that is the sad way of life in this age. Blessed are they whose children do not stray from the light.

## Are Treasured Along the Road” The Sons of Jacob (23-26)

Though long can be the dark night, so also long can be the things that are **treasured along the road**. And though Reuben usurped his father’s authority that night, the text now recounts for us the family of Jacob: The **twelve sons of Israel (22ff)**. Amazingly, it begins with Reuben, even

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<sup>11</sup> John H. Walton, *Genesis*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 636.

<sup>12</sup> It parallels in some ways Ham’s usurping Noah’s authority by sleeping with Noah’s wife (**Gen 9:22**).

though the genealogy is not itself strictly according to order of birth.

“The sons of Leah: Reuben (Jacob’s firstborn) [it tells us this to help us see what it was that Reuben had just done], Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun” (23). Next, “The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin” (24). Third, “The sons of Bilhah, Rachel’s servant: Dan and Naphtali” (25). Finally, “The sons of Zilpah, Leah’s servant: Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram.”<sup>13</sup> “Behold, children are a gift of the LORD; The fruit of the womb is a reward” (Ps 127:3 NAS). These are Jacob’s greatest treasures, and will one day be the heads of the great Twelve Tribes of Israel. God gives us many treasures to be cherished in this life, memorials and reminders of his goodness, and these should give us great cheer.

## Joy at the Coming Home:

### *God Keeps his Promises, Isaac Goes Home*

Our story ends by completing, not Jacob’s life, but Isaac’s. “And Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or

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<sup>13</sup> Of course, Benjamin is actually born in Canaan, but he seems to have been conceived in Haran.

Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned” (Gen 35:27). Joy must have filled their hearts at this moment of coming home. It has been at least 20 years since they last saw one another. When Jacob left, it was not under the best of circumstances. Now, he has 12 sons and at least one daughter, a full quiver, along with servants and a wife and many animals. God has blessed him.

When last we saw Isaac, Rebekah seems to have believed that he was near death. But it is probable that he lived perhaps 80 more years, far outlasting his own wife. It is very likely that Jacob and Isaac spent many years together in the end. But finally, the end must come, even for the great patriarch and only begotten son of Abraham.

Isaac will make the **third death** in this chapter. But it is regarded in an almost happy way, unlike that of Rachel. “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” (28-29).

Here, then, our story concludes. As John Walton says, in it, “God continues to be seen both as One who is determined to fulfill the promises that continue to be made

and moved along from generation to generation and as One who can overcome whatever obstacles may arise. Two centuries have come and gone since Genesis 12 and, remarkably, the family of Abraham is growing, thriving, and still in the land.”<sup>14</sup> “Sometimes progress is so slow and hampered that we can fail to notice the gradual progress being made. Genesis 35 provides an opportunity for the reader to take stock of how far the ancestors have come. Two hundred years and twenty-three chapters into this covenant experience find everything still intact, though there has been no shortage of scrapes and bruises along the way. A dozen times the covenant has dangled by a single thread, but God is faithful and sovereign and his grace is sufficient ... we may at times look at where we are in our spiritual walk and feel as if we haven’t gotten anywhere. We can feel overwhelmed by our failures and our inability to master the Christian life. Those are the times when we need to pause and look back so that we can gain an appreciation of how far God has brought us.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> John H. Walton, *Genesis*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 633.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 640.

So that is the road Jacob takes in Genesis 35. But this story is not only his. This story belongs to God's people who know the Savior. It is their story if they know him. Of course, that is the key. Abraham and Jacob (as we will see again today), were lead by God to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The poem that I cited at the beginning may get it better than some Christians in terms of struggle and temptation, but without Christ, there is no lasting joy in the coming home.